



A Virgin for the Cruel Duke

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Category: Erotic, Romance, Adult, Historical

Description: "You know what you must do if you want me to touch you, wife: beg."

Given to the cruel Duke as a peace offering, Elizabeth vows never to become a pawn. Not for her family, and especially not for her new husband. Yet whenever he's close she can't help but long for his lips on her...

Marrying his enemy's daughter is the only way for Duke Stephen to end the feud between their families. But when his alluring bride dares challenge him, a dark obsession stirs within him. And now, he must possess every inch of her body.

Elizabeth may be his, but she won't allow him to claim her. Only, Stephen knows exactly how to make his wife beg for his touch...

*If you like a realistic yet steamy depiction of the Regency and Victorian era, then A Virgin for the Cruel Duke is the novel for you.

Total Pages (Source): 52

CHAPTER 1

The Duke of Westall, Stephen Wilkins, stood in the entrance of the Rosenberg estate and watched the servants milling around him in a panic with a cold eye. One was hanging his coat, another offering him brandy, a third dashing back and forth between the rooms as though trying to find something useful to do and a fourth trying to ask him a fifth time about the nature of his visit.

One might have thought that the devil himself had come to call.

It was not far from the truth.

“Your Grace, can I offer you refreshment?” asked a young valet, eyes wide in alarm. “Is there anything that I can bring you after your journey?”

“No,” he said crisply, used to command and used to the sight of unease or even fear in the eyes of other men. “Send word to the family that I have arrived as we have agreed. The rest of you may leave, I have no need of you.”

They glanced among themselves, clearly trying to communicate their concern. A Duke of Westall had never in the history of the two houses set foot on the Rosenberg estate without bringing war in his hand and death at his heels. The bad blood between the families went back centuries, and even now they could not meet without attempting violence upon each other.

Stephen had no qualms about violence himself. When he had been in university, still a young strapping boy, not yet weighted down with the pressure of taking on the

mantle of the Dukedom, he had been known to his friends as Mars, the god of war.

Too big, too fierce and too quick to fight.

He had always had too much inside him, too much rage and darkness. It had not gotten better as he had grown. It had grown with him like his shadow.

But then his younger brother, dearly loved and impulsive Herbert with youth and the certainty of immortality in his veins had fought the cursed heir of the Rosenberg estate, Dudley Barnes and both had been badly wounded.

He cared nothing at all about the young Lord Barnes, but seeing Herbert in a sick bed had brought to him how the feud would be if it were allowed to continue, the death and grief and horror that would be dragged in its wake.

For the sake of his brother and for the red eyes and pale faces of his sisters he would not allow that to happen. Which was why he was here, growing mightily impatient with the flutterings of the servants around him.

He was about to break with good manners and walk past them to find his own way when the butler rushed towards them, face flushed in embarrassment and irritation.

“Your Grace,” he said, waving the others off quickly. “I apologize for the delay, there was a little confusion about the time you were expected. Please, let me lead you to the family.”

Confusion, hm? Stephen would have wagered that the confusion was engineered by the family themselves, never willing to waste an opportunity to cause him or his embarrassment. But he nodded curtly and let the man lead him back towards the drawing room at the front of the house. It was a strange place for a man to do business, but Albert Barnes, Duke of Rosenberg was a strange man.

He was shown into a grand drawing room, distinctive with green chairs and a white plush carpet. He made a bow to the room, noting that his Grace was seated in a broad chair with a great spreading back and carved wooden arms next to his son, in a smaller chair, and that four ladies were seated on two settees a little way off.

It was said that no member of the Wilkins family had ever entered the Rosenberg estate in the long centuries the two families had been feuding. Stephen certainly would never have set foot here had he not been driven by necessity.

The ladies he barely knew, having seen them only in the distance at events but he burned at the sight of the Duke of Rosenberg and his son.

God forgive me, he thought. For making a pact with the devil himself but there is nothing else to be done.

“Westall,” Albert said, waving off the servant with one hand. “I believe you know my son.”

Stephen nodded at Dudley Barnes, his heart thudding in his ears. A rush like a fever of rage swept through him. His heart still ached with rage and fear that he might have lost his brother the way that Albert had taken his father all those years ago.

He could not imagine hating anyone as much as these two men. “We have met,” he said instead, his voice cool and level.

The old man did not offer a seat and Stephen did not take one, too certain that if he were to sit he would no longer be able to conceal his anger. Instead Albert took a pinch of snuff from a small box on the table next to his chair and passed the box on to Dudley.

The younger man followed suit, but Stephen noticed how he moved carefully and

smiled to himself in dark furious delight. Herbert had done that. Herbert, his wonderful fool of a brother.

“You had matters you wanted to discuss,” Albert said, gesturing as though Stephen were a serf that he could command.

“Indeed, as did you, Rosenberg,” Stephen said. “The matter of the wedding.”

“Ah, yes. The wedding. The dowry shall be three thousand pounds,” Albert said, his eyes sharp and piercing. “There is no need of a long engagement. I’m sure you will agree that our families can only benefit from being brought together as quickly as possible.”

Stephen snapped his head to stare at Albert sharply, then at the ladies and back to Albert. It was an insultingly low amount, one that a duke’s family would barely offer a mere gentleman, let alone a duke. “There is no need of a dowry,” he said coldly.

“A dowry is traditional,” Albert said, his own cheeks flushing slightly insulted in turn. “To give none would be insulting to our daughter.”

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“There is no need of insult. She will be well cared for with the wealth I have.” Stephen knew that Albert envied the Westall estate and the riches that exceeded his own and felt a little cold pleasure at the way that the old man tried and failed to hide his bitter anger over the reminder.

“So it shall be,” Albert said, a rictus of a smile on his face. “We are agreed.”

“And once the wedding is had, there will be peace between us.” This was the true prize after all, this was what Stephen was here for with his pride kept carefully at bay. They would put an end to the fighting and the killing and those of his who came in the future would not need to look over their shoulders in fear of a Barnes blade.

“You will leave mine be, I shall yours.” Albert looked across at his son, whose face was contorted in a most unbecoming scowl. “That is agreed.”

“Very well. Who is the lady?”

A smile crossed the old man’s face, twisted and mocking. “Come forwards, Elizabeth, my dear daughter.”

Stephen looked over at the ladies. He recognized the Duchess easily, and two of the younger ladies looked familiar from events he had attended amongst his duties. The woman who stood and approached her father was not one he could recall having seen before.

She was short, that was the first thing he noticed. Small enough that he was sure she would not come to his shoulder if they stood side by side. The second thing he

noticed was the proud tilt of her chin as she met his gaze. And the third, the third thing that he noticed was her clothing.

While the other two young ladies wore chemises of fine cloth cunningly embroidered, this one was dressed so simply that he would never have guessed her to be a member of the family if he had been asked. Her hair was fair, a warm golden color completely different to the rest of her family and her eyes were not the watery icy blue of her father but a warm brown.

She held his gaze steadily, a challenge in her eyes. He was the first to look away, glancing to her father.

“I had thought, Rosenberg, that you had two daughters. How is it that your bounty has been increased now to three?”

“My dear Elizabeth was a gift from her dead mother,” Albert said, that same twisted smile still playing on his lips. “While she is certainly my daughter, she is not a daughter of my wife and so she is not out in society.”

The younger two Barnes daughters lifted their fans to cover what Stephen suspected were cruel smirks and the Duchess looked across at her husband, her cold beautiful face unsmiling and set.

He was being given a bastard.

It took a moment for the insult of it to sink in, to really settle in Stephen’s mind. He was asking for a family connection and instead this was what he was being offered, this insult was all he was worth. His lips thinned. “What of the lady’s sisters?”

Albert barely glanced back at his two legitimate daughters, smiling even wider. “They are spoken for, Westall.”

They were not. Stephen would never have come to the Rosenberg estate had he thought there was no Barnes daughter he could tie his fortunes to. He knew that the elder was promised to the Duke of Seymour but there were two of them.

Albert met his gaze. He could see the old man knew that he knew he was being insulted, that he was just waiting for Stephen to call the whole charade off, insult the young lady to her face and cast her aside as a marriage prospect. It was the best they could possibly expect from him, it was all he could be expected to do.

But Stephen was not a common man. He was a man with a driving purpose. Both families wanted the feud to end, Albert just as much as himself. While he was not willing to concede peace without trying for one last win over Stephen's family by offering a bastard child, he still didn't want his only son and heir murdered in the bloody battle between the families.

No. Stephen would not allow Albert Barnes to win. He would have Elizabeth Barnes for his wife. He would end the enmity no matter the cost.

"Leave us," Stephen said coldly. "Clear the room so I may propose to the young lady."

The titters and murmurs from the younger ladies stopped dead. Dudley stilled, even Albert froze in a moment of unguarded shock as they all looked at Stephen and then at Elizabeth Barnes and back again.

Stephen almost smiled. Choke on that, you devils.

It took a minute or two for the rest of the family to leave them. It was clear that none of them were eager to give in to his demand, but he was in the right of it and it was how things were done. So, slowly and reluctantly, they left and it was him and the young woman alone.

She had still to say anything.

“Won’t you sit down,” Stephen said, his tone flat and cold. Whoever and whatever she was to this family, she was to be his wife. But she was also the daughter of the man who had made it his business to try to erase the Wilkins family name from the history books.

Elizabeth kept looking at him, her eyes warm and brown and her face set so still that he wondered if she knew how to smile. “I shall not,” she said firmly in a voice as clear as a bell. “I will meet my fate head on, on my feet.”

Stephen almost fell back a whole step in surprise at her boldness. Did she not understand the importance of what they were doing? It felt as though he could not escape the piercing intensity of her gaze and it made him feel frustrated, ill at ease in his own skin. “Very well. What is it that you think of this union, Lady Elizabeth?”

“Would my thoughts have merit to a duke, Your Grace?” she asked, her hands folded so demurely at her front that one could almost imagine that she was not speaking knives. “I am but a woman, after all.”

“I have never held a woman’s thoughts at a lower merit than a man’s,” Stephen said firmly. “My sisters have my ear as much as my brother and their words have as much worth to me. I would know your mind on this matter as you are just as much involved as I.”

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“Just as much? Am I not more?” she asked, tilting her head to one side curiously. “After all, shall I not be leaving my family home and all those I love to go to yours?”

Stephen frowned at her words. The sharpness of her wit was something he might have enjoyed at another time, in another place. If she were not a Barnes, he might even have been enticed by her. But here in the drawing room of this accursed family all he felt was vexation. One simple answer was all that he wanted. “And you will be given wealth and a home of your own in return,” he said. “You will be a duchess. Many would say you are the winner here.”

“Is there a winner here?”

It was so strikingly close to his own thoughts that Stephen was begrudgingly impressed. She was such a small, drab thing and yet her words were so fast, her wit so quick to match his own that he had to admire her for it, for all that she was driving him mad.

“Is there a loser?”

“I don’t know, Your Grace,” Lady Elizabeth said, smiling at him. It was the faintest raising of the corners of her lips. It was as much of a lie as anything her father had ever said. “Do you think of me as a prize?”

He almost snorted and had to cough to cover it. “Lady Elizabeth,” he said finally. “I will not insult you by using the usual forms of a proposal and pretending that this is not something you expected or that you are unaware of my merits as a prospect. We are sensible people. I am asking for your hand in marriage, you know how much rides

on this arrangement. What do you say to the matter?"

He did not go to one knee or protest romantic love. He felt that she would scorn him behind those sharp, fierce eyes. He felt that it would be something she would detest and moreover he would never get down on a knee before a Barnes. She thought for a moment, and then laughed - a hard noise so loud and sudden that it shocked him. When she spoke, her voice was cold and mocking.

"You speak as though I have a choice in the matter, Your Grace, and yet we both know that my father and you have already decided it all for me. At least do me the respect of not pretending otherwise."

Stephen felt himself flush in anger, the sharpness of her words inflaming him almost as much as the fire in her eyes. He took a great step towards her, pleased as she backed up, retreated from him.

Yet she never looked away, her chin tilted back defiantly as he walked slowly towards her, backing her up until she was trapped against a wall, his arms caging her on either side.

"Have a care, Elizabeth," he said lowly, leaning in so that his breath was hot in her ear. "You should not try to provoke my anger."

"Or what," Elizabeth said, her eyes blazing. "What shall you do, Your Grace?"

He caught her chin, bringing their gazes together like lightning striking. "You will not like the consequences if you do," he said.

He could smell her scent, something light and barely perfumed and he could feel the heat of her, like a fluttering bird. He looked down on her cheeks and could see a flush spreading up from her neck, down past her fichu.

How far might it go down her body?

The thought caught him, pinned him, made his heart beat fast in his chest. What she was doing to him made him more aware of himself than he had ever been in his life, more overwhelmed, more - out of control. He could touch her cheek and feel her skin beneath his fingers, he could...

Stephen stepped back abruptly and bowed, composing himself. "I will see you at the wedding, Madam."

He turned on his heel and stormed from the room. He was not going to lose himself to her. She was a means to an end and that was all. That was all she would ever be.

CHAPTER 2

"Will there be sweetmeats?"

"There will be cakes and sweets aplenty, Annie, now do get down from there and help me with this," Mrs. Adams said, her kind face contorted with the effort of not laughing. "It is our Miss Elizabeth's wedding day, after all. We must be getting on!"

"Will all the ladies be dressed in lace and frills?" Annie said, grinning and spinning on one foot. She was stood on the chair at Elizabeth's dresser and was trying her hardest to make a fichu look like a bridal veil. "And will there be enough flowers that I could have some?"

"Now, none of that," Mrs. Adams said, looking over at Sally with a raised eyebrow that said she thought her older daughter might have been filling her youngest's head with fancies. "Any flowers will belong to Lady Elizabeth and she'll get to say what happens to them."

“I would be glad to send you some, Annie,” Elizabeth said. “But I do not think I shall have the time.” In secret she rather suspected that she did not in fact get to say what happened to anything, but it would do no good to spoil the girl’s fun by saying so.

Sally smiled at her mother and ducked around Elizabeth to pull her little sister down and take the gloves and fichu off her so they could continue putting the finishing touches on the packing.

Their laughter was so familiar to Elizabeth that it was like a hug, and that made her feel all the more like there was a knife going into her stomach with every second that she got closer to leaving forever.

Annie had been so little not so long ago, just a tiny little slip of a girl and here she was already shot up to Elizabeth’s height, a strapping girl of three and ten. She had her own duties for the family, she was almost a young woman now.

What else might Elizabeth miss of her life now she was going away?

She was standing in the center of all the bustle and chaos staring out the window but she was caught in the middle of thoughts of the only family she really cared about and how she couldn’t take them with her or even come visit them, not properly.

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She was to become a duchess, after all. Duchesses didn't go calling on housekeepers and their children.

"My lady," Sally called, her bright cheerful face blazing with a smile. "Come on now, let me help do you up. We're almost ready."

The dress felt foreign to her. It was a dark green, and she knew just enough to know that there was a message in that somewhere, something a little cruel, a little grim. Just like most things that her family did.

But even so it was so much finer than anything she had ever worn that the fabric felt dangerous to touch too much with her hands. She was standing as still as she could manage, her arms held awkwardly at her side so she would not mess up the embroidery somehow and she almost had to laugh at how silly she must look.

All the many little buttons down the back of the dress still had to be done up and she was already so aware of every inch of herself that she dreaded that last little bit of suffocation like it might wring the breath from her lungs.

How could she do this? She had never gone out in society one day in her life, how could she now go from her only home and be enough for a duke to marry? Could she really make it that far or would he look at her in the church and turn his head away like everyone had thought he would that day in the drawing room?

Elizabeth swallowed, her face heating at the reminder.

Why had he looked at her like that? He was so much taller than she had expected, so

broad and so striking. He looked as though he was on fire inside, like everything he touched must catch on fire too.

Maybe that was why she felt so hot under her skin when he was close to her, leaning over her -

“All right, Miss,” Mrs. Adams took one of her hands and squeezed it, her smile large and warm just like everything else about her. “It’s perfectly normal for a lady to be nervous on her wedding day. Don’t you worry, you’re only going to better and bigger things.”

“That’s right,” Sally said stoutly. “I’ve heard that the Duke of Westall has twice the money at least that His Grace does. I bet that sticks in his throat and chokes him when he’s trying to sleep!”

Elizabeth bit back a laugh as Mrs. Adams rounded on her daughter, shock on her face. “Sally Adams, you bite your tongue and pray that the good lord didn’t hear you talking so about your betters!”

“I don’t know about my betters,” Sally muttered, almost too low to be heard. “Money doesn’t make a gentleman, you always say.”

“And a fast tongue doesn’t make a well behaved miss, neither,” Mrs. Adams said, wagging her finger comically enough that Elizabeth gave in to a giggle.

“Now, Mother Adams,” Elizabeth said, touching Sally on the arm fondly. “Let’s not quarrel today. I want you all to be glad with me.”

“Of course, my lady,” Mrs. Adams said, her face softening. “Girls now work quickly, I want to see my lady in her finest at last.”

Elizabeth let them finish with her gown, and smiled a little at her friend as Sally went to get her headdress and Mrs. Adams fussed and worried over her hair.

They were so excited for her. They were so sure that this would be the best thing that could have happened for her. They wanted her to have her freedom at last.

“Oh Miss Elizabeth,” Mrs. Adams breathed.

Elizabeth looked at her dearest friend’s mother, the woman who had held her at night when she was a little girl crying about how lonely and cold and dark her rooms were, the woman who had listened to her thoughts and worries, had watched her grow. The only family she had really ever had.

Sally handed her the beautiful silk gloves that felt like a second skin and then led her over to the mirror so that she could look at herself.

The green of the dress was just like his eyes, she thought. It was such a sudden thought that her knees felt weak beneath her. His eyes and how they had bored into her as she stood before him, just an object for him and her father to bicker over - why had they affected her so?

She was pale, the darkness of the gown making her more so and making her eyes look huge in her face. Sally and Annie and Mrs. Adams were clapping their hands and saying how beautiful she was and how happy she would be but all Elizabeth could see in the mirror was a caged bird going to a new cage.

The footman had her bags and was loading them into the carriage and Sally was going to follow after with her own cases, of course. Elizabeth wished desperately they could come to the ceremony and stand with her, but of course that would look strange at a duke’s wedding wouldn’t it?

No one would be happy if she admitted that she saw the housekeeper and her daughters as more her own than her flesh and blood.

“I’ll think of you every day,” Annie whispered fiercely, grabbing her hands and pressing them tight. “And I’ll pray every night for you, Lady Elizabeth, I promise I will.”

“I’ll miss you, Annie,” Elizabeth said softly, ruffling the girl’s hair. “Be careful.”

Mrs. Adams was next, clasping her into an embrace that felt like home and everything that she would be leaving behind and Elizabeth ached to cry and cling and beg her to come too.

“I wish you all the best, my dear,” she said very softly in Elizabeth’s ear. “Be well and be happy, Lady Elizabeth. Have everything that you ever deserved.”

The Duchess of course had not come to see Elizabeth getting ready and neither had Lottie or Rose. They were her half-sisters, she was marrying the Duke of Westall to save them from having to do it and they couldn’t even bother to come and wish her well before the ceremony.

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But this was enough, Elizabeth felt, closing her eyes tight so that she wouldn't have to let the tears fall. This was what a mother's blessing was meant to feel like. This was all that she really wanted. She squeezed Mrs. Adams back and whispered, "Thank you," and hoped that it said everything that she meant in her heart.

"I really cannot thank you enough, sister," Dudley said, his long legs crossed as the carriage carried them towards the church. "Your generosity and self-sacrifice will not be quickly forgotten by the family, I assure you."

Lottie made a loud sniggering noise and Elizabeth wondered if she thought the Duke of Seymour would approve of his wife making such a vulgar sound.

"Is the Duke of Westall really wicked, Dudley?" Rose asked. She was the youngest, and she should perhaps have been the sweetest. Elizabeth could still remember when she was a little baby, all rosy cheeks and those wide eyes of innocence.

Their gazes met across the carriage. There was no innocence in Rose anymore. There was nothing in this whole family but malice and misery.

"I couldn't possibly scare my sweet sisters so terribly," Dudley said. "Exposing your delicate ears to the tales of his villainy? And so close to our sweet Elizabeth's marriage to the devil? Oh! It would be too cruel for words!"

"You can't simply tease us and leave us wondering," Lottie said, her fan dropping to her lap and her eyes sparkling with merriment. "I'm sure that Elizabeth will appreciate any truth about her intended in the spirit in which it's meant, won't you Lizzie?"

Elizabeth looked at her steadily, but said nothing. It was always best for her to say nothing when they were like this. They circled her sometimes, like hungry beasts tracking their prey. They surrounded her and if she was still and quiet and gave no sign of the blood they were drawing they got bored and went away.

“You are quite right of course, Lottie,” Dudley said, slapping his thigh. “I had not thought about how it might be useful for Elizabeth to know what she must be careful of with her new husband.”

Of course sometimes they were just encouraged to try harder.

Dudley leaned forwards, his face twisted into a mimicry of concern. “Now, Elizabeth. I have met your intended several times, and quite a few of those times were with a sword in my hand. The first thing you should know about Westall is that the man has a temper that would put the devil himself to shame. One time I was trying to retreat from the field after winning the first blood, and he was so enraged that he came at me with his bare blade and tried his best to cut me open with it.”

Lottie and Rose gasped, their hands going to cover their mouths and Elizabeth raised both her eyebrows. It would be rude to roll her eyes at him. She would not do so, no matter how much she wanted to.

“It was only the involvement of our seconds that saved my life, that day,” Dudley said. “He is a fiend when things go against him, but he is even worse when they go for him. One time when he had disarmed me and all should have been ended, he came forwards and ground the heel of his boot into my hand.” He turned his left hand, showing the faint scars across its back. “He said ‘that will teach you to try to best me, you young cur, you’ll think of this next time you raise a sword against me’.”

“The scoundrel!” Lottie said, heat in her voice.

“How can it be borne,” Rose said. “You must have gone back to teach him a lesson, brother darling, you must!”

“Of course I tried,” Dudley said, attempting an expression of modesty which fit very poorly on his face. “But the man is such a slippery fellow. One cannot fight him fair and to his face and one cannot trust him to leave be once the fight is done. He is all temper and cunning, like a howling dog.”

Rose wrapped her arms around Elizabeth’s shoulders. “Oh we are so fortunate to have a sister who will save us all from him!”

“Aren’t we?” Dudley said, meeting Elizabeth’s gaze and smiling.

Was it possible that even this man could be worse than her own family? Elizabeth wondered.

But then he had warned her not to provoke him.

And he was so tall. So strong.

“Of course his sisters are no better,” Lottie said sharply. “That older one with all of those strange ideas, she’s loud and coarse. If I ever find myself in company with her I quickly make my excuses, it’s just impossible to have a normal conversation with her.”

“And the younger, she’s not even out yet,” Rose said. “And she’s eight and ten! It’s all because the older one just won’t abide a man, but I can’t imagine that the younger is much better. I’ve heard she’s touched in the head.”

“That or she has some sort of disease,” Lottie said. “That would explain why she’s so old and hasn’t any suitors.”

“Of course it might just be because she is rather plain.” Rose tittered here, her smile broad and her cheeks dimpled.

“The brother is awful too,” Lottie said. “Going after Dudley the way he did, he must be quite mad! He very nearly killed him!”

“I wouldn’t say nearly,” Dudley demurred. “He was lucky, that’s all. I was feeling quite ill on the day.”

His sisters petted him and Elizabeth swallowed, her stomach churning as they drew ever closer to the church. This was what her life was going to be, was it? An angry violent man and a family who hated hers and wanted them dead?

She could certainly tell that the Duke was dangerous when she first met him, it was in the controlled liquid way he moved, the broadness of his shoulders and the quick way his gaze assessed everything around him. It was frightening but it also made a part of her thrill a little, like liquid excitement in her veins. She had never felt it before.

The carriage drew up and rumbled to a stop and there was a flurry of activity as the Duke came over to help his little girls down and fuss over them. There was so much of a fuss, so much going on that Elizabeth didn’t notice until too late that she was on her own with Dudley.

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She was never alone with Dudley.

She never dared.

He caught her wrist before she could move to get down from the coach, ignoring the need for a hand to dismount in her rush to depart. “Now, sister. Stay a moment, there’s just one more thing I want to say to you.”

“I cannot tarry,” Elizabeth said, swallowing as she heard how pale and faint her voice was in her own ears. “I must get to the church.”

He leaned close, his voice lowering, a smile on his face as their father came over to help her down. “It’s just this, dearest. If your husband should happen to be an Othello, or perhaps a Herakles and tear you limb from limb I want you to remember and be glad in the fact that we, your family, will be happy to avenge you.”

His teeth were bared, barely even a smile, and she felt cold all over, numb and trembling as her father handed her down from the carriage and towards the church.

CHAPTER 3

“..and charge you both, as ye will answer at the dreadful day of judgment...” the curate intoned, his tiny round body quivering with excitement as he read from the Book of Common Prayer. “...if either of you know any impediment why ye may not be lawfully joined...”

Elizabeth tried as hard as she could to listen to each word. She could feel the beat of

her pulse hammering under the delicate skin of her neck, the heat of the gazes of her family burning into her back.

Perhaps in another life she would have been able to stand here with Mrs. Adams at her side giving her away and Sally and Annie in the little chapel, smiles splitting their faces. Instead, the Duchess and Duke of Rosenberg were there, stiff and still as they listened to the ceremony, each step burned into her mind from the single lesson she had been given.

It had clearly burned her father's wife to be in the same room as her for even that long but they wouldn't want their precious reputation to be sullied by rumors of a ruined wedding day, and if there was one thing the Duchess cared about more fiercely than anything else it was the safety of her children from more Wilkins blades.

"Wilt thou have this woman," the chaplain said, turning to the Duke of Westall. He was standing next to her, his tall frame dwarfing hers. She could almost feel the heat from his body and her own skin felt flushed.

She couldn't think.

"...so long as ye both shall live?"

The Duke didn't look at her, his eyes on the Chaplain, his face serious. "I will."

The Chaplain then turned his attention to Elizabeth and she felt her flush grow hotter as she tried desperately to concentrate. The mixture of fear and anxiety and awareness of him whirling in her mind. Any mistake would be picked apart for months, any slip...

He had finished speaking, Elizabeth realized and said, "I will," as carefully as she could, hoping she had not taken too long.

“Who giveth this woman to be married to this man?” the chaplain asked, looking in broad satisfaction towards the others in the chapel.

There was no pause, though Elizabeth had almost expected there to be one. No one pointed out that she didn’t belong to them or with them so they couldn’t give her away. Her father didn’t turn up his nose or scowl. He stepped forwards instead and said ‘I do’ as though it was something he was pleased about.

That remained with Elizabeth as the ceremony continued. He looked pleased with her for once, and yet he was marrying her to his biggest enemy.

The Minister was reaching for her hand now, giving it to the Duke, putting her hand into his large, scarred one. “Plight your troth, my dear,” he said encouragingly to Elizabeth as though maybe he knew how anxious she was.

She swallowed and had to read the words, but that didn’t seem to cause a stir. She said she would take him as her husband as though she had a choice in the matter, that she would hold to him in sickness and in health, that she gave him her troth before God and this holy man who had kind eyes in his tiny old face.

The Duke let go of her hand and Elizabeth glanced cautiously up at him, and wondered if he had imagined this day, who he had imagined at the altar with him. His expression was still serious as he received the ring from the Minister and placed it on her fourth finger.

“With this ring I thee wed,” the Duke said in a low, thrumming voice. “And with my body I thee worship.”

They said more, but Elizabeth couldn’t hear any of the words. Her part was done. She was married. And she was filled with the thoughts of this tall strong man worshiping her with his body.

“Oh Selina, do pass me some more chocolate!”

“I shall not until you’ve had more buns to fortify yourself with, my dear, you shall not subsist entirely on chocolate.”

“It’s a special day,” Diana, the younger of her two new sisters-in-law, formed a mock pout as she appealed to the elder. Clearly practiced at puppy dog eyes there was still none of the spoiled pettishness that underlay everything Elizabeth’s own sisters did. “It is indeed, but that is no excuse to sup your breakfast only,” Selina said, moving to pile buns onto her younger sister’s plate. “I shall bring you another cup to drink but only when you have finished something more substantial.”

Elizabeth envied them their free laughter and jostling. She could barely bring herself to move, she was sat so close to the Duke - her husband - that moving made her all the more aware of his presence. Her plate had on it a few pieces of fruit and a little bit of cake and of that she had not eaten any.

The wedding ceremony had been bad enough but the madness of the breakfast was quickly making her feel suffocated, hemmed on one side by Dudley and on the other by the new man she belonged to, the man who would decide her whole existence soon.

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They were ensconced in a long room in the Westall Estate, the table laden with everything one could hope for at a breakfast and lined with enough chairs for both families and the friends that the Duke of Westall had invited. It was a vast place, sprawling out over beautiful grounds.

It was overwhelming, the luxuriousness of it all. It was too much. She wanted her room and Sally. She wanted to get away from all the people watching everything that she was doing.

Would this breakfast ever end?

She glanced over at the Duke, or Stephen as she supposed she had the right to call him. He was still very severe, the lines of his face like they were cut from stone. There was no gaiety or joy in that face, though it was handsome. His lips were set into a firm line, his eyes focused on a conversation that his brother was having with her father.

What would he look like if he smiled, she wondered.

“May I have your attention,” he said in a low commanding voice that she thought for a moment was directed at her. Then she realized he was standing, glass in hand and addressing the room. “I ask you all, ladies and gentlemen, to raise your glasses with me to my new bride. I am sure you will agree that her loveliness is only surpassed by how ardently one must feel that I am a lucky man to have secured her affections. To my wife, Elizabeth, the Duchess of Westall.”

She stared up at him, eyes round. The words were so kind, so sweet and unexpected

and yet as he finished his speech he turned his gaze on her and it was cold as ice. There was no affection there for her, nothing kind.

All this time she had been sitting here feeling drawn to him, aware to her very bones of how well he looked and he saw her as nothing but a tool to bring two warring families together as one. She was his enemy and she could see as plainly as day that she was not welcome here in his home.

There was a murmur of appreciation from the gathering, who raised their glasses in response and sipped the light, fragrant champagne.

Elizabeth barely touched hers. The anxiety in her chest was in her throat now, threatening to choke her. It only got worse as Dudley finished a long draught of his drink and leant over towards her seat.

“What a lucky girl you are, dear sister, to have found a man who values you so highly.”

“Indeed,” she said softly, her eyes on her plate.

“I wonder how high that value really is,” he said softly, his lips red from berries and his smile wide with cruelty. “I wonder how high anyone here would value you if they knew more of your true background.”

This did not seem safe to reply to, so she did not.

“Have you ever seen a finer spread? Have you ever seen such a fine group of people gathered together? I simply cannot imagine how you will manage in this world, sister dearest. You are such a poor, clumsy thing. You are sure to embarrass yourself and the Westall name before long.” He put a hand on her arm, his grip tight and painful even as his voice was dripping with fake kindness. “I am only speaking for your own

good, sister. You will have to learn very fast to know your place, after all.”

“Her place is at my side,” said a deep calm voice, and Elizabeth glanced up to see Stephen take Dudley’s hand and remove it firmly from her arm. “I am sure my wife, the Duchess, is aware of how much good you mean her, Lord Barnes. It’s hardly the right conversation for a wedding.”

There was a moment where the tension between them was a frisson of hate, Dudley’s face pale with two spots of flush high on his cheeks in fury at being given so stern a warning.

Elizabeth almost smiled. She had never been defended before, never had a name or title of her own to defend herself with. It made a little of the fear and anxiety filling her ebb away.

“Of course, one simply can’t interrupt a wedding,” Dudley said sweetly, staring at Stephen. “I have to congratulate you on your felicity. It’s very appealing. Perhaps I should be looking for my own wife. You could introduce me to your sisters. The young one looks particularly delectable.”

It felt as though thunder had entered the room with them. Stephen leaned forwards, his voice never raising, his tone never sharpening, and said simply, “I shall not and you will never speak of them again.” However, the expression on his face and the taught lines of his body made Elizabeth shiver.

He was a man who meant what he said. He was a man created for danger.

“How dare you -” Dudley started up a little from his seat, grasping the opportunity immediately to cause trouble as he adored to do but their father was there and putting a hand on his shoulder.

“I am sure whatever this is can be explained as wedding day spirits, is that not so, Westall? My son?”

There was a moment when Elizabeth thought Dudley might do it anyway, a moment when she was sure there would be no bringing this back from the edge.

But then he nodded slowly and sank back into his chair.

It was the first time in her life she had ever seen Dudley not get his way. A small flame that felt like joy lit in her heart and she turned to Stephen, ready to thank him.

He was glaring at her, stormy eyes full of anger. It was as though he felt she was to blame, like he was angry at her, and Elizabeth shrank back a little, turned back to her plate and swallowed her thanks.

After only a little more time, the Rosenberg party decided it was time to leave and with them went the rest of the guests, laughing and complimenting the couple and wishing them the best as though Elizabeth had not sat as still as a mouse for the entire affair.

Once the farewells had been said, Stephen stood again from his seat and glanced at his own family with a small nod. Both young ladies rose and exited the room, soon followed by their brother who seemed a little more reluctant to go.

For the first time since the proposal, they were alone. Elizabeth felt her heart begin to pound once more and she stood too, hating to be so much at a disadvantage to him.

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Why was he so tall! So frustratingly handsome? Why couldn't he have been at least a little ugly so she could look at his face and not feel heat in her veins at the same time?

"Wife," Stephen said seriously, turning to her, his hands clasped behind his back. "I am aware it has been a trying day, but I ask you to remember your position as the new Duchess of Westall. You are no longer the kind of person that Lord Barnes may speak to the way that he was doing."

Was he scolding her? Elizabeth felt a little of her anxiety fade and be replaced with anger. "I am distressed that family matters should have so upset you, Your Grace," she said with slow deliberation. "Perhaps you could educate me on how you would like me to respond in future since you are the expert on all matters."

"You would do well to listen to such instruction," he said, the muscles in his jaw bunching a little as though he were grinding his teeth. "You are clearly ill-prepared to take on the part of being Duchess and you have a lot to learn. It is not my fault that this is true and I shall not apologize for pointing it out."

"And I shall not apologize for pointing out that you are speaking like a pontificating old school master trying to teach a class of children," Elizabeth snapped back. "I shall treat my brother how I decide to treat my brother, it is not for you to tell me the way I should act."

"It is my business if you act in a manner which undermines the respect our family is due!"

"Oh please, Your Grace, do tell me," she knew that she was speaking too much,

saying too much but his words hurt and she could not help but battle back. She would never again be part of a world where all she could do was suffer in silence. “Exactly what respect is that?”

“The respect that you are failing to show me, as your husband and as the Duke of this estate.”

“I am a quick study, Your Grace, I learn from experience. I shall show you the same respect I receive from you and no more.”

Stephen made an explosive gesture with one of his hands. “Why must everything be a battle with you, woman!”

“I cannot be blamed for waging war on a battle ground that has been picked for me,” Elizabeth retorted. “Perhaps you should reconsider your approach, my husband.”

“Perhaps,” he said, stepping closer to her in a long stride, his height looming over her. He leaned down and caught her chin in his scarred fingers, his touch warm even as his eyes were burning with anger and heat. “Perhaps I should introduce you to this new approach when I come to your chambers tonight, my wife.”

Elizabeth swallowed hard, her words evaporating in her mouth as he leaned close, his face near to hers, their eyes locked on each other's. It seemed her body was intensely aware of his, of the mere inches between them. It felt as though she might break apart with how he made her feel, it felt as though she might die if he were to ever know about it. It was like being pinned by a hunter, waiting for him to strike.

“Until then,” he said softly, let her go and walked from the room, leaving her weak, her chest heaving and her face aflame. What had happened? What was that? What was she going to do?

CHAPTER 4

The wench. The obstinate child. She made everything impossible!

Stephen stalked through the halls of his house, his fists still clenched in frustration and his thoughts in a fury over how quickly and easily he lost control in the presence of his new bride.

Just like the first time they had met she was a thorn that worked her way under his skin until he could not help himself but respond to her.

It was not the way he liked to do things. In all his dealings he preferred to be, needed to be meticulous and thoughtful. Stephen planned and prepared, he considered all the possibilities and then he made his move. Even when he was acting fast, he had thought of the consequences but when he was around Elizabeth all that discipline flew away from him and he found himself just reacting.

With a huff of exasperation, he turned his path and made his way to Herbert's chambers, knocking on the solid wood of the door and waiting for an answer before letting himself in. His younger brother was lying on a day bed with a book in hand and a cup of hot chocolate from the breakfast at his side.

Even though it was barely the evening, the breakfast having drawn out longer than Stephen had liked even with the Barnes being surprisingly eager to leave, Herbert was still recovering from the last duel and was in the habit of retiring early to rest.

Stephen drew up a chair and cast a careful look over his brother, checking him for paleness or hidden pain. It had been not quite as near a thing as Stephen had at first feared when the seconds had brought his brother back to the estate as pale as a sheet and bleeding profusely, but he was still sometimes caught in that moment of cold horror and needed to be assured that Herbert was still with them.

“What on earth are you doing here, old man?” Herbert asked, his usual quick grin on his face, dimpling his cheeks. “Are you not a bridegroom who should be with his bride?”

“I wanted to see that you were still well,” Stephen admitted, stealing Herbert’s drink and sipping the sweet frothy contents. “I see that Diana visited.”

“I like chocolate too, thank you,” Herbert said, taking it back with a deftness that Stephen was pleased to see. “But she did tell Perkins to bring some by to me when she heard that I was turning in.”

“I thought so. Any new pains? Any old ones?”

“I am fine, Stephen, you good old fellow do stop fretting,” Herbert leaned towards him and placed a hand on his shoulder. “Come on now, let’s talk intrigue instead. I am getting deuced bored being confined to quarters here and not being able to get about like I’m used to.”

Herbert was far happier riding his horse, hunting or playing any number of games that he could get involved in than being around the house and Stephen knew that his convalescence was weighing on him. Therefore he did not scold or remonstrate over the new topic, but instead sighed.

“There is no intrigue to talk about. The matter is done, the peace is settled and we are now connected to the Barnes family by blood. It will take a lot more than the bad moods of Dudley Barnes to break that if Rosenberg’s attitude is anything to go by.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure,” Herbert said darkly, running a hand down his side where the sword had caught him. “Young Barnes has enough bad moods to float a naval ship, I think.”

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“Even if that is so, they have left and gone back to their own lodgings and hopefully we shall be rid of them for a while.”

“Yes, they did leave very early didn’t they? I thought they would linger a little to gloat, or to see what would happen next. I’ve always found the ladies to be very keen on gossip at least.” Herbert wrinkled his nose a little. “Also did you notice their attitudes throughout? We were all respectfully serious, as the occasion demanded _.”

Stephen snorted a little at this as he had indeed seen his siblings debating who could take the first piece of the wedding cake and it had not been even a little serious.

“As I was saying,” Herbert continued, grinning at him. “We were serious, but they were positively giddy. They had the look of people who have bet on a horse that has taken the cup, or someone who has sold a ringer for more than they could have expected to get for it. And no one, not even Dudley cast me an angry look. It was like their souls were too full of happiness for them to remember how much they hate us.”

“Love is a great bringer of peace,” Stephen said and Herbert had to dive his head under his blanket for a moment to regain his composure. “I assure you, I am aware of all the strangeness of their behavior and still today went better than I could have dared to hope. Rosenberg seems determined to keep the peace despite his son and nothing interrupted the ceremony as I was rather worried it might.”

“I held my breath when the minister asked if anyone knew why you two should not be joined,” Herbert admitted. “I was sure someone was going to leap up and protest. I thought about doing it myself, honestly I did. You should not have to throw away

your happiness for the family.”

He frowned a little, it hadn't been far from his mind either and he hadn't dared glance at Herbert in case he should do something so ridiculously impulsive. “But it did not happen. And I have considered all possible ways that this might go wrong. I have planned for each possibility. I have this in hand, Herbert. Trust me. I will be fine.”

He had more than the matter in hand, in fact, he thought as he remembered the satin-soft warmth of Elizabeth's skin under his fingers. Why could he not get her out of his mind?

“But Stephen,” Herbert said, concern on his face and Stephen stood up.

“Enough, Herbert. I have told you that I have the matter in hand. You must trust me on this.”

They looked at each other for a moment and slowly Herbert nodded, which Stephen was pleased to see. He knew how much his brother had been bothered by the arranged marriage and how he hated that this was the price of peace, but if things were ever going to work he would have the trust of his family to make them work.

“Now, I shall leave you to your rest and to your chocolate. Do try not to spill it on the sheets.”

Herbert laughed, and Stephen left, glad he could leave his brother in a happy mood. Of course now the candles were being lit in the hall and he was forced to think about the fact that it was nighttime. It was nighttime on his wedding day. There was a bed that he was obligated to be in, and he couldn't ignore it anymore. In fact, there were parts of him that were very interested in not ignoring it.

Even as he arrived at the door to Elizabeth's chambers, Stephen was still not sure

what he intended to do. He had thought about it (oh he had thought about it) but he had not been able to make up his mind even when his only knowledge of her had been that brief interlude in the drawing room.

Now he had her skin's touch still on his own like a ghost seducing him.

She was a beautiful woman, her curves and the sweet, luscious softness of her lips and the way her eyes stared up at him and he could imagine them veiled by her hair, messy and wild and underneath him as he – well.

It was his duty to visit her on their wedding night. His duty, nothing more, nothing less.

And though she might be his wife, she was also his enemy, she was in his home, and she might as easily be a viper as a woman. It was impossible to know. His blood might be heated, his body might warm to her but every instinct he had said not to let her near him when he was vulnerable.

There was a lot vulnerable about making love to a woman, a lot that the wrong woman could take advantage of.

He pushed open the door to her chamber, not bothering to knock. He might surprise her in some - activity - perhaps. While he didn't necessarily expect to find her making a poisoned drink or hiding daggers around her room, it was possible that she might be doing something that might allow him to understand her true nature.

It was a fine room, one that befitted her new rank and position. They did not share chambers of course, and it was not only because he was carefully avoiding giving her the opportunity to stab him in his sleep. Even with a Barnes woman he had to admit that being on enemy grounds like she was, would be a scary and lonely experience and giving her a little space that was hers was the least that he could do.

His wife was on the bed, draped in a sedate white nightgown that made her look smaller and more soft, voluptuous in the candle-light. Her expression was startled but her cheeks flushed as he walked in, a soft pink glow that spread from her neck up her face.

He smiled to see it and she immediately frowned at him and leaned forwards to gather the things she had been pouring over, a few books, a hair set, a collection of baubles that barely needed hiding. As she leaned forwards a little of the neck of her nightgown fluttered open and he saw the white swell of her breasts veiled beneath.

Godbut he wanted her.

“Is this my welcome?” he said, taking a cold tone. “My, Elizabeth, one might almost suspect that you weren’t expecting me.”

“I am so sorry, Your Grace,” she said, putting her things into a case at the side of the bed and not even looking at him. “In our conversation before, you completely failed to mention what time I should expect you to come.”

“Should a bride not be constantly expecting her bridegroom on their wedding night?” He stalked to the side of the bed, closer to her, closer to her warmth and the heat that he could feel between them. “Perhaps, wife, you should try to pretend a little interest in our marriage.”

Stephen was aware that he was being unfair. She had performed well throughout the day, though she had seemed listless and quiet at the breakfast. But he needed to see more of the real her, he needed to see anything about her that he could use to convince himself that she wasn’t worth his attention.

Perhaps then he could get back to his usual duties and get her out of his head.

“Oh no, have I not been cheerful enough?” she said, her voice acidic. “I shall attempt to rectify that at once and give you at least three more smiles an hour.”

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Why did she always act as though their conversations were a challenge that she was trying to win? It was infuriating and it was even more infuriating that it made him want to grab her in his arms and crush her mouth to his in an attempt to silence her.

“You could start with one.”

“I don’t want to wear out my cheeks so late in the day,” she said, quickly. “You shall have to wait until the morrow.”

“Were you paying attention to the Minister this morning, wife?” Stephen said, placing a hand at the top of the bed frame so he could lean closer to her, his eyes on her face, on the softness of her skin, on her lips parted and glistening. “Did you or did you not promise to love honor and obey me?”

“I promised many things,” she said, pertly, her eyes on his. She was staring at him with a gaze that he couldn’t understand. “I am trying to master them one at a time. We’ll start with the honoring first. I honor you, husband. I honor you far too much to keep you awake any longer. Perhaps you should retire. You must be tired.”

“I am no more tired than you are honoring me,” he said, baring his teeth in a dangerous smile. “What are all these strange things that you were looking at?”

“They are personal,” she said, her tone short.

“Are there secrets between husband and wife?”

“I’m sure that you have your own, so in the spirit of gracefulness you must allow me

mine.”

She was slippery like an eel and far too pleased with herself for this last, Stephen thought. As though she had bested him, as though anyone could best him.

“I never promised I was a graceful man, wife. I promised, in fact, to worship you with my body and to endow you with my worldly goods, not to be graceful and not to allow you secrets.”

There was a little silence as they considered each other. Stephen did not find any indication that his new bride was minding having them so close to each other. In fact she was turned towards him, her whole attitude like she was being drawn towards him whether she realized it or not. She was like a flower turning towards the sun.

“Is that what you want, Elizabeth?” he asked, dropping his voice to a husky growl. “Do you want my body to worship you?”

Her flush rose higher and Stephen saw the way her gaze dropped to his lips for a moment, her own mouth slightly open as her tongue peeked out and wet her lips. It was more than any man could be expected to bear.

Elizabeth wet her lips, her breathing rough and unsteady in her own ears. She didn’t know what she had expected to come of her husband’s sudden appearance or his barbed words but he was so close, leaning over her, his tall muscular frame bracketed against the bed frame and his attention raking over her body as though he could see through her slip and was drinking her in.

She took a short, ragged breath, her mouth opening a little and then his arms were around her, strong and firm and his mouth was on her own. It was hungry, fierce, his lips claiming hers and leaving her barely able to breathe. His mouth moved, his hand was in her hair and she tipped her head back, desperate to taste more of him, all other

thoughts fleeing from her mind.

The fire that had burned between them from the beginning of the day, from the moment when he had first pressed her up against a wall and whispered in her ear was ablaze at last. Elizabeth could not form a single thought. She was captivated by him, helpless in the face of his desire, aflame at his touch.

They fell back on the bed, the covers rumpling under her fingers as Stephen pressed his body down in top of her, holding himself up with one hand and sliding dangerous fingers up the tender skin of her side towards where her breasts were heaving with every shaking breath.

His lips were on her neck, setting her nerves afire and she could only take him in in glimpses, her eyes fluttering closed. He wastouchingher, and she needed more, she needed him to explore her, kiss her, undress her even. She wanted -

She wanted.

A soft desperate moan escaped her as he swirled his tongue against a spot just underneath her chin and she felt rather than heard his answering chuckle.

All the fire in her veins turned to ice so quickly that it hurt. He was laughing at her. At her, the silly little virgin wife who was so quick and easy that all she needed was a kiss to be desperate for his touch. Of course he was laughing! She must be a thing of ridicule to him, something to be made fun of with his family, something to mock and pity!

Elizabeth pulled back but there was not far to go so she pushed at his chest until she could get enough space between them for her hand to fly and lay a blow across his cheek. He stopped, startled, no more mirth in his eyes as he stared at her, both their chests heaving.

“You may be a duke, sir,” she said, keeping her voice steady with all the effort she could muster. “And you may be richer than Croesus. And you may even be my husband, but there are things that are out of your reach to order or to buy no matter how much you might wish otherwise. I am one of them.”

The Duke stepped back, his entire expression going so cold so quickly that she was forced to remember the dangerous manner he had wrapped around him like a cloak when Dudley had dared challenge him. He could not be the kind of man one could strike with impunity but as he stared at her with those cold, thoughtful eyes she could not allow a moment of weakness to slip through her determination.

“Ah, Elizabeth,” he said finally, touching his cheek with one languid hand. “Your hands are shaking.”

His gaze was a little less cold, and she opened her mouth to retort, worried that he was about to laugh at her again but he was too quick.

“I will never force anything upon you, you may be sure of that. I am sorry indeed that I misjudged and you were not pleased with our interlude, but I promise you, my wife,” and here his voice was warm and molten and made her shiver for something other than fear. “I will not touch you again until you beg me to do so.”

It was so outlandish a suggestion, so wild a thought that Elizabeth could not corral her words together in time to protest before the door had closed, leaving her alone and flustered and wondering.

CHAPTER 5

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“Deuced awkward this morning!” Herbert said loudly, flinging himself into the chair in Stephen’s office without a further word of explanation and tilting his head back to look at the ceiling. “I say, are you going to be encouraging the lady Rapunzel to join us for breakfast or will she continue to cloister herself away from our dirty Wilkins eyes?”

It took Stephen a moment to catch up with what his brother was saying. This was not unusual. Herbert was an impetuous young man, always rushing into things head first, including conversations. It could be quite difficult to follow what he was saying. “I beg your pardon?”

“Your wife,” Herbert said, tipping forwards with a frown on his brow. “You must have noted she was not at the breakfasting table? We had a place set for her special or Diana would have been sat at your right like she usually is.”

Stephen raised an eyebrow at Herbert. He had been aware of Elizabeth’s absence like it burned him. Throughout breakfast he had been able to think of little else, of the fire in her eyes the last time they had spoken and the way they had left things. He had spent his night thinking on the feeling of her warm soft breasts under his hands and the way she had sounded when he kissed her - that soft breathless moan that had seemed to be torn from her lips.

However he did not see what business it was of his little brother.

God willing this would not become a habit. His business with his wife was not to become debated by his siblings at every turn. He would not stand for it.

“Perhaps she has no appetite in the morning,” he suggested calmly, frowning a little as Herbert spun to his feet and started to pace the room.

“That’s no excuse, Stephen, and you must know it. It’s a time for the family to gather together and make friendly, to talk through our day ahead and if my new lady sister will not be friendly with us then what are we to do with the matter?”

“I hardly think that one missed breakfast is proof that my wife intends no civility towards you -” Stephen was cut off as Selina swept into the room and sat in the chair that Herbert had just vacated.

“What are we talking about?” she asked briskly. “Elizabeth’s absence at breakfast? Good. I feel there is a lot to say about it.”

“See? Selina agrees with me!”

Herbert said this as if the two of them did not frequently agree with each other in ways that Stephen felt were intentionally engineered to bring him grey hairs and grief.

“If you are saying that we must do something about our new sister avoiding us, then yes I do!”

“Exactly, how are we to keep an eye on her and ensure that she is not plotting against the family if she’s always hiding in her room?”

“It is plain good manners to join the family at mealtimes,” Selina huffed, ignoring Herbert’s dramatics as Diana slipped into the room and patted him on the arm.

“I don’t know if a Barnes can manage good manners,” Herbert added. “I haven’t seen any evidence of them in the rest of the family.”

“I think the Duchess might be made of nothing but good manners,” Diana said thoughtfully, her soft gentle voice making the statement less sharp and more amusing.

Selina smiled a little. “That’s certainly true. However the rest of them are as bad as each other. I am sure I am going to have to box young Lord Barnes around the ears one of these days, he is always talking such incredible rubbish.”

“Quite,” Herbert said. “And now we don’t just have to deal with it outside of the home but within it as well!”

Stephen wondered if his wife was indeed avoiding the family or if she were simply tired after their exciting evening the previous day.

He had thought that maybe the moment might have been soured by what happened afterwards, but in the light of day he was surprised to find that he held nothing in his heart but respect for Elizabeth. Whatever had happened that she had not been pleased by, she had been bold and brave enough to defend herself. He liked that.

He would be happy to wait until she wanted him to touch her again and he had a suspicion that it might not take too long for that to happen.

“Well, Stephen? What are you going to do about it? Or shall I do something?” Selina made a movement as if to get up and Diana looked alarmed while Herbert looked delighted.

“I think not,” Stephen said quickly. He loved Selina dearly, she was an intelligent young woman who had long held that the feud between the families was foolishness. It was a position that Stephen suspected was used to cover up how deathly afraid she was for their safety. She was fierce and strong and loyal but she was not tactful and anything she said to Elizabeth would become a war. “I do not see why you are both so concerned over one missed breakfast. If it were to become a pattern then

maybethere would be cause to worry, but as it is I believe there is no harm in a lady lying abed on the day after her wedding.”

Selina frowned, unconvinced and Herbert folded his arms. Only Diana looked open to his words.

“We have her under our roof here, Stephen,” Herbert said earnestly. “We don’t know anything about her, no one has ever even heard of her and she’s a Barnes! She hates us just like her family does. I don’t like having her here, especially if she’s not going to even pretend at friendship.”

“I feel the same,” Selina said firmly. “I will not forget the harm her family has done to ours. There’s a peace, and I respect that. But all that history is not simply washed away because she has changed her name.”

“Enough of this,” Stephen said severely, his tone stern. “I will not have you speaking like this about my wife. Elizabeth is the Duchess of Westall now, she is my spouse and you must all remember this and respect it. I will listen to reasonable concerns and objections but this speculation and gossip has no place in our home. Do you understand me?”

When Stephen had been barely seven and ten, just finished with university and full of all the passion of youth he had been forced to return home in a rush to a dead father and dying mother. Since then he had raised his siblings, run his estate and built a reputation that protected them all.

When he spoke, they listened. Now was no different. Herbert nodded mulishly and Selina frowned but didn’t argue which was as good as he was going to achieve with her.

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“Now,” he said. “Go about your days. I have a great deal to work on. I will see you at luncheon.”

It was a little later in the morning when Stephen laid down his quill and massaged at his temples. No matter how much he needed to concentrate on the expenses and profits report from his solicitors he was struggling to focus.

No matter how much he might have stood against his siblings on the matter, he could not deny that having them and his wife stay estranged would do no good to the hard fought for and barely won truce that the wedding had been intended to create.

If she continued to avoid his brother and sisters it would only breed suspicion and resentment in them. On the happenstance that she was not intending to cause insult their changing manner towards her would in turn cause her own feelings of resentment to breed like a terrible endless cycle and one that he must be responsible for ending.

He rubbed at his eyes and wished, not for the first time, that he could ask his father’s advice. The previous Duke of Westall had been a quiet serious man who had seemed to manage everything about the estate with a deftness that Stephen both envied and desired. Perhaps it was how young they had all been when their father had been stolen from them by Albert Barnes, but it had truly felt as though he were infallible.

Stephen wondered what he might say if he knew how his eldest son had gone about ending the age-old feud.

Perhaps he would be proud, perhaps not. Either way Stephen would not and could not

regret his actions. He would see no more duels, no more death, no more disaster. The truce would last, the peace would live even if he had to shut up his siblings and his wife in a room until they were friends!

With that in mind he stood briskly from his desk and strode from the room. It was pointless to pursue his work further until he had taken steps to suit action to plan.

As he walked briskly through the halls he caught a glimpse of a woman's figure in the distance and knew immediately it must be Elizabeth. She was walking with her young maid, their heads bent together - the golden hair of his wife contrasted against the dark locks of the maid.

They were so caught up in conversation that they did not see him approaching until he was nearly upon them and he was able to see them laughing and hear their light conversation.

"Ah Your Grace, but you cannot be surprised by it. All such places have them - and you will get used to them soon enough."

"I cannot countenance that, Sally. They are such loud creatures. I shall be hearing that unsettling cry in my sleep, I am sure of it!"

"There's no doubt that you shall, Your Grace, but more likely because they will be calling to each other on the grounds and not because of any nightmares. I hear that His Grace, the Duke of Rosenberg, was intending on getting some peacocks soon, but I doubt that they will be able to out-scream your sisters of a morning."

Elizabeth smiled, bright and amused - an expression that was so strikingly new to Stephen that he darted forwards and called her name.

She looked up and her face fell into a cold, polite expression as she and her maid

curtseyed. "Your Grace."

"Come now, surely we are less formal than this by now, Elizabeth," Stephen said. He felt disappointed to see her smile go and illogically angry at her for making him feel something so absurd. Did he really want her to smile at him so badly? "Good morrow to you. I have come to ask why you did not attend breakfast with the family."

She flushed a little and he was pleased to see it. He knew exactly what she was thinking about, the moment on the bed where his hand was placed across her breast and his mouth on her neck and she writhed beneath him for more.

It was good to see that he could affect her as much as she was affecting him.

"Forgive me," she said, frowning a little. "I did not know I was allowed to attend."

It was so strange an answer that Stephen did not immediately reply and she hurried to fill the silence, her cheeks darkening in color as she avoided his gaze.

"I have not been abed all morning, however. I spoke to your housekeeper, Mrs. Pugh, and she has shown me about the estate so I can better understand my new home since I did not receive a tour yesterday."

This was clearly a reproof aimed at himself and Stephen frowned at her. He had barely had time to deal with all the matter pertaining to the wedding, let alone showing her around the estate. He had meant to do it today, and would be having words with Mrs. Pugh about taking on the duties in his stead. "I trust you are satisfied with the place? Apart from the peacocks apparently?"

She blinked in surprise, then seemed to realize he had heard at least part of her conversation with her maid. "I cannot imagine becoming fond of the creatures, they seem angry and loud and extraordinarily tuneless, like a child trying to play the

trumpet.”

“It’s not a bad comparison,” he allowed. “I expect that you have not yet seen them display their beautiful tails. The male peacocks do so to tell the lady of their desire that they are interested in them.”

Their eyes met and hers slid away from his.

“The rest of the estate is very beautiful,” she said simply, and he was a little disappointed at the lack of fire in her tone. “I am sure I will get lost for a while to come, there are so many rooms.”

“You will get used to it,” he said briskly. “And in future if you have any questions about it you are to come to me, do you understand?”

“Is that an order, Your Grace?” she asked, a little of the fire reentering her gaze.

“If you follow orders,” he said. “I have seen little evidence to the fact.”

She huffed crossly and folded her hands. “I can understand simple instructions, I’m sure.”

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“Then understand this,” he said, stepping a little closer to her and watching her eyes swing up to fix on his face. There was a color now on her cheeks, color that reminded him of how she flushed in pleasure, how she moved beneath him. “I will have you at breakfast with the family every morning from now on starting with tomorrow. It is not optional.”

She blinked, her eyes big with surprise. “If that is what you want.”

“It is,” he said. He wanted many things from her, but he walked on before he could be tempted to tell her them.

CHAPTER 6

“You beast, Herbert, I was going to have that bun!”

“Don’t worry, sis, I’m sure that cook can bring more out if the need is desperate.”

“It’s not desperate, it’s a point of justice.” Diana frowned at her brother scoldingly as he tried to fit as much of the stolen bun into his mouth as he could. “You’ve had twice as many as I have!”

“I rule that Diana is correct,” Stephen said drolly from the head of the table. “And find Herbert in contempt of breakfasting politeness. You shall forfeit your plums to her this instant.”

Elizabeth sat quietly with a warm, sweet coffee in front of her and several small pieces of toast. It was like this every morning now. She had been coming to breakfast

since Stephen had ordered her to last week and her heart hurt a little more every day at how comfortable this family was with each other.

She was even beginning to get to know them all a little. Herbert was nearly as tall as Stephen, but more wiry and he was quick-witted and stubborn. She could tell how protective he was over his family and how much he hated having her in their home from the way he watched her every movement out of the corner of his eyes.

Selina was a surprise, Elizabeth had heard Lottie and Rose talk about her before, insinuating that she was an ugly old maid or a man-hating revolutionary. She was a very handsome young woman, a little younger than Elizabeth herself and very fierce in her opinions. Elizabeth had often seen her wandering the estate with a book or writing furiously in a study or going out to meet friends and discuss.

And finally there was Diana, barely eighteen, beautiful and round-faced with a constant shy smile and sunny disposition. Elizabeth couldn't help but long to be Diana's friend and loathed the fact that she could see her youngest sister-in-law's painful shyness any time they spoke.

What kind of monstrous things did they think she thought about them? What damage would the feud between their families carry on into their home life now?

Of all of them it was her husband that was the greatest mystery. He was kind and funny with his siblings, but she only ever saw him at breakfast. He never approached her outside of the meal, she never saw him nor had he come by her chambers again. It had surprised her at first, as she had been ready for that battle to begin anew, but now she was just confused. What was this life she was living and who was this man who would hold to his promise so firmly instead of taking what he could demand, what belonged to him by every right of law.

"Sir, I protest that plums are too high a price to pay for a bun!" Herbert was saying in

a dramatic tone while Selina threw tiny pieces of bread at him from her corner.

Stephen tsked and stopped the bread throwing with a gesture and a shake of his head. "Please have a mind for the maid," he said firmly. "And as for you, Herbert, I fear you should have considered the penalties before robbing your own, dear sister!"

"Woe, woe is upon me," Herbert cried, piling plums onto Diana's plate and pretending not to notice as she shoved them back into his pockets. "I shall go out to the streets and starve!"

"With half of the baked goods of England in your stomach?" Selina demanded, causing Diana to giggle and Herbert to grin impishly.

They were so bright and joyous in the mornings, their conversations were so friendly and fun and Elizabeth wished so hard that she could join in. There seemed to be an invisible wall between her and the rest of the family, a different wall than there had been at home, a new and seemingly just as impossible wall to scale. Every time she opened her mouth she could see how suspicious they were of her and even though she had told herself she would not let it affect her, it only served to remind her how tenuous her position was.

Any moment her husband might decide that she wasn't worth the trouble and might decide to cast her away or shut her away or banish her.

This was more freedom than she had ever had in her life and she was terrified that she might lose it.

"Order, order," Stephen called, settling the family down. "Assuming that everyone has supped their fill, may I ask that the family attempt to keep disruptions to a minimum today as I have an important meeting with my accountant in my office and I do not want to be disturbed."

It made her heart ache with how much she wanted to be inside instead of outside the wall. She wanted this, this easy acceptance and love. It was so much harder seeing what a family could truly be like and knowing that even what her family had been to each other had fallen far short of the mark.

As Elizabeth finished her toast she noticed that Diana was casting glances her way, eyes flicking to her and back to her plate as though she were afraid of being spotted.

Elizabeth was sure that Diana had a secret.

Every day she snuck away from the breakfast table and went away somewhere in the estate. She didn't return for some time and the times that Elizabeth saw her return she had been flushed and furtive.

The plates were being cleared away as Elizabeth saw Diana stand and slip out of the room once again and this time she decided she would find out exactly what was going on with this one, almost definitely harmless, mystery.

By the time she had tracked down Diana she had gone into seven wrong rooms, surprised three maids and had an extremely awkward conversation with a gardener who had thought she was trying to inspect his roses and kept trying to take her outside.

For all that she was an outsider within the family, the servants certainly tried to impress and please her which was a feeling that Elizabeth was not used to yet.

It was the sound of singing that drew her attention to a small music room towards the east of the ground floor. It wasn't a room that she had been in before and she was a little anxious about sliding the door open and peeking inside, however her curiosity was so strong by this point that she felt she must expire if she did not find out immediately what was happening.

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Inside the room, which was mostly bare, Diana was whirling around the floor in a waltz singing to herself in a low, melodious voice. She was flushed from the activity, her dark eyes sparkling and some of her hair loose and around her face.

Elizabeth must have made some sort of noise for Diana stopped short and they stared at each other for a long moment before they both curtsied and said, "I'm so sorry!" at the same time and then laughed.

"I am so sorry to have interrupted, Lady Diana," Elizabeth said quickly. "I didn't mean to intrude!"

"Oh not at all - Lady - Mrs. - Your Grace?" Diana stammered a little and her flush deepened. "What would you like me to call you?"

"Would Elizabeth be too great an imposition?"

Diana hesitated a little and Elizabeth felt her heart sink. But then she smiled and nodded. "Of course not. And you must call me Diana in return. We shall be very cordial friends."

"We shall," Elizabeth said, falling over herself a little in her hurry to agree. "Might I ask what you are doing in here dancing on your own? I have noticed you come to do it most mornings and I was ablaze with curiosity to find the cause."

"Oh," Diana fanned herself with her hand. "Oh I expect it will sound rather silly to you, but I'm ever so worried about my first season. I haven't been out yet and I know I'm a little old now and that everyone will be paying me all sorts of attention because

of who my brother is and how much power he has and everything and I couldn't bear it if I were to mess up the dances but Herbert won't practice with me and Selina finds it such a bore!"

"Oh - oh no," Elizabeth said, feeling her own stomach twist a little in sympathy. She could not imagine the pressure that Diana must feel being the last Wilkins to come out and so late for her first season. "Why don't we dance together then, I could certainly use the cheerful exercise of it!"

Diana beamed and Elizabeth knew that for once she had said the right thing. "Oh shall we? That would be wonderful. I'm sure you know all the best steps and you can tell me where I am going wrong."

Perhaps she had said the right thing and the wrong thing.

Elizabeth gestured a beat with one hand and they took off, awkwardly humming different tunes and almost careening into each other. It was hard to keep up without any music or any other dancers, and the only times before that she had ever even been allowed to dance had been at a few fun country events that she had snuck out to with Sally.

It had been very different kind of dancing and Elizabeth waited with bated breath for Diana to point out how all her steps were wrong and she was off the beat or the most ungraceful clod in existence as Dudley had termed her.

"Let's try a quadrille," Diana said, breathlessly. "Come on! Follow my lead!"

The steps to this one were brisk but simple and they were soon prancing around the room, dancing towards and apart from each other, their hands joined and held high. Elizabeth found herself laughing, caught up in the moment. It was impossible to be gloomy around Diana, she thought. The girl was sunshine through and through.

“Again,” she gasped as they came to a stop. “Again!”

“A moment’s pause, I beg you, Elizabeth,” Diana said, nearly double with laughing. “I must catch my breath before I go on.”

Elizabeth nodded her assent and waited for a few minutes while Diana caught her breath and then they started again, both of them paying more attention to the steps this time as they made their way around the room.

“Oh how different this would be with a gentleman,” Diana called.

“I think so, though we’d need two to do it properly,” Elizabeth said back. “Still I think we’re getting on marvelously enough without them!”

“We are, we definitely are!” Diana bounced in towards her and then away again. “Herbert never dances with me this long, it’s lovely of you to spend so much time on it.”

“It’s a pleasure, I assure you,” Elizabeth said, and was nearly startled out of her skin when a deep man’s voice said from behind them, “What is a pleasure?”

They both stopped still and turned to the door. Elizabeth felt her face flame red in embarrassment to see Stephen standing there, his arms folded and an expression of faint bemusement on his face. “Whatever are the two of you doing? I heard a strange commotion coming from in here but I did not expect to see this.”

“My goodness, Stephen!” Diana rushed to him, no fear in her for her intimidating brother. “I have been practicing for my season, of course, I want to be ever so ready. And Elizabeth came to find me and she’s been dancing with me this morning, isn’t that kind of her? It’s so dull doing it on my own!”

“Very kind indeed,” Stephen said, his gaze unreadable as Elizabeth forced herself to meet it. “I am glad the two of you have been productively engaged.”

“It’s really been lovely,” Diana said. “Really Elizabeth you must dance with Stephen next! He’s a wonderful dancer, easily the best I’ve ever seen. Come Stephen, you must do it. She’s been so nice to me!”

“Would you like that, Elizabeth?” Stephen asked, his gaze penetrating.

She knew her face must be bright red, but she saw the eagerness in Diana’s eyes and knew that she could not let the girl down. Not after they were finally making progress. “Of course,” she said a little stiffly. “I would be delighted.”

She curtsied, remembering from somewhere that this was the right thing to do and Stephen bowed in response, hand to his chest. He then reached out a hand to her and drew her into the center of the room.

There was no music in the air, no orchestra to play, no other dancers. Elizabeth had heard stories of the glittering events that her sisters and brother were invited to, the way the bodies moved around the floor like one, the wonderful food and wine, the beauty of it all. She had longed to go to just one.

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This was somehow more magical than any real ball could ever have been.

Stephen's hand was holding her fingertips and she could feel blazing desire across her skin. His gaze was on her own and his eyes were so intense that she felt like she couldn't breathe. Even though she did not know any of the steps she felt as though she didn't need to. He drew her with him, took her about the floor with a mastery of movement that made it feel as natural as if they had been doing it their whole lives.

He knew exactly how to move her body and the thought made her heart pound in her chest. Stephen was the center of her world and they could have been surrounded by crowds or all alone and it would not have made a single bit of difference.

When they finally stopped and he bowed to her, she could barely remember herself enough to curtsy back.

"Thank you for the enchanting dance, Duchess," he said, the hint of a smile at the corners of his lips, his eyes blazing..

"It was my pleasure, Your Grace," she murmured, wishing she could take his hand again and that she could keep feeling the way he made her burn with desire. Had any woman ever felt thisway after a simple dance? Was it just her with this man? Why did he tempt her so, devour her with his eyes? Her knees felt weak as she fought to keep a blush from her face.

"Have a good day, ladies," Stephen said, his face serious and stern once more. "Do try not to disturb the household any further."

Diana giggled as though he were not scolding them and Elizabeth forced herself to just nod. She didn't watch him walk away, she couldn't. Instead she walked to the window and looked out across the grounds as he left. It was a beautiful day, but there was a storm within her heart.

CHAPTER 7

“What about this one?” Sally asked, pulling out a modest pelisse in a sensible duck's egg blue. It wasn't fancy or fashionable, but it wasn't too dull either and Elizabeth was desperate to avoid the embarrassment of having to reuse her wedding dress too soon.

She also suspected that one could hardly wear a gown one had been married in on a perambulation around a park, but it was one of the things that she could only suspect and not be sure of.

“It will have to do,” she said heavily. “It's not like we have a great range to choose from.”

In fact her room had come with a very large wardrobe and a cunningly fashioned dresser but her possessions were so small in number that she still kept them in her cases out of fear of how sad and foolish they would look against such grand backgrounds.

“If we had a little more time,” Sally said, shooing her to her feet and helping her on with the pelisse with a critical eye. “I could have done more than a little magic with some lace or a bit of ribbon, Your Grace, on my oath I could. And I shall do so this very evening so you shall not be caught out like this again!”

Elizabeth smiled at her friend. “I appreciate it, Sally. I don't want to be seen to be embarrassing the Duke and his family by being too shabby to be out with them.”

“Maybe he should give you an allowance to get the right clothes then,” Sally said, a saucy note in her voice and Elizabeth looked over her shoulder. She was constantly worried that someone might just walk in as they had back in her old home, and it would be a terrible thing for Sally to get into trouble with the Wilkins family.

“Be careful what you say,” she said softly but firmly. “He has no obligation to do any more than he already does, and I am grateful that we have as much freedom and peace as we have had so far. Is this not better than living under my father’s roof?”

“That’s not a big stile to climb over, Your Grace,” Sally said, pulling back and pursing her lips over the ensemble that they were creating. “There’s not many places that could be much worse.”

“Nonsense,” Elizabeth said briskly. “I have everything I need and more than I expected. Now help me with my hair and let’s talk about what we need to do to prepare for the trip to London in the next few months.”

It was a carefully chosen topic change and Elizabeth smiled to herself as Sally flew into a state of raptures.

“Oh Your Grace, I’ve got shivers just thinking about it! London! To think that I would ever go somewhere so fancy! And you’ll be at all the best places with all the best people, too!”

“I’ll be supporting Diana,” Elizabeth said, feeling a flurry of nerves at the thought that she might be expected to be on show herself as the new wife of the Duke of Westall. “It’s not really about me. It’s her season and we will all do our best to make sure that it is a lovely one for her.”

“Of course, and Lady Diana is a lovely lady, so genteel and sweet to everyone,” Sally said firmly. “She deserves to shine like a star, Your Grace, but you shine like the sun

and I hope His Grace will let your light be seen.”

Her hair was fixed cunningly and pinned and Elizabeth took a look at herself in the mirror. While she would hardly turn heads and was far from being a fashion plate, she looked respectable which was exactly what she was hoping to achieve.

“I shall head down to the drawing room,” she said, taking her bonnet and gloves from Sally. “I hope it goes well.”

It had been only the previous evening that Stephen had told her that a young Mr. Dewsbury would be coming to pay court to Selina on the morrow and that he would be accompanying them on a promenade with her at his side.

It had not been a request so Elizabeth did not view it as one, and she hoped dearly that this would be the right gentleman for Selina. Her sister-in-law was loud and forthright about how she felt about women’s rights, the need for more education and inclusion of ladies in various fields, but Elizabeth suspected that the fact that her first season had been six years back was beginning to bother her.

Sally waved her off and Elizabeth hurried down to the drawing room, her heart fluttering at the thought of walking arm in arm with her husband in public. It would be her first appearance as his wife and she was only glad that it was not exactly Hyde Park they would be walking in yet.

“I was reading the other day about that child who discovered those astonishing bones in Dorset,” Selina said, her face animated. “Some scientists claim it is a crocodile, though what a crocodile would be doing on the coast of England puzzles me to no end. I have looked over the bones at length and I do not think they could possibly be a crocodile, I have seen pictures of them and they are lizard like creatures while this beast has a long - sort of like a beak and fins at once, is that not incredible?”

Mr. Dewsbury, a fashionable young man related to a well-placed marquess, had a glazed expression on his face any time Elizabeth caught sight of it from where she and Stephen were walking behind the couple. He nodded a little and Selina continued talking.

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“I would love to go out there and look at the bones myself. I think it must be terribly thrilling to be able to find ancient things in the earth and learn about the secrets of the world that way.”

“Indeed,” Mr. Dewsbury said slowly.

“Of course we simply must get more women into the field. When I think of the steps that women scientists have taken, leaps in some cases it makes me shudder to think how many brilliant minds we may have lost over the years to the foolish idea that women’s place is not in learning, it makes me sick to my soul.”

Elizabeth glanced at Stephen and saw him watching his sister in a mixture of fondness and concern. It was strange to see a man so fond of his family, it was certainly not anything she had experienced growing up. The Duchess was fond of her children, but distant and her father had a note of cruelty to all his interactions.

“Do you read a lot of books, Lady Selina?” Mr. Dewsbury asked suddenly, and Selina looked taken aback.

“As many as I deem good for my mind, Mr. Dewsbury,” she said quickly, her tone tart. “Do you not?”

“By Jove no, I much prefer to be out doing than to be staying home and thinking,” he said, a little pompously, Elizabeth thought. “Give me my horse and a hunt any day, or a fine ride over the heath or a shoot at one of my friends’ estates.”

“I believe I could tell that about you, sir,” Selina said slowly. “You had the air of a

man who does not prefer thinking about you.”

There was a moment as everyone on the walk waited for Mr. Dewsbury to understand that he had been insulted, but it didn't seem to happen. Instead he looked rather pleased with himself. Stephen turned his head to glance at Elizabeth, an expression of foreboding on his face. On an impulse Elizabeth squeezed his arm quickly, hoping that this would be comforting.

“It's understandable that you would want to stay in the home,” he said to Selina, missing the dangerous way her posture shifted. “It's what all ladies should do, sweet fragile things, but I'm a man. And men are meant to be out doing. And also books just aren't good for the mind, Lady Selina. You will find that you become sick.”

“I did not know that you had studied medicine, Mr. Dewsbury,” Selina said. “But perhaps you are right. I'm beginning to feel sick now. Perhaps you will excuse me while my brother takes me home.”

“Of course, of course, I see a few of my friends, I hope you feel better,” he gave a cursory bow and was already walking on towards some young men as Selina turned back to Elizabeth and Stephen.

Stephen looked thunderous, and Selina looked both cold and disappointed at once. It was as disastrous a moment as it could be, and Elizabeth's caution about engaging with her siblings-in-law melted a little in the face of the hurt feelings she could see Selina was hiding.

“I cannot think that the loss of his attentions will be a great loss to you,” she said quietly. “He is one of the most boorish men I have met.”

“Considering who your brother is, that must be saying something,” Selina said sharply, moving up to take Stephen's other arm, who shot her a quelling glance.

Elizabeth was taken aback and unsure how to respond. It wasn't really a jab at her, but it also felt like it was directed at her, like she and Dudley were connected in more ways than their father.

"I will communicate that you are not interested in continuing the courtship," Stephen said firmly. "If that is what you want."

Selina nodded. "I can overlook some things, but not a detestation of books, of learning."

"Nor should you," Elizabeth burst out. "It's a part of who you are. Who you marry should be in harmony with that."

They were walking underneath canopies of trees, the branches tangling overhead into a beautiful green dappled tunnel. The weather was warmer than expected, a sort of golden day of crisp air and gentle winds that would have felt perfect if it weren't for the tension in the air.

Elizabeth was consumed with the desire for a few minutes to walk through the trees on her own, perhaps to dip her hand into the running brook or to seek out birds' nests or squirrels to watch.

She had spent so much of her life cooped up in her room or sneaking out into the estate to watch the wildlife that she had not realized how much becoming a duchess and not being able to disappear for hours on end would affect her.

There was so little freedom in her world, no matter what she did.

"Thank you for your advice, sister," Selina snapped. "But considering that you did not do any courtship of your own, forgive me if I do not value it above my own thoughts on the matter."

“Selina,” Stephen said warningly. “Enough.”

It was a familiar feeling, this. Not being able to do anything right. No matter what she said it would be twisted and used against her. Elizabeth pursed her lips and fell silent, letting the other two take the lead back to the coach. Once they were inside she fell into silence and looked out the window.

Stephen was telling Selina that she would find the right man and that he would ensure that she was supported in what she wanted to do, a luxury of freedoms that Elizabeth couldn't even dream of. Was it possible for two women from the same household to be so different in position? She was a duchess and yet she had less say in her life than her husband's sister.

“No, I shall say something!”

Elizabeth realized that she had fallen into her thoughts so deeply that she had stopped listening to her companions completely. They were drawing up to the house, the graceful lines of the building beautiful against the backdrop of gardens and woodlands.

It was such a beautiful house. Somehow it felt less grim than the Rosenburg estate, less poisoned by cruelty. It felt like a place that had been made by people who had summer in their hearts.

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Selina was looking at her, her eyes ablaze with anger and Elizabeth could not think of what she had done to get this reaction.

“You do this every time,” Selina said forcefully. “We cannot move or speak without you going quiet and mournful and sulking as though it is us who are the villains persecuting you!”

“I assure you I don’t...”

Selina cut her off. “You do! You wouldn’t even come eat with us without Stephen forcing you to, I heard how he had to order you to come. And you make no conversation no matter how much we try to make you feel welcome. You sit there and you suffocate us and I have had enough of it.”

“Selina,” Stephen said warningly. “Stop this.”

“No!” she got out of the coach and Elizabeth followed, full of confusion and not a little anger. Why couldn’t they see that all she was doing was trying to be polite to them, trying to keep them happy and not to overstep!

“Lady Selina,” she said as evenly as she could. “Do you think your current behavior is friendly? I attempted conversation and you rounded on me, you cannot be surprised that I am not pleased with your treatment!”

“We will have this out,” Selina said, rounding on Elizabeth. “Have we called you out for coming from a family that murdered our parents? Have I told you how my first season I couldn’t focus on any of my suitors because my older brother was trying to

get himself killed? Have I railed at you for Herbert's near miss with death? What is it?"

"You act as though I have been responsible for any of those things," Elizabeth retorted, quivering with fear and anger. "I haven't done anything to you!"

"No, but you haven't done anything for us either," Herbert said, striding up from the house and standing with his sister, aligning himself against her. "You haven't made any effort to reach out to us. You avoid us at every turn."

"Stop this!" Stephen stepped forwards and Elizabeth was startled to find him standing next to her, supporting her. "I have spoken on this before and I do not want to have to do so again. You will respect my wife in my house!"

CHAPTER 8

"No," Elizabeth said, barely knowing what she was doing. Her mouth was moving before she could think things through. It was something she was completely unused to and she did not know what would happen next.

She looked at her husband, standing next to her and aligned against his own family and then she looked at his siblings, Herbert and Selina, resentful, rebellious, angry.

This was a kind house before she had come to it. A house of laughter and friendship. It felt wrong on a level that seeped to her bones that the family should be split because of her. It felt like something that her father would laugh over.

Squaring her shoulders she stepped away from Stephen and towards Herbert and Selina, noticing their wary expressions. "They do not have to respect me, Stephen. I haven't earned their respect. I did not mean to cause offense but I see that I have, and there can be no healing of wounds with no acknowledgement that they exist."

She took a breath, her heart thudding in her chest. It was hard to be open and vulnerable, to risk mockery and disdain. She was scared, she was hurt and angry. She hated her own family in that moment, hated how they cursed her every footstep. Her future was tarred because of the name she had been born into and it didn't seem fair.

“We don't speak about the feud,” she said slowly. “I think that's a mistake. We all know that the reason our marriage even happened was to bring a unity between the Wilkins and Barnes families, but no one has acknowledged that in recent years one family has suffered more than the other.”

Even Selina said nothing. Everyone was looking at her and the silence was so deep that it felt as though the earth beneath the estate was listening too. The sky was clear and blue above, the wind had died down and there were no servants coming out to greet them or bother them.

Elizabeth was aware, sudden and painful, of how small she was in the face of this ancient blood-shed, the wars that stretched back centuries. She didn't feel like she was a part of it. She had no ill-will towards the Wilkins family because the Barnes family had never made her feel like she belonged to them.

She had no nightmares from fearing her brother or father might not return, no trauma wondering when the next upset might come or from fearing she might lose another loved one at any time.

But even though she had never seen these people as her blood enemy, that was not how they saw her. To them she was a reminder of everything that had been done to them, someone who meant them ill-will, perhaps even harm.

It struck her through the heart and gave her the strength to keep speaking. “I cannot fix the wounds that my family has dealt to yours with an apology. It would be futile to believe that my words could begin to match the harm that you have suffered, but in

good conscience I cannot be silent and I must speak from my heart. My family has killed those you love, taken family from you before their time and pursued you with duels and insults no matter where you go. It is cruel and abominable what they have done. I have no excuses, no understanding for why, no pride in their actions. I am sorry for the way that they have hurt you. I wish I did not constantly remind you of what you have lost.”

Everyone was still staring at her, but they no longer looked as though they were preparing to battle each other. Herbert looked wary but surprised, while Selina looked as though she were considering Elizabeth’s words very carefully.

Elizabeth did not dare look back to see what Stephen looked like, not until she was done. She was not sure she could finish if she saw that he disapproved of her speaking out when he was trying to take control of the situation.

“I would like to be friendly with you all. I have longed for it, in fact. I am not very sure what to do at so merry a table, so I ask that you forgive my reticence. I will try to better meet your friendship with my own, if you will let me.”

Selina dashed forwards and took her hands in her own, her face serious but a softening in her expression. “You shame me with your sincerity. Let us both turn over new leaves and try to forge a new path.”

“Well said, Selina,” Herbert added, nodding to Elizabeth from where he was standing. While Selina looked to Elizabeth to be far less hostile, there was still a coolness to Herbert, a wariness that she feared she would never break through. “We can all try out this peace thing going forwards I think. Like Stephen has been telling us to.”

Elizabeth glanced back to Stephen, worried that she would find she had once again misstepped in her attempts to be the wife that he expected. He was looking at her

intently, his eyes sharp and assessing but there was no anger in his face.

“Now you have come to your senses, both of you go inside,” he said to Herbert and Selina. “I will speak with my wife alone.”

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Selina squeezed Elizabeth's hands once more and went to Herbert who escorted her inside, their heads tipped together in deep conversation. Elizabeth felt a pang, watching them go. What would it be like to have that sort of closeness with a person one could trust so whole-heartedly?

Stephen could not deny that his temper had been well and truly roused against his brother and sister by their blatant disregard of his command. While he knew that Selina was forthright to a point that sometimes did her harm, he had not expected Herbert to encourage her.

Perhaps he should have done so.

As he had been preparing to go to battle for the peace he had fought so hard to attain, Elizabeth had completely surprised him by doing so herself and in a manner he could never have expected.

There was something entrancing about the way that she opened her heart to them, even when they were accusing her, standing in hostile judgment of her. He was caught completely out of himself by watching her beautiful, expressive face, listening to her address the problem with as much bravery and honesty as any soldier.

It was enough to win over the hardest of hearts, and he was pleased to see that both Herbert and Selina had softened by the end of her speech though he would be having stern words with both of them later. While he loved them dearly, and loved how well they defended each other, he required trust from his siblings and when he gave them an instruction he expected them to obey. If they had a concern with those instructions they should have come to him, not lashed out publicly the way Selina had.

Elizabeth was looking at him now, her large dark eyes so expressive in her pale face. He was struck again how sometimes she looked like a wild bird, something regal and fierce like a falcon, watching a predator and waiting to take flight.

“Walk with me,” he said solemnly, offering her his arm.

She took it without argument for once and they turned their steps towards a path into the gardens. It was a small, cunning water garden near a flight of steps up to some lovely terraces and he had often played there as a child, jumping from one tier of the fountain to the next or falling into the pools in an attempt to catch hold of the fish that played there.

“I am glad to see that you know why my family is cautious to trust you,” he said finally, not mentioning his own reserve when it came to the matter. “I applaud your forthrightness. It was needed, I think.”

“The wound had to be lanced,” she said firmly. “It would just keep festering otherwise.”

“I think you are right. And I am glad also to see that you don’t have the same - bloodlust that your family does.”

“Wouldn’t that be rather inconvenient a thing to exist between husband and wife?” she asked, her lips twitching upwards a little.

He returned the small smile. “It’s not completely unheard of.”

“I am glad to assure Your Grace, that I have no desire for violence at all. Just for peace. Like you do.”

Her voice slowed towards the end of the sentence, as though there were things that

she was not saying. There were mysteries to his wife that he did not understand, but instead of frustrating him they only made her all the more enticing. He wanted to unwrap her thoughts, unwrap her past and unwrap her body, to get to know why she was so small and cold and quiet sometimes and so fierce and sharp the others.

Stephen paused near the fountain, holding Elizabeth by one hand. The light always felt clearer here near the water, like he could see things more distinctly. He looked into her eyes and saw the caramel gold in their depths, the warm shifting colors like a maze of riches.

“You are truly beautiful,” he said softly, and was pleased to see her blush and try to look away. “No,” he said, catching her chin and tilting her head up so she had to look at him. “don’t hide your eyes from me, Elizabeth. I intend to have my fill of looking into them.”

“Pretty words, my husband,” she said, looking up at him again. This time he could tell that her wit was a tool that she was using to hide how flustered he was making her, and they had no bite.

He wanted to pull her into his arms in the shattered light through the fountain spray and kiss her, tangle his fingers in her hair, undo her and carry her off to his bed where she should be. But he had given his word, and while he might not have told her so, he was truly in no hurry to do something that she might not like.

Elizabeth felt her heartbeat thudding in her chest. There was a sort of thick tension between her and Stephen, like invisible energy binding them together. They were standing so close, hand in hand and he was leaning over above her so he could look at her.

Perhaps he really was trying to look into her eyes.

They were so close, his head ducking down near to her now and she remember the frisson of delicious heat that she had felt that night when he claimed her in a kiss that felt like he was consuming her with passion and flames.

Maybe he would kiss her again in the garden with the sound of the fountain in their ears and the air heady with the smell of blossoms. Her eyes fluttered closed and she felt her body leaning upwards towards him, her face tipping back and her lips sliding open.

She wanted him to kiss her. She wanted to feel his mouth on her again. Why did he affect her like this? These were such strange, terrible, wonderful desires. She felt alive with them, a warmth tingling through her like she was drunk with it.

She could feel the warmth of him getting closer, their lips must surely be only inches apart now, she could feel his breath upon her lips. Close and nearly and please just a little more...

“You know what to do if you want me, Elizabeth,” Stephen whispered, holding her chin in his hand and pinning her still. “All you need to do is beg.”

She swallowed hard, her eyes flying open. He looked amused, smug but also his eyes were dark with want as well. She was not the only one here who desired.

“I have been told that to beg is quite below my station, Your Grace,” she said, huskily. Her breathing was ragged and she had to wet her lips but he was watching her, and she was almost certain that she could see him quiver a little at the sight.

He quickly got himself back under control and brushed a strand of hair back from her face. “As you wish, wife,” he said. “We will see how long that lasts.”

CHAPTER 9

Afew days had passed since the disastrous perambulation with the young Mr. Dewsbury. Stephen had written to the family and informed them that his sister was no longer interested in pursuing the courtship. It had been a polite but cold letter and while Dewsbury had come to call several times since and left his card, each time he was told politely that they were not in.

Hopefully the young ass would eventually give up. Selina's happiness was not to be squandered on the hubris of proud young men who didn't even have the sense to appreciate the woman in front of them.

"Elizabeth, you absolutely must come and tell me what you think of the samples for some of my wardrobe for the season," Diana exclaimed, tugging Elizabeth past the open door of the library where Stephen was sitting.

His attention had not been on his books or his work for some time. No matter how hard he worked to focus on everything he needed to do, his thoughts drifted away to thoughts of his wife. Her eyes were universes of secrets and her lips promised endless temptations and he was having to stay late hours in his study to try to catch up on his daydreaming hours.

Was this what married life was like? How did anyone ever get anything done?

His gaze followed Elizabeth as it was now wont to do as she followed after Diana, a little smile on her face. She was settling in better now. Selina was warmer to her and even Herbert had stopped viewing her with open suspicion. She talked a little over

meals, though still mostly sat quietly and listened.

He found that if she was nearby he was looking at her, watching her. She drew his attention like the sun. He noticed things like how her meals were always small and plain, carefully selected from the simplest items on offer and how her dresses were also simply made and practical.

Stephen couldn't decide whether she was a modest, cautious person or if she simply wasn't used to the luxury of an estate like Westall. Her wit was quick enough when she liked, but other times she shrank from confrontation. She was a creature of passion and also of restraint, of quiet footsteps and a loud voice.

He was mystified by her. And worse, he could tell that she wasn't happy, and it was driving him mad.

Perhaps at the beginning it would have been reasonable for her to be unhappy with the way that she had been married off without a say in the matter to a family that was hostile to her, but now she was settled, she was surrounded by anything she could want, she had gotten the friendship of his younger sister and she still was not happy.

It wasn't even as if he could be angry with her about it. She was not unhappy. She was not moping around creating misery for herself. But she had an air of reserve, a quiet sort of seriousness as though there was something that stopped her from being happy.

Stephen hated it. He found that of all things in the world at this moment he wanted Elizabeth to be happy, to smile and laugh and embrace her new home. It was important, for the peace between the families of course. How could there be peace if the Duchess wasn't happy?

That was why he rose from his seat, left his book lying on his chair and strode out to summon a horse. For the treaty. That was all.

“My dear fellow, what exactly is it that you are telling me?” Perceval Hamilton, Marquess of Stapleton asked, his kind face clouded by a small frown of concern.

Stephen had ridden up to Stapleton's manor, covering the several hours of travel at a fierce pace. Some people thought that his fast, sometimes furious activity meant that he was a man who didn't think through his actions, however the opposite was true. He considered things carefully, with a strategic mind, and then once his mind was made up so was his path set. He acted quickly and without mercy or hesitation.

Percival had taken him into his study and was pouring them both decanters of brandy with the sort of single-minded focus that had made him a particularly good student when the two of them had been in college together.

“What part of my speech is confusing you?” Stephen said, perhaps more sharply than was warranted. Now he was taking action on the matter he was impatient to get started. “I am in need of marital advice, and as you have been married since the Dark Ages by this time, you seemed the right person to speak to.”

“Very droll,” Perceval said, rolling his eyes and handing him a glass. “You have indeed made your point in as few words as you could, my friend, however I need more specificity. Do you want advice on managing your married household, putting off your in-laws, understanding your wife's purchases? The matter is vast and varied, and while I am obviously an expert on the subject I do need a little direction.”

Stephen scowled and sipped his brandy, flexing a fist at his side at the thought of his in laws trying to take over Westall Estate in any way. “I trust you know me well enough to know I can manage administrative matters on my own. No, it is the matter of Elizabeth - the Duchess and her -” he groped for the right word. As dear a friend as Stapleton was, he did not want to speak too freely to him about his wife's heart. It felt like an intrusion to take the private things she was feeling and dissect them with another. “Her moods. I am at a loss on how to handle her moods. How do you

manage with your lady wife when she is unhappy?”

“Good God, man!” Perceval exclaimed, sitting back in his chair. “I never thought it would happen so fast. You are barely wed and already the feathers of the hen are ruffled, are they?” He barked a laugh, his eyes twinkling. “It’s different dealing with the sharp tongue of a woman, isn’t it? I always say better by far to box the ears of a man who has insulted me than to hear Celia raise her voice in anger. The creatures are so soft and sweet but their hearts are mighty!”

“Indeed,” Stephen said dryly, raising his eyebrows. “I have noticed that.”

“Take heart, sir!” Perceval said, his smile broadening. If there was a topic that would be sure to keep Perceval Hamilton speaking hour on end, it was the matter of his beloved wife Celia and the joys and trials of being wed to her. “I can help you. I have weathered many a storm from my lady’s fair eyes, and I have much advice for you. Now, what manner of upset is the Duchess in, tell me. Is she storming around your house? Is she slamming doors or scolding? Has she taken to the particular polite coldness that can only mean a lonely bed and a long difficult mystery to solve on why she is so offended?”

“She is quiet,” Stephen said, slowly. He was struggling to imagine Celia doing any of the things being described as he had always known her to be a calm, sensible lady. “And withdrawn, I suppose. She appears neither happy nor unhappy. She is not shutting herself away but she is not exactly speaking with me either.”

“Ah,” Perceval said sagely. “I see.”

It would be a very simple thing to shake his friend of decades by the shoulders, but Stephen did not. Not because he couldn’t, but because he was a generous man who was asking a friend for advice and with that came some annoyances like said friend acting as though he were a sage explaining the mysteries of the stars. “What do you

see, pray?"

"You, my dear friend, have taken some action that has hurt the lady's feelings," Perceval said firmly. "We all do so now and again. A lady is a wondrously steady soul, but the strangest and most alien actions can cut them to the quick. When I have upset my wife I buy her gifts to assure her of my affections and distract her from her wounded feelings. What you must do, without pause, is have some pretty trinkets brought to your home and give them to the lady. Ply her with sweets and flowers, give her glittering baubles, perhaps a fine hat. She will soon forgive you whatever it is that you have done without knowing."

While Stephen was not certain that Stapleton was right when he said that Elizabeth's feelings were hurt, it certainly sounded like the sort of thing he could remember seeing his father do for his mother when they were still alive.

Sometimes his mother, who had been small and fierce and kind and beautiful, would storm around the house in a quiet coldtemper and his father would lay beautifully wrapped presents on her bed for her to find.

"That is a good idea," he said, standing up and bowing. "Pardon my quick departure."

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“No, no, of course. Go and get your home life sorted!”

It was a good way of looking at it, and Stephen left the Stapleton manor with a lighter heart than he had felt for weeks.

He arrived back home two days later with mysterious and elegantly wrapped boxes and parcels piled in the coach with him and a sense of satisfaction in his heart.

It was no simple feat to procure clothes so swiftly and in fact Stephen had been required to bring to bear the weight of his name and his fortune at the dressmaker to achieve the miracle of two gowns in so short a time frame.

When the small woman, an older lady with thin nimble fingers, had prevaricated over her ability to keep her staff late and how she would needs do away with any other business over the period that she would be working on his order, Stephen had taken his card, laid it on her desk and said ‘Madam, I shall buy your whole shop if I need to’.

All other problems disappeared quickly afterwards once he had assured the lady that he had his lady’s measurements to hand after the wedding and would be returning to her for less urgent services at a later date.

It was the work of a busy afternoon to buy the other necessities, the headdresses and jewelry and muffs that he knew were in fashion. He had noticed how simply and almost invisibly Elizabeth dressed, always seeming to be trying to melt into the background and dammit that was not how his wife was going to present herself.

At last he was back home and he would be able to bring her the gifts he had collected. It had been hard to keep the secret from his siblings and their inquisitive questions, and even harder somehow not to tell Elizabeth that he was preparing something for her. The idea that she might be pleased, might be excited and smile upon him was a pleasant one.

One of the servants needed to help him with all the bags and boxes, and Stephen led the way, striding down the hall towards Elizabeth's room with one of the boxed gowns under one arm.

He knocked and pushed the door open when she answered, waiting for the servant to leave his parcels and close the door behind himself before turning to his wife. She was sitting at the vanity, a hairbrush in her hand and a look of such surprise and confusion on her face that he found himself amused by it.

"Here," he said, putting the box on her lap. "The rest are yours as well, but you may as well start with this one."

"What - what is -" she stopped and fell to opening the box, giving a little gasp that thrilled his heart as folds of exquisite peach satin spilled out over her lap. He had thought long and hard about the best color for the first gown he would buy her. Something that represented her beauty, that would offset her coloring and her fair hair. It was both a sensual and an innocent color, which he felt suited her well. She ran a hand over the fabric in silence, her eyes wide.

This was encouraging, so Stephen reached into his pocket and put another box in her lap. "This accompanies it."

She opened the box without a word, revealing the glittering pink topaz set of necklace and earrings that he had selected at the finest jeweler he could reach without going all the way to London.

Yes. This was going well. Stephen thought to himself and waited for Elizabeth to start the effusive sort of thanks his sisters always fell into whenever he got them something special. Of course in those situations he had the delight of showering gifts on someone he loved, whereas here naturally it was just to keep the peace.

“I can’t accept this,” she said, her eyes still on her lap and her voice strange and stilted. “I - you - please. Take it back. Take it back to the stores, you must. I simply cannot take it.”

He stepped backwards, startled and feeling the start of anger in his chest. “Why in heavens would I do that? I bought them for you and you are going to have them.”

“I say I shall not,” she said more firmly, looking up at him now with a defiant look in her eyes. “Please return them all. I do not want them here.”

“Are they not fine enough for you?” he demanded. “Are you so redolent with jewels and silks of your own that you can turn down those that I provide for you?”

“I can manage well enough with what I have,” she said, standing up and pushing the boxes so that they toppled to the ground in a heap. “I don’t need you to dress me or to cover me in jewels!”

“You do need me to if you are ever to look like you are actually a duchess and not a poor relative acting as a companion to one of the girls,” Stephen growled, his fists clenching so tight that his fingernails were biting into his skin.

“I assure you, Your Grace, I can present myself well enough that anyone with proper breeding will understand my rank,” Elizabeth said, her tone sharp.

Stephen shook his head and stalked back to the pile of gifts, sweeping them into his arms and taking them to where Elizabeth stood. “I am not returning them.”

“I am not keeping them!” she retorted.

He put them on top of the other boxes, creating a precarious pile with colorful ribbons and wrapping papers and lace spilling everywhere. “You can do what you like, wife. I have given them to you and they are your possessions. Wear them, burn them, eat them for all I care.”

He turned on his heel so he would not see her face any longer and that tight, fierce almost hurt expression she was wearing instead of the pleased smile he had been hoping for. “I’ll be damned if I have any more to do with it.”

With that said, he stormed out, leaving gifts and wife behind him.

CHAPTER 10

“Your Grace, look at this headdress, I think it’s all feathers of some bird from the continent!” Sally exclaimed, pulling the lid off a box and peeking inside in raptures. “I know I’ve never seen a chicken with so fine a tail!”

“I’m not keeping them, Sally,” Elizabeth said sternly for what felt like the dozenth time. Sally sometimes had a tendency to hear her and say ‘of course, Your Grace’ and do the opposite of what she was being told because she thought she knew better.

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“Oh, of course Your Grace. I’m simply airing the things out so they don’t get returned to the shops in poor condition,” Sally said cheerfully, placing the headdress on the vanity and moving on to the next large box that must be another gown.

Elizabeth still felt a sharp searing pain in her heart at the thought of giving up the first gown. It felt finer than anything she had ever owned, even the wedding dress which she knew her family had spent the lowest amount they could without losing face on.

She had heard from Sally that some of the servants were still talking about how Stephen had gone to the dressmaker hired to make her dress and caused a fuss over the first plans and had even threatened to have a replacement at the church to put her into should she arrive in anything that would not be becoming of a duchess.

It made her heart thrill a little to think of him doing that. She had to very sternly remind herself that it was for the sake of his reputation and the reputation of his family that he had made the effort, not because he cared about her.

Just like now. Just like this where he was buying her such beautiful things so he could be sure she wouldn’t bring him shame when they were in society together.

She could feel her cheeks heating at the thought.

Sally gave a low gasp and Elizabeth stood up and come to where she was bending over the other gown.

“Oh Your Grace, you wouldn’t look like a queen, you’d look like an angel,” Sally breathed.

Elizabeth didn't dare touch it even with a fingertip. It was a silvery gown, shimmering with a brocade done in shimmering thread and embroidered cleverly with pearls. It wasn't a very complicated design, but it was beautiful and the effect was something that shimmered and glittered as it moved.

"It's lovely," she whispered, blinking back hot tears from her eyes and she was glad when Sally caught her hand and squeezed it.

"It was meant for you, Your Grace," she said quietly.

Elizabeth shook her head, swallowed and stepped away. She wouldn't let herself be foolish enough to give into silly dreams. "It was meant for a duchess, not forme."

"Youarea duchess," Sally said, frustration lacing her voice. "You should be dressing in fine things like this and having carriage rides and being treated like a jewel. Why won't you let him do right by you?"

Ever since she had been very small, Elizabeth could remember that she had wanted someone to value her. Not even to love her, just to value her, to see her as worth something.

Her first gift had been a honey cake pressed into her hands on her Natal Day by Mrs. Adams when she was a small girl.

Her most treasured items were little carved wooden figures that Mr. Adams had created for her of clumsy little dogs or regal cats, and of a small bag that Mrs. Adams and Sally had given her at Yule that was cunningly crafted so she could hide it away everytime Dudley came into her room to find and smash her few small treasures.

Her father had never given her anything and the Duchess of Rosenberg had ignored her except for a Guide to Housekeeping that she had presented to her coldly when she

was fifteen. But now Stephen was bringing her these treasures, jewels that could have been worn by a proper lady, gowns that were so fine she would turn heads for the right reasons and which were clearly actually made for her, glittering accessories that any fine lady would be glad to receive and a muff so soft and beautiful that Sally had almost wept over it.

She couldn't accept them. A small part of her feared that they were being given to her because she was a thing that Stephen had gotten from her father and now owned and could dress how he liked. But at the same time she yearned for them.

Look how beautiful they were, how lovely! Did that not mean that he thought she was lovely too? Lovely enough to look like the kind of lady who would wear these things? Even though she knew that he had not done it because he cared about her, because he wanted her to be happy, but just because he needed her to look the part – it still made her feel warm inside.

Seeing all those parcels, all those gestures where he had thought about what would suit her. It felt good. She was a little cross with herself over how good it felt. A part of her wanted to keep these things and she wouldn't allow it.

There was a sudden, perfunctory knock at the door.

"Come," she called, looking over the piles of things in frustration. If it were Diana or Selina she would have even more trouble on her hands convincing someone, anyone that she did not want these things and could not keep them.

Perhaps it was closer to the truth that she desperately did want them, that she wanted to believe that she could be given them freely and kindly and because of that, because of how terrifying that was she had to send them away.

"Elizabeth," Stephen said, opening the door with his usual briskness. "I am glad to

find that your maid is with you. We have been summoned to Stapleton Manor for an evening party and will be leaving within the hour. Be ready to go by then.”

He didn't wait for her response, closing the door and stalking away. She both thrilled at and loathed the way he was so used to being able to command obedience and attention, the way he would give instructions and then simply expect them to be carried out.

It was like he could not imagine for a moment that someone might disagree with him.

Elizabeth turned to Sally, who was positively brimming with excitement. “Do not say it.”

“Oh Your Grace,” Sally thrilled, clapping her hands. “At least you have -”

“Sally! Do not say it!”

Sally giggled. “My lips are sealed, Your Grace. Will you want your pink gown for the evening?”

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It was tempting to show Stephen that she meant what she had said and wear perhaps her wedding gown or one of her sensible pelisses, but Elizabeth couldn't deny that she was trembling on the inside with anxiety over this first social engagement and she could not afford to lose face by showing up ill-prepared in appearance.

“Yes, I think the silver one is too much for an evening party. Can you find a matching headdress?” she stopped and couldn't help but laugh as Sally presented her with an elegant creation of roses and pink feathers. “Well. That will do. Come now, we must be quick if we are to be ready in the hour.”

Sally took her by the hand and started to help her out of her dress. “It's no challenge at all, Your Grace. After I got both Miss Rose and Miss Lottie ready for that one engagement within but twenty minutes after they forgot they were going I have plenty of speed that I can put to use in your service.”

There were perhaps a dozen other carriages drawn up in front of the beautiful manor when they arrived, and Elizabeth was keeping a tight rein on her emotions as they drew to a halt, lights lighting the path up to the entrance and glittering like stars in the falling dusk.

She had always longed to be out at parties the way her sisters were. They told such tales of the dancing and the food and drinks, the clever conversation and the wonderful dresses that they saw. It sounded like a magical other world that she wasn't even allowed to peek into.

The footman opened the door of the coach and Herbert and Stephen stepped down, then turned and waited to help the ladies down afterwards. Elizabeth waited for the

daughters of the family to go first, only to realize everyone was looking at her oddly.

Of course, she bit her lip. She was the Duchess. It would only make sense for her to disembark first.

Stephen's hand was strong and warm in hers, even through the thin fabric of her gloves and she clung to his fingers a little too tightly as he drew her back from the carriage and waited on Herbert helping first Selina and then Diana down. They both looked beautiful, Selina wearing a regal blue gown and Diana in a charming yellow one that made her look even more like sunshine than she usually did.

Her heart was pounding with excitement.

"Do we go straight up to the door?" she murmured to Stephen, terribly sure that there must be so many unknown rules to doing this right and not wanting to make a slip.

"Indeed," he said calmly. "The servant will announce us to the Marchioness who will be pleased to meet you. Ceilia Hamilton is a very dear friend of the family."

"I see," Elizabeth said, making a mental note. "Shall there be refreshments or are we to go in to dinner later?"

Herbert, Selina and Diana all glanced at Stephen for some reason that Elizabeth could not fathom. He did not seem to notice, continuing his steady but slow pace towards the door.

"It is a dance so there will be light refreshments. Ices, cakes, that sort of thing. Supper will be much later once the dancing is done."

"Oh," she took a care to hide her excitement as well as she could. She had never had ices and the idea of watching beautiful people whirl around a dance floor was so

delightful and so wonderful and so frightening that she thought she might faint. “Will I be expected to dance with anyone who asks me?”

A muscle jumped in Stephen’s jaw and he sent a look so angry at the inoffensive path they were walking up that it nearly made her stumble. “As the Marchioness does not like to dance, the Marquess will invite you to dance with him to open the dancing.”

“What about you?”

“It’s just not done for a married man to dance with his wife,” Herbert cut in helpfully. “Doesn’t give the single ladies much of a chance to show off their skills if it’s all married folk dancing together.”

The idea of not dancing with Stephen gave her a pang and she sighed a little. He was the only dancing partner she had ever had and she knew him. She had enjoyed their brief dance around the floor, the way that fitting into his arms had made her feel like flying, and now it seemed that she would rarely get to experience that again.

They arrived at the door and gave their names to the servant who summoned an exquisitely dressed woman with jet black hair and dark serious eyes who stood a little taller than Elizabeth and had fine, high cheekbones and a long straight nose. She curtsied and they all responded in kind, then she took Stephen’s hand with the air of an old friend.

“I am so glad you have come. I have been in conversation with General Carlton for the last quarter hour at least and he will insist upon telling me the story of the time he rescued that flock of sheep from a wolf in -”

“A thunderstorm,” Herbert said laughing.

“With hail and lightning,” Diana added.

“And with a bad knee and only one hand due to the other having been wounded in battle,” Stephen finished. “I know it well. It is good to see you, Celia.”

“Let me take you through,” Celia said, leading the way into a ball room that was so beautiful that Elizabeth thought she might forget to breathe.

There were people around the room speaking with each other, laughing and talking as servants brought out fresh plates and glasses and bottles of the most tantalizing things. A small string quartet filled the air with music and everyone was dressed in clothes that were gorgeous and mesmerizing, colors and patterns mingling together until the whole scene was a kaleidoscope.

Stephen bowed to Ceilia. “Please excuse me, madam, I want to introduce my wife to some of our friends.”

“Of course, of course. I will see to it that the young ladies are introduced to the young men, she replied, waving them off.

Stephen took Elizabeth’s hand and threaded it through his arm, leading her towards a small group of couples talking with each other. She was so distracted by all the colors and sounds and smells that she didn’t notice she was absently swinging her fan in her other hand, tapping it against her chin until Stephen stopped her.

“Do you wish to tell the Marquess’s second footman that you love him, Your Grace?” he asked in a low tone, a glint of anger in his eyes but none showing on his face. “Because if you do not then you should stop making that gesture with your fan this instant.”

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Was it possible for such a simple thing to mean so much? Elizabeth barely dared reply, carefully slipping her fan into her reticule so she would not say anything else without meaning to. She was bound to do something terrible here, Stephen would see what a failure she was and be furious with her. And yet his hand was still warm on hers and his presence steady by her side, leaving her heart fluttering in her chest to know that he was looking out for her.

“Lord Stapleton,” Stephen stopped in front of the small group. “I believe you did not have the pleasure of formally meeting my wife the last time you saw her, may I present the Duchess of Westall.”

Elizabeth started a curtsy but Stephen’s grip became so on her arm that she could not perform it and was forced to instead simply nod her head, her cheeks coloring as the Marquess bowed. “It is a pleasure, Lord Stapleton. I know you are a friend of my husband’s and I am glad to finally meet you properly.”

“It is a terrible time to meet people when you are getting married,” the Marquess agreed. He was a man of height, but not as tall as Stephen was and he had a face that was creased lightly by laugh lines as though he spent his time smiling. “It is my absolute pleasure to be properly introduced to you, Your Grace.”

The fact that a man of such rank and title called her ‘Your Grace’ was enough to make Elizabeth feel like sitting down. Had Stephen not said she was the highest ranked lady at the gathering? How was that possible!

The conversation flowed around her as Stephen introduced her to the other two gentlemen, two Lords who were pleased to meet her and eager to impress. He then

guided her to a seat and fetched her a crystal glass filled with lemon flavored ice and another of lemonade.

“Are you - hovering, Your Grace?” she asked softly.

“Nonsense, it is my job as your husband to make sure you meet my friends,” Stephen retorted, a frown on his face.

The ice melted in her mouth as a small flush crept up her cheeks. She was almost certain that he was cossetting her and it made her heart skip a little in her chest. It was a dangerous luxury. “I do not need to be coddled, Your Grace,” she said softly, with no heat in her voice.

The frown on his face deepened. “I do not need you to tell me how to treat you.” As soon as the sentence was out of his mouth he seemed to be taken aback by what he had said, but he did not retract it.

“Your Grace, I didn’t mean to-” Elizabeth started, carefully. She did not want them to fight, not now, not here. She was liking this side of him, the protectiveness he was showing. It made her feel delicate and cared for, safe in a way she hadn’t known she longed to feel.

She was cut off however by a voice hailing them. “Ah, I’m glad to have found you again.” It was Celia walking up to them, her gazefixed on Elizabeth’s and an expression of understanding across her face.

CHAPTER 11

Lady Stapleton took the seat next to Elizabeth with a little sigh of relief. “I cannot express how much I have been needing to sit down, Your Grace,” she said. “Westall, would you mind checking on my beloved Stapleton? He has gotten distracted by

some of the young men trying to start a competition of some foolish sort in our parlor.”

Stephen frowned a little and Elizabeth got the feeling that he was not used to getting such requests at any social occasion, particularly not such a fancy event with such a prestigious array of guests. “Of course, my lady,” he said, however, nodding to her. “I shall return, Your Grace.” This seemed to be directed at Elizabeth and she just nodded back, feeling a wave of relief wash over her as he stalked away through the crowd.

“Sometimes these events are overwhelming things, are they not?” Celia asked in a soft voice. “Especially if one’s husband dotes on one so much that one can barely move without tripping over him.”

Elizabeth laughed a little, covering her mouth with a hand. “Did it look very like that?”

“Only because the Marquess is very similar,” Celia said. Their eyes met and Elizabeth was surprised and pleased to see that the other lady’s face was sympathetic and kind. “I do love him dearly, but if he had his way he would spend most events so close to my side that I would struggle to breathe, I assure you.”

“And do you - like it? The attention?” The words slipped out before Elizabeth knew what she was saying and she glanced around the ballroom quickly to see if they were being observed. Many heads did in fact turn their way from the little groups around the room, but none for long and she suspected that the hostess and the new Duchess being involved in a tete-a-tete was the topic of conversation but not perhaps because she had done something socially reprehensible.

“A lot of the time I find it very pleasant,” Celia said. “He is a kind man, you know. A brave one and a good one. His charms are numerous. Sometimes, however, I find I

have a heart for independence and at those times he is amicable enough to do such small favors for me that allow me a little space for myself.”

Elizabeth nodded, wondering what it must be like to have a marriage where both partners were fond of each other. “How do you - tell him what you want without making him cross with you?”

Celia looked at her, a quick sort of look that had a wealth of sympathy behind it. “Come, Your Grace. Will you favor me with a turn around the room?”

It was a sudden statement and jarring, but Elizabeth glanced around and saw several groups of ladies beginning to make their way across the room towards them and thought that she understood. “I should be very pleased. Must you call me ‘Your Grace’ at all times?”

“I certainly should while we are in so public a setting,” Celia said, laughing as they rose and set off in the opposite direction to the ladies trying to reach them as naturally as possible. “If you want me to call you something else in private then you need only ask.”

“I would like you to call me by my name,” Elizabeth said. She felt that she was sounding a little petulant in her own ears, but she couldn’t help it. She was always Your Grace this or Duchess that now. So few people called her by her given name that she was beginning to worry it would never be heard again outside of talking to Diana.

Celia smiled quickly and looked pleased. “I should be very delighted to, if you still feel that way next time we meet.”

“Very well then,” Elizabeth nodded firmly. “Now, I suspect you were walking me in this direction so we should not be interrupted. Was it so that you might answer my

question?”

“Indeed it was. Are you familiar with the story of how the Marquess and I became engaged?”

She shook her head. It was something that she was almost certainly meant to know and once again she cursed that she had no idea how to even start educating herself for the position that she had found herself in.

“I was quite young, just turned eighteen and my father, the Earl of Carmody, had business near the Stapleton lands. It was an arranged marriage by both families to create business ties. The Marquess had not inherited the title at that time and the two of us had only met once before the wedding.”

Elizabeth stared at her. “Then you too...”

“Yes, my marriage was also an arranged one. I know that it’s the fashion now for people to make their own choices on the matter, but both our parents were very old fashioned. The Marquess has always said that the instant he met me he was in love with me.”

“Did you find -” It felt like a dangerous question to ask out loud.

“We are very happy together and love each other very much,” Celia said firmly. “But I know all too well how difficult it can be to be married to a man you barely know.”

A rush of relief so powerful that she nearly cried ran through Elizabeth and she clasped one of Celia’s gloved hands, trying to keep her expression calm. “How did you manage it? Can you tell me anything that might help?”

“Oh Your Grace,” Celia said softly, her voice warm. “There are a number of things that may help depending on the troubles you are having. When we were first married I had endless arguments with my husband about one thing or another. It became bitter and we became cold and distant for months before we both managed to understand each other. What saved us from further heartbreak was finding ourselves stuck in a small inn during a thunderstorm. The Marquess and I were forced to talk at length and we found that so many things that had hurt us both had been an inability to see why the other wanted to do what they were doing.”

“Just talking made so much of a difference?”

“Oh indeed! Communicating often, well and with true curiosity has made us strong enough to weather any mishap. I recommend that the next time that you find yourself in a situation where you feel frustrated that you try to talk clearly about what you want and why. Men are wonderful creatures, and the heavens know that we couldn’t possibly manage without them, but they do struggle so to understand what is not spelled out for them.”

Celia clapped her hands briskly. “Now, Your Grace, let me get you one of our round cakes and then we really must start the dancing!”

Dancing with the Marquess was very different to dancing with Stephen Elizabeth found. He was shorter, but that was not the most striking difference, nor was his jovial manner. His hands were not as strong, as strangely safe. His touch didn’t make her feel like she must thrill straight out of her skin or leave her cheeks flushed. He was very good, true but he didn’t make dancing feel like they were so in tune with the music that they were becoming part of it.

Many other dancers joined them on the dance floor once they had started and Elizabeth was a little nervous that even her cautious practicing with Diana would not prevent her from making an example of herself and careening into someone.

However the Marquess kept them going in the right direction and even managed to make them look presentable with it. Her cheeks were flushed with exertion and pleasure as they stopped, and he gallantly led her over to a chair and promised to return with some lemonade.

“My word, Your Grace,” a lady’s voice said from very nearby. “You and the Marquess make a fine picture out on the floor.”

Elizabeth looked up to see a lady in a becoming gown of light lilac that was not as fancy as anything that Stephen’s sisters were wearing standing near her with another

couple of ladies in tow. The lady was looking at her with an expression that Elizabeth was extremely familiar with, a sort of sour pleasantness. A sweetness that was meant to sting.

“Indeed?” Elizabeth said calmly, wondering what possible reason these women could have for trying to corner her so. “It was most enjoyable. I am quite out of breath.”

“I can imagine,” the lady continued, that sour note only more evident in her voice. “We are fortunate to have quite a few gentlemen present but the ladies still outnumber them, sadly. I hope your husband will be willing to dance a few rounds with us single ladies later?”

“I certainly can’t speak for my husband.” Elizabeth was not sure that it was proper to ask the lady her name, and for want of anything else to do, looked at her companions for a clue as to what was going on. Both ladies looked uncomfortable in the way people might if they were about to watch something go very badly, and they didn’t want to admit they were looking forwards to watching it.

“You must tell us how you managed to tie him down at last,” the lady said. “The Duke is such a close friend of the family that we have been hoping to see him happily wed for some time, but always despaired of it actually happening.”

Oh.

Suddenly things became a great deal clearer and Elizabeth sat up a little straighter. “Is it not wonderful that we have found each other? I am sure that you must be overjoyed to see him happily settled down, as a friend of the family.”

“Of course,” the lady went an unbecoming shade of pink around her cheeks. “We were hardly expecting it to happen so fast, however. Why the banns were read for barely three weeks!”

“The heart wants what it wants, and we were eager to be wed,” Elizabeth stood and nodded, remembering Stephen’s grip on her arm and deciding that it was best not to curtsy. “Excuse me.”

“So we will not soon be invited to a christening?” the lady asked sharply, stepping forwards and staring at Elizabeth with a sort of rank boldness that took her aback.

Everything that she could think of to say sounded in her ears like a confession. The protest would be taken as a statement of guilt, not to say anything would be taken similarly. It was so rude, so gauche a thing to have implied, nay outright stated, that Elizabeth could see the other two ladies stepping backwards discretely, wanting to get further away from the disaster that was happening.

“Why Miss Sandford,” a voice said from just to Elizabeth’s right. “I did not know that you were so eager to speak about babies. I must introduce you to Mrs. Eastbrook. She is to give birth in five months and she is dying to tell someone about her pains.”

Celia stepped in between the two of them and took Miss Sandford by the arm, gracefully sweeping her away as Selina joined Elizabeth and threaded their arms together. “I think I heard my brother asking after you, sister,” she said, making terrifyingly threatening eye contact with the now shrinking other women. “Come, we mustn’t keep the Duke waiting. You know how protective he is of you.”

As they walked away, Elizabeth squeezed her arm in gratitude. “I could have handled myself, you know.”

“I am fully aware,” Selina said briskly. “However in the face of such rudeness, a lady should not have to handle herself. It is enough for her to refuse to dignify such a person with her attention while her friends and acquaintances deal with it.”

It was a lovely thought. Elizabeth allowed herself to relax a little as they went to

where some servants were giving out tiny little pies filled with something spiced and delicious. Being protected. Having people. Being part of something bigger than just herself.

After a little while further of watching the dancing, admiring the lights and the costumes and the food and speaking to both Celia and her husband, and at times Stephen's siblings and Stephen himself, who did his duty with a few of the single women but definitely not Miss Sandford, Elizabeth found herself sitting and blinking back exhaustion. She was sandwiched between Selina and Stephen as they talked about Diana's dance partner and how Herbert was trying to ensure all the loneliest girls in the room had someone to dance with (except Miss Sandford).

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Her eyes were drooping and she felt a little anxious at the thought of the hours and hours of party left, the supper, the table manners, the revelries and dancing and music. Her head was throbbing and the whole of her felt tired and pleasantly exhausted but being here for so much longer sounded quite impossible.

However what else could she do? Unless -

She glanced at Stephen, who was listening to Selina and smiling a little, the corners of his lips tilted up in that way they did when he was secretly amused and trying not to show it.

Maybe Celia was right. Maybe she should try telling him what she wanted.

“Your Grace,” she said carefully. “I find I am getting quite tired. Would it be possible for me to excuse myself and return home in a little while?”

He glanced at her, a crease forming on his brow and Selina peered at her as well before standing and walking away with her usual purposeful strides.

“What is she...?”

“She is fetching Herbert and Diana,” Stephen said, standing up and waving over one of the servants. “Please ask the Marquess or Marchioness to join me.”

The servant bowed and disappeared across the room as Elizabeth tried to bring enough focus together to understand what he was saying.

Celia joined the quickly, a frown of concern on her face that eased a little when Stephen bowed slightly.

“We must return home early,” he said formally. “I am sorry to disrupt the party but my wife is not feeling well.”

“Oh no,” Celia glanced at Elizabeth and nodded. “I see. Of course you must do what is right for her. We will hold another event soon and you must come and visit next week for supper.”

“We will be delighted,” Stephen said as Celia turned to arrange the collection of their coats and his siblings hurried up. Diana’s sweet face was twisted with concern and even Herbert, who had certainly been the slowest to warm to her had a tiny crease on his forehead.

“You do look pale,” Diana whispered. “Oh Elizabeth, are you well? We must go home immediately and you must to bed.”

“I shall have cook put together a small tray of broth and tea,” Selina said firmly. “You mustn't exert yourself.”

“I’ve called the footman and the driver,” Herbert added. “We can leave immediately.”

Elizabeth flushed. “Everyone does not need to leave with me,” she protested. “I shall be well enough for a little while yet and then one of you could drive home with me and return for the last of the party if you absolutely had to.”

All of them looked at her in confusion, so strikingly similar in that moment that Elizabeth could see the family resemblance even with Diana, who was smaller and curvier than her angular, dark-haired siblings.

“Elizabeth,” Selina said. “What you need matters to us.”

“Indeed,” Stephen said. “However, if Elizabeth feels the matter is not urgent, I can take her home and the rest of you may stay here until the morning and make your way back then. There is no need for you to miss the party as long as it is not an emergency.”

“Oh you are all going to convince everyone that I am pregnant indeed if you continue like this,” Elizabeth said drolly, and they laughed. “No, I assure you. I am but tired.”

The others needed a little more reassurance, but once they were certain that she was not ill they agreed to stay and enjoy the party, and Elizabeth was allowed to lean on Stephen’s strong steady arm on the way out to the carriage. She wondered what it would be like to have that arm wrapped around her shoulders, keeping her warm on the way home.

It was a lovely thought and one that she let herself sink into as they traveled on, the carriage rocking soothingly and the night outside magical and wonderful at once. They were traveling through a small wooded area and she was gazing out of the carriage window so that Stephen would not have a chance to see how flushed she had become when she saw something move in the road ahead, a fluttering frightened movement that she recognized from her days exploring the Rosenberg Estate.

“Stop the carriage!” she said, so loudly and sharply that the driver pulled to a halt at once and she leapt down, barely noticing the mud staining the bottom of her dress and ran towards what she had seen.

CHAPTER 12

The night had been far less of a disaster than Stephen had initially feared. For the whole hour he had waited for Elizabeth to ready herself for the outing he had been

pacing and trying not to think about what would happen if she were stubborn enough to go to a socially prestigious event wearing one of her appallingly plain outfits.

However she had surprised him, coming into the room a vision in pink, her cleverly set curls glossy and her skin glowing and radiant. She was a vision, and he was a little surprised to find himself looking forwards to turning up to the party with the most beautiful woman in England.

While he was pleased that Celia and Elizabeth had clearly hit it off, the fact that his wife did not know the most basic things about approaching something so essential as an evening party left him uneasy and angry with her entire family.

No wonder she often stayed quiet or looked uneasy when matters of proper behavior came up. After seeing her very nearly curtsy to Perceval he was half inclined to believe that no one had taught her anything on how to be a lady and they were all extraordinarily lucky that they had gotten as far as they had without any serious mishaps.

One day Albert Barnes was going to reap the fruits of his many cruelties and Stephen was increasingly certain that there were many small evils he had done to his illegitimate daughter.

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He was in the carriage on the ride home reviewing the evening and cursing himself for not noticing that Elizabeth was tiring far earlier when she cried out and then leapt from the carriage in her beautiful gown and pelted off into the darkness of the forest.

In that moment Stephen's heart took such a huge and painful jolt in his chest that he was stunned by it into momentary stillness. It was long enough for her to make it a few steps down the path before he could fling himself out into the night after her, calling her name.

His feet pounded against the muddied track as he swiftly caught up with the forest nymph his wife had apparently turned into. The lantern that the driver was holding cast a soft glow over the scene so that he had to slow his steps to take her in.

She was like a creature from a myth, beautiful and strange and achingly lovely in ways that made him think of stories of fairy maidens and bespelled woods. Her hair had come loose and was tumbling around her shoulders in soft waves and her face was luminous in the mingled light of lantern and moon. Her gown was stained with mud but somehow that only added to the image of a wild creature that he would have to be very careful not to frighten away.

In her arms she cradled a bundle of feathers, flapping weakly and letting out soft chirps of distress.

As he approached, slowly, unable to shake the sudden unearthly feeling that if he made a sudden movement she might melt away before him, Elizabeth looked up at him, her eyes wide and a tear trembling down her cheek.

“Its wing,” she said softly. “Its wing is hurt.”

The sound of her voice broke the spell that her glorious dishevelment had wrapped him in and he strode to her side and looked down at the small kestrel, its intelligent eyes wide in panic and one of its wings limp and loose at its side.

“It looks broken,” he said softly. “It will die out here shortly. Predators will have it.”

“I cannot allow that. Stephen please, may I take it home so I can take care of it?”

He would have said yes to her, naturally. It was not necessarily a good idea, and she was likely to have her heart broken when the bird failed to thrive and was found dead in a few days, but having sisters had taught him the wisdom of helping instead of hindering their soft hearted attempts at rescuing small creatures.

However Stephen did not think there was a thing in the world that Elizabeth could not have asked him for then, not with her eyes so large and trusting, not with her calling his home her own.

“Of course,” he said. “Mrs. Pugh will help you create a safe place for it to rest and I will send for one of my groundskeepers in the morning. He will be able to advise how best to set the wing.”

Her face broke into the most beautiful, radiant smile he had ever seen. “Thank you, thank you.” Then she turned her attention back to the bird. “We will get you well again, I promise.”

As she turned and made her way back to the carriage, Stephen touched a hand to his chest. His heart felt too large, too full. What strange magic was she doing to him?

The footman ran for Mrs. Pugh as they drew up to a stop at the entrance of the estate

and Stephen himself opened the carriage door and then came around to help her down. He was wrapping his own coat around her shoulders to protect her from what she was almost certain was a very small wind that perhaps he was imagining to be stronger than it was when Mrs. Pugh came hurrying up.

She was completely different from Mrs. Adams back at the Rosenberg estate, but kindly nonetheless. She was a tall woman with straight fair hair and very pale eyes. She had dainty hands and feet and enough strength in her to keep the whole estatemanaging as it should do. She spoke in as few words as she could manage and allowed silences to talk for her.

Elizabeth had been greatly amused when Diana had told her a series of stories about how when Herbert had been a teenager he had been ‘rather bad tempered’ and he had been constantly getting into scrapes. While Stephen had kept him in line the only other person he showed any respect for was Mrs. Pugh who had once subjected him to so thorough and ringing a silence that he had remembered it in terror ever since.

“Ah it’s so small,” she said tersely, a line of concern on her face. “Come.”

Elizabeth followed her into the building, only slowly becoming aware of the chill in the air and how thankful she really was for Stephen’s coat around her shoulders. She waited as Mrs. Pugh found a small box and some soft pleasant things to line it with, and then the two of them settled the young bird inside and Mrs. Pugh assured her in the space of three words that she would take care of him and Elizabeth could retire.

It was late enough by now that Sally would have turned in and in fact Elizabeth was rather glad of it. She loved Sally with all her heart, but she was so tired she felt like all she wanted was the quiet of her room to change her clothes, clean her face and slowly unravel the many thrilling beauties and adventures of the day.

She was taking off her headdress when she heard someone behind her and realized it

was Stephen coming in, his footfall now familiar enough to her that she could tell when he was near.

“Is that all it takes to get you to smile?” he asked, his voice low. “Allowing you to keep some wounded bird?”

Elizabeth turned fully and looked at him from across the room. In that moment it felt as though there were an enormous gulf between them but also as though they were somehow reaching for each other despite it.

His gaze was electric.

She felt her heart pound.

The moment stretched and stretched. Her tongue felt heavy in her mouth and she was aware that she was blushing, aware that she should break the silence but unsure how to do so properly.

She waited too long. A look of something like disappointment crossed his face and he bowed. “Good night, Elizabeth.”

No, it couldn't end like this. Elizabeth grasped hold of the advice that Lady Stapleton had given her and made a decision, hurrying forwards towards him and taking his hand in her own.

“Wait.”

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He paused. It was something strange and wonderful to be holding his hand like this, a strong competent man who was waiting because she had asked him to, who was letting her hold him back.

“Thank you,” she said, stumbling a little over the words. It was hard to speak what she knew to be true and close to her heart, hard to make herself so vulnerable. “Thank you for tonight. For the party. I wasn’t - I was never allowed to parties when I lived in the Rosenberg Estate. I always longed to attend a dance, see all the lovely sights I heard my sisters speak about. It has been a dream for me.”

She wasn’t sure she could help him understand how much it had meant to finally live the world she had always been cut off from, but he squeezed her hand gently and his eyes were full of warmth when he looked at her.

“You should be taken to any event you desire,” he said firmly. “You will get positively sick of it when we have been in London a while. I shall want to go to every event with you on my arm.”

No one had ever been proud of her before and Elizabeth had to swallow hard around a lump in her throat. “Oh.”

“You are lovely, my dear,” he said more gently, reaching down to brush a curl of her hair from her face. “I am a lucky man.”

She wanted to duck her head and hide from his perceptive gaze, but that felt like running away so instead she gathered her courage and met his eyes firmly. “I also want to thank you for the gifts,” she said, as steadily as she could. “I know I must

have appeared most ungrateful today when you went to so much effort. I have never received gifts that were so valuable before, nothing so lovely and worth so much money. I did not know how to accept them from you. It felt too much.”

He lent down to her. There was a gentleness to him in that moment that she was clinging to with all her might to keep her from pushing him away and hiding once again. “I was glad to get them for you. They were simply to make you smile.”

“Your Grace, they are so expensive!” she protested.

“I value your smiles highly,” Stephen said, his eyes bright.

Elizabeth felt that she must sit down, her knees a little weak beneath her. But she also did not want to move away, she wanted to be as close to him as she dared. She wanted him to hold her, to make her feel wanted and safe and beautiful.

His lips were so close to hers that she trembled.

She could feel the tension in him, the iron will he was using to hold himself back and she realized at last that he truly would not make a single movement until she asked him to.

“Stephen,” she said, her voice hoarse.

“Just say the word darling, if you want me,” he said, so low in his chest that she could feel the vibrations.

“Please,” she whispered. “Kiss me.”

He let go of her hand, and she made a noise of protest, a soft cry that escaped out of her like a wish, but he wrapped both arms around her almost immediately, scooping

her up and walking both of them over to the bed where he put her down, his eyes fierce on hers and tangled one hand in her hair, bringing her in for a kiss that seemed to devour her soul.

Elizabeth whimpered. Under any other circumstances it would have mortified her to have that sound escape her lips, but somehow, with his hot mouth pressed against her own, she found she didn't mind it. Barely noticed it even, as his tongue slipped between her lips and another thoroughly undignified sound escaped her.

They had kissed before. Elizabeth too had done her share of imagining, on nights alone in her room at the old estate, when she was desperate for the love and warmth of another person. But nothing she had conjured up had prepared her for this. How strangely unlike anything else, the sensation of his tongue against her own, or the echoing sensation it pulled from another, lower, part of her. She felt the urge to move, to shift with that aching warmth, to surge up and press the full length of her body against his own, to feel the hardness of his chest beneath the fine evening clothes. To do, she didn't know what, but something.

"Stephen!" she gasped out, pulling back so she could look at his face, to see if she was having the same effect on him that he was having on her. The duke's, her husband's, eyes were dark, pupils large as he looked down at her, but there was concern on his face too. She didn't want that. She wanted more of that dark, hungry expression. She wanted his tongue back in her mouth. She wanted more of him.

"Remember, I will stop at any moment should you say the word," Stephen said. "I will only, tonight and ever, do what you ask of me." And oh. Oh that did something else to her entirely. Something sharp and hot and wonderful that hurt, and she wanted to cry but she wanted to kiss him more and so she did.

"I don't know," she said, between kisses. "What to ask you for." She might have expected someone else to laugh but he cradled her face tenderly instead and asked,

“May I show you pleasure?” Another whimper came out and she nodded, almost frantic. ‘Overly eager’, said the voice in the back of her head that watched and criticized everything she did. It sounded like her step mother. It had no place in her bedchamber that night, or ever.

Her husband smiled down at her as his hands came up, gentle as any lady’s maid, and undid the laces and clasps of her finery. The headdress was already gone, curls mostly loose, all it took was a few pins to have the rest tumbling down around her. His hands brushing her neck as he carefully removed and set aside her necklace, then her gown, her petticoats, her stays, her shift.

“It’s not fair,” she said, voice hoarse. “If I am to be the only one naked.” She blushed at her boldness but her husband, gazing upon her in a way that would be disquieting if there was not so much gentleness mixed with the want, immediately obliged. Elizabeth watched, heat spreading across her chest and up her neck as he shed each layer, and wondered if this was how he had felt as he undressed her.

“Satisfied, wife?” Stephen asked, eyes dancing, and if he wasn’t so enticing, Elizabeth thought to herself, she might find him slappable. Instead she bit back another moan and said, “Well? What now? You said you’d show me pleasure, so what is it you intend to show me?”

It was just short of a demand, and she might be embarrassed by that later, but it seemed to please him because he smiled and closed the gap between them. “With your permission,” he said, moving his mouth towards her throat.

“Granted, granted,” she panted, realizing that her first impression may have been correct after all, and that her husband was, for all of the wonderful qualities she was discovering, a really very annoying person. All the same it was rather hard to care at that moment, because his mouth on her throat sent another wave of shocks through her body, pulsing towards the building heat and slickness between her thighs.

Elizabeth cried out and she felt the man smile, smile, against her skin before asking for permission again and dropping his mouth ever lower.

Stephen trailed kisses down her neck, across her shoulder and her collarbones, pausing infuriatingly to ask if he might, if he could, if she would allow it, as he moved to explore each new part of her. Infuriating, and yet it brought a sharp warmth to her chest to have him care so much about her wants and her comfort. Still she was on the verge of telling him to stop asking, that he could kiss her anywhere and she would like it, when his mouth landed on her nipple and he did something with his tongue that made her writhe.

“Oh! Oh good god!” she cried out, and then clamped her hand over her mouth in mortification. Stephen laughed a little, the delight on his face making it clear he wasn’t laughing at her this time “it’s a big house wife, no one will hear you. You may be as... vocal as you wish.”

The implications drew another low moan from her throat and Stephen laughed again from where he held himself over her, the muscles of his chest tantalizingly out of reach of her sudden desire to run her tongue over them. A good thing probably. Though perhaps he would like that. Perhaps she would ask him later what he would like for her to do to him. Heat flooded her face but before she had time to overthink it his tongue swirled around her nipple and she arched up, almost screaming with it.

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“You like that, don’t you?” and oh he was smug, and it made her want all those unknown things even more as if she could bed the smugness right out of him. She wanted to tell him so but instead all that came out of her was “More!” and he took her at her word, redoubling his efforts with fingers and tongue until she thought she might lose her mind with it.

“I need, I need,” Elizabeth gasped, not knowing what it was she was begging for, only that she would do just about anything for it. “I know,” Stephen said, voice low, somehow commanding and gentle at the same time. “I know what you need, don’t worry.”

He left her breasts, now so sensitive the air itself felt like an echo of his touch, and began to kiss down over her stomach only to pause once more as he reached her mound of Venus. “May I?” he said, looking up at her, all trace of humor gone from his expression. Elizabeth had no idea what he was asking but it didn’t matter, anything to alleviate the unbearable desire in her and she would say yes.

“Please, Stephen,” she said. “Please.” Stephen, the duke, her husband, watched her for a moment, a small, victorious smile turning up the corner of his mouth. Then he parted her legs and settled between them, pressing a kiss to the inside of her thigh, just above where her stockings sat. This time his kisses trailed upwards, and confusion and shock warred within her, because surely he couldn’t be intending...

He was. He did. His tongue found its way inside of her and she did scream this time, hands clenching in the sheets as her whole body reacted to the feel of it. It was electric. It was like nothing else, except maybe the feel of his tongue stroking the inside of her mouth, only more so, and so many other things as well.

A string of blasphemies found its way out of her mouth as she twisted beneath his onslaught. It was so much, it was too much, and when he stopped to once again ask if she was alright and if she'd like him to continue she thought about killing him.

“Yes, for the love of God yes, don't ever stop again!” Elizabeth cried out in near unhinged frustration, and the damnable man actually did laugh at her again before putting his mouth back where it belonged and putting it to proper use.

It was like a kind of madness, the pleasure taking possession of her body and driving all thought and self-preservation from her mind. Elizabeth bucked and twisted below him like a wild thing, crying out the most obscene things and guttural noises any proper lady ought to be ashamed of. But of course she wasn't one, and perhaps he didn't mind that, because her wildness seemed only to drive him on, refining and intensifying her pleasure.

The climax took her by surprise, heat and intense waves of an indescribable pleasure beginning where his mouth joined her sex and shooting all throughout her body before leaving her limp and exhausted. “I assume that is to Your Grace's satisfaction?” Stephen said, and without opening her eyes Elizabeth knew he wore that expression of insufferable smugness again where he lay between her legs. Once again she found it truly hard to care and instead held her arms out for him. The bed shifted, then dipped, as he resettled himself beside her and took her in his arms, kissing her forehead as she nestled in against him in sleepy satisfaction.

“I did not know a body could do that,” she heard herself admitting, and the smile was evident in Stephen's voice as he replied.

“There are all kinds of things a pair of bodies can do that you may find delightful, and all the time in the world for me to show them to you.”

Elizabeth let out a hum, soft and pleased and hopeful and felt herself begin to drift

off. Distantly she was aware of Stephen moving, perhaps even of him leaving the bed - then a door, and she was aware of a sense of loss, but sleep had caught her by that time and she let herself slip away into dreams.

CHAPTER 13

“Catch me if you can,” Elizabeth challenged over her shoulder, darting further into the garden. Her feet were bare, something she had not done for years and the grass was warm and soft underfoot as she ran. She was wearing a light white muslin, something she would normally have never dared wear outside and the ties were loose, leaving her breasts dangerously close to spilling out of the top.

She could hear him chasing her, his laughter carrying after her on the air as she ran towards the little garden he had taken her to, the fountains calling to her under the summer heat.

“I see you,” he called.

She had known he would enjoy the chase. He was the hunter and she the prey, and yet it did not make her feel powerless as she climbed onto the fountain and stood, letting the water drench her and plaster her dress against her skin. The soft blush of her naked flesh now showed through the wet muslin as though she were wearing nothing and her hair was wet and wild around her shoulders. She tossed her head back, relishing the cool water and waited for him to reach her.

She felt like a nymph of the fountain, like a magical being who was drawing him on towards her for her own desires.

Strong hands encircled her waist and drew her into his embrace, Stephen claiming her mouth as his rightful prize. They pressed against each other, her wet near-nakedness hungry for his body and longing to know the secrets he might teach her as his hands

shifted, found her breasts and slid her dress further down her shoulders to free them to the air.

She arched into his grip, into his touch, her head falling back as he kissed his way down her throat. He was still holding her to him and he was so strong, so powerful and she yearned - she yearned - she

Awoke with a start to Sally leaning over her and shaking her shoulder lightly. "Your Grace, you are still abed? It is near to breakfast!"

"Oh you have woken me!" Elizabeth blurted, then felt her face suffuse with a flush of embarrassment. She could not take it back now, but she wanted to desperately. It felt as though all the things that Stephen had done with her, all the things she had felt last night must be writ over the room, that Sally must know from her very face what they had done, and she could not bear it.

"Your Grace?" Sally frowned, concern on her sweet face. "Is everything all right?"

"All is well," Elizabeth said quickly, wanting to bury her face in her pillows but not daring. "I am simply tired. It was a busy night and then I had a - dream."

"A dream?"

"A nightmare," Elizabeth said hastily. "I was being pursued by a - monster."

"I am right glad I woke you then, Your Grace!" Sally said stoutly. "Now come and get dressed. Some new morning dresses have arrived today for you!"

"Please, Sally, just one of my old dresses thank you." There was so much to think and feel about last night already that Elizabeth did not want to think what might happen should she go down to breakfast in one of the new dresses Stephen had bought for

her. It would feel something like calling herself his and she wasn't sure yet how she felt about that.

Sally made an expression of disapproval but didn't argue, going and fetching a simple morning dress and helping Elizabeth to change and tidy herself after her busy evening and night. "Whatever happened to your gown, Your Grace? All the servants were abuzz about it this morning. It's been sent to be cleaned but apparently it was such a sight that there are rumors flooding around that you were chased through the woods, or had to flee some terrible fellow after your modesty!"

Elizabeth laughed, well used to the way that servants could make a meal of gossip out of the smallest details of their employer's lives. "Darling Sally, nothing so sinister! I found a wounded bird in the forest, that's all. I do hope it is all right this morning!"

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“Quite well, Mrs. Pugh tells me. His Grace’s man came early and has treated the wing and very soon they’re to come up to your room and set him up in here if you would like, Your Grace. He’s a brave little fellow and the groundskeeper has strong hopes he may settle enough to wish to stay with you as your bird if you care for him.”

Elizabeth smiled in delight. She had always loved the birds that had been kept at the Rosenburg estate but had never been allowed to spend much time with them. “That is exactly what I would wish, thank you Sally,” she said brightly. “I must hurry to breakfast but please make sure he is as comfortable as he can be made.”

“Good morning,” Stephen said as she came into the dining room, a little surprised to find him on his own as the hour was getting late to be starting to breakfast. Then she remembered that his siblings had stayed at Stapleton the night before and had likely not returned yet. “How is our young guest settling in?”

She smiled brightly, crossing to sit next to him. “I am told he will likely recover well, thank you, Your Grace.”

“Stephen.”

“Thank you, Stephen,” she said, her gaze dropping a little. She could feel the smile spreading further on her face. When she looked up again it was to find her husband staring at her lips as though entranced, an intense expression on his face.

A flush built up her cheeks as she remembered how he had been delighted by her smile the night before, and then by - other things.

She could not stay so flustered by him! Diana and the others would be home soon, and she felt she would surely die if they were to notice that she was so affected.

“Are you well, Duchess?” he asked, a wicked smile on his lips. “In truth, you look as if you may have a fever. Should you return to your bed? Should I call for a doctor?”

“Indeed sir,” she said, lifting her coffee cup to her lips. “I am quite well, perhaps it is you who are unwell. Is your vision fading?”

“Did you find me to be sickly last night, Elizabeth?” he asked, buttering a piece of toast and looking so demure that she wondered how anyone had ever found him out when he had performed mischief as a child. No man came to be in possession of such an innocent affect without practice.

“Your blood certainly ran hot,” Elizabeth retorted, keeping pace with him. It felt like safer ground to be exchanging witticisms like this, and she could see by the twitch of his lips that he was enjoying it too. “Maybe you are the one with the fever.”

“Perhaps we are both ill and should to bed together in fear of spreading it to the rest of the house,” he said, propping his chin on his fist and grinning at her. She scoffed and waved a hand at him and he caught it, kissed the knuckles quick and merry.

“When do your siblings return?” Elizabeth said quellingly, hoping it would bring him away from such dangerous topics and give her a moment’s reprieve to catch her breath.

“They should be home shortly. I imagine they supped early so they could make the journey back. They enjoy Stapleton Manor, but they do not like to be long away from home.”

“I can understand that,” Elizabeth said. It was true. Westall Estate was a happy home,

but one with a tragic past. Both things made it a home that the inhabitants disliked to travel far from. She could imagine that in the past the ladies had dared barely leave their house for fear that they would return to find one of their brothers dead. “I hope that they had a lovely time.”

“They will be glad to see you are well. You have settled in to the house so naturally that I believe they are coming to see you as part of the family.”

“I am glad,” Elizabeth said. His tone was a little stilted, cautious but she felt her heart warm at the thought that she could actually begin to have a real part of this world. “Perhaps we should finish the chocolate, however. If Diana is to return soon then we shall not get any.”

He glanced at her quickly, checking her expression and then laughed when he saw that she was jesting. “I say you are right, wife, why should we be the ones to never get a chance at it!”

He took the carafe and poured her a steaming cup, then one for himself. She had noticed that he rarely partook and she had initially been concerned that such rich dishes were not appropriate for her. It felt wicked for the two of them to share the luxury, despite it being his house and her being his wife and the pretense at thievery made her laugh into her hand.

It was frothy, the chocolate. Sweet and rich and milky and it tasted like warmth and comfort.

“Oh -” she gasped. “Oh it’s lovely!”

He was watching her with interest, his own mug untouched. “You could have it every morning, you know. We have plenty.”

“I know -” she hesitated and then smiled when he pushed his mug over for her to have as well. “I was worried it wouldn’t be allowed.”

“Elizabeth...” he was cut off from whatever he was going to say by a servant knocking, and she was glad. It felt as though he might be about to ask something that she was not ready to answer.

“Pardon, Your Grace,” the valet said. “There is a messenger here from the Duke of Rosenberg.”

Elizabeth felt laughter leave her as quickly as though someone had opened a window and let in a draft. She looked to Stephen and found his face set in a puzzled frown.

“Let them in,” he said firmly. “We will hear them.”

The servant darted away and Elizabeth barely had a moment to wonder what her family was about to do to ruin her life again when a small figure came to the door.

“Annie?” she gasped, half standing from her seat.

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Annie had always been small and bright, like a tiny little star, but she had never looked so tiny as now, standing in this large room and bundled up in a traveling cloak. She was staring at them with a fear that was not natural on her face, but it disappeared so quickly that Elizabeth wondered if she had seen it at all.

“Your Grace, Your Grace,” she said stiltedly, curtsying. “I have been sent by His Grace the Duke to let the Duchess know that her sister Lottie Barnes is to be married to her betrothed, the Duke of Seymour in the Autumn and shall be pleased if you will attend the nuptials.”

Elizabeth was so surprised that she forgot where she was for a moment. “Why would Lottie care about whether I attend?”

There was a slight silence, and she bit her lip and glanced at Stephen. He didn’t seem to be attending to her slip, however, instead looking at Annie with a frown on his brow. For somereason or other, the news of the marriage was concerning to her husband and Elizabeth didn’t have the faintest idea why.

“Excuse me, Your Grace,” Annie said, curtsying again. “Duke, sir, might I stay here a while? I miss my Sally so much and I’ve been wanting to see her for ever so long. Might I stay so I can see her for a bit? Please, sir, Your Grace sir?”

It was a very sudden speech, and one that seemed to have been rehearsed. Elizabeth felt a little rush of glee at the idea of her other sweet little sister figure staying with her, making this place more and more like home, but Stephen said nothing, still gazing in a thoughtful way at the small girl.

“Please, sir,” Annie said, her voice soft and desperate. “Please. I’ll work ever so hard, wherever you want me to. I’ll do just about anything you need. I just want to see my sister, sir. Please say I may.”

“Your Grace,” Elizabeth said softly, putting a hand on his. “Please. I would consider it a favor to me if you would.”

Stephen turned his head slightly, looked down at her face, his eyes serious and searching. Then he sighed a little and looked back at Annie. “I do not have a great need for a child to work on my estate,” he said firmly. “However, Mrs. Cope, the cook, has enough work that you will be useful in the kitchens. Mr. Brooks will take you. Send him in to me and I shall arrange it.”

Annie clapped her hands and bobbed curtsey after curtsey but it was to Elizabeth that Stephen glanced and she whispered thank you to him, and pressed his hand. He smiled in return.

CHAPTER 14

“Hello again, Your Grace,” Mrs. Cope said, laughing her all-encompassing laugh as Elizabeth opened the door through to the kitchen and stepped in to the warm room. It smelled of spices and sugar as Mrs. Cope was making cakes for the week and Annie was very diligently cleaning pans in one corner while Sally was already settled in a warm corner with a chair next to her.

“Hello Mrs. Cope, I hope I’m not interrupting.”

“Nonsense, like I mind the company, Your Grace! You are welcome any day of the week, even if it weren’t your own estate to start with!”

Elizabeth laughed. The cook, a woman of broad stature with red hair and merry eyes

that glittered like stars had told her something similar every day recently as she came to spend time with Annie and Sally and enjoying the familiar surroundings.

Perhaps it wasn't particularly proper for a duchess, but as Mrs. Cope said it was her estate and she no longer felt like the rest of the Wilkins family would look down on her for making a wrong step.

"Your hospitality is as kind as ever," she said to the cook, going to sit by Sally and pulling her embroidery out of her bag to work on. There was a warming cup of tea set at a little table at her elbow no sooner had she sat down, and Mrs. Cope put a little plate of dainty treats, small cakes and fruits and cheeses out for her to snack on.

A couple of days previously Annie had asked to be able to set up the little plate, and Mrs. Cope had puffed and huffed in offended dignity that as the head cook of the house it was her duty to be making the Duchess her plates and seeing to her needs when it came to refreshments and no small upstart girls no matter how much the Duchess might like them were going to steal her job.

Sally had laughed and agreed, telling Annie that she needed to think up a better way to sneak some of the fancy cakes for her own and Elizabeth had been inclined to believe seeing as the girl had looked so down-hearted afterwards.

But all in all Annie was settling in well. Elizabeth thought that she might be able to convince Stephen to let her stay longer, perhaps even permanently. Maybe with time she might even be able to bring Mrs. Adams to the estate in some capacity and have all of her true family with her at last.

"Oh and Annie," Sally was saying as Elizabeth took a fortifying sip of her tea. "I forgot to tell you earlier - I was out the other day with a young man! The kindest fellow I've met, he works in the stables here and his hair is ever so fine."

Annie stuck out her tongue, pausing over the soapy water to throw some of the bubbles at her sister. “A young man? Why would he be interested in you?”

Sally shrieked in offense and Mrs. Cope laughed again, a belly laugh that filled the kitchen with merriment.

“I’ll have you know I’m considered a very fine young woman,” Sally said, raising her voice over her sister’s faked retching. “He said he’s never been out on so fine an excursion with any other young lady he’s met!”

“Ohh so he’s been out with other young ladies,” Annie teased. “He’s got prospects he does.”

“None as fine as I am,” Sally said, sticking her nose in the air as Annie giggled.

It felt so much like being at home again that Elizabeth ached for their mother, Mrs. Adams would have been scolding Annie for teasing and checking that Sally was being careful and sensible, but also giving out petting and kisses and hugs to soothe any feelings and comfort any hurts.

“How is your mother, Annie?” she asked, something she had been trying to ask since Annie had arrived. “Is she well? Does she have any messages for me?”

“Oh she’s very fine,” Annie said distantly. “She didn’t say much when I left. I expect she wasn’t really thinking about it.”

Mrs. Cope leaned over from where she was mixing a fragrant batter and tweaked Annie’s ear. “What do we call the Duchess, missie?”

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Annie squeaked and scowled, rubbing her ear. “Your Grace.”

“Indeed, and we don’t forget such things in my kitchen, do we?” Mrs. Cope said, not unkindly. “There’s manners to be remembered here.”

Before Annie could answer, there was a little knock on the door and Diana appeared, her face merry and sweet and a little book in her hand. “May I join? It smells so good in here and you are all having such a merry time.”

“Of course,” Elizabeth said while Sally hopped up immediately to fetch another seat. Diana sat next to Elizabeth with a big smile of gratitude and started to read out little pieces and bits from the comic tale she was in the middle of reading, much to everyone’s delight.

Elizabeth listened happily, watching Sally and Annie squabble quietly in sisterly companionship with half her attention as she carefully formed the tail of a beautiful bird on the embroidery she was working on. It was something she had often lost herself in back at the Rosenberg estate, creating beauty in a world that had so little.

“I love these little currant cakes,” Diana exclaimed, helping herself and looking deeply pleased when Mrs. Cope immediately added a few more to the plate. “I don’t know how you make them so light, Mrs. Cope.”

“It’s a lot of beating of the batter, Your Grace,” Mrs. Cope said merrily. “It’s why my arm is so strong and feared far and near.”

“I’ll say,” Annie put in and everyone laughed at her rueful expression.

Mrs. Cope cooed and gave the girl a piece of candied fruit. “Oh you’ll learn to get on the sweet die of me, ducky, I don’t hold anything against anyone for long.”

“That’s a fine quality,” Elizabeth said, grinning at Diana, who smiled back. Her littlest sister-in-law had been occasionally joining in on her kitchen visits since she’d discovered them quite by accident and seemed to really enjoy the warmth and the relaxed atmosphere.

“Hullo,” said a new voice, as Selina pushed into the room, her eyebrows raised in surprise. “Is this a party?”

All of them froze briefly, wide-eyed like they were being caught doing something wrong. Elizabeth could see that Diana was worried that she had misstepped and that the servants were worried that they might be blamed for it.

She gathered together her courage and smiled at Selina. “We are just taking advantage of Mrs. Cope’s excellent hospitality, sister. Won’t you come join us?”

Selina looked a little surprised at first, like she wasn’t expecting so warm a welcome. Elizabeth knew that they had not been friendly at first, but she also remembered Selina’s support at the dance and had always admired the younger woman’s forthright frankness and quick intelligence. Their eyes met, both hopeful and wary, then Selina looked at her hands and her whole face brightened.

“Is that embroidery?” she asked, hurrying over and taking Sally’s seat as Sally subtly moved to get a new seat for herself and give the ladies room to speak together. “Look how cunningly you have captured Patrick - that’s what we all call that peacock. How are you getting his feathers so iridescent? Do tell me, I’ve been dying to think of a way to get the colors looking right!”

Elizabeth beamed, leaning forwards to point out the way she had layered the threads.

“It’s not difficult at all! I separated the silks down to single threads and then twisted them together in the different colors, see how it makes the combination more natural?”

“Doesn’t it take an age to pull apart the skeins, though?” Selina asked, gesturing towards the embroidery and when Elizabeth nodded and handed it to her, looking it over with every sign of delight. “I hate when I have to do it because I always create such a mess and it takes me hours to untangle it again.”

“I wind them into tiny pieces of card as I go,” Elizabeth said, pulling out a little skein she had made for the piece she was working on to demonstrate. “See? It helps prevent the tangling and keeps things neat. I spent a whole evening once getting so tangled that Sally had to come cut me free and I learned my lesson!”

“It was even in her hair,” Sally added from where she was sitting, doing some mending. “I don’t know how you managed it, Your Grace.”

Selina burst into gales of laughter, a hand resting on Elizabeth’s arm companionably and in that moment Elizabeth realized that these people all cared about her. They were all ready to accept her, no matter if she was embroidering in a kitchen in company with a scullery maid and other servants. They didn’t judge her or think her too strange to be associated with. They were in fact sitting with her.

This was happy, Elizabeth thought. This was what happiness was. And it was Stephen who had given it to her.

As Selina started to tell her own stories of mishaps, Elizabeth curled a hand protectively around her heart. She needed to thank Stephen. He had given her so much, so freely and with no other desire than to see her happy. She needed to tell him how grateful she was and she wanted it to be - something sweet. Something that would show how truly she appreciated him.

She remembered him speaking of sneaking off with Herbert as a boy, taking apples and pies and wandering the estate to eat lunch under the sky. He had sounded a little wistful, like he missed the freedom of those days.

Elizabeth nodded to herself firmly. She would take him out on a walk, they would have a picnic just the two of them. She would thank him, and they would be able to move past all the darkness and suspicion and fear that had marked the first weeks of their marriage.

With that decided, she brought her attention back to the conversation around her, soon laughing over some stories of Diana as a baby while Mrs. Cope brewed more tea and Annie and Sally giggled together in a corner.

“Damn it, Westall,” Perceval said, handing over the cigar clippers as he took his first draw. “Not everything is a blasted conspiracy, maybe the couple have affections for each other or it’s another advantageous match. You can’t deny that Seymour is a fine match for any young girl.”

Stephen leaned back in the leather armchair, taking a long draw on the fine brandy that the waiter had brought to them. He and Herbert were at The Royal Hounds, a prestigious gentleman’s club that the three of them frequented when they had a chance. They were ensconced in a small private sitting room with cigars and brandy and a hearty meal being prepared for them.

“I didn’t summon you here for your optimism, Stapleford,” he said coolly, pouring the other two men snifters of the brandy and toasting them with a gesture. “We must be realistic. Albert Barnes takes no action without having a plan behind it, sometimes several.”

“But love -” Perceval started and then stopped, laughing as Herbert threatened to throw a cushion at him. “If you will stifle my speeches on love, then I will keep

myself to unsentimental topics. Could Rosenberg not simply want connection to Seymour's fortune?"

"Perhaps," Stephen said slowly, turning the thought over in his head.

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“I don’t envy him Lottie,” Herbert put in, sipping his own brandy. “I am familiar with her sharp tongue and I would not be wed to that.”

“The lady’s character aside,” Stephen said, quellingly for he did not hold with gossip about a lady in a gentleman’s club. “Seymour is a rival of mine in the House of Lords, and Rosenberg will know that. We never meet but we are at odds with each other on some topic or other. The bills I wish to support, he opposes and those I want to oppose, he is the greatest voice in favor of. I cannot put my mind at ease that linking to his power is not some deeper plan on the part of Rosenberg.”

“It likely did not harm his suit,” Perceval said thoughtfully, refilling his glass. “But is there any way to find out for sure?”

“Not many, the Barnes family doesn’t exactly socialize with us,” Herbert said.

“They didn’t,” Stephen said. “But times have changed and there’s no reason I should not invite my brother-in-law to visit the estate for a spot of hunting now that it is season for partridges.”

Herbert looked appalled but Perceval inclined his head. “A fine way to see if vigorous sport and much wine and brandy loosens his tongue. What of Seymour himself?”

“Seymour as well,” Stephen said decisively, putting his glass down with a thud. “We will hold a hunting party and invite them both. I should be able to see at the least by their behavior to each other if not in conversation with them directly whether there is something to be concerned about.”

As Perceval raised a cheer in support and Herbert started to complain about spending any time around Dudley Barnes, Stephen's thoughts went to Elizabeth. What would she think of his plans?

Who would she side with if it came down to it?

CHAPTER 15

Elizabeth touched her hair lightly, checking that it was in place before knocking on the door of Stephen's office. It was the first time she had come to him like this and she had wanted very badly to be dressed well and to make a good impression on him.

"Come," he called.

She pushed the door open and got her first glimpse of his working environment, a large study piled with books. It wasn't neat, but it was ordered chaos, books piled in small groups of similar topics, papers stacked on the large dark wood desk, shelves that burst with folios and newspapers alongside leatherbound books.

Stephen was bent over his desk and glanced up briefly, before seeing it was her and standing. "Elizabeth?"

She curtsied, her cheeks flushing. She was wearing one of the light dresses she had received recently, a sprigged poplin that she knew she looked very well in, and she had picked out one of the jewelry pieces that he had purchased her in that first flurry of gifts, a brooch that was a dazzling sapphire, pinned to her bodice. "I wanted to speak with you, Stephen," she said carefully. "I have a request."

"Of course," he said, businesslike, striding around his desk to take her hand and lead her to a chair. His eyes lit on the jewelry and she knew that he had noticed that she was wearing his gifts and that he was pleased if she could read him right. "What do

you need. Is there a problem?"

"No, no, there is no problem. I simply wanted to take you on an outing, husband and wife. Do you have time to accompany me on a picnic, Your Grace?" Elizabeth smiled up at him and saw the pleased surprise in his face before he hid it again.

He was always so careful with what he showed the world.

"Do you have a time and day picked out?" he asked. "I shall clear my appointments for that day."

"I would like to take the time tomorrow, if it would please you. It has been lovely weather lately, and the air is not yet so cold it will be unpleasant."

"Of course," he said immediately, barely bothering to look at his diary. "I shall be at your service, Your Grace. What time shall we set out?"

"I was thinking of leaving here at just before noon, and then walking to the hill that is half an hour from the house, the one that you have told me about. I shall have Mrs. Cope put a basket together."

Elizabeth stood, ready to go and begin her preparations but found herself stopped with Stephen taking her hand and bringing it to his lips for a kiss that set her nerves aflame. His eyes were fixed on hers.

"I am looking forwards to being alone with you, wife."

She blushed, feeling tingly all over in a deliciously tempting way. "You are incorrigible, husband."

With his laughter in her ears, she left the office and headed to the kitchen to discuss

her wishes with Mrs. Cope.

“Here, pin it down with this,” Stephen passed her a book and Elizabeth darted to put it over the last corner of the blanket. They had spent a pleasant time walking out to the hill and Stephen had even told her some stories about his experiences growing up in these surroundings, but now they were trying to put out all the things that had been so carefully packed for them the wind was trying to sabotage her plans.

“Ah, that’s done it,” she cried, sitting down on the picnic blanket in delight now it was no longer flapping or threatening to blow away. “Please, join me. I will dish up.”

Stephen laughed and flung himself down next to her, his long strong form drawing her attention away from the basket long enough that she had to clear her throat and grope for a distraction.

“How was your friend, the Marquess, the other day?” she asked, ducking her head to keep her eyes on what she was doing and away from how diverting Stephen was in his shirtsleeves.

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“Perceval was as well as he ever is,” Stephen said, rolling to his side and propping himself on one arm to watch her unpack. “The man is an ox. I have known him since I was at university and I have never known him to be ill.”

“He does give off the impression,” Elizabeth said, with a laugh. “He seems like a man that an illness would not dare to approach.”

“And I do not?” Stephen feigned reproach, which only made her laugh harder.

“My lord, you look as though you would give a cold a good thrashing, but the Marquess looks as though the cold would simply expire trying to encourage him to feel anything but well.”

Stephen gave a short, delighted laugh and stole one of the cakes she had unpacked, taking a large bite of it. “You are not wrong there. I was intending to speak with you, actually, about what we were discussing while I was at my club. Would it interest you to hear it?”

Elizabeth sat back a little and looked at him curiously. “Heartily so, sir. Please, do tell me all about it.” It was strange how greatly their relationship had changed over the last few weeks. She could still remember how she had disliked him to start with, how she had been sure he would be another jailor to her and how clearly suspicious of her he had been.

He reached for another cake so she continued with unpacking the small pigeon pies and the cheese and fruits and the bread and other things that Mrs. Cope had packed into the basket while he spoke.

“I don’t know about your sister, but I do know that your father and brother still mean me harm. We were discussing whether it might be a threat to our family if your sister were to make a match with my political rival Seymour, and we have decided to hold a hunting party here at the estate. I shall invite Seymour and I would like to invite your brother as well. He’s not a particularly careful gentleman and my hope is that he may slip and tell us if there is a plan in motion.”

Elizabeth leaned forwards and placed a hand on his arm. “He may not be careful, but he is cunning. You must promise me that no matter what you do, you are careful when he is around. I do not trust him and neither should you.”

Stephen raised his brows, his face serious. “Those are strong words about your own brother. I am not censoring you, but may I ask what drives you to say such things?”

“You do not know how glad I was to marry you,” Elizabeth burst out, biting her lip as he looked at her in clear surprise. “Oh not the arranged part of the marriage or walking into an arrangement where I knew you would all hate me for who I was, but to escape that house. My days were torture there. They despised me for not being legitimate and Dudley is the worst of them. He is cruel and he is merciless. He will do anything to spite you. I fear him.”

“You have no need to fear him any longer,” Stephen said, rising to his knees and drawing her closer to him with both hands. “Elizabeth, if you are at all uncomfortable with him being at the estate I will discard the plan at once.”

“No.” She took a breath and leaned against his chest for support. “No. I can bear it if it will help uncover danger to you. I must. I shall.”

“My brave wife,” he murmured, tilting her head back with one finger and leaning in to kiss her, sweet and chaste on the lips. “You are more than I could ever had hoped for.”

“Could I be less than brave having married into this family?” she asked, smiling and he kissed her again in answer. The kisses deepened, her own lips surrendering to his as he cleared a portion of the blanket with one hand and pulled her down with him into a tangled embrace. His hands were trailing down herside, loosening the ties of her dress and then his mouth was kissing down her breasts and she was arching, hoping, praying - wanting for more, more more.

Would it be so wrong to ask for it? They were married, after all. There was nothing so shameful about needing her husband, about wanting him to lie with her.

She opened her mouth, the words on her lips when she glanced at Stephen and saw that his skin was pale and he was struggling for breath. He rolled away from her, off her and onto all fours, vomiting violently into the grass beyond the blanket. He heaved again and again before collapsing weakly, one arm wrapped around his stomach.

“Pain,” he muttered. “My stomach.”

When she had been little, Elizabeth had seen a rat just after taking some poisoned meat. It had died slowly and badly and she had cried for weeks, but it had looked a lot like what was happening now. With a lurch of fear in her chest she realized that she had eaten none of the food. Stephen had been poisoned.

There had been no way for Elizabeth to carry or even to support Stephen for the walk back to the house. He was nearly unconscious and even though he was making a valiant effort, the two times they had attempted it he had collapsed onto the ground immediately.

With no other recourse, Elizabeth had stripped off her shoes and run like the wind towards the main house. She had run barefoot before as a girl and the shoes that she had been wearing would only have slowed her fleet feet and her clever steps. When

she arrived, bloodied and panting, her dress torn and her face deathly pale, all the servants had hurried to her.

“Go, call a physician this instant,” she shouted, her voice shrill and cracking in her ears. “Go at once. Fetch me several men and Lord Herbert, His Grace is very ill. Go now! Now and tell the physician that I fear he has been poisoned!”

Herbert ran out in time to hear the last and Elizabeth would gladly have lived her whole life without seeing the expression of devastation on his face. She would have rather not told all the servants such a thing, knowing as she did that the gossip would reach London before the day was over, but unless she had spoken of the matter she could not be sure that the doctor would bring what he needed and she would not risk Stephen’s life on propriety.

“Take us to him,” Herbert snapped, a few other servants joining them and Elizabeth turned back around and led them at as fast a pace as she could manage back to the site of the cursed picnic where Stephen was now lying pale and unconscious next to the fateful spread.

Everything after that was a blur as Elizabeth felt the last of her strength leave her. She was helped back to the house by those who weren’t needed for Stephen and then wrapped in a blanket by Sally, whose pleasant face was twisted in concern. The wait for the physician felt like an eternity, everyone running in and out of rooms, and shouts for different possible necessities coming from one end of the house to the other.

Finally the physician rode up with the valet who had rushed to fetch him in a carriage, and ran into the house. Elizabeth started into the room, into her husband’s room, but Herbert was there, in the doorway, looking at her.

Why was he looking at her like that?

Why was he so angry with her?

Elizabeth fought with herself, trying to gather her thoughts together, to bring herself back to reality enough to understand what was going on. “What -?”

“Do you think I will let the woman who nearly killed my brother to his sick bed?” Herbert snarled, the fury on his face so dark that it was nearly physical. “Get away from this door while we bring him back, and then I shall decide what to do with you.”

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The door slammed in her face, leaving her numb and cold all the way to her bones. She could not even feel angry. She had taken Stephen out and he had nearly died for it. What else was Herbert to think? And what else was she to think except the horrible little thought that was planning roots in her mind that she could not tear out fast enough?

Shortly afterwards the door reopened and Selina and Diana emerged, each taking one of her arms and leading her to the drawing room where they could wait together.

“We know you had nothing to do with it,” Selina said firmly. “Herbert is worried about Stephen. He will come around.”

“Of course he will and of course you did not,” Diana said, pressing against Elizabeth’s side and bringing some much-needed warmth to her. “You are our dear sister, you are not to be suspected in such a manner.”

“If anyone says anything bad against you they will have me to deal with,” Selina added and the two girls nodded at each other over Elizabeth’s head.

Elizabeth could not speak. Her words had been stolen from her, like the joy she had dared to feel on a windy, sunny day with her husband by her side.

Now there was just fear and horror and barely daring to hope.

CHAPTER 16

Time had not been solid for a while. He could recall searing pain, a feverish panic

that Elizabeth might also be - then his consciousness ebbed like a tide. There were snatches of awareness, a long night where every time he tried to sleep people shouted and jostled him and walked him up and down a room and then fed him something slippery and foul that drove him to vomit.

He could remember just wanting to rest, hearing his family begging him to keep awake, why was Diana crying? What was happening? Why were they so -

It had felt endless. But then it had slipped away too and he was being woken by a man poking and prodding him and feeding him strange smelling liquids, then being woken again and then again in a shifting sea of slipping in and out of consciousness.

When he finally came to himself and felt like his grasp on his faculties was firm, he felt weak and ached in his very bones as though he had been subjected to some great exertion. It took effort to sit up, but once he had done so it became easier slowly to move and he was able to swing his legs off the bed, bewildered to find himself in just a night shirt after all that.

Bright daylight was streaming into his room and the sheets had a bitter scent of sickness to them. Diana was curled up on the chaise at the end of the room and Selina had dropped off in a chair near the bed, both of them pale, their sweet faces creased with worry.

But Elizabeth. Elizabeth was nowhere to be seen. Stephen pushed himself to his feet and then sat again, heavily, his heart thudding with adrenalin. Elizabeth was not here and he could not remember her present in the fevered rememberings of his sickness after the poisoning. Was it possible that she had eaten the poisoned food before he had been able to warn her? With her frailer constitution it was possible that whatever had struck him low would have killed her outright.

“Diana!” he bellowed. “Selina! Wake yourselves!”

Diana squeaked and fell off the chaise in a heap while Selina started to her feet in one movement, bleary with sleep. Both of them flung themselves to his side, and he had to struggle out of their arms in order to get their attention.

“No, attend me. Where is Elizabeth? Was she affected too? Is she -” he did not speak the word. He could not speak it in case it would infect the air and bring about what he was most frightened of.

“Stephen, Stephen,” Selina caught his hand and squeezed it firmly between her own. “No. Elizabeth is well. She did not eat whatever it was that was tainted. She came home and brought the whole house back to where you were so that you would be saved.”

“She’s fine, brother dearest, fine,” Diana chimed in, tears streaking down her cheeks. “We nearly lost you. We nearly lost you.”

This time when they fell on his neck, sobs wracking both of them, he allowed it and wrapped his arms around them. “My poor girls,” he said softly, stroking their hair. “It has been a hard time for you both. How long have I been ill?”

He could feel himself slowly relaxing with the knowledge that his wife was safe. His wife was safe, his sisters in his arms and likely his brother out raising hell trying to find whoever had done this ill deed.

“It has been three days since you collapsed,” Selina said, sitting back a little and trying to compose herself. She always held herself so firmly in hand, forcing herself to bear whatever trials or dangers they faced and remain the steady anchor of their household.

“The physician said you might have died, had we not reached you as quickly as we did,” Diana added, leaning into his side like she was a little girl again.

Stephen bent and kissed her forehead. "Where is Elizabeth?"

Both of his sisters glanced at each other, their expressions darkening. It was rare he saw Diana angry, and it made his stomach twist unpleasantly. "What is it? What has happened?"

"She was the only one with you when you were poisoned," Diana said slowly, her hands twisting together. "And she used to be a Barnes, so -"

"Herbert was a fool and declared her at fault for the whole business," Selina finished, crisp in her fury. "It's clearly nonsense, but in your absence the servants are looking to him to order the household and we could only protest."

"I beg your pardon?" Stephen said, feeling an ice-cold rage wash through him and brush away any lingering weariness. "He did what?"

"Exactly," Selina said. "Both of us knew that Elizabeth would do no such thing, but his suspicion of her is too great to be reasoned with."

"Go and fetch him for me," Stephen said, his voice cold. "I shall be dressing and fetching my wife from wherever he has put her, but I shall have a few minutes before then for us to have words."

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Selina stood, and took Diana by the arm and the two of them hurried from the room, giving him the privacy to change from the bed-shirt into clothes that did not stink of a sick bed.

He was finishing dressing when Herbert rushed in, not even pausing to knock and clasped his hand.

“Stephen! You are up and about! Should you not be resting? I will send for the physician immediately.”

“Where is my wife, Herbert?” Stephen asked crisply, stepping back from him. “What have you done with Elizabeth?”

“That treacherous witch?” Herbert’s normally pleasant face twisted into an expression of fury. “I’ve had her locked in her room until we could be sure of your condition. Then I shall send to the authorities so we can decide what to do with her.”

Stephen felt himself go hot with rage and grabbed Herbert by his collar and shook him hard. “You damned youngfool. How dare you treat her so? Poison me? There is no underhanded bone in that woman’s body! If she wished me dead she would take matters in hand herself to my face, not feed me poisoned sweets with a sweet expression!”

He shoved Herbert away from himself and stormed from the room, not wanting to wait one more moment to listen to his brother try to excuse his behavior. He could understand being suspicious perhaps, and scared and angry, but to take such actions against Elizabeth while Stephen had been insensible - it was beyond bearing.

When he reached her room he had to summon a servant for the key and then unlock the door, furious all over again that she had not been just shut inside but locked away like a prisoner in her own home.

“Elizabeth!” he said, rushing inside and coming to a halt, finding her stood by the window in one of her old plain dresses, her hair long and loose about her shoulders and her face cold and pale in the sunlight. “Are you well, have you been hurt?”

“I am not hurt,” she said coldly, turning her head slightly to look at him. It was as though they had gone back to the beginning and she was cautious and wary of him all over again. “I am your prisoner, sir. I am as well as that can make me.”

His mouth felt dry and his heart was beating strangely in his chest as he approached her. “You are no prisoner of mine. I know that you have no hand in what has happened and I will say so to anyone who needs me to.”

“How can you be so sure?” she asked. Her gaze was distant, as though she were looking at him from very far away. “I am a Barnes. We are a treacherous breed of people. I could easily be behind the whole matter.”

It ran him through to hear the words coming from her own lips, but he shook his head fiercely. “No. You are not behind it. I know it as well as I know myself.”

Oh and it hurt her, it hurt her like she was rending in two to say the words. To not fling herself to his feet and beg him to know her better than his brother did, to not let him embrace her and tell her that all was well.

Elizabeth felt as though she must be trembling all over. Her throat was tight and she ached to be still so cold and distant to him but she must. Had she not brought this danger to his doorstep by being near him? Did she not mean that he must always be careful, always be looking over his shoulder in case another be trying to kill him?

“How can you be so certain?” she said, feeling her numb lips forcing themselves to form the words. “Did it never occur to you that I might hate you just as well as my father does? The man I was forced to marry in order to protect my own family?”

“Is that true?” Stephen asked, sudden and sharp, a look of hurt on his face.

Is that true?

It took so few words then to destroy the trust he had in her. He could never see her as anything but a tool of her family that might be used to hurt him. Elizabeth turned back to the window, feeling her eyes sting with tears. She couldn’t speak.

“Is it true,” Stephen repeated, so close to her now that she could feel the heat of his presence. “Do you hate me, Elizabeth?”

She turned at that, staring up at him in surprise and saw it in his face. He did not think her a murderer. He did not. He still did not.

“I -” she stopped, her throat choking on the words and he touched her cheek with one of his lovely hands, so strong and scarred and safe. “I -”

“You can be honest,” he said softly, his voice warm and kind. “If you hate me, you can tell me. I shall not harm you.”

“You would never harm me,” she said quickly, her tears spilling down her cheeks. “I know that like I know myself.”

“Then?”

She couldn’t do it. Not even for his own sake. She shook her head slowly. “I do not hate you.” It was so far from hate, what she felt, that she was too scared to name it

yet. It was the other thing, she thought. The sweeter thing.

“Nor I you,” he said, a smile blooming on his lips. “I have missed you, wife.”

At that a soft sound, not quite a sob, tore its way from her throat and Stephen’s smile gave way to concern. “Ah sweetheart,” he said, gently cupping her face and peering down at her. “It’s alright.”

“Is it?” she said, and Stephen pressed a kiss against her forehead as if in response. “Is it alright?”

He was still cradling her face in his hands and, as their eyes met, that irresistible force was back between them, that pull which drew them together even when they had seemingly disliked each other in the very beginning. Elizabeth could taste her heartbeat in her mouth and then Stephen’s mouth was on hers and she was answering his kiss with a sudden fierce hunger that welled within her.

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“We will make it alright,” Stephen promised between kisses, the surety in his voice melting the shard of ice that had lodged in her stomach. “We will make it right together.”

The two of them made their way across the room, Stephen walking her backward onto the bed and kissing all the while as if they couldn’t bear to be parted even for a moment. As the mattress hit the back of her knees Elizabeth let herself fall backward and edged herself further up the bed, looking up at him, inviting.

“I want you,” she said. “As my husband. As your wife.” and the noise he let out in that moment was gratifying.

“Are you...” he said, throat working. “Is that what you want?”

“Yes,” Elizabeth said. “Please.” and it seemed that was enough for him because he immediately divested himself of jacket, cravat, and waistcoat before lowering himself over her on the bed. Elizabeth whimpered softly as his mouth joined hers again, the weight of his body pressing down on her somehow comforting and thrilling all at once.

Stephen’s kisses moved across her jaw, nipping at her earlobe and producing a sharp little cry that seemed to particularly please him, before starting down her throat. Elizabeth was pleased that this time he didn’t feel the need to ask permission for every single touch and caress, and was instead putting his earlier discoveries to good use.

Thrilled by her own boldness Elizabeth canted her hips up against that place where he

was already swelling beneath his breeches, and the groan he let out ignited something deep and primal within her. When Stephen pulled back she wanted to grasp and clutch him to her but then he was yanking off his shirt, looking down at her with eyes that burned, and all of a sudden her dress felt too tight, hot against her skin.

“What was it you said to me the other night?” Stephen said, chest heaving. “That it was unfair for you to be the only one of us undressed?” and, though Elizabeth would deny it if ever asked, she scrambled to join him in disrobing.

Clumsy with desire, he fumbled a little at the laces on the back of her dress, and they both laughed. “Wicked,” he said, sucking a kiss against her throat. “To laugh at your lord husband.” Elizabeth laughed again at that only for it to turn into another moan as his hand found her nipple and he rolled it expertly between his fingers.

“Oh Stephen,” she breathed, voice taugth with desire. “I want you. In the manner of man and wife I want you.”

“Turn around then,” he said, those strong hands of his on her shoulders, spinning and guiding her back onto the bed. Elizabeth’s eyes raked up his body, all tightly coiled muscles and fine dustings of hair, and thought she might expire with need if he didn’t make good on his promise very soon.

“Lay back,” Stephen said, the gentleness in his voice belying the naked want in his eyes. “And let me ready you properly.”

Readying her meant more of what they had done the other night, and Elizabeth writhed and moaned and cried out beneath the ministrations of his tongue. But then he paused and pressed a finger against that opening between her legs and said, “May I?” as if that wasn’t the thing she wanted most in the world at that very moment.

It was entirely different to the work of his tongue, work he resumed upon her assent

as he slid first one and then two fingers inside her. It felt like closing a loop, completing a circle of pleasure, as the two complimentary sensations came together, making her scream her pleasure without even a thought of who might overhear it.

That same, glorious warmth began to build and build within her but then Stephen stopped, again, and she would have cried out in protest but he was kissing her instead and she could taste her own pleasure on his tongue.

“Wife,” he murmured, and the absolute fondness in his voice made her heart sing. “I am ready to begin if you are.”

It was in a haze of want that she cried “yes, yes,” and watched him position himself between her legs, only for him to wince a little and put a hand to his side and a cascade of ice water to flow through her. He was sick. He had been poisoned and nearly died and was this even safe for them to be doing?

Elizabeth sat up “Stephen, should we? Is this safe? Have you asked a doctor?” Her husband froze and stared at her, and she could tell from his face that he was torn between laughing at her and that deep fondness she apparently inspired in him.

“Ask a doctor?” There was a hint of laughter in his voice but more than that there was warmth and the desire to reassure her. “Wife, no one has ever died from love making. I assure you, we would not do this if it was not safe. I have no intent of abandoning my position so soon. Not when it has become so newly pleasurable.”

As much as she was still concerned for him Elizabeth couldn’t help smile at that little bit of flattery. “Will you assure me you will stop should you feel any discomfort, any pain at all?”

“If you promise me to do the same,” Stephen said very seriously. “The first time can be painful for some women but it need not be, not if the husband approaches it slowly

and carefully, and takes pains to prepare his lady first. You must tell me if it hurts, or if I am not going slowly enough.”

The thought of it, of his manhood finally inside her, filled her body with heat and her reluctance to allow him ebbed away. “I promise,” she said, laying back and letting her legs fall open before him. Stephen smiled gently, and carefully positioned the two of them before, finally, finally, pushing inside her.

Elizabeth gasped at the feeling. It didn’t hurt exactly, but it stretched and pulled, and felt so strange to have something so large intruding inside a place that, prior to today, had never had anything inside it before. Stephen stilled above her, carefully scanning her face for any signs of discomfort, and the knowledge that the whole of him was buried inside her was enough to set her clenching around him.

“God Elizabeth,” he moaned. “What are you doing to me?”

“What am I doing to you?” she demanded, pushing her hips up against him. “Don’t just lay there, dosomething.”

“As my duchess wishes,” he said, a little smile quirking the corner of his mouth before, very slowly, beginning to thrust in and out of her.

Elizabeth whined and arched her back beneath him “Stephen! Damnit, more!”

“More what,” he teased, though the strain from maintaining this agonizingly slow rhythm was obvious in his voice.

“I don’t know what! Please! I’m not fragile Stephen. You won’t hurt me. Please!”

It seemed that please was, as ever, the magic word for him, because he began moving properly then, and oh, that was almost it. Almost enough, but not quite, and she thrust

her hips back at him, meeting him stroke for stroke, as she chased that pleasure that was seemingly just out of reach.

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Then Stephen slipped his hand between them, to circle the place he had tormented with his tongue just moments before, and yes, that was it. That wonderful, complete pleasure from before, but more so, magnified, by the feeling and the knowledge of his manhood inside of her. That rush of feeling, those waves of electrifying pleasure, came faster this time, and she cried out with shock at the intense sensations where her body pulsed around her husband's.

It seemed to shock him too, or at least he cried out near as loud as she had, and it only took a few moments more for him to still atop of her, languid and spent as she.

Instead of leaving her as he had last time, he pulled her closer, into a sleepy and warm embrace and aa Elizabeth settled, feeling safe at last she realized the truth could no longer be denied. She loved him. She loved her husband.

CHAPTER 17

It was a deuced unpleasant thing for a man to wake after a pleasant evening with his wife, the first pleasant evening of hopefully many to come and find her no longer at his side. Stephen had woken slowly, reaching with one hand for the warmth and softness of Elizabeth and his mood had soured as he felt nothing but an empty and cold bed.

Where had she gotten to? Stephen stretched and winced. The exertion of the previous night right after having woken from his illness had left him with sore muscles and feeling tired, but neither had ever stopped him before.

It was a pity he had no clothes in her room, as he had to gather up the clothes from

the previous day and put those on, crumpled though they were, before he could go in search of his wayward wife and bring her back to bed where she belonged at least until breakfasting time and perhaps a good while after.

Was this why so many young couples went on a honeymoon after they were wed? All his thoughts were turned upon her, upon how she felt in his arms and how she tasted, how she sounded when he made her feel wild and uncontrolled. How was he meant to deal with his peers or run the estate when she was seared into his mind?

A young woman, Elizabeth's maid, hurried by and Stephen called to her. "Daisy."

She paused, her round face anxious and drawn. No doubt the past few days had been hard on the young woman if his brother had considered Elizabeth responsible. "Yes, Your Grace, sir?"

"Where is my wife?"

She glanced over her shoulder, tense with some fear or anxiety that he couldn't understand. Who was she afraid of here in his house? "I - I don't -"

"Daisy."

She blinked up at him and her shoulders slumped a little. "She's with my sister, Your Grace. She's in the music room that Miss Diana uses to dance in."

Stephen frowned. "Why is she in there?"

"She didn't say, but it seems something terribly serious, sir. I'm really worried. And after everything that happened when you got sick, Your Grace, sir. I don't think she can be hurt again, begging your pardon. You have to take care of her."

That said, in a rush that Stephen was a little surprised the frightened girl managed, she squeaked in alarm, glanced around again, curtsied three times and bolted down the hall.

Whatever was going on?

He could not hear any voices and the door was closed, but something, some old instinct pushed him to open the door silently and step into the doorway. Stephen knew that whatever his wife was discussing with the impertinent, spirited child who had demanded to be allowed to stay at his house, he wanted to hear it and he didn't want them to know that he was listening.

"I love you," Elizabeth was saying, her voice strangled as though she was trying to keep it level through threatening tears. "I will protect you, Annie. But I cannot let you stay here, not after everything that has happened."

"I didn't -" the child wailed, sobbing into her hands. "I didn't -"

"I am sure that you were mistaken and that you didn't mean any harm," Elizabeth said slowly, her face twisted in grief and pain. "But I cannot do anything more for you. You will have to go home to the Rosenberg Estate as soon as you can get away."

The crying grew louder, the child almost bent double, arms wrapped around her middle now as though she were trying to hold herself together.

"What is happening?" Stephen asked. It was strange to see his wife who had always been kind and generous to those around her and treated the sisters as though they were more like her family than servants from where she had grown up standing still and stiff while the girl sobbed. "Elizabeth, what is going on?"

Elizabeth turned to him quickly, her face whitening further until her eyes were stark

and huge in her small pale face. “Nothing. I want Annie to return to the Rosenberg Estate, to take news to my sister. That’s all.”

It was a choppy, stilted explanation and not one that Stephen believed for a moment. However he would never have called his wife’s honesty into question in front of servants, not even servants that she knew well.

He did not, however, have to pretend to believe Elizabeth as the girl, still crying, with her cheeks wet and her eyes red, stepped forwards.

“I did it, sir. I did it. They said Her Grace did it, but I did it. I poisoned you.”

There was a small cold silence.

Stephen stared at the child, then turned to stare at Elizabeth in turn, taking in the pallor of her skin and the nervous twisting of her hands in her skirts. She was wearing her old gown, not one of the dresses that he had bought her and she looked so miserable that he couldn’t bring his heart to be angry that she was trying to hide this from him.

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“It won’t have been her fault, Your Grace,” she said quietly, a note of pleading in her voice. “She is a good girl, a kind girl. I am certain my father - someone must have threatened her. Please do not hurt her, let me send her away. She cannot stay with us, but I could not stand it if she were to be killed, please Stephen.”

His mouth thinned a little and he looked back at the girl who was standing very still, her eyes on the ground.

“I want to talk to her alone. Please leave us.”

“No! No, please Stephen,” Elizabeth grabbed his arm with both hands, naked terror in her face. “Please do not be angry with her, she is only a pawn in my family’s games. It’s not her fault. Please.”

“Elizabeth,” he said gently, taking her chin between two fingers and pressing a soft kiss on her cheek. “Have faith in me, sweetheart. I will just talk with the girl. I mean her no harm.”

He could not even be angry that she would think such a thing of him as he saw her shiver and lean into his caress. Who knew what kind of world she had grown up with under Albert Barnes’ roof? Who knew what they might do to a servant that betrayed them. It was not her fault that she was so protective, any more than it was her fault that she had been born into that family.

“Go,” he said, squeezing her hand. “I will tell you all after we have spoken.”

She nodded, wordless and wan, and left the room.

The girl, red eyed and still crying, tried to meet his gaze. She was a stoic little thing, her arms still wrapped around herself as though she might burst apart in a moment, but her chin set as she faced him, her lips pressed into a white line and misery painting her face.

“Are y’gonna kill me?” she asked, hiccupping a little on a sob. “I don’t want my mama to know. She’ll die of a broken heart, she will, sir. I don’t want Daisy to know neither.” Tears brimmed and fell down her cheeks but she didn’t look away from him.

“I don’t make a habit of slaughtering children,” Stephen said dryly, gesturing at a chair. “Sit down, girl. I won’t harm you, I don’t lie.”

She hesitated, but she was trembling too hard to keep standing, so she eventually slid over to the chair and settled on it, looking between him and her knees. She was still crying but trying not to be loud about it, like she felt she didn’t deserve to weep. Perhaps she did not in front of the man she had nearly killed, but Stephen would see. He always wanted all the facts before making a decision.

“Why did you come here, Miss Adams?” he asked, stalking to stand in front of her, hands behind his back.

She wriggled a little and hiccupped. “Was sent with a message, sir. And - “ she glanced up at him, a quick searching look. It was cunning but the kind of cunning of a trapped fox kit trying to survive. “I don’t know how to say it, sir.”

“Start at the beginning.”

The girl rubbed at her face and he sighed and passed her his handkerchief. He could be just while not being unkind. “Come on now. Start with why you were sent to me. Who sent you?”

She blew her nose and was silent.

“Was it the Duke?”

A head shake, she glanced at him again and there was fear in her gaze. Not fear of him. Fear of something else.

“Was it the Duchess?” It was not the Duchess. Stephen already knew that. Duchess Rosenberg was not one to meddle in the matters between the two families, and she would have known enough to send a proper messenger, not a slip of a child. It had seemed strange at the time, but Stephen had assumed that the Duke was trying to insult him.

She shook her head again, harder this time.

“It was Lord Barnes, wasn’t it, Annie?” Stephen said, gentling his voice a little. “Dudley Barnes sent you to me. He wanted you to hurt me?”

Annie shuddered all over and ducked her head into her hands, a fresh bout of sobs shaking her. “No,” she wailed. “He didn’t want me to hurt you, sir. He didn’t want me to hurt you.”

A cold hard horror settled in Stephen’s stomach and he stepped back, sharply. “What do you mean?” His voice was flat, harsh in his own ears.

She raised her face, tears pouring down her cheeks. “It was Lady Elizabeth, sir,” she whispered. “He wanted me to hurt Lady Elizabeth.”

A rush of fury so hot that it left him unable to speak consumed him.

The girl kept talking, now she had said the most horrible thing it seemed to have

opened the floodgates. “Lord Barnes, sir. He told me if I didn’t do what he said he would kill my mother, that he could do it easy sir, just go in her room and slit her throat while she sleeps and blame a robber. I know he’s a bad man, and I know he’d do it and I didn’t want my mother to die,” she sobbed, raw and desperate. “He told me I had to come here and stay long enough to get some stuff into Lady Elizabeth’s food, that it would make her sick and then his dad would be able to bring her back home and start war with you again. I know she’s happy here and I didn’t want to ruin it for her but I’m so scared all the time at home and I miss my Daisy and Lady Elizabeth and he swore me it wouldn’t do her lasting harm, sir, I promise he did!”

Stephen clenched his fists tightly enough to feel his nails cut into his skin and took a deep breath. Every fiber of his being was aflame with fury. Barnes had tried to murder his wife, his Elizabeth, with poison in the hands of a terrified girl. He would have had this child responsible for a death and Stephen’s family blamed, for who would believe that a little girl would murder someone?

It was a cruel plan, one that hurt so many innocents. God only knew what impact unknowingly murdering a lady she clearly held dear to her heart would have on the child, let alone her family, and then the death would ruin his entire household if the Duke decided to get revenge.

“He told you that it would not kill her,” he said in a dangerous voice, forcing himself not to move as in the fierce fire of his rage he could not be certain he would not do something that would terrorize the girl. “Did he tell you what the poison was?”

Annie shook her head mutely.

“It was arsenic. I only ate a little and I am a large man. I was fine. She would have died.”

Annie crammed her hands over her mouth, her eyes overflowing again.

“He wanted you to kill her so that he could use her death to destroy me and my family,” Stephen continued, the truth ruthless on his tongue. “He would have made you a murderess.”

“Please don’t tell her, sir,” Annie said, so softly he had to strain to hear it. “Please don’t tell her the truth.”

He took a deep breath and unclenched his fists, thinking of Elizabeth, her smile when she first saw the girl, her kindness to the family, how she clearly loved the Adams sisters as if they were her own. “I shall not. It would break her heart to know what you nearly did to her,” he felt a little twinge at the wail the girl let out at that, wounded and forlorn. While he might be angry with her, furious at how near a thing it was, and while he might believe her to be impulsive and foolish to not have entrusted at least Elizabeth with the truth as soon as she was safe enough to do so, it was not this girl that was to blame. “You cannot stay here in the meantime, Miss Adams. I will ensure that you face no consequences for your actions, but you will be sent to my estate in Somerset in the meantime to keep you away from the remaining danger until the matter is settled.”

The girl nodded, her hands over her face now to try to hide her weeping. “Will I ever

come back?"

"When it is safe," Stephen said firmly. "I will be having a talk with my brother-in-law. He is to visit soon and I really must ensure that no one further suffers for his obsession with violence."

Annie shivered a little. "Are you going to kill him, sir?"

"I will make sure he is no longer a danger," Stephen said, his tone dark with violent promise. "To mine or to anyone else."

CHAPTER 18

How. Elizabeth turned and walked back on her steps for the twentieth time. How could this have happened. How could it have been Annie.

There was a cold little thought at the back of her mind, a suspicion that she was ignoring as hard as she could because every time it surfaced she felt her heart shrink from it.

Annie had been so normal, so natural. She had been chattering away like there was nothing wrong. She had been listening to Elizabeth talk about how happy she was, how much she loved her new life and all along she had been planning and plotting and intending -

How.

But Annie. Her little sister in every way that mattered. A baby she had held when she was just born, a toddler she had taught how to count, a little girl she had played pretend with in the glades around the big house.

Annie.

Her heart ached and she paused in her pacing and leaned against the wall, pressing a hand to her chest as though that would soothe the pain flaring there. How could she bear it, losing her Annie? Losing her sweet sister? She had barely had her back, just had her for a little while!

“Elizabeth,” Stephen said, standing in the doorway to her room, his face grave. “Come, don’t wear your shoes out.”

She darted to him and then paused, hesitating. She wanted to wrap around him, hold him to herself and beg his pardon for bringing nothing but pain and terror to his life, tell him how sorry she was that he had been caught in this deadly game by her family. But at the same time holding him felt like a luxury that she could not allow herself.

Was it fair to cling and to tell him how much she cared when every moment she was near him was another moment that he was in deeper danger.

He stepped forwards and put his hands on her shoulders, his thumbs rubbing soothing circles into her skin as he bent to kiss her forehead. “Now, none of that. You look as though you are expecting a funeral. I gave you my word, did I not?”

“I don’t doubt you,” she said quickly, leaning towards to rest her head against his chest. Her temples were pounding with pain, a headache that had been ebbing and flowing since the day Stephen had collapsed. “I am so worried for her. She is so young to have this over her head.”

He hummed, stroking her cheek. “She’s a bold little thing, brave too. I wish she had come to us when she arrived here. Surely she must have realized that no news could have been carried back to reveal what she was doing.”

“Maybe,” she felt herself melt as he ran his fingers through her hair, massaging at the sore points on her scalp and soothing away the tensions of the long days without him. “I think sometimes it is easy to get trapped and forget that help is present if you ask for it.”

She could sense that he was looking at her searchingly then, but did not meet his gaze and he said nothing for a moment, guiding her to the bed so he could sit them both down, pull her against his chest and continue to work the aches out of her scalp with his strong safe hands.

How could she feel so safe with him? It was as though her heart had accepted him too deeply and too thoroughly to ever consider that he might hurt her.

“What have you decided?” she asked eventually.

“I am sending her to the Sandhall Estate in Somerset, one of my properties. She will be safe there for the time being and it will allow me to manage what is happening here so that no further consequences find her.” He paused, and his voice when he next spoke was gentle. “She won’t be brought to cold justice, sweetheart. I will keep her secrets.”

“Oh,” Elizabeth felt the sound rip out of her and she flung herself at him, wrapping her arms around him and allowing herself to finally give in to the tears that had been building for days. “Oh thank you, Stephen. She means the world to me. I - I don’t want you to think I would have sheltered her here and never told you what she did. I was going to send her away myself, but I was so scared for her.”

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“I know,” he wrapped his arms around her and held her safe and warm, rocking her gently. “It’s all right. I know. I know what you were doing. I would have done similarly had it been a loved one of mine in her place.”

“She is a sister to me,” Elizabeth blurted, finally letting that truth free. “I was not allowed to be with the family, I was kept apart in my own small rooms. I barely ever saw the Duke and his wife, and only sometimes saw my siblings until we were older. It was Mrs. Adams and her children who loved me and cared for me and they are the closest thing to a family I have.” She sobbed and then laughed, bitter and cold. “That is the wife you got, Stephen. A cast-off. An outcast. I had never been out in society before the other night. I can never be a duchess worthy of you.”

“Hush,” Stephen said, drawing back and bending to look in her face. His eyes were fierce but their anger, their coldness did not hurt her. He was not angry with her, she knew that well now. “You are stronger than I could ever have imagined to have made it this far with so little help. I will summon a tutor for Diana’s season and you can sit in with her so she has support and company. You will learn enough that way to be able to manage anything that comes before you, for you have the spirit and the wit to do this well with nothing.”

Elizabeth let out a breath as a rush of relief swept through her. “I have been so frightened of letting you down.”

“You could never. If anyone judges you they will judge us all and we shall laugh at them, for we are stronger together than some snide gossip.” He stroked a hand over her hair. “I have sent Annie away immediately with one of the maids. She will have a way to travel but there is a letter going with her which will mean she will be taken

care of and treated well.”

Elizabeth felt her heart twist at the thought of not being able to bid Annie farewell.

“Will she ever return?”

“Of course! Why in heavens does everyone act as though I am banishing her to the new world? It’s Somerset. There is naught ill there, just apples and sunshine. She will come back after the business with your family and the hunting party has been settled, it will be too dangerous before then.”

“Oh of course,” she relaxed, letting herself settle against him properly. “Have your plans changed now?”

“What, upon finding out your father’s son was trying to blackmail a child to poison me?” he grimaced and his eyes, beautiful eyes that they were, flashed with danger that made her shiver a little. How was it that he could be so deadly, thrumming with threat and fire and yet it made those parts of her that were so newly awakened yearn for his touch?

“Dudley?”

“He told her that he would murder her mother.”

Elizabeth paled, clinging to him. “Mrs. Adams - is she - what if she -”

“Do not concern yourself, he will simply think she has not had the chance yet and all the servants have been instructed to tell him that I have sent her away briefly to fetch some cider for my natal day next month. Do you think he would take such action without being able to see the person he is hurting experience the pain he is doing to them?”

She shivered. “No. He likes to see his bolts go home.”

“Then he will not act against Mrs. Adams until he is certain he can do so in a way that will draw every bit of satisfaction from it. If it was ever anything but an empty threat. He will want to wait for Annie to return in the hopes that she has not acted yet. The news of my collapse has not been spread, there is no need for him to know.”

Elizabeth nodded, feeling her pulse thrumming with fear. It was too real, too clear how easily Dudley could hurt Mrs. Adams. He must have made the threat knowing it would hurt her just as much as it would harm Annie. “No wonder Annie was afraid,” she said softly. “Dudley can make it feel like there is no escape from him, like no matter what you are thinking he is ten steps ahead and he will always win.”

“Nonsense, he couldn’t even win a duel against Herbert,” Stephen said briskly. “Herbert is a strong fighter, but he’s impulsive and he had never dueled before. It should have been simple if your father’s son were as smart as he thinks he is, to work him into a rage and then overwhelm him with cunning. Instead he was wounded as badly as Herbert was and drove his father into a peace treaty with me.”

Elizabeth huffed a weak little laugh. “I suppose that is so. It is hard to describe how he does it. I have always been frightened of him, ever since I was a girl. The way he looked at me sometimes made me feel cold.”

Stephen tightened his arms around her. “I do not blame you for that. He is a man who knows how to goad his targets to feel shame or despair or rage. But he is not infallible and he is not good at long plans. In this situation what was he planning for the aftermath? Were you to be executed for my death, thus pointing a long finger of shame at his own family? No. He can be beaten and I shall do so myself. He will learn not to meddle in my affairs.”

If she had to make a wager between Stephen and Dudley, Elizabeth felt that it was

obvious who would win. Dudley had never had the calm cold center that Stephen had, he didn't plan things out meticulously, he did not have the determination to do even what was uncomfortable for himself in order to make his plans come to fruition.

No, Dudley would come to fear her husband and she would enjoy watching.

"Thank you," she said softly. "Thank you for everything. You have been so kind to me, even though my father sent someone to harm you. You have no obligation to be gentle to Annie. It means so much to me."

"You are my wife," Stephen said firmly. "I will do what I can to make you comfortable and happy as I should. Is all this the reason I woke up to a cold bed this morning? Fretting about young Miss Adams?"

Elizabeth felt her cheeks go red as she remembered their night and all the strange and wonderful things he had made her feel and the sounds she had made, the things she had said. "Once I had my suspicions I did not want to waste time in seeing to matters," she said. "But I am sorry that I left you, I did find it hard to escape your embrace without waking you."

"Mmm," he leaned down and kissed her temple. "I have no doubt of that. I remember distinctly going to sleep with you in my arms."

"It was a very pleasant way to sleep," Elizabeth admitted. "And also a pleasant way to wake."

"I shall want to repeat the experience so that I can have the pleasure of waking to it too," he murmured.

She lifted her head to look at him and his eyes were bright, shining as he looked at her as though maybe he really cared about her beyond all the plans and truces and

treaties and politics. He cupped her cheek with one hand and brought their lips together in a kiss that felt like absolution and security, that felt like warmth and affection.

She let her eyes flutter closed, pushing away the thought that she did not deserve any of his affection. She had brought her brother's murderous rage to his door in a way that might never have been accomplished had she not married him.

Before this the Wilkins family had only had to fear the Barnes family in social settings where a duel might be demanded as a matter of honor, but now the Barnes family could send agents into the very heart of the Westall Estate. It was no longer bare swords and open battles, but poisoned foods and knives in the dark that they had to fear.

And it was her who had made it possible.

CHAPTER 19

“Is everything ready?” Stephen asked, pouring Elizabeth more hot chocolate before she could ask for it. The days before they could reasonably hold the hunting party had slid by in a rush of preparations and he was still certain they would have missed some crucial detail.

“Mrs. Cope has been working for days on the food,” Selina said promptly, nodding across the table at Elizabeth. “We’ve spoken to her just this morning about the first dinner party, haven’t we sister?”

“Indeed we have,” Elizabeth said confidently. He had been certain that putting the two of them in charge of the catering would work well. Selina was forthright enough that she would not realize she was basically leading Elizabeth’s decisions, and she had run events for him before so she was well used to what was expected. It was as subtle a way as he could manage to give his wife the support she needed in learning how to manage social events. “I am particularly excited for all the pies she has puttogether for the main event. Selina suggested a focus on game meats to celebrate the hunt..”

“And Elizabeth suggested that we represent all the different game from the estate in a wonderful feast,” Selina added enthusiastically. “It will impress everyone, I am sure.”

“I think it will be talked about for months,” Diana said cheerfully. “And I cannot wait to have one of the quail pies, they are so very dainty and Mrs. Cope put an entire egg

into each one!”

Stephen turned his attention to Herbert, who was watching Elizabeth with a pinched expression. No matter what he said to his brother he could not shake him of his conviction that Elizabeth had been party to the poisoning and it certainly hadn't helped that they had not been able to present him with an alternative suspect.

“How are the grounds?”

“The groundskeepers say that there is plenty of action for when we want it,” Herbert said. “I still think that being around Barnes blood with guns out is courting trouble, Stephen.”

Stephen frowned, but he felt Elizabeth place a hand on his arm and held back his temper. It was not the time for them to be fighting amongst themselves, not when they had such deadly foes at their doorstep. “No matter how sure of himself Dudley is, he will not be willing to risk the noose by shooting me in front of a party of witnesses,” he said calmly. “Keep an eye on the guns being brought in and out of the house, though. See if you can keep track on how many each has brought with them. I want to know if anyone is carrying guns that would not be expected for the event, smaller ones for instance. Easy to hide on the person.”

Elizabeth's grip grew tight on his arm and he glanced at her and smiled reassuringly.

Perhaps not as reassuringly as he would have liked. Her return smile was thin and forced.

“Are you expecting someone to try to shoot you, Stephen?” Selina asked, her face paler than normal.

“No. I do not expect any danger,” Stephen said, mostly truthfully. He was not

convinced that Dudley Barnes would not take advantage of their proximity to try something but he was certain that he would not endanger himself to do so. And so long as Stephen was smarter and faster than him there was nothing to worry about. “But I will not take any risks with our safety. We are inviting the wolf into our home, everyone will be careful. Especially you, Herbert. You wounded him once. We will not risk him taking vengeance.”

Herbert nodded. “Very well. I will go see that the servants are prepared for the evening.”

The others rose too, but Stephen pulled Elizabeth to his side before she could leave and kissed her hand. “Do not be afraid, sweetheart,” he said softly. “I will protect you.”

“I have no doubt,” she said. “But who shall protect you?”

“Your fiery heart will protect me,” he said, rising to pull her against his chest in an embrace. “I know that you are worried about your brother being here, but I have taken every precaution. We will be safe and we will find a way to entrap him. He will no longer be a danger to you after this hunting trip. To you or to the rest of the family.”

“Or to you,” Elizabeth said, her eyes ablaze. “I am worried about what he will do to you, Stephen. He has tried already once!”

“And I have no doubt he has many ideas on how to try again, but I am also sure that I will be one step ahead of him. Have faith in me, wife.”

“I do,” she said, leaning against his chest then, exhausted and feeling small and delicate in his arms. “But I also know how dangerous he is.”

“As do I, vividly.” Stephen kissed the top of her head. “Come. Perceval and Celia will arrive soon, they promised me they would come as early as they could so that we would more thoroughly prepare. You will feel better when I have Perceval at my side and you can have Celia at yours telling you all the many dangers he and I have faced together.”

“Oh god,” Elizabeth said, slipping her hand into his. “You are simply convincing me that the Marquess encourages you to terrible feats of danger, Stephen.”

“Perhaps,” he laughed, kissing her knuckles. “But he would never do anything to annoy his wife.”

“Ah yes, a very wise man,” she said, taking his arm. “I hope you learn much from him, Your Grace.”

“I’d rather learn much from you, Your Grace,” he said lowly in her ear, and delighted in her blush as they left the room together.

“You never have the best cigars, old boy,” Perceval complained, rooting through Stephen’s cigar box in search of his favorite brand. Stephen snorted a little. He had made it a point of principle never to stock the foul-smelling things that Perceval had formed such an attachment to when he had been doing business in Denmark and his friend could never seem to understand his stubbornness on the fact.

“I have no desire for my house to smell like an unwashed cow farm,” Stephen said briskly. “Have one of my cheroots and be done with it.”

Perceval made a face as though he had been told to eat a cake of soap, but gave up his search and selected a fine specimen to cut and light. “You have no taste, Westall.”

“I have too much taste, Stapleton.”

“You’re worried about something,” Perceval said, puffing a stream of tobacco smoke. They were seated in Stephen’s study and Perceval was now looking at the ceiling and making smoke circles with unerring accuracy. “I can see in your face that all is not well.”

“You are perceptive as ever,” Stephen said, lighting his own cigar but not drawing on it. “Barnes accepted my invitation, but I fear he has some devilry planned. He moved against me recently, and his failure may drive him to desperate heights.”

Perceval frowned, still looking upwards. “Must the hunt continue?”

“More now than before. I must have information on what he is planning next. We cannot be taken unawares, not after what nearly happened. I will not be surprised, I will not lose anyone else to the Barnes’ thirst for blood and treachery.”

Stephen took to his feet and paced up and down before his desk, his fist clenched so hard that he crushed the cigar in it. “It may get bloody, Perceval. You have a wife. You should think hard before you decide to see it through.”

Perceval stood and crossed to him, taking the burning mess of cigar from his hand and dropping it in the ash tray. “I have your back, Westall. Always.”

Stephen felt a little tension leave his shoulders and nodded at his friend. “Be careful.”

“I shall. Careful is what I do. You shall be bold and wrathful and I shall carefully

follow behind preventing all who try to stab you in the back and picking up the mess.”

Stephen laughed. “Like old days?”

“Like old days,” Perceval clasped his hand. “We go into the fire.”

Barnes and Seymour arrived at the same time, around the middle of the afternoon as some of the other guests were trickling in. Stephen ensured that he was the one standing at the door to greet them as they walked up the path.

Seymour was a serious sort. If he had not been so set against Stephen’s own political plans he had often thought that they might find themselves well suited as friends, but as it was he was an annoyingly perceptive and dogged opponent. He seemed tired already of his company as Dudley trailed him to the door.

“Westall,” Seymour said with a brief nod. “Thank you for the invitation. I was delighted to accept as we are to be closer acquainted through our wives.”

“Indeed,” Stephen said with an answering nod. “I am glad of the opportunity to speak with you outside the parliament, Seymour. Welcome to Westall Estate. I see you have travelled with Lord Barnes.”

Dudley smiled at him, a slow offensively impudent smile. “We might as well have, it would have been quite foolish to take separate carriages as we were coming from the same place.”

“Of course,” Stephen said calmly, ignoring the fact that Barnes did not even nod his head. “The hunting party shall begin in earnest tomorrow, however tonight I am throwing a small dinner party. I hope you shall enjoy dining with us.”

“I shall be delighted to,” Seymour said earnestly. “I have not yet met your family, Westall, and I have heard nothing but good reports on them.”

Stephen smiled and nodded. “Carter will take you to your room,” he said, gesturing at a valet. “Dinner will be at seven, but there will be drinks in the drawing room from six. Please join us when you are comfortable.”

Carter took Seymour’s bags and led him into the house. Barnes went to follow but Stephen raised a hand to stop him.

“Lord Barnes,” he said coldly. “Not so fast if you please, sir. We have much to discuss.”

“Do we?” Dudley said insolently. “I can’t think of a single thing you could have to say that I would find at all interesting.”

“I suggest that you think hard then,” Stephen said. “I shall speak with you in private.”

“I see no need of that,” Dudley said, starting to move past him but Stephen stepped in front of him and blocked the way, lowering his voice.

“If you would rather that I speak loudly and freely now in front of all who can hear us than I shall. I have nothing to lose by doing it. Consider whether there is anything you would rather hide and follow me to my study.”

He stalked away, sure that Dudley would follow.

He did.

Once the study door was closed, Dudley took a chair and flung himself into it, lounging easily backwards. “Is there any need of such dramatics between family?” he

asked.

“Is there any need for arsenic between brothers?” Stephen countered, viciously pleased as the color ebbed from Dudley’s face. “Indeed. I know all. I know everything you intended to do with your sordid little plan. I did think better of you, Barnes. I thought you at least had the nerve to attack me to my face and not hide behind a child to do so.”

Dudley gritted his teeth, his lips thinning into a white line. “What do you intend to do?”

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“So far I intend to keep the peace,” Stephen said. “But remember this, brother. I am not a forgiving man. I remember my injuries and those who have injured me. I am patient and I am more cunning than you. I suggest that you stop trying to find a reason to start this feud anew and accept the peace that we have found before you discover what will happen to those who truly anger me.”

Their eyes met for a long moment. Stephen wanted nothing more than to tear out the young coward’s throat. To hurt him the way he had planned on hurting Elizabeth, the way he had planned to ruin Stephen’s family and hurt all those he loved.

Something in his gaze seemed to shake Dudley, for he looked uneasy for the first time Stephen could ever remember seeing.

“I don’t know what you are talking about,” he said slowly. “But of course I shall seek to preserve the peace.”

“Good,” Stephen said coldly. “Get out of my office. There will be a man outside who will show you to your room. I suggest that you wait until dinner to rejoin the party.”

He turned his back, keeping watch on Dudley in the reflection on the polished clock he kept on his desk until the man rose and stormed from the room.

Whatever happened next, he had tried his best.

CHAPTER 20

“Mrs. Carter is a most accomplished musician,” red-faced Mr. Carter said, his

whiskers constantly getting into his glass of wine and then gently spraying his food as he talked. “She plays nearly every instrument I know of. I have only to mention one and it turns out she is a prodigy at it. She plays the pianoforte most uncommonly well, and then she can turn her hand just as excellently to the harp. And when it comes to singing, then she cannot be matched in the entire town we live in. No matter where we go people are always asking her to do some piece or other. Do you play anything, Your Grace?”

Elizabeth smiled lightly at him. She had been avoiding Celia’s amused gaze for the last fifteen minutes at least for she was sure that were she to look to her right for a moment she would burst into giggles.

She had never met the Carters before, but Stephen had confessed to her that he had sent them a late invitation after realizing in alarm that Lord Barnes would otherwise be taking Diana into dinner. Mr. Carter was a cheerful local gentleman with a modest fortune and enough connections to the estate that it wasn’t completely unreasonable to invite him and his wife.

He had pressed her hand to his lips and commented that she must think him paranoid to go to such lengths but she had shaken her head hard. The idea of Dudley near Diana gave her such a sick feeling in her stomach that she had nearly had to sit down.

Bless the Carters. They had filled the party in just the right way to protect Diana completely and they were kind enough people that they never questioned their inclusion.

“I am learning the pianoforte,” Elizabeth said charmingly to Mr. Carter. “But I shall be very pleased if your wife would be willing to favor us with a performance later.”

“Indeed,” Celia said, wicked thing, clearly trying to catch Elizabeth’s eye. “It has been a while since I have heard a lady perform a fine piece of music, I am alas

completely unable to play any instrument at all.”

Mr. Carter was so excited to be able to talk more about his wife that he dropped his cutlery in the sauce and then knocked a spoon off the table all together and had to disappear in search for it.

Celia nudged Elizabeth’s arm lightly and Elizabeth looked anywhere but at her. She would not laugh. It would be so improper. She was a duchess. She was serene. She was calm.

She glanced over the other end of the table at Stephen, who was between Diana and Dudley himself. After everything she had protested the seating arrangement roundly with her husband, not wanting her brother anywhere near any food that he might eat, but Stephen had pointed out that it was better than having Dudley near anyone else. At least Stephen knew what to look for.

He was carrying on conversation with several people with his usual serious intensity, but she could see how his gaze never strayed far from watching Dudley. And in turn her half-brother was tense and shifting in his seat as though he were a little boy again trying to figure out how to do the worst thing he could get away with while his tutor was still watching him.

At least he was between Stephen and the Duke of Seymour, and Herbert was next to Diana on the other side of the table. Those she loved were as safe from him as they could be with the danger right in the room.

Indeed he was focused on his plate so intensely and carving his meat with such ferocity that Elizabeth thought it might be something else he was imagining carving.

She could take a moment, letting Celia volley the conversation from Mr. Carter while she made the appropriate noises, to listen in to the conversation at the other end of the

table.

The Duke of Seymour was fastidiously carving meat for the lady next to him, something that Herbert was forgetting to do. “Lady Selina, I believe apart from during the Season, I have not seen you at any gathering. It seems a shame for you to keep such beauty away from the balls and parties that would surely benefit from your presence.”

“Until quite recently we have had to be careful about where our family attends,” Selina said charmingly. Elizabeth suspected her of kicking Herbert from under the table for he jumped a little and started attending to the bird with more diligence than before. “While of course it is my pleasure and duty to attend as many occasions as we are able, I do prefer not to risk my brothers’ lives while doing so.”

“One would think that the Dowager Countess of Marchmont's 80th birthday celebration would have been safe to attend,” Herbert said shortly, slipping a sliver of duck onto Selina's plate. “But alas, some people have no respect for occasions, Your Grace.”

“Indeed, it quite ruined my green ballgown to find myself in the garden in the pouring rain,” Selina said. “But then some men are unwilling to continue with trying to murder my brother if I am present so one does what one must.”

“You put yourself in that kind of danger?” The Duke frowned, leaning forwards. “Surely such business has no place for a woman.”

“A woman's place is wherever those she loves are,” Selina retorted, eyes flashing. “I have as much heart for my family as any man, and I will do what I can to help them.”

“Lady Selina is a radical,” Dudley drawled, a bitter bite behind his usual barbs. “She reads about ancient lizards and science and thinks the sexes should be equals.”

Selina smiled at him so beautifully that Elizabeth thought for a moment that she was going to ram a fork into his throat. It was exactly that sort of smile. “Why Lord Barnes, I did not know that caring about one’s family was radical.”

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In the crisp silence that followed Herbert snorted. “My dear sister, please consider to whom you are speaking. One can accuse Lord Barnes of many things but surely you recall that one certainly cannot accuse him of the sin of sentimentality.”

Dudley bared his teeth and Elizabeth glanced quick and sharp at Stephen who was watching the affair with a dark expression, coiled to act should he need to, but it was the Duke of Seymour who spoke.

“I would never dare consider Lord Barnes sentimental, no matter what else he might be.”

“No indeed,” Herbert said with a quick fierce grin. “Perhaps it is not surprising he is as yet unwed, ladies do like a man to have some fellow feeling. Gentle creatures that they are.” He jolted again, and Elizabeth knew Selina had kicked him once more.

Seymour snorted. “I must say I am also not surprised by the matter.” He glanced at Selina, a knowing to his gaze. “But I’m not sure all ladies are so gentle, Lord Herbert.”

Herbert laughed and Selina looked the picture of modest perfection, but it was Dudley’s face that drew Elizabeth’s attention, Dudley and the dark wrath on his face as he glared between Herbert, the Duke of Seymour and her dear, beloved husband.

Dudley was not a man who could be safely embarrassed, not in private and certainly not in front of strangers.

“Selina, sister,” she said, projecting her voice across the conversations. “Please do tell

me again about the large lizard fish that was found on the beach. I believe the guests will be delighted to hear about it, it took me so strangely when you told me!”

Selina beamed at her, distracted immediately and the conversation moved on, Selina and the Duke of Seymour delving into a conversation about large strange lizard bones and Herbert being distracted by Stephen and Diana. Elizabeth tried to shake the feeling that something bad was going to happen.

She was no longer the little girl she had been before. She had nothing to fear here. She was stronger, she was protected.

But even as she tried to once again attend to the conversation between Celia and Mr. Carter and Perceval, she noted how Dudley was holding his knife, knuckles white, point leaning towards Stephen.

As the dinner party wound down, as the brandies were poured and drunk and the men chatted about grouse and partridge and which they were most fond of shooting, Elizabeth felt a thrill of relief that her first dinner party was not just nearly over but had not been a complete disaster.

Mrs. Carter was a woman with a face that became bright red with joy and who had sparkling dark eyes that were stars in her face. She told Elizabeth and Celia a number of stories about her first parties held once she married Mr. Carter and Elizabeth had been surprised and delighted at how honest and funny they had been.

She rather suspected that Mrs. Carter had an inkling of her nerves and the kindness made her like the woman fiercely. Stephen sent her a little smile over the lady’s head, and she realized that he had known exactly the right people to invite to this party to limit the damages and to give her a buffer.

Stephen was discussing a political matter with some of the men and the others were

slowly moving on towards the drawing room for last drinks before turning in. It was a hazy moment of pleasantries, softened by good food and wine and Elizabeth was feeling so sweetly happy looking at the profile of Stephen's face as he talked animatedly about this great thing he was passionate about that she didn't notice who was at her elbow until it was too late.

"Who knew you cleaned up so well, sister dear," Dudley said lowly, his face shuttered in a way that she was not used to as he followed her gaze. "Perhaps I shouldn't be surprised that living with the enemies of your family agrees with you."

"No one is an enemy here," she said, hearing the old tremor entering her voice as cold ice flooded her blood. She could feel his presence like an old scar, a threat on her skin and she thought again of Stephen and Annie and poison. "Are we not all family, brother?"

"You were never real family, Elizabeth," he said softly, looking at her. His eyes were almost black with malice. "You were an embarrassment to my mother and a trial to my father and you'll be nothing to us when you are gone."

A prickle of fear went down her spine and she glanced around, checking for her new family and where they were, if anyone could see how she was cornered, threatened - alone.

They were distracted, all of them. He had picked his timing well, like he always did. Always pinching her where the bruises wouldn't show, always making sure no one was near to see him hurt her or destroy the things she loved, always hiding, always subtle, always secret.

All her life she had wanted someone to rescue her from him.

Elizabeth looked at her brother and in a flash of true anger saw him without the veil

of fear that had been blinding her for years. This man. This horrible man who could not love, who could not care about anyone, whose only way of showing affection was to hurt others, this petty little man had made her life miserable. He had turned her into a victim, a shrinking flower always looking elsewhere for salvation.

“Lord Barnes,” she said, her voice starting weak but strengthening as she saw the surprise in his face, the way his eyes flashed with confusion as he looked at her. “I will have you recall that our familiarity is not so great that I will allow you to speak to me this way. You may be a duke’s son and you may be half-blood related to myself, but I, sir, am a duchess. You will speak to me with respect.”

He snarled. “Or what will you do? What can you possibly do against me?”

“Perhaps you should consider what you could possibly do against me,” she retorted, leaning in to match him gaze for gaze. She was calm now, in the center of the storm of her rage. “After all, brother, you are in my house and you should wonder perhaps who it was who prepared the food you ate tonight.”

He blanched so pale, so quickly that she knew everything she had ever needed to know about his intentions for her and her husband.

It was a cold victory, but one that soothed a little child that she had once been. This was for her. This was for every version of her who had trembled at his words or refused to let him see her cry.

“Sleep well, Lord Barnes,” she said, turning on her heel and stalking to the door. “I know I shall. I am, after all in the bosom of my family, surrounded by people who care about me.” She turned her head a little, looked back at him, curved her lips into a knife of a smile. “I pity anyone sleeping in the camp of their enemies tonight.”

Elizabeth walked away. She was freer than she had ever been. As she crossed to the

drawing room Celia and Selina called her over to hear some escapade Perceval had gotten up to and it tasted like victory.

CHAPTER 21

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“Don’t you feel even a little bad for the poor birds?” Diana asked, peeking around Celia towards where there were preparations being made for the beaters and the assistants for the afternoon’s activities.

Selina laughed. “Sweet sister, if we had sympathy for all the living creatures on the earth whatever would we eat? You like roast partridge and grouse fine enough when it’s on your plate!”

“I don’t like to think about how it got there, though,” Diana said with a shiver.

“And so you shouldn’t, Lady Diana,” Mr. Carter said, passing by. His brows were angled solicitously but Elizabeth was sure that no matter what the conversation was about, the topic would swiftly be changed to Mrs. Carter. “Why my own dear wife will simply not allow talk of hunting in the house. It was only because of the deep admiration that we hold for your family and the Duke that she was willing to come to the party, for she will surely be alarmed with the talk of what we have caught and how we have caught it.”

“I shall stick to her, then,” Diana cried. “We shall avoid the talk together!”

Mr. Carter was so pleased at this that he dropped his hat, then his gloves and then finally his cane and he had to bend three or four times to gather them up again.

Elizabeth moved on from the small group to where the men were discussing stratagems. While the partridge was not a particularly wily opponent, it seemed that the gentlemen were all keen to show their shooting prowess and come back with the best brace for the kitchens, and they were briskly debating the merits of beaters and

the foul play that poachers were wont to get up to.

“Before the main event this afternoon and everyone else arrives, let us have a small wager,” Herbert was saying. “Whoever can get the most partridge and pheasants in the woods without any aid shall have the first attempt at the driven game when the rest of the party starts this afternoon.”

“Ah Lord Herbert,” Perceval said, a beaming smile on his face. “That sounds like sport indeed, but let us not wager for so small a trifle. Let us each man put a purse in the pot to be won by the lucky winner.”

The rest agreed heartily to the plan as she approached, and then looked somewhat embarrassed to be caught in the act by a lady, even Stephen taking the air of a man trying to check the time on his watch and the sky for clouds at the same time. Elizabeth had by now spent enough time with Celia to know the Marchioness disliked gambling enormously, which was enough to make those near her nervous of speaking of it where she might find out.

“I shall go with Herbert, we shall keep each other right,” Perceval said briskly, breaking the awkward silence.

The Duke of Seymour looked a little disappointed, Elizabeth thought, and then gamely said that he would pair with Dudley who pretended that he did not notice the hesitation.

“I see that I have been left to my own devices,” Stephen drawled in amusement.

“Not at all,” Elizabeth said. “I shall come with you, Westall.”

He looked up at her, surprised. “Elizabeth?”

“Indeed,” she said, carrying on as quickly as she could so he would not see how nervous she was. “It sounds like an entertaining way to spend the morning and I should not like you to be alone. The honor of the house demands that you win the wager, after all.”

This was at least part true. She did not know if he could see it in her face but the idea of him alone in the woods with his enemy or enemies near him and armed made her stomach turn over in fear.

Perhaps he could see how much it meant to her for he nodded, his face softening a little. “I shall be glad of the company. Come, let us find some horses and be started. You shall be my luck today, wife.”

“Whoa Captain, whoa,” Stephen drew in the rein of his stallion and glanced cautiously at Elizabeth who was sat like a bag of old washing on the back of Cleopatra, one of the gentler horses in the stables.

In truth he should have suggested she ride while he led the horse on a longe line, but she had been so excited at the idea of riding out with him that he hadn’t had the heart.

“Tell me again how it is that you’ve never ridden a horse before,” he called over his shoulder, keeping Captain on a short rein so they would not outstrip Cleopatra who was enjoying the chance to meander the woodlands.

While Captain had aspirations to be some sort of war horse and would gallop all day if Stephen would let him, his glossy black coat rippling over his lean muscles and his proud head tossed back in delight, Cleopatra was a dappled gray who was a cat at heart and loved to poke her muzzle places and properly explore.

“Why on earth would I have ridden before?” Elizabeth called back, trying gamely to urge Cleopatra to a slightly brisker walk. “The horses in the Rosenberg Estate were

not for my use, husband. I might have gotten ideas quite above my station if I had been allowed on one.”

Stephen pulled Captain to a halt and glanced at her again, his brows furrowed. The more she spoke about her life before they had met, the more he felt the best course of action before him was to ride to the Rosenberg Estate and push Rosenberg’s head into a horse trough.

How had she remained such a spirited, intelligent and kind woman with everything she had been against?

“Oop!” Elizabeth pulled on her reins. “Why does she want to go off the path so greatly?”

“She desires knowledge,” Stephen said dryly, moving Captain over to take hold of Cleopatra’s reins.

“And who are we to keep her from it?” Elizabeth said with an amused smile as he drew them on down the path. “I cannot help feeling that it would be easier for me to urge her onwards if I were able to ride the way that you are.”

He laughed. “Perhaps, I am sure I simply lack as a teacher for the appropriate way to manage the horse side saddle.”

“Are you saying that there is something you cannot do, Your Grace?” Her smile was impish, mischievous. It was an expression he was beginning to see more of, it was charming on her face. It made him catch his breath a little, how beautiful she was.

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“I must admit I have not perfected side saddle riding,” he drawled, smiling back at her. “Oh however shall I live that down.”

“I will keep your secret, sir,” she said, then she moved slightly wrong and her heel clipped into Cleopatra’s side and before he could adjust a stronger grip on the reins Cleopatra, startled by the sudden and unexpected blow, twisted her head and bolted.

Stephen dug his knees into Captain’s side, heart hammering in his chest as he raced after them immediately. He should never have allowed this to happen! How many times a year did a person die from an accident while out riding? And they were in the forest where there were plenty of places for the horse to stumble or a branch to knock her from her perch. He would have his wife dead by the end of the afternoon and that would -

He would never recover that.

It was a new thought, a strange thought in its clarity.

He would never survive losing her.

The race was brief. Cleopatra was a good hearted creature and once she recovered from her startle she came to a stop. However, as much as she had not expected to be kicked, Elizabeth clearly did not expect the horse to stop and slid from the saddle to the ground in a tumble that made Stephen’s heart drop.

He flung himself from the saddle and ran to her side, pushing the horse away before a hoof could go astray and hit her by accident.

“Elizabeth!” he knelt on the loam-covered earth, reaching for her shoulder but afraid in a cold moment that perhaps she was already hurt and he should not move her. “Elizabeth, are you -”

She made a soft noise, small and shuddering and he thought that perhaps she was whimpering in pain or weeping from the fright of it before she moved, her mane of hair falling from her face as she sat up and he realized that she was laughing.

“Oh I am not good at this, Stephen,” she said, tears of mirth running down her face. “I shall never be one of those elegant ladies, I am going to be a wild woman and ride astride like the men and cause a scandal.”

Stephen reached out to touch her cheek. “Are you hurt?”

“Just my pride, what little there is,” she said merrily, letting him help her to her feet. “I always thought it looked so easy, and look how wrong I was.”

Stephen put his arm around her shoulders and drew her against his side for a moment, pressing a kiss to the top of her head. All this time he had thought himself lucky to have met a woman that was interesting and beautiful, not cruel like her family but a good match for him practically and a woman he desired in his bed. It was more than many couples could hope for. He cared about her as part of his family and because their union would keep the peace for everyone he loved.

And yet now, with her soft warmth pressed against him and the music of her laughter still in his ears he knew it was more than that. It wasn't just practicality, or lust or fellow feeling for someone in his household.

This was deeper, a feeling that consumed him like fire and yet also made him feel renewed, created anew. He knew what it was and yet he was wary of it, wary of the implications in this crucial moment, of what it might mean with everything so

delicate.

“No one can see,” Elizabeth said, pouting at him winningly and making his heart melt. “Won’t you show me how to ride astride? I am sure it will be much easier.”

He laughed then and kissed her hand. “When we are not in a forest and there are no important guests at the estate I shall take you to a field and teach you gladly - and in a saddle that will suit it, not a sidesaddle like the one you have. For now I shall fashion a lead rein and help keep Cleopatra from bolting again.”

She beamed at him and he helped her back onto the horse, mounting Captain and using a length of line from the saddlebags to keep the two horses linked. “I feel safer already,” she said. “Nothing can harm me if you have things in hand, I am sure.”

“Quite so,” Stephen said, more seriously than he had initially intended. “Nothing will harm you while I am with you, Elizabeth. That I am certain of.”

“Well then,” she said. “Let us win this wager!”

“And so we shall,” he said, grinning back at her. “Onwards, my duchess.”

They picked up speed once more, and now that Cleopatra was forced to keep from the forest and follow the path and stay at Captain’s side they were finally able to make progress into the woodlands.

It was a beautiful day, the light filtering through the trees and the soft sounds of nature all around them. Elizabeth was enchanted, her face aglow with interest and joy as she looked all around her. Once again he was struck with how well she fitted into the setting, the nymph-like beauty of her.

“How will you kill them?” she asked, eyeing the undergrowth with curiosity. “How

will you find them for that matter?"

"It's the right season for hunting them," Stephen explained. "At this time of year they are fat and complacent, pecking for berries and foraging for food. We will see many of them soon enough now Cleopatra is not frightening them off for us. I will shoot them with my rifle and we will collect a brace of them to show the others how it is done."

She nodded. He had been concerned that she would find the matter too bloody and cruel, especially with how she had taken up the wounded falcon and nursed it back to health. But she was apparently practical enough to see a difference between an eating bird and a hunting bird.

"Well then, husband," she said, shooting him a sparkling look full of wicked impishness. "Perhaps you should show me how well you can hunt? I have seen little evidence so far."

"Is that so?" he said, a smile tugging at his lips. "Then we must change that immediately."

He pulled Captain to a stop, having spotted the signs of a large plump bird just moments before. In a smooth movement he brought up his gun and fired, hitting his mark immediately and knocking the bird off its perch.

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Elizabeth gasped and then clapped her hands together. “Oh well done!”

It was a cry of honest admiration and Stephen was surprised with how it touched him to hear it from her. “The first of many, my duchess,” he said, dropping off the horse and leading both with him to fetch the bird so they would not take off with Elizabeth while his back was turned. “You clearly do bring me luck after all.”

She blushed when he looked back at her, quick and bright pink and he smiled. Perhaps he was not the only one feeling a warmth at being admired.

CHAPTER 22

“There’s another,” Elizabeth called, pointing towards fluttering feathers in the underbrush and thrilling a little as Stephen moved liquidly, his second gun already going off.

He was impressive as he worked, practiced at reloading and an accurate enough shot that no bird they had spotted so far had escaped his aim. She slipped from the horse and walked over to join him where he was standing under a spreading oak, the dappling light over his face as he concentrated on ramming the next shot into his first fowling piece.

He had brought two weapons, advising her that it was often safer when out hunting to have a backup in case one were to only wound an animal and need to put it out of its misery. It made sense to her. While she had never been on a hunt, one thing that Dudley had always spoken about to anyone nearby with passionate interest was the workings of guns. He had a large collection and when he was a teenager he had spent

hours loading and reloading them.

The riflemen in the army can do this twice a minute he would say when questioned. Am I not better than a common soldier?

Elizabeth could remember how uneasy she had felt during those months, how it had felt to be in the woodlands around the estate and have her shoulders prickle and wonder if maybe Dudley might be out with one of his guns.

While he had never threatened her with them, something both his parents had been very serious about, she had always wondered if she would not look rather like a deer to her brother, prey to be killed with fear to be feasted on afterwards, as fulsomely as a venison dinner.

“You do this well,” she said softly to Stephen, trying to push away the increasing sense of wrongness she was feeling.

Perhaps it was because she knew that out in the forest Dudley was prowling around with only the dubious restraint of the Duke of Seymour to keep him in check. Perhaps it was the way he had been so quiet all morning, checking his weapons as the others talked, watching those around him with dark malignant eyes.

“I have had a lot of practice,” Stephen said. “Come, let us walk a little way. I am tired of riding and the horses could do with a rest.”

“Gladly,” she said, taking his arm after he secured the horses. “I have not heard nearly so many other shots from the forest. I think you shall win the wager, Your Grace.”

He smiled at her, the secret special smile he only ever seemed to send to her. It made his eyes crinkle and sparkle and her heart skipped a beat every time she saw it. While

she knew that he might not feel for her the way that she felt for him, it was something between them. Something more than convenience and business and practicality. It was more and it made her hope, no matter how foolish she told herself that was.

“Of course I shall,” he said, grinning in a quick confident grin that made him look boyish and wild. She wondered what he had been like as a young man, whether he had been freer and wilder, not constrained with the trappings of dukedom keeping him serious and tired. “I have your good luck at my side and I also picked the part of the woods which has the most birds in it.”

She laughed, surprised. “Stephen!”

“Elizabeth,” he mimicked back. “What, was I supposed to let Seymour or your brother beat me?”

“Herbert might have,” she said, laughing again. “And what about the Marquess?”

“Perceval knows that all is fair in a wager,” Stephen said gaily. “And as for my dear brother, I love him with all my heart but he has not the patience or the eye for hunting in a woodland. He will have loosed his shot at anything that moves or gotten distracted by Perceval looking to gather a bunch of wild flowers for the Marchioness.”

She could picture it distinctly, Perceval exclaiming over some of the lovely blooms in the woodlands while Herbert waited impatiently, partridges sneaking away behind them. It was such a charming, such an appealing image that she didn’t notice the sudden stillness around them for a moment too long.

It was the sort of stillness of a woodland when a predator was nearby. She had been out one evening when she was very young, wandering the estate looking for bird’s nests and moths. The evening had been filled with sound, bird call and rustling and

all the things she had already become so used to. But then everything stopped dead, so still and silent that she had felt the hairs on the back of her neck go up. A fox slinked from the shadows, a bird in its mouth as all other wildlife froze to avoid becoming a second dinner.

That was happening now. That was happening now and her arms were covered with goosebumps and her scalp was prickling with the sense of wrong wrong wrong wrong

-

Stephen was still speaking but Elizabeth couldn't hear him through the rushing in her ears. She turned her head and saw as if in a dream her brother standing there, a way off, his gun trained on them. He was hunting them after all and it was too late to stop him.

It happened very slowly, or perhaps very quickly. The gun bucked and she moved, moved quicker than she had ever moved in her life. She flung herself into Stephen, pushing him away and feeling a line of fire bloom over her shoulder - red and bright and horrible. She fell onto the forest floor, winded and in pain, unable to process what was happening.

Was she feeling this weak already? Why couldn't she move?

"Stay down," Stephen hissed in her ears. She felt like the world was coming in and out of focus, barely managing to process that he was pressed over her, keeping her shielded. She couldn't get him to move, her hands were trapped under her and her tongue felt so thick in her mouth. She wanted to tell him to run to safety. She wanted to tell him not to be hurt for her, not again. She knew it was again. She knew that with a clarity that had come from a place inside her, where things were hiding.

There was no point hiding from them anymore.

He wouldn't move. He was so heavy. She was - she was -

Stephen cursed softly as another bullet kicked up dirt just an inch from them. How Barnes was firing so quickly, he didn't know but it felt like there had been more bullets than was possible in the last few minutes.

His hands were wet with his wife's blood.

His hands were wet.

But he was still, he stayed still and hoped that Barnes might think he had gotten lucky with one of the stray shots. Might stop firing long enough to give him a chance to -

There was a pause. "I have a pistol aimed at your head, Westall," Barnes called. "Get off my sister. I want her to watch as I put you down in front of her eyes. That will teach the slattern her place."

Rage boiled underneath his skin and for a moment red floated in front of his vision, but he did not move. He could not make a mistake at this moment, he could not take a wrong step.

"Westall!" the voice was closer. "Come on, man! Are you too cowardly to face me?"

"Westall!" closer again. Stephen counted his footsteps and listened to Elizabeth breathing, shallow and weak. He did not know where she had been hit, just that she had protected him with her own body. He could not let her down now. He would not.

"Have I truly ended you at last?" the voice was close, now, but a breath away and Stephen felt the toe of a boot in his side. He rolled with it, latched around Barne's legs and pulled him to the ground in a smooth movement that set off his final shot like a crack into the air.

It was a pistol shot and he knew that the difference in sound would have the others

running towards them. He could already hear their voices, the shouts of alarm. Whatever happened next, Barnes would not kill his Elizabeth. That was enough for him.

“Curse you, you blaggard!” Barnes flung himself out from Stephen’s grasp, crawling backwards and throwing the gun from him. “I will see the end of you and your line if it’s the last thing I do!”

“Run,” Stephen said, getting up into a crouch, blood trickling from his lip. “Run like the cur you are, Barnes. I will lead a wolf hunt after you and you will see what the last thing you do is this day.”

The voices were getting louder. Barnes looked at him, hate and revulsion in his face and bolted into the woods. Stephen waited barely a moment, just long enough to see that some of the people joining him would be able to care for Elizabeth before calling to Perceval and to a few of the servants running up and taking after Barnes.

His feet pounded the loamy earth, Perceval at his side, his men at his back. It felt right. It felt the way things were always going to end, perhaps. Putting down a mad dog in his woods, culling a wolf from a pack. He could see Barnes ahead, ducking around the trees and knew that he would do anything to escape.

They ran through the woods, and then towards the fields beyond.

“What happened?” Perceval called, his voice stern and serious.

“He shot Elizabeth,” Stephen growled. He felt like an animal that had been let off its leash at last. He wanted blood, blood that was not his own dear wife’s on his hands. He wanted to tear and destroy. He wanted to kill. “You will have to be my sanity. He shall face justice, and not at my hands.”

Perceval nodded. He knew this role, they had done this before. Stephen's rage and need for justice flared bright and cold and he could see the way to destroy a man, to burn and salt the earth. Sometimes he needed someone to hold him back, and while Perceval could not actually stop him, his old friend was a good balance for his anger.

"There he is!" one of the gamekeepers called, pointing to where Barnes was racing for a horse that had been left for him. It was so clearly planned and prepared that Stephen felt a rush of cold fury run through his blood. How long had Barnes been planning to do this? How could he sit at supper with his sister, looking her in the face and intending to murder her on the morrow?

"Faster, lads," he said through gritted teeth. They would need to catch Barnes before he reached his horse or there would be no stopping him.

One of the groundskeepers cut to one side at a nod from him and the other went to the left while he and Perceval ran straight ahead. Barnes saw them coming and redoubled his efforts but he was tiring, clearly unused to this much activity. Perceval put on an extra burst of speed and darted in front of him, forcing him to turn and face Stephen himself, bold cruelty on his face, daring him onwards.

He was a weak man, Stephen realized. A weak, cruel, small man who hurt people for the pleasure of it. He was a cancer in their lives, in the whole of England. Perhaps if he had not had Stephen's family to focus on he would have turned that sickness on those around him, those nearer to him. No more.

"How does it feel to watch your wife die?" Barnes asked, face twisted into a sneer. "Come on, Westall. Spill my blood. Murder me like your family have wanted to all this time."

Stephen slowed his pace and walked up to the man, rage and vengeance in his heart. He wanted to take his throat out. He wanted to tear out his heart. He wanted to kill.

But he didn't need Perceval to stop him.

Elizabeth would want him to do the right thing, the thing that would be best for their family. Elizabeth would want him to be bigger than her brother.

Barnes smiled at him. "I knew I'd kill her one day," he said softly, like he was speaking a prayer.

Stephen said nothing, simply stopped in front of him and hit him hard enough in the jaw to knock him to the ground. "Secure him, take him back to the house. We will summon the authorities."

Barnes was still calling him names, demanding that they fight as he turned away. Vengeance was for the past. Elizabeth, his Elizabeth was for the future.

Stephen started to run, feeling hope and fear war in his chest. His future had been left on the ground, bleeding. He could only hope he would not come back to find that she was dead.

CHAPTER 23

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:20 am

“I saw the whole thing,” the Duke of Seymour was saying in his serious, calm voice as Stephen finally reached the party surrounding where Elizabeth had fallen.

His calm tones made Stephen’s heart ease a little, surely he would not be standing there speaking so calmly if Elizabeth were dying. As he approached he could see Herbert bent over Elizabeth, who was propped against a tree and made comfortable with coats bundled into pillows, listening to the Duke as he carefully fed Elizabeth small sips of brandy from a flask to strengthen her.

“I lost track of Lord Barnes shortly after we set out,” Seymour continued, severely. He was speaking loud enough to be heard by the whole company who had gathered, the women and the arriving gentry who had been intended to join them for the later shoot. Stephen thought that this was planned, it was well known how little love there was lost between the Barnes and Wilkins family and Seymour was ensuring that a neutral party was being heard to throw his support behind Stephen and his family so there could be no doubt about what had happened.

He felt a sharp twist of gratitude for his political rival. He had always known that Seymour was an inherently frank man, someone who did what he did because he earnestly believed it, but he had never before appreciated how his sense of justice would drive him to do what he thought was right before.

“He had been acting strangely all morning,” Seymour was saying as Stephen slowed his pace on approach. “Quite unlike himself, quiet and distracted. He left me in the woods, but I had an uneasy feeling about what was going on so I attempted to find him. I am sorry I was not in time to stop him, Westall,” he said to Stephen sincerely.

“Not at all, Seymour,” he said, knowing that he was a picture of dishevelment, his clothes muddled and bruises on his face. “It is not your responsibility to police the behavior of Lord Barnes. I am grateful you were able to see enough of what happened to be able to assist the magistrate when he arrives.”

“I shall be glad to,” Seymour said. “I arrived in time to see him trying to shoot you without provocation, and I will openly swear to it before any court of law.”

Stephen nodded to him and offered his hand, which Seymour took and shook firmly.

“Your brother is an evil of the kind that not even I had imagined,” Herbert was saying to Elizabeth, who was a little more aware now and holding her arm tightly. “I cannot imagine it was easy to grow up in the same house as him.”

“No,” she said softly, her eyes seeking out Stephen’s own. He saw something there that made his heart swell, something of warmth and - more. “No, it was not easy.”

“I have also not been easy to get along with,” Herbert said softly. “I know I have been cold and distant and suspicious, Your Grace. I cannot express my regret to you. You saved my brother. I will owe you my gratitude for all my life.”

“I am glad he has a brother who will protect him as well as you do,” Elizabeth said, a kindness from her that Herbert had clearly not expected for he was speechless in response.

It was something they had needed but now that what they needed to say was said, Stephen strode forwards and scooped Elizabeth into his arms. “Pardon my intrusion, brother, but my wife needs her bed and a doctor.”

“She has been scored in her shoulder, Stephen,” Herbert said, standing up. “It is not deep, but it has bled most profoundly.”

Stephen nodded, relief surging through him. It was not the kind of wound that might sweep her from him with a fever in the night. "Send for the physician and I leave you in charge of Lord Barnes. Men have gone to summon the magistrate, but he may want to send the matter on to London, no doubt the royal family will want answers."

Herbert nodded and Stephen turned, and not caring for the party or the onlooking eyes, strode off towards the estate with Elizabeth's head pillowed on his breast.

It was his room he took her to in the end. His room where she should have been all this time, near his heart and in his arms. As he placed her on the bed she whimpered a little and he hurried to put pillows under her shoulders, propping her up.

"I don't want you to ever do that again," he said softly.

"I promise I shall never go hunting with you and protect you from my brother's shotgun again," she said, her voice a little weak still but a smile on her face. "I do not think I shall have need to."

"You know what I mean," he growled, kneeling down beside the bed and pressing their foreheads together. "I nearly lost my mind, Elizabeth. I thought you had died."

"And I thought you would be shot because you were next to me," she said, voice wavering. "I thought that I had finally killed you with the bad luck I bring behind me wherever I go! I would never have recovered from it, Stephen, I could not let it happen!"

"What your family does is not your fault," Stephen said, caressing her cheek with one hand. "I will never hold it against you, do you hear me?"

"But this all - it's all happened because you married me!"

“No, it all happened because I wanted peace. Dudley would have aimed his shot at me no matter what you had done, and have you forgotten my wife how little choice you had in the matter? No, you are blameless here.”

“But you were poisoned instead of me,” she blurted, her cheeks flushing as he looked at her in surprise. “Oh I know I was not supposed to know it, but I have been lying to myself for long enough to be able to tell when I am doing it again. It was not your food that Annie was always trying to get access to.”

Stephen closed his eyes. “It is true,” he said softly. “But she did not know that the poison was lethal, my dear. And I would rather survive such a thing myself than have had you die of it.”

“No, I will not have you hurt for me,” Elizabeth caught at his hands, bringing them a little apart so she could look into his eyes. “You don’t understand, Stephen, Iachedwhen I thought I had lost you! It was -”

“It was like dying myself,” Stephen finished. “I felt the same when I thought I had lost you. It made me feel -”

“Hollow?” she offered.

“Feral,” he said. “Alone. Angry. Lost. Grieved.”

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Elizabeth traced his jaw with a finger. “What does that mean?”

“I think you know,” he said, catching her hand and kissing it. “I think you feel the same.”

“I want to hear it.”

“I love you,” he said, not in a whisper but loudly, loud enough that she would know how fiercely he meant it. “I love you, Elizabeth. I have loved you for some time I think.”

Tears were streaming down her cheeks and she pressed her lips together and ducked her head to rest on his shoulder. “I love you too,” she said softly, muffled. “I loved you a little I think the first time you defended me from Dudley. I knew it for sure when I rested in your arms after our night together. I knew my heart was beating for you alone.”

“Oh my darling,” Stephen brought her face up and pressed his lips to hers, searing their mouths together in his desperation to show her how much she meant to him. She was his everything, his world.

She melted against him, her arms coming around him and her lips opening sweetly under his own. He tangled one hand in her hair, deepening the kiss and thrilling at the soft desperate noise she made below him. How had he ever gotten so lucky as to have the love of this woman? She was remarkable in every way.

His grip on her tightened and she hissed. He immediately drew back, panting. “My

love, your arm -”

“It is but a flesh wound,” she said, her lips tilted upwards. “I need you, Stephen. I have been so scared for you, for us. I need you to show me that everything is all right. Please.”

Stephen found his mouth on hers before realizing he’d done so. It was natural, inevitable, like breathing. “I’m here my love,” he murmured against her lips. “You have me, as I have you.”

Elizabeth whimpered into him, her body arcing up against his seemingly of its own will. “Stephen,” she whispered, and kissed him. “Stephen, Stephen.” His hot mouth was on her neck and she let loose one of those embarrassing noises from the other night only to realize she wasn’t embarrassed. That she could never be embarrassed by anything that passed between them like this.

“Elizabeth,” he said rawly, looking at her with the wild eyes of a man who had had to physically tear himself away. “Elizabeth we can’t. You’re injured...”

“It’s just a graze,” she cut in. “It barely hurts. Please, I need you, please.”

Stephen groaned low in his throat “You are going to be the death of me.” But then his mouth was back on hers, and they were crashing together like waves on the beaches she’d only ever read about, losing themselves in the flood of need.

Removing her dress was quite impossible like this but Stephen pushed up her skirts, and she gasped as the air kissed her heated flesh. Stephen’s hand trailed up her leg, over stocking and ribboned garter to bare thigh and places more intimate yet. Elizabeth tossed back her head, another raw noise of need tearing its way free, and Stephen moaned as if she was the one with her hands on him and not his fingers driving her to distraction.

“I love you,” Stephen said, his voice so serious Elizabeth opened her eyes and looked at him. He was gazing down at her with a perfect storm of emotions in his blue eyes “You have changed everything for me, and now I find that I cannot do this without you. I cannot be the Duke without you as my Duchess. I need you Elizabeth.”

“I love you too,” she said, voice thick with the flood of emotions he had engendered in her. “You have changed everything for me too Stephen. I need you.”

Stephen smiled at her then, and leaned down to kiss her gently. “Against my better judgement,” he said. “I’m willing to give us what we both desire, but you must promise me that you will be as still as you can. I would not have you harm yourself for all the world, my love. Be still, and let me take care of you.”

Something about his words send a warm pulse of desire through her and she closed her eyes. “Yes, I can do that,” she said, and felt the shock of realization that it was true. She could let someone else, she could let Stephen take care of her. His large, warm hands cupped her face and she could hear the smile in his voice as he said “good. Let me know if it hurts.”

Elizabeth opened her eyes and watched him as he freed himself from his breeches and carefully positioned himself above her. It seemed he had determined to keep his shirt on and when she pointed it out he laughed, a little ruefully.

“The doctor will be arriving soon my love, best not get entirely undressed and keep him waiting even longer when he does. Besides, tis only fair is it not? After all, your upper body remains covered.”

It was Elizabeth’s turn to laugh here, remembering how she’d chafed him about fairness and nudity that first time they’d made love. “Very fair, my love. Now, please, put us both out of our misery.”

It seemed that final please was the magic one because Stephen finally eased his way inside her, both of them groaning in mingled relief and pleasure. It felt just as good as the first time, better even, his body fitting into hers like they were made for each other, and when his hand slipped between them she writhed.

“Careful my love,” Stephen teased, his fingers slowly tracing circles that matched the gentle thrusts inside her. “You wouldn’t want me to have to stop, would you?”

Elizabeth made a noise that was half frustration, half pleasure. “Oh, you really are a very annoying man.”

Stephen laughed against her ear before his tongue snaked out to lick around the shell. “The most annoying. The worst. Perhaps I should remove myself from your presence. I’m sure aggravation can’t be good for your health right now.”

“Don’t you dare,” she growled, before another moan escaped her lips. “Don’t stop Stephen, don’t stop.”

“I won’t sweetheart,” he said, “Not unless you ask.”

The movement of him inside, his fingers stroking her so gently, so insistently made her breath catch in her chest. She felt herself rising to a peak of ecstasy driven with the flaming touches of his hands on her skin, his thrusting, the pressure of him on top of her - oh it was all so much, too much and she was holding herself so still for him, just little gasps coming from her as he sped up so so carefully.

“Please -” she gasped out. “Love, my love, please. Please.”

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“I’m here,” he rasped back in her ear, his muscles tight under her hand, their tension a testament to how he was keeping himself in reign to ensure that he was careful with her. “I have you my darling. Let yourself go.”

She tipped her head back as he angled his thrusts more insistently, his fingers circling the place where all the pleasure of her body seemed to center, keeping pace with his movement. She was surging towards that place of complete oblivion. A cry, wordless, desperate tore from her lips and he clutched her to himself and thrust, once - twice - again before he finished as well, the two of them tumbling over into ecstasy together.

He pressed a kiss, beautiful and sweet against her lips. “I am yours,” he murmured. “As you are mine.” His chest was heaving and his voice was still hoarse with exertion but there was a new warmth, a love in his voice that made her dizzy with joy.

“I am yours,” she echoed, her whole being flush with joy. “I am. I truly am.”

No matter what happened next, they had found each other at last.

She had longed for so long to have someone who would love her, who would care about her and he had wanted so long for peace and for justice. Neither of them would ever want for someone at their side, someone to support them into the future and to hold their hand. They would be each other’s, always.

EPILOGUE

“Oh my lady!” Daisy shrieked, rushing into the room. “My lady they are here, they are here!”

Elizabeth got up from her seat and grabbed her old friend by the hand, squeezing tightly. It had been a few weeks since the events of the hunting party and so much had happened since that she sometimes wondered if she had dreamed it all. “Come then, we must meet them at the door! Your mother will be so overwhelmed otherwise she will not know what to do with herself.”

They hurried, arm in arm, down the hall, laughing together. It was so strange to think that only a little while ago she had worried that her new family would look down on her for being friends with her maid or consider her an embarrassment. Now -

They ran to the front door just as it opened to show Mrs. Adams, flushed from the journey with little Annie pressed so hard against her side that Elizabeth thought they might never stop holding on to each other. Their bags were being unloaded behind them and her beloved husband was stood there just behind them, smiling at her over their heads.

She had told him all about how dear the family had always been to her, how Mrs. Adams was as close as she had ever had to a mother and Daisy and Annie were just like her sisters but she had never expected him to do this.

“My lady,” Mrs. Adams said in a soft breath, holding open her arms. “Oh my lady, look at you.”

Elizabeth felt the tears spring to her eyes and flung herself forwards to rest against her. “It is so good to see you again,” she said, sobbing a little. “I have missed you so much!”

“And I have missed you too,” Mrs. Adams said quietly, stroking her hair. “It has been too quiet to be living without my girls, too quiet indeed. I cannot thank His Grace enough for offering me a position here so I can be closer to you both.”

“And me,” Annie said in a little voice. “I’m here too.”

“Yes and my little Annie,” Mrs. Adams turned to look at her daughter, an expression on her face that Elizabeth understood in a sharp, cold moment and ached for. “Both of us here and far away from the Rosenberg Estate at last.”

“Come in,” Elizabeth said gently. “We have much to talk about.”

She let Daisy take her mother’s arm, chatting away already about everything she would grow to love at the Westall Estate, the cunning gardens and the ducklings and the peacocks and the kind staff and the family so nice and easy to deal with as she rested her own gaze on her own little sister and saw the guilt that was eating at her heart.

“You too, Annie,” she said, offering her hand.

Annie looked at her with naked hope in her eyes. “Me too?”

“Yes, I think we have some things we need to talk about, don’t you?”

Annie paled then and glanced back at Stephen, reproach in her face.

“No, he did not tell me,” Elizabeth said firmly. “I knew in my heart what the truth was, and I think it is time we cleared the air.”

She led Annie through to where Mrs. Adams and Daisy were waiting and then ushered them onwards to her own office, something Stephen had arranged for her as they had started to expand her education in being a good Duchess. Stephen walked behind, content to let her handle the matter but there should she need him.

It was so sweet to have someone there in that way, someone who would support her

and hold her and be there to help her no matter what.

“My lady,” Mrs. Adams said as the door closed. “I can’t tell you how sorry I am over what happened with my Annie. I thought I had raised her better and it was you and your husband who suffered.”

“Mum!” Annie said, face bright red.

“No, Annie, it needs saying. You know what you did was wrong. You know you don’t have no right to be here now with these kind people instead of in some cell somewhere - oh my heart,” she pressed a hand to her breast and her face twisted in grief. Elizabeth darted to her and took her free hand in both of her own.

“Mrs. Adams no,” she said softly. “Annie made a mistake. She should have come to speak to Stephen and myself. But what she did was not so bad as what you think. Yes, she came here to poison me,” she heard Daisy’s sharp intake of breath and Annie’s small moan of sorrow but she pressed on. “However the reason she did it was because my devil of a brother pressed her so hard. She is just a child and he told her that if she didn’t do his bidding he would kill you in your bed. He also told her that all the elixir would do was make me ill for a little while. She never thought she would truly harm me. I think I can confidently say that she would have never done so.”

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“Of course not!” Annie exclaimed hotly, forgetting her shyness. “I’d never proper hurt you, my lady, you’re my -”

“We are sisters,” Elizabeth said, turning and smiling at her gently. “And as sisters you need to know that I forgive you, Annie. So long as you remember that from now on when you are in trouble you must come and tell me or your mother or my dear husband straight away and we will do what we can to help you.”

Annie nodded, her face pale but her eyes brimming with tears. Good tears. The kind that would bring healing.

“Oh that bad man,” Mrs. Adams exclaimed. “Oh I would love to get him on my own, with a pan in one hand oh I would. He would soon be sorry he ever tried to hurt my girls, begging your pardon my lady... Your Grace.”

“I think he is sorry already,” Stephen drawled, coming over to stand by Elizabeth’s side. “His trial did not go in his favor and I know they are debating whether to banish him or imprison him. I suspect they will choose the latter, it came out how truly dangerous he is during the trial and I think more than one noble family is afraid of what he might do if he were ever free again.”

Elizabeth smiled, leaning into his side and reveling in how easily he moved to wrap an arm around her waist. She could not believe that she had ever been a nervous little girl, unsure of her place in the world. It was so clear now, so easy to be big and bold and confident with this man next to her, her sisters both old and new supporting her and her new brother singing her praises. She felt like she was a whole new person. “I hear my father is struggling with the fall out?”

“Oh my lamb,” Mrs. Adams laughed her wonderful big laugh. “He is as harried as a chicken with no head, make no mistake of that. His wife won’t leave her rooms, she’s all over with a fever she says, quite bed-ridden but I think it’s the shame of it all, and your half-sisters, well they’re disappointed that they’re not getting invitations to parties anymore, would you believe it? They sit around the house all day complaining on what they are missing out on while your father paces and prowls and tries to keep all his business deals from falling apart.”

Elizabeth laughed merrily at the thought. Her half-sisters had always been more interested in their parties and excitement and company and flirtations than anything else. It didn’t surprise her one bit that even in the face of the ruination of their family name the thing that would bother them most would be the idea that they were no longer desired at all the best evenings and dances. “Oh no, poor Lottie and Rose, how their social lives will wither.”

“And the Duke of Seymour sent over such a letter, so polite and formal to break the engagement!” Mrs. Adams continued. “Your father smashed three plates upon reading it and your sister had such a fit that the doctor was summoned in case her brain was going!”

“Smart man,” Stephen said dryly. “I always knew that Seymour was too good for that match.”

“Quite so,” Elizabeth said firmly. “He would have soon been bored of Lottie’s company anyway. He seems too interested in deep conversation and she likes nothing more than gossip and scandal.”

“At least she’s finally the subject of some herself,” Daisy said pertly.

“Daisy!” Mrs. Adams said, pretending shock and the three of them embraced, Annie clinging to her mother and Daisy holding on to both of them as though she would never let go.

Elizabeth watched, her heart warming. She had been worried about how much Daisy would miss her family from the first, but Daisy had insisted that they would not let Elizabeth go on her own without a single friend into a house that might not be welcoming. It was good to see them finally together again.

She caught Daisy's gaze and gave her a meaningful look. Her friend grinned, nodded and took the arms of her sister and mother.

"Come now, I will show you to your rooms my dears and we will see our lady again soon. Come, Annie, I have had your favorite cakes made and mother I have posies in your room that you will delight in."

Both Mrs. Adams and Annie allowed themselves to be drawn from the room with protestations of delight and promises to see Elizabeth soon, and she turned and threw her arms around her husband, resting her head on his chest.

"I thought that you would want a longer meeting with your family," Stephen said kindly, kissing the top of her head. "There was no need to cut it short."

"Oh but there is," Elizabeth said. "There is every reason, and I would not have had a witness to our news for all the world, Stephen."

"What?" he took her shoulders gently and drew them apart so he could look into her face, his expression curious but merry. "What have you done now, my darling? What is it that you are looking to spring on me?"

She smiled, knowing that her mischievous smiles and her laughter were things he loved, things he encouraged. "Oh my husband, are you so wary of me already?"

"I simply know when I am bested, wife," he drawled, running a hand through her hair. "Now come, speak your news. I am but flesh and blood and I can only take so much excitement."

“Well, my dear,” she said, running a hand up his arm. “Do you remember that first night we laid together - just after we had that fright over your health?”

“Just after you were suspected of poisoning me, I recall,” he said, laughing and bending to steal a kiss from her. “The strange paths our lives have taken since then!”

“Yes, but Your Grace,” she said, ducking another kiss. He was trying to distract her and she knew that if he were able to kiss her much longer she would be distracted indeed. “Now Stephen, listen. My monthlies have not been since, and it has been past time for it to happen. I am quite certain I am -”

He let out a whoop like an excited boy and swept her up in his arms, spinning her in a circle. “You are with child? Elizabeth! You are with child!”

“Be careful,” she laughed, clinging to him. “Yes, yes I am with child. We are to have a baby, Stephen!”

Stephen looked at her then with love in his face so stark and beautiful that she could barely breathe. “I have never been so happy in all my life as I have been with you, my darling.”

“You gave me life to live,” she whispered, leaning in for a kiss full of promise and hope. “I will never regret marrying you, Stephen. I cannot wait to be yours forever.”

With that he swept her into his arms and started off towards their chambers, their laughter and joy mixing together in their moment of delight.

The End?