



A Virgin for the Ruthless Duke

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Category: Erotic, Romance, Adult, Historical

Description: "Obey me. Or would you like to find out what happens when you don't?"

Desperate to secure her sister's future, Selina needs a husband quickly. Yet her sharp tongue has every suitor running for the hills. Until she catches the attention of a monster...

Cold. Powerful. Ruthless. Duke Richard leaves no favors unpaid. So when his enemy's sister saves him from scandal, he vows to give her what she wants most. But first, she must submit to him.

Making Selina irresistible is an easy fit for a man like Richard. But showing her how to tempt a man is dangerous. For the dark desire she sparks within him might just be his undoing...

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

Total Pages (Source): 84

CHAPTER 1

“Oh, I cannot wait to arrive at the Mulford estate,” Diana, Selina’s younger sister, gushed, bouncing in her seat, visibly unaware of their aunt’s scolding look. “I heard the Marchioness has brought some dancers from France just for tonight. She really is taking well to her new position. The Marquess must be so pleased.”

“Is that so?” Selina asked. “Then I cannot wait either.”

Selina, Diana, their older brother Herbert, and their aunt Martha—the Dowager Countess of Riddington—were currently on the road to a house party that was set to be a two week-long affair, and Selina was excited.

They had taken extra care when attending parties, as they were still trying to recover from the near mishap that had happened at the last party they had hosted at their estate, but this would be the first they would attend without any strict preparations.

“I do hope you will show this much excitement when gentlemen come to make your acquaintance, Selina.” Martha tutted. “I hear you have quite the scolding personality.”

Selina rolled her eyes and clasped her aunt’s hand with a smile. “I am rather charming, dear aunt, if I do say so myself.” She ignored Herbert’s snort of laughter and continued. “I only direct my barbs at those deserving of them.”

“Which is every gentleman, from the look of things,” Martha murmured. “It’s no wonder that you have been unable to secure a match after the many Seasons you’ve had.”

“Aunt Martha,” she whined, “I really have been trying, but?—”

“You have made enough excuses, dear girl. That is why I’m here.” Aunt Martha frowned. “I know you still harbor your wild notions of a love match, but you have nearly become a spinster because of that fancy, and now you’re ruining your younger sister’s prospects, as you remain unmatched. You really must put aside those childish ideals for something more practical.”

“I am being practical. It is not entirely improbable to have a love match.” She argued.

“But when it has taken as long as it has for you to find it, it is only fair to adjust your desires.” Aunt Martha responded undeterred. “I need both of you married soon but your adamance is not only impeding your chances but your sister’s.”

Selina turned to Diana with a questioning look, but her sister was unable to meet her eyes.

They discussed everything so it was odd that Diana would have kept something this important from her.

“What happened?” she asked with a frown.

“It is nothing, Selina. I?—”

“Tell me the truth, Diana,” Selina insisted.

Diana sighed and shook her head, still quite unable to meet her sister’s eyes. “Lord Banbridge said he cannot court me because my sister remains unwed,” she answered, biting her lip. “But he did not say it harshly. He only worried he would make you feel bad.”

“Really?” Selina asked snidely. “And did he say it as nicely as you put it?”

Her sister’s silence was answer enough.

Selina would not feign ignorance to the rumors surrounding her, considering how loudly she expressed her views on the misogyny in Society. She had made it clear that she would never conform to the small mold the gentlemen who had attempted to court her deemed fit to squeeze her into.

“Do not hound your sister for information, Selina,” her aunt scolded. “At least she has had many offers since her debut, but they were too far beneath her station to be considered. If you were to secure a good match, then you just might help her worth increase in the eyes of the ton.”

“Oh Auntie, I do not think my worth should be determined by what Society thinks,” Diana argued, pouting.

“It should not, but it is what it is, dear girl,” Martha answered. “Society’s view on such matters is the only thing that matters, and that is why you must learn to curry favor with them and rebut all underhanded comments with tact and subtlety rather than brute force—as your sister does.”

Selina felt positively chided. It wasn’t the first time she had been told that she lacked tact, but what was the need for coy words when they would only give slower results? It was better to use sharp words than fists, even though many of the gentlemen were rather deserving of those too.

“I hardly think Selina lacks tact, Auntie.” Diana laughed. “The insults behind her words are usually very well hidden. Only smart minds are able to discern them in order to take offense.”

“I do hope you do not intend to follow in your sister’s path, Diana,” Martha gasped, looking horrified. “It would be a shame to see my nieces are such uncultured harridans.”

“It isn’t so bad, considering that it gets the job done.”

“Oh, dear me!” Martha exclaimed, placing a hand on her chest. “What would your dear mother say if she could see you two now? Surely she would be upset with me for failing to teach you both propriety. This is why I wanted you two to stay with me.”

“Dear aunt, you worry too much.” Diana giggled. “Stephen did a fine job of raising us. Did he not, Herbert?”

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Their brother snorted. “If you say so.”

“Stephen will surely hear of this,” Diana threatened.

Selina watched her siblings bicker, unable to join in as the reality of her decisions dawned on her. She hadn’t realized that by remaining adamant about her pedestal, her sister—who did not always share her views—would be affected.

She wondered just how much heartbreak her sister would have endured by losing matches in which she might have otherwise been happy.

“Will you two stop your bickering?” Martha scolded. “You’re giving me a headache.”

“We’re sorry, Aunt Martha,” the two sisters chorused, not looking in the least bit apologetic.

“On a positive note, I might have someone who would be interested in marrying Selina,” Martha announced. “He is a very dear friend—a little older than you might like, but he is a lover of books and wealthy enough to make you happy.”

“Why do I not know this eligible bachelor?” Herbert snorted.

“Because he is close to my age and has been widowed for some time, so he rarely attends public gatherings,” Martha answered. “He will be a sensible match for your sister.”

“I...” Selina started, unsure what to say.

On the one hand, she wanted to protest with everything in her against a match with a man that old, but what other options did she have? If she failed to secure a match at the end of the Season again, she would very likely be pronounced a spinster. Worse, she could doom her sister to the same fate.

“I will meet this gentleman, Auntie,” she announced.

Her words were met with a gasp from Herbert and a wide-eyed stare from Diana.

“You will?” Martha asked in surprise.

Selina nodded. “But I ask that you give me till the end of the Mulfords’ house party. If I fail to secure a match, then I will meet your friend,” she bargained.

It was the least she was owed, considering it would be no easy feat to sign over her life. She knew Diana would question her later, but she would have to make her arguments before then. It would be a sacrifice she would make if only to ensure that her sweet sister found her chance at happiness.

The carriage slowed to a halt, announcing their arrival, and discussions were put aside as they were helped out of the carriage and introduced to their hosts.

“It is a great pleasure to have you here, Lady Riddington,” Lady Mulford, their hostess, greeted with a bright smile.

Selina had known her only briefly when she had only been the daughter of the Baron of Notting. Now that she was Marchionness, Selina had to admit that marriage agreed with her. She looked radiant as a newly wed ought to. A slight pang of envy struck her but she buried the emotion and returned her kind smile.

“The pleasure is all mine, Lady Mulford.” Martha smiled. “I believe you already know my nephew and nieces.”

“Of course. The Duke is a dear friend of my husband’s.”

“That is good to hear,” Martha answered. “I look forward to the activities over the next couple of weeks.”

“Rest assured, I’ve only organized the best there is,” Lady Mulford announced. “Come now, you’re the last to arrive, and it is dinner time.”

They were ushered quickly to the drawing room, where they were paired and then led into the dining room.

Selina noted that the seating arrangements had been organized such that she wasn’t surrounded by unfamiliar faces. She spotted Lord Howser, whom she had all but insulted once, in the seat across from her own. He appeared not to have forgotten or forgiven their prior interaction.

To her left was the Earl of Churcham, a positively pleasant fellow who immediately struck up a conversation with her.

“I must say, this Season has proved quite interesting, Lady Selina.” He smiled. “I attended a play at the theatre recently, and it was riveting. Have you seen any of late?”

“No, I’m not fond of fiction,” she answered, biting her lip. She hoped she hadn’t said the wrong thing. “I prefer biographies and science,” she added hastily.

His eyes widened, but he quickly schooled his features.

“You do not look the sort to have such interests.” He laughed uncomfortably. “I thought ladies enjoyed lesschallengingtopics.”

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“Most do, but I find I enjoy a challenge.”

He nodded, his eyes darting around again. He was visibly uncomfortable being around her.

“What are your interests, My Lord?” she asked quickly.

Men love to talk about themselves, do they not?

“Hunting, fencing... I have quite a lot,” he answered. “But I’m sure none of those would interest you.”

Oh no.

She worried she had already ruined the conversation.

“You might be pleasantly surprised.” She tried to salvage the exchange. “I enjoy?—”

“You really should pursue more feminine interests, Lady Selina,” he told her. “It will make conversations a little less off-putting.”

“I do have feminine interests, as you so put it, but what is wrong with seeking knowledge about the world around us?” she asked. “If I were to tell you that there are many fruits we are unable to grow in our climate, but with special conditions, we might be able to form a new species adapted to our climate, would that not interest you more? There are certain houses one can build to keep humidity and warmth that...”

She noticed that his eyes had glazed over, and soon he turned to his left and joined the conversation with Lady Fiona, who was discussing the recent musical she had attended with Lord Bailiwick.

Now left alone, Selina caught her aunt's disappointed look from where she sat two chairs away and lowered her head, trying to focus on her meal, which now tasted like chalk in her mouth. She was only too grateful when dinner ended and everyone chose to head to the drawing room for games while some of the gentlemen opted for drinks and cigars.

She chose neither and decided on a stroll through the gardens both for air and to clear the intrusive thoughts clouding her mind. The path was lined with lit torches, and the air was fragrant with the scent of Lady Mulford's impressive garden. She instantly felt at ease.

She took one turn about the stone-lined gardens, mindlessly admiring the flowers lit with the silvery glow of the moon, and then decided against returning to the party, as the night wasn't so cold that she would catch a chill if she remained outside longer.

As soon as she spotted a stone bench under a fragrant orange tree, she took a seat. The sounds of the party in full swing behind her and the gentle sounds of the owls in the trees beyond the estate gave the night a magical feel that helped calm the thoughts swirling in her mind.

Since she'd hoped to secure a match at the Mulfords' party, she couldn't help but notice for the first time that she was severely lacking in many ways. Her earlier attempts at conversation attested to the fact that she hadn't still mastered the art of conversing with gentlemen. If she were to secure a match, she would need to learn quickly.

But how?

She couldn't ask any of the other guests for help, considering they all had the same goal, and she could not ask her aunt, who would no doubt make a scene.

Sighing, she rose to leave before her prolonged absence became a subject of discussion.

Turning to head down the path, she ran straight into a solid wall that had her bouncing back, and she would have landed firmly on the ground had a pair of hands not reached out to steady her. Her hands landed on the man's shoulders as she attempted to right herself, her heart pounding rapidly from the shock of her near fall.

She looked up, eyes wide, to see that she had bumped into none other than the Duke of Seymour—the newest acquaintance of her brother, Stephen, since he had recently helped corroborate her brother's statement about Lord Dudley's attack on their hunting party.

She hadn't interacted with him in the weeks that had followed, but she had often seen him briefly when he was visiting Stephen in his study. He had never offered her more than a cursory nod, and she had always been in too much of a hurry to notice much about him.

She hadn't noticed it back then, but with his large hands around her and under the glow of the moon, he was quite handsome to look at. His shoulders were so broad that they should have scared her, but she found herself marveling at their height difference.

His sandalwood fragrance wrapped around her in a cloud as they remained entwined in the moonlight. Had they been in a novel, one might have thought this the start of a wonderful romance.

“You do realize the impropriety of our positions, Lady Selina?” he said suddenly,

reminding her of how close she was pressed against his frame and what that would have implied had anyone walked by at that moment.

Her cheeks flushed instantly, and she took a step back, wrapping her arms around herself as a chill swept through her. He had been so warm that her body struggled to adjust to the rapid change of temperature. She shivered at the phantom warmth his hands left on her waist, and she frowned, wondering why it hadn't been unpleasant being held by him.

“I suppose I should thank you,” she said, unable to meet his eyes.

“Indeed.”

“Thank you for... helping me, Your Grace.”

“You shouldn't be by yourself so late at night, Lady Selina.” His tone was grave.

“You do not know what sort of dangers might be lurking about the estate.”

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“No one would harm me here, Your Grace,” she retorted.

“That is not that kind of danger I speak of, Lady Selina,” he continued. “Not all men would be as proper as I am.”

Her cheeks flushed further as she realized the implications of his earlier warning.

“It is fortunate that I am in no danger with you then.”

“I would not make that assumption too quickly, Lady Selina.”

His words stunned her but he didn't seem to notice. He didn't even glance at her before walking away—presumably to return to the party. She also walked back quickly but timed it so no one would think they had escaped for a lover's tryst in the gardens.

Her cheeks reddened again as she remembered how tenderly his arms had wrapped around her and how his shoulders had felt beneath her hands.

He had been right to warn her. He was a dangerous man to be around.

CHAPTER 2

Richard smiled to himself at his interaction with Lady Selina. Her reaction to him had been a pleasant surprise because she always looked cocksure whenever he saw her at her brother's estate or when she was terrorizing small-minded noblemen who thought she was one to be trifled with.

He recalled how she had flushed at his nearness, and found that it gave a young air to her appearance. He had always thought her handsome, but at that moment, he thought her beautiful.

His hands burned where they'd wrapped around her, the memory of her small waist in his hands flashing through his mind.

But his smile quickly dropped when he spotted his mother holding court, as though she were the hostess, at one end of the room. She looked as she always did—dressed elegantly in a rich velvet gown in a shade of burgundy that gave color to her pale skin. She was overdressed again, and he knew that meant only one thing—one of her rivals was present and she was trying to make a point.

He hadn't even expected her to be in attendance, as she usually shunned parties that involved long stays away from the estate. Eli, the Marquess of Mulford and one of his oldest friends, had failed to mention that he had sent her an invitation as well. Richard would scold him later for such a terrible oversight. But, for now, he would avoid conversation with her.

However, she spotted him, and contrary to what he'd hoped, she made her way towards him with slow, deliberate steps. He frowned at her flair for the dramatic—another thing he disliked strongly about the woman who birthed him.

“You could at least try to pretend that you're happy to see me,” she scolded with a false smile. “I am your mother, after all.”

“You cannot fault me for my displeasure, can you?” he asked.

She rolled her eyes. “You really do need to work on your conversation skills, Richard. You are a duke.”

“Why are you here?” Richard asked, ignoring her attempt at emotional manipulation. “Eli didn’t mention that he’d invited you.”

“I’m here to mingle with the rest of the ton,” she answered, smiling. “And to ensure that you do the same.”

“I do not need you to play matchmaker for me.” He frowned.

“Find yourself a bride, then I won’t need to,” she threatened. Then, plastering a bright smile on her face, she turned to a group of matrons. “Lady Sarah, it’s been an age since I last saw you.”

Richard’s eyes darted around, looking for an escape before they could approach him, but he didn’t move quickly enough, and soon they had him surrounded by their unmarried daughters.

“How do you do, Your Grace?” Lady Sarah asked. “I believe you know my daughter, Charlotte.”

Richard shot his mother a glare, but she walked off with a triumphant smile on her face.

“I am well, Lady Sarah,” he answered, causing the woman to preen visibly.

“Your Grace, we have been introduced before,” another matron spoke up. “I am Lady Justina. This is my daughter, Beatrice.”

She pushed her daughter forward, and the others took turns introducing their daughters as well. But as disinterested as Richard visibly was, they were undeterred. He almost admired their dedication.

“Your Grace, we are all curious to know,” Lady Vivian said, looking around suspiciously. “We heard that you ended your engagement to Lottie Barnes.”

Richard frowned, straightening to his full height as he realized that he had stayed too long with the group if they considered themselves acquainted well enough to be asking such questions.

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“I believe I must mingle with other guests,” he announced, not caring for their disappointment. “If you will excuse me.”

He walked off, heaving a deep sigh, and turned to take another walk in the gardens, since his first attempt had been interrupted by Lady Selina. He sincerely hoped that the gardens would be devoid of guests and quickened his steps.

Stepping onto the balcony, he felt much better as the cool air wrapped around him. He had never enjoyed social events, but his position demanded that he attend.

“Your Grace!” a feminine voice called out to him.

He stopped in his tracks, turning around with a frown as he spotted the unfamiliar face. She had been introduced to him earlier, but he didn’t even recall her name.

Why was she seeking him out?

He raised an eyebrow as she came to a stop near him, unable to meet his eyes.

“Good evening, Your Grace,” she greeted with a curtsy. “I am Beatrice Canton.”

The Earl of Verity Hill’s daughter. What does she want with me?

She visibly shook with unease before him, and he found himself irritated that his solitude had been interrupted.

If she was going to be brave enough to seek him out, she should have been bold

enough to at least speak so she would not waste his precious time.

“How may I help you?” he asked.

“I...” she stuttered. “I just wanted to make your acquaintance. You... I have heard of your bravery, and I... I...”

“Lady Beatrice,” he said with a polite smile, “if there’s nothing of import requiring my immediate attention, I will take my leave.”

He turned to leave, but she stopped him by grabbing his sleeve, her eyes darting around suspiciously.

He frowned at the complete lack of decorum and tried to pry her hands off his arm, but she held firm, her eyes still darting around.

He wondered what would have her behaving so improperly.

He heard voices in the distance and saw the way she perked up in excitement. When she stepped closer to him, he realized that he had been caught in a trap. She had meant to use a scandal to trap him in marriage.

He tried to pull his arm free without hurting her, but she held strong.

“Unhand me at once, Lady Beatrice,” he demanded.

“It will be only a moment, Your Grace. Can’t you stay a little longer?”

He pulled at her hands, and the second he was free, he felt himself being pulled backward into one of the bushes. A hand was slapped over his mouth.

His eyes widened, and he struggled against his attacker.

“Your Grace?” he heard Lady Beatrice call, her hands digging into the foliage just beside the one he was hiding in.

“Your Grace?” she called again, before stomping her feet in anger and storming off.

His eyes adjusted to the dim light, and his eyebrows shot up when he saw that his assailant was none other than Lady Selina.

She was pressed against him and didn't seem fazed by it as she peered around the bushes. He was very aware of her softness pressed up against him. One long, elegant leg was wedged between his, stirring his desire as he struggled against her hold.

Richard frowned. Lady Selina was still pressed against him, her hand covering his mouth even though Lady Beatrice had long since gone. Voices approached again, and he frowned even harder, realizing that Selina must have had the same thought.

Was she also trying to trap him in marriage?

What is it with ladies and scandals?

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He pulled at her hands, but she placed a finger over her lips in a gesture of silence. He stilled but made sure that she knew he was displeased with her plan by glaring at her.

Did she really think that her strength would be enough to hold him down?

If he were to move quickly, he would be free of her grasp and escape before the guests came and caught them in such a compromising position, but the voices sounded so close. He decided against escaping, but that didn't mean he would accept being trapped so easily.

He grabbed her shoulders and spun them around, so her back was pressed to the wall she had trapped him against. Her eyes widened, and she gasped, but he slapped a hand over her mouth in return.

“Did you hear anything?” a voice asked from beside them.

“No.”

“I'm sure I did,” the first person said. “Let's return to the party. It's too cold to be outside.”

Richard released her as soon as their steps faded into the distance, stepping back himself. She was still pressed against the wall and visibly shaken.

“If you wanted a marriage that desperately, I believe there are more effective ways than trapping a man in a scandal,” he scolded with a glare. “I would never have expected that from you, but I guess desperation makes people do things they never

thought they would.”

Selina frowned, snapping out of the daze she had been in.

“What do you mean by that?” she asked, visibly confused. “I’m sorry if I gave you the wrong impression, Your Grace, but I only meant to help when I saw what Lady Beatrice had planned to do.”

Richard raised an eyebrow at her in disbelief. “You do not expect me to believe that, do you?” he asked with a sneer. “You just happened to be close enough to pull me into a scandalous position, and we were almost caught before I stopped you.”

She scoffed, folding her arms. “I am not impressed that you would think so little of me, but you do not know me well enough to assume I would stoop so low.”

“You’re correct in your assessment that I do not know you, but you are nearing spinsterhood,” he stated. “Wouldn’t marriage to a duke be a very advantageous match for you, Lady Selina?”

“You disrespect me, Your Grace.”

“I am stating things as I see them.”

“You must visit a physician, then, because your vision is failing,” she snapped. “I had thought you two knew one another, but upon closer inspection, I discovered the truth of her actions. Perhaps I shouldn’t have interfered—you would have been only a few steps from the altar with your bride, by now. If I want a match, I assure you I will not need a scandal to secure it.”

“Yet, you’re unmarried.”

“Because I choose to be.”

She made to step away, but he caught her hand in his.

“Unhand me, Your Grace.” She frowned at her hand in his. “You obviously find my presence as revolting as I find yours.”

“We are not done with this conversation.”

“I believe you already concluded that I was attempting to trap you in marriage, and I see no reason to continue defending myself,” she snapped, her eyes flashing with hot anger. “I must return to more appealing company before my absence is noticed.”

Richard could not help but notice how polite she had been throughout their argument, and he took a step back to analyze the entire ordeal.

If she had indeed wanted to trap him, would she not have made a noise when they heard the steps approaching?

She had actually saved him, and now that he realized it, he felt positively foolish to have accused her so.

He could choose to pretend that he didn't realize his mistake and let her walk away, but his conscience would never let him rest.

He stepped closer to her, intending to apologize, but was intrigued by the way her eyes widened in shock.

He risked another step closer, his proximity bordering on impropriety, but her blush and inability to meet his eyes teased the part of his brain that loved mischief.

Her breath hitched, and a rapid pulse beat at the base of her neck. His tongue was tempted to taste it, but he cleared his throat, shattering the allure of the temptation.

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“I suppose I must offer my thanks. You did indeed help me out of a dire situation,” he said with a smile. “I should offer you a reward in return.”

She was unable to meet his eyes, and her cheeks were visibly red with an adorable blush that ran down her face to her neck and disappeared into her décolletage. He was sorely tempted to see just how far beneath the blush went.

He shook his head, realizing that he needed to be away from her. He had never found himself thinking such improper thoughts about any gently bred lady, and he didn't intend to start now.

“You can ask for whatever you wish,” he added, unable to tear his eyes away from her very appealing décolletage despite wisdom telling him to do so. “There is little to nothing I cannot accomplish.”

She shivered and took a step back. Her tongue darted out to wet her lips. Unable to help himself, Richard's eyes followed the movement. Her lips were full and glittered in the moonlight. He wondered what they tasted like and how red she would turn if he were to kiss her.

“I do not want anything from you,” she answered, meeting his eyes.

He frowned in surprise. He had been expecting her to use the situation to her advantage. She wasn't married, so she could have asked him to marry her. She was a duke's sister, and her brother was doing well financially, so she would not need money from him.

If she wanted gifts, he could get her anything she desired. He was interested to know what she desired of him so he could learn what sort of woman she was.

“Why?” he asked. “I am being very generous. Books, jewels, dresses. I can have anything made for you. Many women would love to be in your shoes.”

“I did nothing that needs rewarding, Your Grace,” she answered with a graceful curtsy that irked him. “I only did what I thought was best. Besides, you helped my family a few weeks ago, and that was a feat worthy of a reward, yet you took nothing.”

She was being so polite that he was tempted to pull her into his arms just to see her lose her sense of propriety.

“Surely you want something.”

“I assure you, I want nothing, Your Grace,” she assured him. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I believe you said that staying outside for longer is dangerous. You really should take your earlier advice, Your Grace. You do not know what sort of people are lurking about the estate.”

Richard, stunned into silence, watched as she quickly returned to the house. His lips still tingled where her hands had touched them, his fingers subconsciously rising to his lips before he caught himself.

He really needed to rid himself of thoughts of Selina, but first, he wanted to see what she would ask for once she’d thought better of his offer.

Everyone wanted something, and he wanted so desperately to see what it would take to make her eyes go as wide as they had earlier.

CHAPTER 3

“I do hope you’re already considering prospects,” the Dowager Duchess of Seymour said, walking up to where Richard had been sitting under one of the pavilions that had been set up in Eli’s garden.

“Good day to you too, Mother,” he greeted, not looking at her.

His eyes were fixed on Selina, who was currently standing just in front of the pavilion with her aunt and conversing with Lord Yardley. It didn’t appear to be going very well, from the looks of things. The man’s eyes kept darting around as though planning his escape while Selina looked nervous.

He took in her appearance with a frown. She looked beautiful as always, although her dress—the same shade as a peach, cut quite elegantly—was a sartorial travesty and did nothing to accentuate her beauty.

Surely she had better dresses in her wardrobe?

It was almost painful to watch her attempt to carry on a conversation. At that moment, he decided he would help her gain confidence when conversing with gentlemen.

Her eyes kept flitting downward, and she picked at the hem of her dress. He could see the gentleman’s disinterested gaze; his body language showed that he wanted to flee as quickly as he could. The moment came sooner than Richard had expected, and he saw her aunt round on her with a frown.

Selina was a beautiful woman, by all standards. If she were anyone else, or if he was looking for a wife, he might have considered her. He had overheard men complimenting her and knew it wasn’t just his assessment alone. But looks weren’t

all that mattered when it came to securing a match.

Most gentlemen were put off by poor conversation skills or an interest in unsuitable hobbies. Two factors which she seemed to have in full measure. If he were to help her, it would take a thorough reorientation of her previous education and a thorough polishing of skills she had let lie fallow. It was odd that he didn't mind committing his time to such an endeavor.

He waited until her aunt had finished scolding her before waking over to her. He saw the second she noticed him and gave her a wink as she shook her head, warning him to stay away, before her aunt could notice. He smile brightly as he ignored her and stood only a short distance away from the older woman.

“Good day, Lady Riddington,” he greeted. “Good day, Lady Selina.”

He smiled at the annoyed, wary look that crossed her face—a clear contrast to her aunt's excited one.

“Your Grace.” Lady Riddington curtsied. “It is a pleasure.”

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“Indeed.” He smiled. “How do you fare today?”

He wasn't one to make meaningless conversation, but he needed Lady Riddington to be content enough not to hover, considering the conversation he intended to have with Selina. If his knowledge of Society mamas was correct, a little flattery and interest would have the old woman trusting him with her niece.

“I fare well, Your Grace,” she answered. “It is a fine day to be outside.”

“Indeed. I am grateful for the weather and the clean country air.”

“Oh, truly. I feel I am in much better health than when I came.”

Lady Riddington was radiant with joy at the conversation they were having, and he knew he would get the result he desired if he were to ask.

Selina eyed him warily, causing him to smile wider. She had obviously developed a deep distrust of him, since their conversation the night before hadn't ended on positive terms.

“Lady Riddington, would you mind terribly if I borrowed Lady Selina for a moment?” he asked with a small smile. “I would like to take a turn about the gardens, but there is no one who I would love to grace my arm more than your lovely niece. Even though she would put the flowers to shame with her beauty, I am sure they won't mind terribly.”

Selina's eyes widened, and he was sure he had stunned her with his flattery. She

certainly hadn't expected him to be so charming. She was going to be even more shocked by the conversation they were about to have.

"Oh, Your Grace!" Lady Riddington flushed. "You are most definitely welcome to take her."

"Aunt Martha—" Selina tried to protest.

"Do not embarrass me again," her aunt said before walking away.

Richard tried hard to mask his amusement, but Selina's frown had him smiling from ear to ear.

"Have I offended you?" he asked, knowing full well that he had.

"Why would you say those things to my aunt?" she said, glaring at him.

"I do not believe we are so well acquainted that you would speak so brashly to me," he teased.

She scoffed, folding her arms.

He offered her his hand with a smile. "You do know that your aunt is watching, and if you do not take my arm, another scolding is sure to come," he added in a bored tone.

Selina turned to her aunt, and sure enough, the woman was glaring at her. Even from this distance, her eyes didn't lack heat.

Why couldn't she see that the Duke of Seymour was the last person she should have considered her niece safe with?

Selina took his arm grudgingly, and he led them at a sedate pace around the garden as he had told her aunt. Her body warmed at the contact, but she suppressed the feeling, not understanding why her body reacted that way to him.

His proximity allowed her to breathe in his scent, a nice sandalwood and spicy blend that tickled her nostrils yet had her breathing deeper. It wasn't at all unpleasant. Different but not unpleasant.

“What do you want, Your Grace?” she asked. “I thought our business ended last night?”

“Indeed, but I happened to be present while you had that abysmal conversation with Lord Yardley, and I couldn't help but worry for you.”

“Why?”

“You intend to find a match here, no?” he asked.

“I do, but I fail to see how that is any concern of yours.”

“I think, rather than courtship, you might want to consider trapping a gentleman in scandal.”

She glared at him. “If you think that insulting is the best approach to conversation, I must suggest you find a different companion, Your Grace.”

“I can help you secure a match,” he suggested.

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She rolled her eyes. “I fail to see how you can do that.”

“You have abysmal conversation skills, as I noted earlier. You lack confidence, and from the way you glare at me, it is obvious you do not understand the subtle art of flirtation,” he stated, rattling off the list of shortcomings he had noticed she possessed.

She glared at him again, pulling her hand away. “How dare you!” she hissed. “You know nothing about me.”

“But I have heard quite enough about you and how you are one Season away from spinsterhood.”

She frowned, biting her lip as anger painted her face red.

“You do not have to insult me with my circumstances,” she snapped. “I am very much aware of my problems.”

“I did not mean to insult you, Lady Selina. Forgive me if I did,” he offered.

He hadn't meant to insult her, but something about her stubbornness sparked the cynical side of him.

She sighed, biting her lip. “I... I do need help if I'm being honest,” she admitted softly. “There is something that all the other ladies have mastered, but I seem to be ignorant of it.”

“I don’t think you have had reason to use those skills.”

“It feels hopeless, honestly. I already made a deal with my aunt, but I cannot help but worry about my future.” She ran a hand over her brow.

“What deal?” he inquired.

“I must find a love match by the end of this party, or I’ll have to marry a friend of my aunt’s,” she answered. “She has described him as a nice gentleman, but I cannot help but find the prospect unappealing when he is at least twice my age. What hope of happiness lies in my future?”

She looked so frightened by the prospect, and he couldn’t mask the frown that crossed his face as he processed her words. She had to drop the notion of finding a love match and focus on more practical things if she hoped to find someone of reasonable age and status by the end of the party.

It was no wonder she was yet to be matched. She must have rejected suitors who had asked for her hand because she hadn’t felt the spark.

The idea was an unrealistic fantasy he had seen reinforced by the rise of novels depicting marriage as something more than a transactional affair.

He had yet to see any couple with such unrealistic beginnings last. His parents were a prime example, and his strained relationship with his mother was the result of their love fading before it even had the chance to grow.

She and his father had discovered quickly after marriage that they needed more than love to sustain a relationship. They had grown apart as they realized that the supposed spark that had driven them to a short courtship and marriage had faded so quickly. Richard had learned quickly to resent the entire notion and all who stood for it.

His friends, who were all happily married now, had started off in arranged matches to practical women with good breeding and prospects. He intended to do the same, but in due course and with much more care than he had given his first match. At least now he knew how best to help Selina and pay off his debt to her, but he would first correct that silly ideology she had.

“If I were to offer my help, would you accept it?” he asked.

“Your help?” she echoed, confused.

“I can help you find a suitable match,” he announced.

Selina eyed him as though he had grown two heads because he couldn't have suggested that he could help her secure a match. It was the most unlikely thing she had ever heard! And the impropriety of such a suggestion! He wasn't even a family member. If word were to get out, she would be shamed and would find herself in an even more terrible situation than being unmarried at her age.

She tried to recall how the conversation had moved so quickly in such a scandalous direction. The Duke had strolled over to her, looking resplendent in a dark, emerald vest which he'd paired with brown wool breeches and hessian boots that shone. His dark hair fell artfully over one side of his face, and her hand itched to feel just how soft it was.

He wasn't smiling, but his eyes were twinkling with mischief, which had caused her breath to hitch. She felt her heart beat that strange staccato and wondered at her strange reaction to him.

She had been around many men, but none had made her heart race the way she had seen described in books. She sincerely hoped that it was a temporary feeling—or better yet, that she had come down with a fever.

“You’re being hilarious,” she responded, laughing softly, her eyes darting around.

She also hoped that he hadn’t noticed what his nearness did to her.

“I assure you, I’m not,” he rebutted, looking affronted.

The look on his face was so out of place that she couldn’t help but laugh. He didn’t look like the well-respected Duke whose presence inspired awe, but like a small boy who hadn’t gotten his way.

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He watched her as she laughed, saying nothing, but the intensity of his stare eventually stopped her. She looked away from him, wrapping her hands around herself. He still said nothing as he watched her, and she wondered what he was thinking.

“Your Grace?” she called softly, jarring him out of his thoughts.

“I assume that your laughter means that you do not believe me,” he said with a playful smile.

“It is rather hard to imagine, Your Grace,” she answered with a smile of her own. “You do not speak to anyone. I can hardly trust what you say about anyone here.”

He smirked and stepped closer, crowding her with his broad frame and delicious scent. She hated how heat rose to her cheeks at his proximity. Her heart raced in her chest unsteadily, and even though she hated to admit it, she found his attention... welcome.

A couple of eyes strayed to them, and she noticed a few guests duck behind their fans to whisper. They were being utterly improper, conversing this long without a chaperone—especially given his proximity—but he didn’t seem to notice or care.

“If I do not know so much about people, then how do I know that Lord Caldwell broke off his engagement to Lady Fiona and is now courting Miss Hannah?” he asked.

Selena raised an eyebrow at him in surprise.

It wasn't exactly uncommon knowledge, but she hadn't expected the Duke, who often pronounced himself too busy for gossip, to be aware of such trifles.

"How...?"

"I have my sources," he stated smugly. "Is that enough to convince you that I can help? Think of it as repayment for your help last night. I do not like to owe favors."

"You would not be owing me if you chose not to help," she tried again. "Besides, knowing a little bit of gossip doesn't make you an expert on the gentlemen of the ton. You barely know anything about me or my interests. How can you find me a match that aligns with my interests or will make me happy in the long run?"

He was gradually wearing down her walls with his insistence, and as she considered the idea, it seemed a much more welcome decision despite common sense warning her otherwise.

She really did need help, now that she realized how lacking she was. But accepting it from the Duke? It was entirely inconceivable.

She had failed yet again to name anyone who could assist her learning process, and who better to educate her than the Duke, who was often described as too proper?

Many a nobleman had described him as charming, and even Stephen had waxed lyrical about his charms once he had gotten past his initial misgivings about the man.

He looked so eager that she knew it would hurt him if she refused again.

"It is a hard thing you offer, Your Grace," she admitted, biting her lip and looking down.

She felt his hand on her chin as he tilted her face up to his.

He was even closer now, and at this proximity, she could see the little brown flecks in his blue irises and the thick, dark lashes that framed them. She swallowed deeply, her eyes darting down to his lips and then back to his eyes. There was a light dusting of freckles on the bridge of his nose, which added a youthful air to his face.

They were barely a hair's breadth apart, and if he were to lean in closer, he would be kissing her. She found she didn't oppose the idea as much as she should have.

She stepped back, needing to put some distance between them to gather her thoughts, which had most definitely strayed.

"Where would we even begin?" she asked. "If I were to agree, that is," she added quickly, noting his triumphant smile.

"You can start by wearing something green tonight," he suggested. "I believe it would look marvelous with your eyes. Perhaps even brighten them and make you look more interesting. You are a beautiful woman, Selina. It does not become you to dress in a way that does not flatter your beauty."

He broke their stare to trace the curves of her body with his eyes, sparking a hot and sensual heat.

"You have the potential to hold the entire English aristocracy in thrall."

"I thank you, Your Grace, for your kind words."

Selina cleared her throat to regain some of her composure, her voice slightly hoarse with the effort. She wanted to laugh at the ludicrous suggestion. A dress, of all things? What did he know about women's fashion?

“But surely you cannot be serious. A dress would hardly help me. I have worn very elegant dresses all Season, yet they haven’t helped in the least.”

“Are you the tutor, or am I?” he asked with amusement. “You accepted my help, so you will help me do what I do best.”

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For a man rumored to be stoic and unfeeling, he seemed to smile a lot more than was comfortable for her.

“While I am grateful, Your Grace, I have to ask why you are so sure of such a notion. How exactly have you become an authority in women’s fashion? Do you not think I might be better served by receiving advice from a woman, most likely a modiste? They are, after all, experts on the subject.”

For some time, his expression remained the same, his eyes dancing with merriment that indicated that he was thoroughly enjoying their exchange. Slowly, his smile turned wicked—a dangerous edge to it.

In just a moment, he had turned from a jovial duke to a predatory one that could gobble her up in one bite.

Selina became ever more sure of that assessment when he took a step forward, causing her to take a cautionary step back in a bid to widen the space between them. But he did not seem interested in that idea because he kept moving forward until her back was flush with the wall. With no place to run, she had no choice but to stare up into his eyes with slight panic and no small amount of excitement.

“Ah, Selina,” he said, bending his dark head so she could feel the heat of his breath on her sensitive earlobe. “I might even be more knowledgeable than the modiste on this subject.”

He purred in a way that left her in no doubt about the sort of knowledge he meant. If she had any sense of self-preservation, she would have left it at that, but her senses

must have been faulty because she felt the bold, curious part of her stirring.

“Could I ask how that came to be?” she asked, still staring at him wide-eyed.

His gaze darkened further, his eyes fixed on her lips, and her body flushed until her clothes irritated her skin.

“My Lady, I might have agreed to help you, but I am not going to be responsible for destroying your delicate sensibilities. Trust me, you do not want to know how I have acquired the skills you speak of and how easily I could wield them.”

He stepped back, and she finally could breathe without inhaling puffs of his scent. It had been playing havoc with her senses in the few minutes she had been in his company.

“I still find it hard to take your advice, considering you’re unmatchd.”

“If I wanted to be shackled,” he stated in a bored tone, “I would be. Do not forget that I was engaged once.”

“And that only proves that you have terrible taste in women,” Selina snorted, then clapped a hand over her mouth.

He let out a deep, loud chuckle that drew more looks their way.

Martha looked positively joyous from across the garden, and considering that she hadn’t come to interrupt, she obviously approved of Selina conversing with the Duke.

“You really must stop drawing attention to us, Your Grace,” Selina warned, uncomfortable at the amount of jealous looks she was getting from Society mamas and their daughters.

“Why? Are you embarrassed to be seen with me?” he asked. “We will be seeing each other quite a lot for the duration of our arrangement. You’d better get used to it.”

“I haven’t agreed to anything.”

“Yet,” he added.

“But do you have to make it so…”

“Use your words, Lady Selina.”

“Never mind,” she sighed.

She still hadn’t recovered from how his laugh had rattled her. She realized that she wanted to hear it again, much to her dismay.

“You will have to be much bolder if you want to keep a man’s attention on you,” he stated.

“How?”

“Like so.” He stepped closer. “Do not look away. Look at me.”

It was hard, but she managed to keep her eyes on him.

He seemed to be enjoying making her uncomfortable. Well, two could play that game.

She stepped even closer to him, smiling when the amused look in his eye faltered. She lifted her chin, feeling empowered by the look in his eyes. When he smirked and took a step back, she felt as though she had won an unspoken game.

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“There may be hope for you yet.” He smiled and turned away from her. “See you tonight, Lady Selina. Do not forget the dress.”

Oh God.

CHAPTER 4

Richard knew that he had left Selina feeling confused, and the joy of that knowledge had him nearly skipping to the pavilion where he had been resting. He found Eli already sitting there, along with his mother. They seemed deep in conversation, but while his mother looked engaged, Eli looked uncomfortable.

Serves the bastard right for inviting her.

“Seymour!” Eli called, rushing to his side. “Where have you been?”

“Taking a tour of the gardens,” Richard answered, moving to claim a seat.

“With a possible prospect, I hope?” the Dowager Duchess asked.

“When I find a wife, Mother, I will let you know.”

She snorted and then took a sip of her tea.

“All the men your age are married already, yet you insist on being picky about a bride,” she complained. “I still do not see wh

y you ended your engagement to the Barnes girl.”

“Can we not discuss this again, Mother?” Richard snapped. “I did it for good reason. I do not need you to question my decision.”

“I was only offering my opinion,” the Dowager Duchess argued stubbornly.

“I do not need it.”

“Have you two sampled the flavored ice?” Eli said, trying to break the tension between Richard and his mother. “Helen says that they’re divine, and I’m inclined to agree.”

Helen was his Marchioness and since they’d been wed only a few months prior, anyone could tell that Eli was besotted with her. They had been a practical match and had hated each other from the outset, but it seemed that things were progressing quite smoothly now.

“We have, dear boy, and your Marchioness is correct in her assessment. It is indeed rather lovely,” the Dowager Duchess answered with a nod. “I spy Lady Frisbery. Excuse me for a moment.”

She stepped away to greet some friends, and Richard took the opportunity to turn to Eli.

“I am still upset that you invited my mother here while knowing that we do not get along,” he scolded. “I’m starting to question our friendship. You do not seem to know me at all.”

His friendship with the Marquess of Mulford was one of the oldest he had, dating back to their school days when he had gotten in trouble for always starting fights.

They were a trio, including their friend James, the Marquess of Crawford but considering the man's prolonged period of absence from society's events, they were mostly a duo.

They'd bonded over a shared love of violence and had been inseparable since—at least until Eli started courting Helen, who now occupied most of his time even more so during marriage.

“I actually didn't expect you to accept the invitation or attend. Your mother was a welcome representative of your family,” Eli argued. “You never wrote back. Just know that my mother is upset with you.”

“Yet, she happened to have a room prepared for me,” Richard retorted with a smirk.

“You know how she is,” Eli sighed.

“You should have known that I would never turn down an invitation from you.”

“There was one time you?—”

“Let us not discuss the past,” Richard interrupted.

“It's near impossible with you here.” Eli said with a pointed look that hinted at another failed attempt to contact their friend.

“Did he at least write back this time?”

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Eli nodded much to his surprise.

“What did he say?” Richard asked unable to hide his curiosity.

“He is assuming his father’s place as the duke of Pembroke.” Eli answered.

“Why?” he asked. “I thought the duke’s health was improving.”

Eli shook his head looking grim.

The duke of Pembroke’s rapidly declining mental health had been a topic of controversy for years but considering he was started on a new trial of medication, he seemed to be have improved.

A somber mood settled over them but then suddenly Eli clapped his hands together as though remembering something. He looked up to frown at his friend but spied his mother returning and said nothing.

“That reminds me,” he announced. “Lady Justina and her daughter Beatrice left early this morning before most of the house had awoken.”

“Lady Justina and Beatrice?” the Dowager Duchess asked, settling into her seat.
“What happened?”

Eli leaned in close enough to whisper because, even though the incident had passed, he didn’t want the rest of the ton to know about it, and he didn’t want to shame the girl for the rest of her life because of a moment of foolishness.

He was a stickler for justice, but that didn't mean he didn't know how to mete it out with compassion.

She was young and desperate and obviously under much more pressure than she could handle to find a husband in the competitive marriage mart. It was almost pitiable.

“Lady Beatrice tried to trap Richard in marriage last night.”

The Dowager Duchess's dramatic gasp made Richard roll his eyes. She placed a hand on her chest as though she had heard something utterly sacrilegious.

“My word!” she exclaimed. “What is wrong with young girls these days?”

Richard had informed Eli of the incident as soon as he had returned to the party, although he hadn't expected his friend to act on it so quickly.

“Did you...?”

“I didn't say anything to them,” Eli answered, shaking his head. “Perhaps she had the decency to feel embarrassed of her actions.”

“Hmm,” was Richard's only response.

“You do realize that you are rather intimidating when you meet strangers. She must have realized that you would be even more intimidating once she'd tried to make an enemy of you,” Eli said.

“It is a necessary skill, my friend.”

“Thankfully, she had the decency to feel remorse for her actions,” the Dowager

Duchess sneered.

It was a good thing that the girl had thought to leave before his mother caught wind of what she had done. His mother didn't believe in forgiveness and would have no doubt made the girl and her mother's lives a living hell.

She had used her influence as Dowager Duchess to build up and tear down the reputations of girls who didn't live up to her standards of propriety in the past. Now would have been no different, and very few families would have been willing to risk her wrath by marrying their sons to anyone she deemed unsuitable.

Even now, Richard sincerely hoped that someone else would catch her attention, or the reason for Lady Beatrice's ruin would fall entirely on him.

"I absolutely detest girls who lose all decorum in the rush for marriage," the Dowager Duchess said with a frown. "In my day, we knew the power of flirtation and good manners. It just goes to show poor breeding if she could behave so filthily. What a disgrace! It just goes to show the extent of decadence that has taken over Society these days. It is a good thing she left, or I would have given her and her mother a piece of my mind."

Richard wondered what his judgmental mother would make of his deal with Selina. She would no doubt sneer at her for depending on a man to help her secure a match, and Selina, with her short temper, would not hesitate to shove his mother off her high horse.

It was a battle he would love to watch, and the mere thought of it had him smiling. That earned him stares from Eli and his mother.

"What is it?" he asked with a frown.

“You think about her and smile,” Eli said, an awestruck look on his face. “I must meet this wonderful woman.”

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“There is no need to meet her. There is nothing between us,” Richard argued, not knowing why this conversation was even happening.

“I surely hope there is,” the Dowager Duchess said. “I need you to give me grandchildren before I die.”

“You’re not dying yet,” Eli said with a smile. “You’re much too stubborn.”

The Dowager Duchess frowned playfully but took no offense.

Since her relationship with her son was strained, she had developed a soft spot for Eli. The ease with which they communicated had angered Richard at first, but since it freed him from some of her unwanted attention, he didn’t mind it so much.

“Thank you, Eli.” She smiled. “But I do need to be healthy enough to care for them.”

Richard rose from his seat, opting for solitude to escape the conversation he was currently having. If he sat still, no doubt the truth of Selina’s identity would come to light, and he didn’t want his mother to focus her attention on her.

Selina would no doubt be incensed that he would call attention to the friendship no one was supposed to know they had... if he could call what they had a friendship.

“I will remove myself from this conversation now,” he said to the two of them.

“Enjoy your tea.”

“Why are you...?”

He was off before they could protest.

Out of the corner of his eye, he spotted Selina conversing brightly with her sister. She looked so animated that he couldn't help the smile that crossed his face.

He had heard her laugh once and been stunned by the sound and how beautiful she looked when she was not laboring under the weight of trying to find a husband.

It wasn't hard to imagine how beautiful she would be with her hair down and in less restricting garments. His body tensed as he realized the direction his thoughts were taking.

There was nothing innocent about the sensations he had found himself feeling around Selina since they had bumped into each other the night before.

He had only ever observed her from a distance. Previously, he hadn't given too much thought to her, as she was of no importance to him, but the accursed party had set her more often than normal in his sights and arms.

He had never been attracted to innocents, preferring bolder women like Lottie, but the fact that Selina seemed disturbed by his closeness rather than using it to her advantage stirred his blood in more ways than he liked.

He had been happy that Lottie was bold with her flirtation, for it meant that he would not have an awkward wedding night. He had even found her attractive, but he had never felt an inkling of the desire he felt for Selina.

He would have kissed her if there hadn't been other people present, and the fact that it had been painfully hard to pull away from her had annoyed him endlessly.

She had caught him unaware earlier when she had stepped up to him and looked him

in the eye. So unlike the shy girl who had struggled to maintain eye contact with him. And that was just with a little influence from him.

He wondered if she would become a vixen if he were to seduce her and teach her all the forms of pleasure he'd learned to give. She looked to be the sort that would challenge him in every way possible, and his mind teased him with images of her writhing beneath him. He could almost hear her pleading cries as he pinned her down, taking his pleasure from her as hard as she desired him.

Feeling the surge of arousal in him, he groaned, promptly pushing the thoughts out of his mind. He should not be thinking about Selina in such a way.

She hadn't given any inkling that she was interested in him in that manner, even though he could see what his proximity did to her. But he understood that she had never been that close to any man before him.

She was a nobleman's daughter first and foremost, and worse still, an innocent. If he lost control with her, he would find himself trapped in a scandal that would end with him married to her, and he didn't think that was the kind of match she wanted or her brother would approve of.

Considering her brother, their friendship, which was founded on their shared ideals, would be strained.

There were more than enough reasons why attempting to corrupt her in the slightest would be a terrible miscalculation on his part.

Perhaps he was having such feelings because she possessed the qualities he desired most in a woman. That had to be the only sensible explanation because his hands hadn't itched to undress a woman to see if she flushed everywhere just as beautifully.

Her smooth, creamy skin, spotted with a light dusting of freckles across her nose and collarbone, teased him every time she wore a low-cut dress, and he was taunted by her long legs, which cut an elegant line as she walked. He knew they would look beautiful wrapped around him.

Then, there were her lovely green eyes, which changed hue with every emotion she felt. He wanted to see what those eyes looked like when she found her pleasure.

The image that flashed through his mind had him hurrying to his chambers to hide the evidence of the strong desire he felt for her.

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Damn.

He had gone too long without visiting his courtesan. After the party, he would be paying her a long visit to rid himself of the tension in his blood.

Knowing that still did not calm the salacious thoughts racing in his mind. Usually, he would have avoided a woman who tempted him so, but he had agreed to help her, and he was nothing if not honorable. He would just have to ensure that he maintained a safe distance from her at all times.

Yes. He would maintain a safe distance from her no matter how her body just begged to be touched.

Damn.

He so very dearly wanted to see if she would wear the dress he had suggested.

CHAPTER 5

Over the next few hours, her thoughts were haunted by the sound of his voice telling her to wear a green dress. Eventually, she gave in and asked Betsy, her maid, to pull out the green dress she had packed even though it required some work.

Now as she stood in the doorway of the ballroom, the focus of many guests, she grudgingly admitted that the Duke was right and the color did wonders for her. She could not blame them for looking. The dress she wore was made of emerald-green lace, offset by satin in the same color, and complete with a set of gloves. It was cut in

a way that flattered her voluptuous shape in good light.

She garnered admiring glances from both ladies and gentlemen alike, confirming what she had always known. Betsy was a good hand with the needle and had managed to transform the dress so that no one noticed that it was at least from three Seasons ago.

Selina had arrived just as the men were about to withdraw to the drawing room to participate in the customary card games. Her presence had caused the process to slow down, as more than one gentleman had stopped to give her an admiring glance or two.

While she was not particularly given to vanity, their helpless attraction soothed her wounded feminine pride. She silently thanked the Duke of Seymour. His plan seemed to be working tremendously well.

“You look absolutely lovely in green.” The deep voice that belonged to the object of her recent thoughts came from somewhere behind her. In combination with his proximity, it caused the hairs on the nape of her neck to stand up.

“I would say that it definitely matches the color of so many people’s jealousy this night,” he added, slight amusement lacing his voice.

“It is all thanks to you, Your Grace. I must confess, you do have an eye for fashion,” she said, turning so she was staring into his handsome face.

She watched his amusement transform into smug satisfaction.

“I do aim to please, My Lady,” he said with a slight bow. “My job is only half done, at the moment. You have yet to attract a suitor. I bet my entire estate that you will attract a score of them tonight.”

“Do not tell me you are prone to gambling, Your Grace?” she asked with a teasing smile.

“It would be for a worthy cause,” he replied, his eyes dancing with merriment.

“My Lady,” a voice called from behind her, causing her to turn around.

It was the blonde-haired, blue-eyed son of the Duke of Nottingham, and he was smiling at her sheepishly, if not nervously.

She did not blame him—the lad had hardly attended college. He was still young and inexperienced in the game of charming the ladies of the ton, even though he did have the makings of a future rake with his blonde, Adonis-like looks. She almost felt sorry for the ladies; how easily he would be able to charm them to their ruin if he so pleased.

“Could I perhaps trouble you for a dance?” he asked with a bright smile. “I believe a quadrille will start soon.”

Selina had to admit that what he lacked in experience, he made up for with his manners and enthusiasm. While he might not be a good suitor for her, he was an attractive man. He would make a good partner even if he did not set her blood on fire the way the Duke of Seymour did without making an effort.

“I would be delighted to, Your Grace,” she replied with a deep curtsy, offering him the dance card that was tied to her wrist.

“I believe that is my cue to leave,” Seymour spoke up from behind her, causing her to turn back to him.

She had been acutely aware of his presence even though he had remained quiet. The

back of her neck warmed as the heat of his breath met her, causing her to heat up everywhere else.

“My Lady, do enjoy your dance. I believe I promised to dance with one lady this evening,” he said with a bow.

Acknowledging her dance partner with a nod, he strode away and met up with a young, blonde lady—a debutante, Selina was sure, gauging by how hard she giggled.

She was a golden beauty, and Selina could see why Seymour would want to have her as a dance partner. It was a natural response any red-blooded man would have to such a young, innocent beauty, but she did not understand why it made her chest tighten and her breath shorten.

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“My Lady,” the Duke of Nottingham called, reminding her that she did have someone waiting for her.

From the cold look in his eyes, it was obvious that he had not been blind to the fact that she had spent the better part of five minutes staring at Seymour like a lost puppy.

“I believe the dance is starting,” he said, offering her his arm while she studiously avoided his gaze.

The dance was a mostly quiet affair, for her partner seemed to have decided to keep quiet.

Several times, she caught herself searching the dance floor for Seymour. At last, she spotted him dancing with the golden-haired beauty. He was smiling at something the young lady had said, and at that moment, Selina would have given anything to know what they were talking about that had him so captivated.

“Why do you not go to him?” her partner asked in a gruff tone, causing her head to snap up in surprise.

“Go to who, Your Grace?” Selina returned, plastering on an innocent smile, hoping that he had not caught her staring again.

“To the Duke of Seymour, My Lady,” he said with a forced smile. “I might be young, but I am not stupid. You have spent most of the dance seeking him out with your eyes when you thought no one was looking, and he was doing exactly the same when he thought no one was looking too.”

Richard was seeking me out too? He showed no inclination to do so when his carriage was so calm and peaceful.

“I think you might be mistaken, Your Grace. I do not think of the Duke in that manner, and he definitely does not see me in that light.”

As she spoke, Selina suddenly realized that the music had come to an end. Her dance partner bowed to her, before offering her his arm and leading her off the dance floor.

“I might be young, My Lady, but I am a man, and the looks exchanged between you both were nothing short of incendiary,” Nottingham said with a rueful grin. “Thank you for the wonderful dance, My Lady. I hope you can smoothen things out with your Duke.”

“He is not my—” she started to protest but stopped when the man strode away after a brief bow. It seemed he did not want to listen to her excuses.

Seymour could not have feelings for her when he was surrounded by several beautiful, fresh-faced debutantes. Apart from making suggestions about her wardrobe, the man had not made another effort to strike up a conversation with her. She did not understand where her dance partner had come up with the ridiculous notion that he might be interested in her in a romantic way.

She was a confident person, naturally, but she was well aware of her strengths and flaws. She was an older young lady, fast on her way to spinsterhood, with tendencies to be more opinionated than was good for her.

Selina was hardly a catch for a man like the Duke of Seymour, who was a public figure in his own right—handsome, with the perfect blend of brooding and charming tendencies that made him one of the most eligible bachelors in England.

To think that he would forgo the chance to be with a beautiful, innocent debutante to be witherwas to be possessed of a delusion of the highest order.

Selina was suddenly angry with the Duke of Nottingham for planting such a thought in her head.

“You have outdone yourself, my dear,” an excited voice said from beside her, making her look up until she met her aunt’s hazel eyes.

Martha’s eyes were dancing with merriment at the moment, and her overly plump body was vibrating with happiness.

“Good evening, Aunt Martha,” Selina greeted in a dry voice. “I thought you would be resting this evening.”

“Silly girl,” her aunt said, swatting her arm. “If I did not come, who would keep an eye on you girls? Besides, I am glad I have attended this particular event because I get to witness the turn in your fortune. You had more admirers this evening than in your previous Season. Whoever advised you to wear the green dress did a good deed and needs to be rewarded,” she said, her mouth splitting into a smile.

“If everything continues in this manner, it is safe to say that you will be married before the end of this Season.” She clapped her hands together in excitement. “Continue what you are doing—it is working!”

The sight of her aunt smiling so widely was surprising to Selina. The elderly woman was usually foreboding and disapproving—always ready to criticize. She had given Selina grief on the matter of her unmarried state, insisting that it was her strong opinions that scared all potential suitors away.

Selina had never thought that she could do anything to please the grumpy older lady.

A part of her was soothed by the thought that she had her approval. No matter how overbearing Martha was, she was the only motherly influence Selina had in her life since her parents had died several years ago. Selina was grateful to her for looking out for them, even though she did not always approve of her methods.

“Pray tell,” Martha continued, drawing her out of her reverie, “who is the fashion genius behind your transformation? I really want to reward them.”

“It was the Duke of Seymour,” Selina blurted out.

“Seymour?” her aunt asked, a puzzled expression creasing her brow. “What would he know about fashion, and what business does he have with you?”

“He owed me a favor and decided to pay it by telling me which color he felt best suited my complexion and eyes.”

“I must say he has a good eye,” Martha said with a nod. “But then Seymour is the perfect gentleman. Kind, handsome, and charming. He is perfect, except for the fact that he has flighty Johanna as a mother.” She shook her head in pity.

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“You are acquainted with the Dowager Duchess?” Selina asked, her curiosity getting the better of her.

“Yes, I am. We both debuted at the same time, and even then, she was prideful and flighty. She was beautiful and had many suitors, but she was adept at using her beauty to get what she wanted. She kept all of them on a short leash, making them believe that she might consider their suit while accepting all their gifts until the drawing room of their house resembled a gift shop.

“Until towards the end of the Season, when the previous Duke rejoined the ton and immediately took a liking to her. He was very much like his peers, but one thing set him apart from his competitors. He was a rich duke, and Johanna claimed to have fallen in love with him. In a thrice, she wrote rejection letters to her other suitors. Her courtship with the Duke was a whirlwind, and soon they had one of the best weddings the ton had ever seen.

“But barely a few years into their marriage, the love story that had taken the ton by storm turned sour. It appeared that while the Duke’s charm might have subdued her flighty tendencies, it did not completely stop it. In no time, she was acquiring lovers left and right. It is a little surprising that she managed to raise a good-hearted, principled man like the current Duke.”

Selina would be lying if she said the story hadn’t surprised her. The Duke was so proper and disciplined, but he was playing havoc with her equilibrium. Like his mother, he could hold people in thrall. The fact that he had not used those natural talents was a testament to his principled character.

“Speak of the devil and she appears,” her aunt muttered under her breath.

Sure enough, when Selina looked towards the entrance of the ballroom, the Dowager Duchess of Seymour was walking in, dressed to the nines in a deep blue sequined dress that glittered when she moved. Her carriage depicted nothing short of Royalty, and at that moment, Selina understood how the woman was able to enthrall so many men in her prime.

After all, the Dowager Duchess still carried traces of the great beauty she once was in the slimness of her nose, her high cheekbones, and the unique indigo shade of her expressive eyes. She was beautiful. She knew it, and she was not afraid to use her beauty to get exactly what she wanted, even if that was a place in a young rake’s bed.

As Selina watched her walk in with a bold smile, it soon became clear to her that she was heading towards them. Her smile dimmed as the Dowager Duchess came closer.

“Good evening, Your Grace,” Selina greeted, before dropping into a curtsy.

Her eyes widened in shock when she saw that her aunt remained standing, her expression one of open defiance.

“Please forgive me, Your Grace,” Martha said, jutting her chin. “I cannot curtsy with these knees.”

She did not bother to appear remorseful because she wasn’t, and she definitely did not have any problems with her knees.

Her love for gardening meant that she spent a lot of time on her knees, and a curtsy was in no way a hardship for her—except that she did not want to, since the Duchess in question was an enemy.

“I would prefer not to be known in Society for forcing people to curtsy in their failing... health,” the Dowager Duchess said, emphasizing the word ‘failing,’ knowing that it would annoy Martha.

Sure enough, Martha’s eyes narrowed, flashing with aggravation.

“I must confess that you look well, Martha,” the Dowager Duchess continued with chilly sweetness.

“And you look exactly the same,” Martha gritted out.

“Really? I would say the same for you, but that wouldn’t be true. You seem a little more plump. Still have an appetite for sweets, eh?” The Dowager Duchess’s eyes flashed with merriment even though her expression remained frosty.

She was thoroughly enjoying the exchange and how it enraged Martha.

“Well, at least I have kept my dignity,” Martha retorted. “I am sure the same cannot be said for you.” When the Dowager Duchess’s smile dimmed at the particularly sharp barb, she went in for the kill. “You must have had so many worries lately. The wrinkles on your forehead are as deep as the ridges I have to make for my flowers.” She affected a concerned tone, but the triumphant smirk on her face belied it.

The Dowager Duchess barely had any wrinkles except for a few laughter lines that Selina could see. But public opinion was a cunning thing, and for a woman who considered her beauty one of her most valuable assets, Martha had found the easiest way to wound her.

“I believe I spotted my son somewhere in this ballroom. You will have to excuse me,” the Dowager Duchess said, before walking away as fast as she could while remaining graceful.

Martha was indeed a formidable opponent in a battle of wills, and no matter what she said, Selina knew that there was more to their cold enmity than she had let on.

The effect of her new transformation had followed her to the next event at the house party. This time, Selina wore one of her green gowns—a rich shade of forest green embroidered with wildflowers. More than one gentleman had sworn that the gown made her look like a goddess of wildlife, and who would not want a goddess on his arm?

She was approached by so many men that it became exhausting. Even though she made appropriate noises when they conversed with her, her mind was preoccupied with trying to find Richard and ascertain where he was on the large expanse of land that was the terrace of the Mulford's house. When she found him, he was standing somewhere close to the river, his dark head bent in conversation with another gentleman.

She knew she should be grateful that his advice seemed to be yielding fruits and she now had a herd of new suitors, but with every conversation, her disappointment deepened until she despaired of finding an independent-minded, level-headed man among them.

They all spoke of the same things—their expectations of the women in their lives, their pride in their horses, and how large their estates were. There was nothing in the way of character that suggested her married life would not be drab and uninspiring.

Besides, while she dressed up for the day's event, she had come to the realization that she only had two green gowns in her possession and she had already worn them. Since the ton held rather irrelevant things in high esteem, it stood to reason that she could not give them the opportunity to ridicule her when she was finally changing their perception of her.

She noticed that the Duke was heading somewhere into the house—presumably to find the library, as he preferred the solitude of such rooms when he wanted to escape the chaos into which social events could transform in the blink of an eye.

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Excusing herself from the gentleman who was engaging her in conversation, she hurried after him, the skirt of her dress bunched in her hands to allow her ease of movement. She was just in time to see him turn the corner and enter the library.

She waited for some time outside, doing her best to slow her breathing so that it wasn't obvious she had chased after him. When she had succeeded in calming down a little, she turned the knob and stepped into the dimly lit library.

“Lady Selina,” he said in that deep voice of his. “While I would never miss the chance to be with a beautiful woman, I am at a loss as to what brings you here, in this moment, when you should be entertaining your admirers.” He arched a perfect eyebrow.

“About that. It appears that your tip has been working tremendously well, and I am grateful, but there is a problem.”

“What might that be, might I ask?” He folded his arms across his chest and leaned back against one of the shelves.

That position drew her eyes to his biceps as they bulged against the fabric of his shirt sleeves.

She had to make a conscious effort to look away, but when she met his eyes, the hot spark in them told her that her ogling had not escaped his notice.

She could feel her cheeks burning with embarrassment, and she cleared her throat in a bid to regain her composure.

“It appears that I have run out of green dresses, and I still do not have the suitor I so desire.”

“There is no rule that says green is the only color that flatters your complexion. Light shades of brown, as well as gold, could work as well.”

“To my knowledge, I have no brown dresses in my closet.”

“It is nothing that cannot be solved in a thrice. It is hardly enough to get your skirts in a twist about.”

Instead of reassuring her, his words and overly relaxed body language irritated her in a way that she had not expected.

“It seems you are not treating this with the urgency it requires. While I might have several suitors now, there are none that I am willing to marry.”

Richard’s expression turned intense, and he slowly pushed off the shelf. He prowled towards her, his eyes flashing with heat.

Instinctively, Selina moved backward until her back was flush with the wall beside the door, but Richard did not stop. He kept advancing until she could feel the heat of his body.

“Why do you think that is? That you have not managed to find a compatible suitor amongst all your gentlemen admirers?” he drawled, a cruel smirk curving his lips.

The man was aware of the power he had over her, and he was not afraid to use it.

“Perhaps you are holding on for someone else?” he said, leaning forward so that she was forced to inhale even more of his scent.

Each moment she spent this close to him shattered her self-control bit by bit.

“And what if I was? Would it be so wrong if I decided that I want to have a happy marriage with a man who adores me?”

“Of course not, kitten. It is not wrong, but it might be a tad bit unrealistic, especially with your aim to marry soon.”

“I do have some time?—”

“I do not think you do,” he interrupted, his smile dropping and his expression turning serious. “Besides, I do not think you will find what you are looking for in the gentlemen of the ton.”

“Why? Do you find me that unattractive?” she said, a note of affront in her voice.

“On the contrary, My Lady. I find you intelligent and bold, and while they are traits I admire, they make you an incompatible prospect for at least a third of the ton. These men are vain and are only interested in hedonism of the highest order. They have no purpose to help better society like you do. How could they, when most of them are as dumb as a doorknob? What you require, dearest Selina,” he said, stepping even closer, “is a man who will match your sharp wit and tame your sharp edges.”

His eyes burned even hotter as they roved over her face, sparking heat and awareness along her spine.

She licked her lips, which suddenly felt dry. His eyes followed the movement with almost scalding intensity.

“Do not tell me you think you could be that man?” she asked, her eyes widening in disbelief.

“And what if I could?” His voice was a deep growl, and his eyes feasted hungrily on her lips.

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She did not know who moved first, but in the next moment, their faces were almost touching, their lips separated merely by a sliver of air.

At that moment, Selina desperately wanted him to kiss her. She desperately wanted to know what it felt like to have those tempting lips moving over hers. Perhaps he was way above her station, but he could give her this. A memory to hold onto in the dark, lonely nights she was sure to endure in the future.

Just when she was sure he would slant his lips over hers and whisk her away from her misery, he withdrew.

“My apologies, My Lady,” he muttered, striding away quickly as if the devil was on his trail, leaving Selina standing in the middle of the library confused, frustrated, and more than a little angry.

Richard walked away, and kept walking until he was out of the house, taking deep breaths in the hope that it might cool his overheated body. For some reason, whenever he was in the presence of Selina, he lost control, saying and doing things he would never have contemplated ordinarily.

He could not believe that he had implied that she would do better to consider him as a suitor. He could not believe that he had said that, but the thought might not have been that unrealistic, especially considering the hot flares of jealousy that had plagued him during these last events. He had watched her being wined and dined by other gentlemen, knowing very well that they would not make a good spouse for her.

When he had started having such thoughts, he should have done the reasonable

thing—staying away from the source of his jealousy and avoiding events she was likely to attend. However, it seemed he had developed a liking for torture that made him attend these events and watch her being fawned over by her suitors.

Soon enough, he could take it no longer. He decided to step away and go to a quiet corner of the house before he gave in to the urge to approach her. He wanted to tell her suitors off, especially the ones that were lecherous enough to glance down her bodice.

It seemed, however, that his peace was not to be because she followed him to complain about green dresses and lack thereof.

He doubted she had approached him simply to talk about her wardrobe. He believed she was not completely unaware of the sensual tension between them. He believed it was that attraction that was drawing her to him. Today, he realized that he had an unhealthy attraction to seeing Selina in the throes of some strong emotion, whether it was anger or desire.

He had loved it so much that he had not realized he was taking the bait. Soon, he was burning with those volatile emotions and had almost kissed her. It had taken him superhuman strength to drag himself away from the glittering, pink temptation of her lips.

Somehow, he knew that if he touched her, it was not going to end in a kiss. It would go on, progressing until they brought it to its natural conclusion and he'd made love to her.

No matter what, he was never going to dishonor her in that manner.

Standing in the middle of the clearing, he scanned the sea of noblemen who were wining and dining. Eventually, he spotted Eli, the host. He was standing on the bank

of the river, deep in conversation with two other gentlemen.

Sensing his approach, Eli looked up, and their gazes met. Something on Richard's face might have indicated that all was not well with him because Eli excused himself from the gentlemen and approached him.

"You look hassled," Eli said with a teasing smile. "Do not tell me you were hiding from the ambitious mamas and their debutante daughters?"

"Far from it," Richard replied ruefully. "I think they might have set their eyes elsewhere for the moment. I have a lot on my mind. Do you fancy a walk to town?"

"Why would you want to do that when you have a carriage, especially in this chilly weather?" Eli asked, an incredulous look on his face.

"It is primarily because it is chilly that I wish to take a walk."

Eli stared at him. He was perplexed for a moment, but when he eventually realized the possible cause of such a proclamation, he nodded. However, he made no effort to ask him about it, and for that, Richard was immensely grateful.

CHAPTER 6

"My Lady," Richard greeted when they came across Selina trying to leave the luncheon with her maid in tow. "It seems you are leaving. Might I interest you in a trip to town? This might be a good chance to acquire the dresses you require."

She seemed surprised and a little discomfited by the offer. She accepted the proffered hand of the footman to board the carriage.

Once she was seated comfortably, she replied, "I thank you for the offer, Your Grace.

However, I do not think you need to go to the trouble.”

“It is no trouble,” Richard said. “Besides, you asked for my aid in choosing beautiful dresses, and I intend to keep my promise.”

“If you insist. Perhaps you might join us in the carriage,” she said, gesturing to the seat across from her.

“I thank you for the offer, My Lady, but I would prefer to walk.”

“In this chilly weather?” she asked, her eyes widening in disbelief.

“The weather is precisely why I want to walk. It is... bracing...” he trailed off.

Ignoring her concerned gaze, he stared off into the distance. He had to let her stew in her confusion because there was no way he was going to tell her the reason for his newfound masochism. Even now, as he stood in her presence, he could feel the stirrings of desire.

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Spending time near her would be torture of the worst kind.

“If you say so. I will meet you at Gracie’s. I hope she has the dresses I seek.”

With that, Selina pulled the carriage door closed and signaled to the driver, who tugged at the reins and led the team of horses forward.

“I have seen you do irrational things, Seymour, but I must say that your actions during the last hour are so confusing. I swear I can feel a headache coming on,” Eli said, a perplexed expression on his face.

“There is no reason to concern yourself with the matter. It is nothing more than my occasional bout of health consciousness. I heard that exercise is good for humors.”

“No sane man of my acquaintance would take on such senseless torture, braving the streets of London in this unforgiving weather—especially when they run the risk of their bollocks falling off.”

“Life is full of novel experiences—you would do well to embrace them,” Richard said, ignoring the look of disbelief on his friend’s face.

Eli seemed to have decided that he was insane because he did not bother making conversation the rest of the way to the modiste.

It was perhaps for the best because Richard could not tell him the reason for his irrational behavior. It was a novel experience for him as well because he would never have believed that, one day, he would be fighting arousal so acute that he would

resort to walking down chilly roads to maintain his grip on his self-restraint.

His life had been quiet for the most part—one step away from boring. He was collected and respected, until the day he had met Selina and his life was turned upside down. Suddenly, he was thinking of her, wanting to be close to her, and longing to watch her face while she broached topics she was passionate about.

He had written it off as curiosity, since she was different from ladies her age, but recent events had proven that notion to be a fallacy because it was more than that. Selina was crawling into his veins and wreaking havoc on his carefully controlled world.

In no time, they were in front of the modiste's shop, with the name 'Gracie' written boldly on its glass doors. The carriage that bore the Duke of Westalls's crest was parked right in front of it.

"I believe I have an appointment with a gentleman in a club down the street. I will see you later," Eli said, before continuing down the street.

Sure enough, when Richard turned the knob and opened the door, Selina was seated with her maid by her side. She tilted her chin in acknowledgment of his presence.

"Welcome, Your Grace," a cheerful, buxom woman said, approaching them with such a wide smile on her face that he thought her lips might tear from the effort. "I am Gracie," she added with a brief curtsy. "I must say, it is an honor to make your acquaintance, Your Grace. What might I help you with?"

"I require dresses for the beautiful lady here," Richard said, gesturing towards Selina.

"What kind of dresses would they be, and do you perhaps have some styles in mind?"

Richard turned to take a long look at Selina, tracing the lines of her body with his eyes, and enjoying the answering flush that rose to her skin. More evidence that she was not immune to his charms.

Selina was a voluptuous beauty and that, in combination with her vivid green eyes, completed the idea swirling among the ton that she looked like a goddess of the forest and he couldn't help but be inclined to agree.. Her curves, barely concealed by her clothes, were the stuff of dreams, and her slender neck was fodder for his fantasies, as he fantasized about nibbling on its tempting length while he made love to her.

“Your Grace?” Gracie called, jolting him out of his reverie.

He realized he had spent the better part of five minutes staring at Selina lustfully.

“Have you decided on the style, yet?” the modiste asked from beside him.

“Something that will accentuate her slender neck, I think.”

“Splendid,” the modiste said, beaming and clapping her hands with excitement. “I must confess, Your Grace, you have a good eye for fashion. I would have recommended the same.”

“Excellent,” Richard replied absentmindedly, his eyes following Selina as she talked with her maid.

“Does the young lady agree as well?” the modiste asked Selina. Her welcoming smile did not falter, but the concern in her voice was obvious.

Perhaps she was worried that Richard was one of those controlling gentlemen who chose everything for their wives even down to their underclothes. Perhaps he should have corrected her, but he did not feel the need to. If she thought he was married to

Selina, then all the better. It was best to protect her reputation.

“It is beautiful. I like it,” Selina replied after taking a good look at the design, beaming with excitement.

“What colors would you prefer, Your Grace?”

“I think green, gold, and brown will do nicely.”

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“Excellent choice, Your Grace.” The modiste beamed as she walked into a smaller space at the end of the shop to take down his orders.

In no time, she had returned and asked if he would like to order gloves. He chose some colors matching the dresses they had already purchased and ordered them to be made in satin. Selina was so beautiful with her stunning green eyes and glowing skin that he was positive that the colors would look good on her.

After requesting that he be billed despite Selina’s protests, he escorted her to her carriage and waved her goodbye before hiring a hackney that would take him to Eli’s townhouse.

“I wasn’t expecting you to be back so early, especially since you have taken Wilkins’ sister to the modiste,” Eli said once Richard stepped into the study of his London townhouse.

“It was a simple affair that was concluded in no time, and the lady in question was sent home to rest,” Richard said absentmindedly, moving straight to where the decanter of brandy sat.

Splashing some into a glass, he downed the shot at once, bracing himself for the inevitable heat that bloomed in his throat and chest.

“I think you have a soft spot for her,” Eli said suddenly in a matter-of-fact tone that caused Richard to choke on his drink and cough.

“Wh-Why would you think that?” Richard asked between coughs.

“Well, that might be because you follow her around with your eyes, and what man follows a woman he is not interested in to the modiste?”

“I do. Lady Selina is a dear friend of mine, and I decided to give her insight when she decided to change her wardrobe. It is my way of showing my gratitude,” he said, cradling his glass before taking a seat opposite Eli. “She recently saved me from a particularly desperate marriage-seeking debutante and her equally scheming mama. I am simply returning the favor by helping her attract a suitor.”

“Perhaps. But it might be better if you were the suitor. It would not hurt to get married soon, especially since you seem to have a good relationship with the beautiful lady in question.”

“You do realize, Eli, that I am the last person who should be planning to get married when the drama that ensued between me and Lottie is still fresh in the minds of the ton. It would be prudent to exercise care in choosing a bride who does not have hidden bloodthirsty tendencies. Besides, the lady does not seem to be interested,” Richard said ruefully.

“You are blind if you really believe that—but I know you are not. I would write off your excuses as fear of the unknown, but Selina is not like your parents or Lottie. You still have a chance of being deliriously happy with a lady that you desire.”

“I never took you for a shrink, Eli. While I’m sure it makes for good entertainment to discuss my love life, I think now is the time for a subject change. What time do you plan on visiting Gentleman Jackson’s salon?”

“In the evening, perhaps,” Eli answered, sipping brandy from the glass he cradled to his chest.

“I will accompany you. I need something to do to work off accumulated tension, do

you not agree?”

“I believe I do,” Eli answered with a smug smirk, knowing that Richard’s sudden need for boxing might have something to do with the romantic feelings he was ignoring and denying every chance he got.

CHAPTER 7

Several days had passed since the Mulford’s ball, where Selina had shared that heated interlude with the Duke and he had followed her to modiste for fittings for a new dress.

No matter what she did, she could not shake the notion that the Duke would make a wonderful husband, given how caring, handsome, and intense he was. Not that she had any hope of him looking her way. He had a better chance of making good matches with girls fresh out of the schoolroom who sighed over his good looks and worshipped the ground he walked on.

For the better part of a week, she had trouble going about her usual tasks. Her mind seemed to be fixated on Richard—his good looks; his deep voice; his actions, which confused and confounded her. One minute he was teasing her, seducing her like he was interested in her, the next he was avoiding her like the plague, preferring to walk in the chilly weather rather than share a carriage with her.

Even now, lying in bed, she finally admitted that she had not approached him alone in the library simply to discuss the deficiency of her wardrobe. It would have been easy to solve the matter. She could have simply gone to the modiste and requested that they determine which colors suited her best.

Instead, she had made the excuse to see him, deluding herself to the point that she felt he was the best person to help her purchase dresses and she had to meet him

urgently—even better if he was alone.

But when she had stood with her back flush against the wall, his arms bracketing her and caging her in, she finally admitted the truth—that she was so drawn to the Duke that she wanted to be in his presence always, that she loved watching expressions play across his too-handsome face and listening to that deep voice of his that sparked fire in her nerve endings.

At that moment, when she had stood in his arms, she had wanted nothing more than his kiss. To have the perfect arch of his lips pressed against hers. It nearly happened, judging by the fire that burned in his eyes. But the moment before their lips could touch, he had withdrawn, seeming to realize who she was. She had felt disappointment and embarrassment so acute that she had wished the ground would open up and swallow her.

The moment they almost kissed had remained, playing in an endless loop in her head since that day and haunting her dreams until she woke up frustrated and aroused.

The Duke of Seymour seemed to have taken up residence in her head without her consent, and it was all shades of annoying.

“My Lady?” Betsy called, poking her head around the door. She pushed it open further when she noted that Selina was back. “There is a delivery for you from the modiste. Your dresses have arrived, My Lady,” she said with a bright smile.

“Really?” Selina asked, sitting up.

She slid out of bed and pulled a wrap over her dress just as the door opened and footmen brought in several boxes, each tied elegantly with an emerald-green ribbon.

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They set them down on the floor, and she counted no less than eight boxes. She did not remember being fitted for that many dresses. Opening the first box, her mouth dropped open in amazement.

Inside the box was the most beautiful dress she had ever seen, folded and complete with a note. The note was signed by the Duke of Seymour, requesting that she wear the dress for the upcoming ball.

The dress was a beautiful piece made with emerald sequins that caught the light as she moved. Its bodice was cut lower than she was used to—perhaps to honor the Duke's idea for dresses that would flatter her slender neck. The dress was fitted, drawing the eye to her curves.

She couldn't help but stare at herself in the mirror. She had to admit that she looked like a siren gowned in a green fire. While she admired the fit of the dress, she was a little worried about how the ton were going to react to the sight of an unmarried lady in such a bold gown.

While the men wouldn't protest, the matrons—those women who lived and breathed gossip—would have a field day labeling her wild and untamed. An absolute wanton.

That was why she was unsure of the Duke's intentions. He had been under the ton's scrutiny for longer than she had, attending their events and watching scandals rise and fall, so he was in the best position to understand the kind of attention this style of dress might attract.

Of course, she loved it and felt beautiful in it, but that was immaterial to public

opinion, which derived pervasive joy from tearing daring young ladies apart.

That was why she had to be sure of his intentions. He was a self-proclaimed expert on women's fashion, after all. This was the excuse she gave herself while she donned the dress, before throwing her coat over her shoulders and sneaking out of her chambers under the cover of darkness, taking care to not wake Diana who was sharing the chamber with her.

When she stepped up to the giant doors of his own chambers, she was surprised to find that they were unlocked and ajar, sliding fully open at the turn of the knob. The reason for that oversight became clearer when she stepped in and saw the elderly valet seated close to the door, fast asleep.

Thanking the good Lord for small mercies, she crept past him and closed the door gently behind her. Then, she crept past, heading towards the door at the far wall hoping it was the bedroom since the rooms in the estate ought to mirror each other. She was surprised to find it open as well, as if he was waiting for her.

The room was dimly lit when she stepped inside, her eyes gradually adjusting to the light as she made out Richard's figure facing the window. He seemed to be gazing out.

He was dressed only in his smalls. His chest was bare, his skin glittering in the moonlight. Shirtless, the Duke bore little resemblance to other noblemen. The muscles in his back flexed as he moved slightly. His exposed calves were also muscular and peppered with hairs.

Even watching him from the back, the man was potent and attractive in a dangerous way.

For a moment, Selina completely forgot her reason for this nocturnal visit to his

room.

“I always knew you were bold, My Lady. However, I didn’t think you were this bold,” he said in a low voice, not bothering to turn to look at her.

“What makes you think so?” Selina asked, her mouth dry.

“No unmarried woman who values her reputation would run the risk of being seen entering or exiting a bachelor’s room. But here you are, unafraid.”

“I apologize if I do not fit your expectations for an unmarried lady. Believe me, I would not be here if it wasn’t important.”

“Pray tell, what is so important that you would take such a risk?” he said, turning to face her, his arms folded over his chest.

“It is about the dress,” she began haltingly.

“What is wrong with it? I thought dresses from Gracie’s were the height of fashion,” he said, a confused look briefly crossing his face.

“It might be the height of fashion, but it is not particularly good for an unmarried lady like myself.”

“Why?” he asked with a raised eyebrow. “Perhaps I need to see the dress to understand what you mean.”

In answer, she untied the cloak, allowing it to pool on the floor around her to reveal her emerald-green dress.

For a moment, Richard seemed to have lost the power of speech as he stared at her in

surprise and something that resembled awe.

“Your Grace?” she called.

Clearing his throat slightly, he replied, “I think you look ravishing, My Lady. I fail to see the problem.”

“It is scandalous,” she said, gesturing towards her chest.

“How so?” Richard asked, a mischievous smile curving his lips.

“The bodice is cut too low. The dress is too fitted,” she said slowly as if he was dim-witted. “It is unseemly for an unmarried lady to wear it.”

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“You, my dear, are not a debutante, and therefore you are not required to affect purity. Besides, it is a well-known fact that men are visual creatures and are moved by what they see. So, this might help in your hunt for a suitor.”

“I would never be comfortable wearing this dress. I do not believe I could wear it to tomorrow’s ball.”

“Truly?” he said, pushing off the window ledge and taking halting steps towards her, driving her backward. “You are not comfortable wearing a dress you consider scandalous to a ball, but you are comfortable wearing such a dress to a bachelor’s room?”

He kept coming closer until she could feel the warmth of his breath on her face, his eyes burning with intense emotion.

“I bought the dress for you, and you appear in my bedroom almost as if you want me to remove it,” he said, pulling the sleeve of her gown down so that her right shoulder was bared.

“Richard,” she said in a small voice, “you know this is not the reason I came here.”

“I beg to differ, My Lady,” he said with a laugh. “You are no blushing innocent who does not know what it means to visit a bachelor in his rooms.”

This was a version of Richard that Selina could not remember meeting. He was laughing, but instead of the sound being reassuring, it sparked equal parts fear and excitement in her chest. This Richard was dangerous and unpredictable, and she had

to be careful if she wished to escape him in one piece.

“Richard...” she said, staring into eyes that were so dilated they appeared black. “This is dangerous. Please let me go.”

In answer, the Duke let out a dark chuckle, and Selina realized that she was in more trouble than she had bargained for.

“Dangerous for whom, My Lady?” Richard asked darkly. “You or me? You, My Lady, seem to have a liking for danger and a strain of recklessness that runs in your body as sure as your blood.” He cupped her face in his hands. “I have fought so hard and for so long to stay away from you. Fighting my beastly urges, staying away to keep you safe. But do you appreciate it?” he spoke in a low, dark tone. “No, you do not. You tempt me till I’m out of my mind with want. Perhaps you will understand better if you get burnt by the heated fantasies that have plagued me in recent days.”

Sliding a hand around her waist, he dragged her closer, her body flush against his so that he was aware of the succulent softness of her that drove his arousal to greater heights. Her eyes widened in surprise, and he studied her for any sign of protest before slanting his mouth over hers in a kiss.

The kiss was a revelation, a far cry from his fantasies. She tasted sweet, like apples she might have had at dinner. She was soft, and he found himself nibbling on her lips, laving them with his tongue until she opened her mouth to allow him inside. The kiss turned wild as their tongues fought for dominance, the drugging effect making him lose his hold on his self-restraint.

He dragged her even closer, running his hands down her body and cupping her breasts in a way that made her moan in pleasure.

He needed more. In no time, he was tugging at her dress, desperate to have access to

the smooth softness of her skin. He had pulled down the sleeves and was about to unfasten her bodice when he was dragged out of his lustful haze by the sound of something falling over.

He immediately let go, a feeling of disgust overtaking him. Were it not for that noise, he might be ravishing her now, taking from her what wasn't his when he knew he could offer her nothing in return.

He had allowed his self-control to slip and had almost committed an unforgettable offense as a consequence. Distantly, he could hear Selina refastening her dress, but he was too ashamed to look at her and the evidence of what he had nearly done.

Taking a deep breath, he turned to her. "Selina... I..." he began.

"Please, do not apologize. It would make the situation even worse than it is," she replied stiffly.

It was meaningless to apologize when there was ample chance that it might happen again. The only other way to make sure it did not happen again was unpleasant, but it seemed to be the best solution.

"I do not mean to apologize," he said, keeping his expression bland. "I did it to teach you a lesson about the consequences of reckless behavior. I hope that you have learned well and will refrain from visiting me at odd hours of the night."

"I will make sure to take your advice to heart, Your Grace," she returned in a voice as frosty as ice. "I might have made this mistake once. I will make sure never to repeat it."

With that, she swept out of the room, leaving an aching sensation in his chest.

It might have been the best solution, but it had not come without its measure of pain.

CHAPTER 8

Richard had always prided himself on his self-control. It was perhaps the reason why he had survived this long in polite society without being entangled in many scandals. His remarkable self-possession had been the fodder for whispers that he was as cold as ice and might have a preference for men.

While such a rumor might be annoying, he was usually unperturbed because he knew it wasn't anywhere close to the truth. When he was younger, he had sown his wild oats just like other men his age, but now that he was older and more mature, he preferred to be discreet about his affairs, and that had been possible because of his self-discipline. It was one thing that he was sure of in his life.

Meeting Selina had thrown everything he knew about himself out of flux, including his willpower. Usually famed for being made of steel, it fell apart in her presence. He had yet to figure out how that had happened.

Surely, he had met more beautiful women, sirens in their own right, with more sensuality than should be legal, but for some reason, he had never felt the helpless burn of desire with them that he felt with Selina.

Perhaps it was her intelligence and sharp wit that never ceased to intrigue him, or maybe it was her eyes, those green pools that shone with intelligence and dark humor. Maybe it was her short, curvy figure that had him entranced.

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Perhaps it was a combination of all the things that made her Selina, all those qualities in close proximity—in the close, intimate space of the library—that had eventually led to him kissing her when she came to his chambers, devouring her mouth like his life depended on it. The offense was probably worsened by the fact that he had been most likely to ravish her right there in the library with no care for her reputation or who might see them.

Instead of feeling remorse, standing alone in the library after she left, he found himself feeling a twinge of regret that they had not been caught. The thought was strange but one that he agreed with at a deep level. Somehow, he had developed feelings for her that went beyond sexual attraction. It appeared he was not averse to the idea of marrying her.

But whatever honorable thoughts he might have had after the deed did not negate the fact that he had committed the sin of seducing an innocent with such uncontrolled hunger.

He was surprised she had not run from him when they broke apart. While he understood that what he had done was wrong, he admitted that—in the deepest part of his soul—he could not summon an iota of regret. In fact, if the opportunity presented itself, he just might do it again because now that he had tasted her lips, he was developing an addiction to them.

His addiction was confirmed when the next morning brought them to a picnic in the gardens. It was a different event from what most members of the ton lived for, but it was a welcome adventure for both young and old noblemen who had grown weary of the typical Society balls and luncheons.

Most of them had ditched their formal suits for more casual attire to fit the open air and sunshine that the picnic spot afforded them. The men ditched their dress shoes for boots and their jackets for simple waistcoats, while the ladies wore bright-colored dresses that brightened the area, chasing away the usually serious and tiresome air that was associated with the events of polite society. That brightness was made more blinding by the appearance of Selina.

She was dressed in a yellow day dress. It was simple and sweet at first appearance, but to him, it might as well have been as scandalous as a transparent dress. The bodice—just like every one of her new dresses—was cut low, revealing a good portion of the creamy white skin of her breasts. They gleamed in the sunlight, inviting his touch and reminding him of what it felt like having them pressed against his chest when he had devoured her mouth the previous night.

Despite how stunning she looked, it seemed that she was not yet quite used to being the center of attention.

She stood at the corner of the picnic, fidgeting with the skirt of her dress while biting her lip nervously. It was a habit he had noticed she slipped into whenever she was nervous or unsure. Unfortunately, the action drew his eye to her lips and the way they gleamed pink, plump and healthy in the bright daylight.

Of course, the sight of her white teeth biting her lip did things to his composure—flooding him with memories of how it felt to have her lips beneath his, how sweet she had tasted, and how much he wanted to kiss her again.

The way his mind was going, he was well on his way to full-blown arousal here in public, under the scrutinizing, judging eyes of the ton. He tore his eyes away from her face and her tempting lips, only to glance at her hands while they toyed with her dress. Looking closely, he realized that the gloves she wore were inside out. He guessed, in her nervousness, that she had not looked closely when putting them on.

He rose from the blanket and strode towards where she stood at the edge of the gathering. She did not seem to have noticed him, her eyes scanning the group before her—in search of a familiar face, perhaps.

“Good afternoon, My Lady,” he murmured in her ear, causing her to jump with surprise.

“Your Grace,” she greeted him, her eyes flashing with something that closely resembled relief rather than excitement.

Richard couldn't be sure because the expression disappeared as quickly as it had appeared, shuttered by her usual mask of indifference. His chest ached with disappointment. He yearned for the passionate Selina who had melted with desire in his arms.

“I had not expected to see you here,” she said coolly “You made it quite clear that you wished I stayed away from you. I assure you, Your Grace, I have learned my lesson well.”

Richard undertook most things in his life so thoroughly and carefully that they usually led to excellence. It was this predilection for excellence that had made him one of the leading voices in the House of Lords. He had never seen the need to resent that tendency until this moment, when it seemed he had done the work of pushing Selina away almost too well.

Gone was the shining warmth in her eyes. In its place was the cool indifference that hid her hurt and embarrassment following the events of the previous day. He was lucky she was still speaking to him, especially after the way he had dismissed her last night.

“I mean no offense, My Lady,” he said, keeping his voice as mellow and cajoling as

he could manage. “I had just noticed a little wardrobe mishap on your person and only wished to call your attention to it.”

His announcement caused the indifferent mask to fall, replaced rapidly with panic, before she glanced at her dress from several angles in the hope of finding the offending part.

“Do not fret,” he said, suppressed laughter evident in his voice. “I assure you there is nothing wrong with your dress. The problem lies somewhere else.” He took her fingers, causing her to look down at her delicate hands in his larger one. “Your hands. You seem to be wearing the gloves inside out.”

When she pulled back her hands in her attempt to correct the mistake, he held fast, unwilling to release her.

“Let me,” he whispered, waiting till her hands fell limp before starting the task of pulling off the lacy gloves.

He took his time, making sure his fingers dragged over the smooth skin of her hands, enjoying the feel of the shiver that she seemed to be doing her best to suppress. The hitch in her breath fanned the fires of his ego till he was convinced that he stood taller than his considerable height.

Once her gloves were completely removed, he took advantage, making sure to hold onto her hand, the feel of her bare skin on his sending sparks down his spine.

It was ridiculous that just holding hands with this confounding woman could inspire the depth of desire that even the experienced courtesans he had known in his youth could not. It was unbelievable. He was just holding hands with her, for goodness' sake. But what he had with Selina defied logic, and he had already given up on trying to understand.

Sliding the gloves back on after turning them the correct way was another lesson in torture, but in no time, it was done. Immediately, Selina withdrew her hands with such alacrity that one might think they were about to get burnt.

While he understood the reason for her reaction, it still did not sit well with him. Swallowing the offense to his pride, he plastered a welcoming smile on his face and offered her his arm.

“Perhaps you might allow me to lead you into the party, My Lady?” he said in his best charming voice.

For the next few seconds, Selina stared at his arm warily, before reluctantly accepting his hand. He led her into the event—attracting the attention of many gentlemen as they moved—before pulling her down to a sitting position when they got to his blanket.

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While being the center of attraction seemed to be the wish of most of the young women of the ton, Richard was intrigued to see that Selina did not seem to be enjoying it. The attention seemed only to increase her nervousness, as she had taken to tugging on her skirt and playing with the hem while actively avoiding the gazes of interested gentlemen.

While her candor was attractive to him, he could not overlook the fact that she lacked the proper etiquette needed to navigate polite society. While her beautiful new dresses and natural beauty might have attracted the interest of many a gentleman, there was a chance that her lack of proper decorum might be the final hammer that shattered their interest in her.

It didn't make logical sense that he found her attractive but her candor felt like a breath of fresh air in a society that was always pretentious.

A part of him was still hesitant about the idea of refining her when he so keenly admired the untouched honesty that bled into her deportment. It was part of what made her Selina—the unique woman who had so easily taken over his thoughts.

He watched her scratch a part of her dress and pull at it, almost like the material was irritating her skin. If it was, he would not have blamed her. The sequins that made up part of the sleeve were known to be scratchy sometimes—not that this would excuse such unrefined behavior from a lady.

He was sure she must have had some training on etiquette before she entered Society, but with everything that had happened around that period—her parent's death, in combination with her natural character that made her a less desirable partner to the

less-than-intelligent men of the ton—she had become something of a wallflower, relegated to the edges of the ballroom, content to watch other people dance.

Her etiquette lessons collected dust where she had shelved them among the less important things in her life.

To the untrained eye, she might have seemed content, but she was not. Occasionally, he noted the gleam in her eyes when she stared at a particular lovestruck couple and how long she stared at married couples who were notorious for their inability to keep their hands to themselves.

With time, it had become clear to him that the serious-looking Selina, with her refreshing political views, was, in fact, a romantic at heart.

That was the reason he had vowed to help her achieve her goal, even if it was the last thing he did. He fought the unholy urge to ravish her, captivated by the movement of her lips as she popped pieces of cake into her mouth. For the first time, he found himself envying a sweet dessert its place within the confines of her mouth.

For the rest of the picnic, he learned a lesson in torment, trying to keep his hands to himself while also keeping his mind from slipping into the gutter, as it was wont to whenever he was in her presence.

The picnic ended, and the guests started to step away, dispersing in different directions. He once again offered her his arm—any excuse to have her close to him again.

They walked to the house in silence, her expressive eyes admiring the scenery and the expansive grounds. He, on the other hand, was content to watch her, drinking in her features and every change in her expression as she admired the nature around her.

Just when they were a few feet away from the front doors, he leaned towards her, closing his eyes as he inhaled her unique scent.

“Come and see me later tonight at the library,” he said in a whisper. “It appears we have some crucial matters to discuss.”

He quite enjoyed the tiny shiver that ran through her as he spoke.

He still wore his smug smirk when she turned to look at him, her face a picture of surprise and curiosity. She had opened her mouth to ask him about his invitation, but she must have thought better of it, what with the number of people that moved around them and the possibility of any one of them overhearing her.

The wrong words in the wrong ears might guarantee that they would become the next topic for the gossips to use for entertainment at dinner.

Selina turned her head away, keeping her mouth shut. She might be impulsive at times, but she was also meticulous.

When the guests had retired to their bedrooms after dinner, Selina rose from her bed, where she had lain for the past few hours waiting for them to leave. She felt as though she had been forced to listen to their raucous laughter for what seemed like an eternity.

Standing up, she belted her robe over her nightdress, then pulled her coat over it, using its hood to further conceal her identity.

Opening her door as quietly as possible, she crept out. After making sure that there was nobody in the hallway, she crept forward, closing her door behind her as quietly as possible.

Descending the flight of stairs, she was a little taken aback to see that the hallways were so quiet—a contrast to how busy and noisy they were during the day.

Turning quickly on her heels, she headed down the hallway on her right, walking until she reached the fourth door. She could see slivers of light spilling out from beneath it, confirming that the room was occupied. Opening the door carefully, she peered in. Her eyes landed on Richard, who was leaning against one of the shelves and nursing a glass of brandy.

His eyes lit up with recognition and something akin to relief, as if he had feared she might not come. As if her curious mind would have allowed her to sleep before getting answers to her questions.

“Please come in, My Lady,” he said gently, spreading his arms wide in welcome.

She came in and hung her coat on the coat hanger at the door, and then she stood there in her night rail. When she turned around, it was to see Richard’s eyes burning down the length of her body. The night rail covered her to the tips of her dainty toes, but it might as well have been transparent with the way his gaze affected her.

When he noted her awareness of his open gawking, he looked away.

It was now Selina’s turn to stare at him. His evening coat and waistcoat were gone. He stood there with only his shirt on. He had rolled the sleeves up to his elbows, revealing muscular, capable forearms dusted with hair. His cravat was gone, and his shirt was unbuttoned to the second button. His hair was slightly tousled, like he had run his hands through it several times.

Overall, the man oozed an easy appeal. His mussed appearance in the dim light of the library was doing strange things to her equilibrium. If she wasn’t careful, she might end up in the same state she had been in the previous night—embarrassed, mortified,

and aroused.

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Taking charge of the situation, she cleared her throat. “Your Grace, you do not seem to have called me here to read,” she said with a pointed look at the glass of brandy in his large hands. “Perhaps you might be kind enough to tell me the important topic you wished to discuss?”

She kept her tone as formal as possible, remaining at the door, making no move to approach him even though every inch of her being wanted to be close to him.

Instead of taking offense at her stiff tone, his lips widened in a smirk.

“Do you care for a drink?” he asked, raising his glass in a mock salute.

“No, thank you, Your Grace,” she said, maintaining her frosty tone. Being in his presence scrambled her thoughts, and she did not want liquor to muddle her senses further. “I would much prefer to keep my wits about me.”

“Whatever you say, My Lady,” he said, pushing off the shelf and approaching her with slow, short steps.

She was tempted to take a step back, her senses recognizing the predatory intent that oozed off his larger frame.

She fought against it and maintained her stance. She would never allow him to know the true extent of the power he held over her.

Suddenly, he stopped by the desk just a few steps from her and deposited his glass there. He folded his arms across his chest and regarded her intensely, so much so that

she almost squirmed under his gaze.

“You have done exceedingly well since we began our lessons, My Lady. But it seems I have neglected a core component. It is the leading ingredient that has the power of transforming you from an admirable lady to one that commands the room with her presence.”

“What might that be?” she asked warily.

“It is quite simple, My Lady,” he said, resuming his approach towards her.

He stopped right in front of her, and she looked up into the dark pools of his eyes.

“Etiquette.” He said the single word as if it held the secrets of the universe.

Stepping away from her, he turned back and paced the room.

“You, My Lady, are a beautiful woman, but it is the little things that might be keeping you from reaching your full potential. The way you stand, walk...”

“But there is nothing wrong with the way I walk.”

“You laugh too loudly. It is unbecoming of a young lady.”

“I’m sorry if my honest laughter offends you and those uptight people.”

“You mix up members of the ton.”

“I have never done that!”

“You were also tugging at your dress, which is very unrefined behavior.”

The sharp tone gave her pause. She realized with surprise that she was panting and that Richard's breathing was also heavier than usual.

She did not understand what had brought about the argument. She just knew that his presence discomfited her, and when he started making disparaging remarks about her gait and manners, she felt a flare of irritation. She had held onto that anger to combat how helpless she felt in his presence.

Blowing out a breath through her lips, she tried to calm down enough to answer him without raising her voice in anger.

"Your Grace," she began haltingly when she felt she was calm enough. "I only scratch and squeeze my dresses when I'm nervous. When I'm not, I usually keep my hands where they belong—folded in my lap."

"Well," he said in a patronizing tone that fanned her irritation back into flame, "you are in the eye of the ton now, dear Selina, and they certainly will not consider the possibility that your failure at etiquette was caused by a bout of nervousness. Take the way you stand, for instance." He came to stand behind her, then gently pushed at her back and tilted her chin up so that she stood with her chest pushed forward and her head held high. "You have to command respect and give no chance for nervousness."

"I do not have easy control over my emotions. I cannot simply decide not to be nervous," she huffed.

"Well, you will learn to control them if you wish to achieve your goal."

That commanding, authoritative tone he used to speak to her was the last cut in the tether of her self-control.

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“I guess you know plenty about self-discipline,” she said coolly, not bothering to hide the sneer in her voice, “when you have only very recently lost yours and almost ravished an innocent. I do not think you have the right to speak so sanctimoniously on the subject of controlling one’s emotions.”

The silence that followed her challenge was deafening, and when she mustered the courage to look into Richard’s eyes, she regretted at once her decision to provoke him.

He was still, almost unnaturally so, his eyes filled with heat that spoke of his rage. She might have just pushed him too far, beyond what his self-restraint could handle.

While fear and anticipation warred in her chest, she was surprised to find that she was trembling in excitement.

She liked him best when he was out of control, the elemental male he kept hidden beneath his proper clothes and manners, free and running wild.

That thought confirmed to her that she was more unhinged than a proper young lady should be. But for the life of her, she did not care.

A red haze had descended over his vision, and he could feel his self-control slipping with every word that tumbled past Selina’s bewitching lips. Since the moment she had stepped into the library, he had felt a change in the atmosphere, the very air rearranging itself to accept her presence. His equilibrium was not left out, tilting on its axis immediately when he had caught her poking her head into the library.

The longer she stayed in the library, the more he felt his composure unraveling, so much so that he had started to castigate her.

He was well known in the House of Lords and among his peers for his skill in diplomacy. As a matter of fact, he had acted as a diplomat for the special office of England several times.

But when it came to Selina, his natural charm deserted him, and he found himself grasping at straws, throwing words at her, trying to provoke her—anything to prove to himself that he wasn't the only one suffering from the madness that boiled in his blood whenever he saw her or thought of her.

Not one to disappoint, Selina had taken offense and had hit him where it was most painful, the wound still fresh. She had referred to his most recent indiscretion of almost ravishing her in the room where they stood.

It was more annoying because it was true and because he did not even feel remorseful about it. For the last twenty minutes, he had been fighting the urge to repeat it.

Perhaps it was fated that they were alone again with no hope for interruption by any of the other house guests.

Perhaps she had dreamt about it like he had done since the day before. Was that the reason why she had not tried to avoid temptation by avoiding being alone with him?

Perhaps she had breathed life into the topic—even though they had been actively avoiding it—because she wanted him and just could not help herself and was as helpless as he was.

Prowling towards her, he was impressed to see that she stood her ground, even though her body shivered and her eyes darted around with a mix of fear and

excitement.

When he finally stood before her, he grabbed her waist, pulling her against his aroused body, enjoying the gasp that escaped her lips.

“Perhaps, My Lady, you have not truly seen me lose control, but I can guarantee that you are about to.”

“I would wager that I have,” she said in a hoarse voice.

“Selina, so help me...”

“I do not understand why you are so upset. I’m simply saying the truth...”

He shut her up the only way he knew how. Cupping her face in his hands, he claimed her lips in a passionate kiss. A moan of relief and enjoyment escaped his throat as he devoured the lips that had been a source of torture since the previous night.

He licked her lips, plunging his tongue inside when she gasped. The kiss caught fire then, sending heated sensations down his spine until he forgot who and where they were.

A part of his mind warned that he had let this happen, that he had repeated his mistake, but that tiny voice was drowned out by the strength of the sensations taking over his body and destroying his self-restraint in the process.

Selina might have seen him lose control, but tonight, she might have unleashed the bestial part of him, and she must bear the consequences of playing with fire.

CHAPTER 9

“You will do no such thing,” Herbert said passionately, his booming voice echoing through the drawing room. “I will never allow it.”

“Please, do stop screaming, Herbert. You will not change my mind by disturbing the entire household,” Selina replied, busying herself with her embroidery.

“You do not truly want to marry that old man. Apart from the fact that he is way older than you, he is friends with Aunt Martha. That alone disqualifies him, in my opinion.”

“Oh, do try not to be judgmental, Herbert. You hardly know the man to make assumptions about him.” Selina smiled.

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She was totally enjoying seeing Herbert upset.

“Neither do you,” he retorted.

Their aunt had a weird taste in friends who were at either end of the spectrum. They were either homely and lively, or they were wild and disreputable. She had yet to decide which part of the extreme Lord Finch belonged to.

“Besides, I’m sure you will not be able to tolerate the man,” Herbert continued. “Not only is he known to be a fool, but he is also too old for you. If his belly protruded any further, he would look like a woman in her ninth month of pregnancy!”

“Herbert!” Selina chastised, fighting to keep her mirth under control. “That was not kind.”

“Well,” Herbert said, opening his arms wide without remorse, “I was just stating the facts. Please tell me you will not marry him.”

“This is not simply about me. I am in no hurry to marry, but I need to if I’m to help Diana’s prospects.”

“Your marriage has nothing to do with Diana’s prospects. The nobleman who wants her will approach her despite whatever stories circulate amongst the ton. Just focus on yourself and carefully choose a suitor.”

“You and I both know that it is easier said than done. While there is a possibility of a suitor approaching Diana, it is highly unlikely. Most members of the ton move like a

herd, seeking popular opinion when making decisions on what the latest fashion is, which lady is a good prospect, and which is not.

“From the first day she debuted and that hateful Lord Hightown insinuated that she might be unsuitable for marriage simply because she had a spinster for an older sister, she saw a drastic drop in the signatures on her dance card.

“I love Diana and do not want her to suffer the pain and humiliation that comes with being seen as a spinster. It is a hard, harsh life. If I have to marry Lord Finch to protect her, I will.” Selina released a breath.

“So, when you manage to marry Diana off, what happens to you? Who is going to protect you? Who is going to save you from the miserable life you seem hellbent on signing yourself up for?”

“It won’t be a miserable life. I will have my books, my embroidery... Perhaps I might have children. They would keep me busy for a time. I would live happily, indeed,” she said in a shaky voice, forcing a cheerful note into it that did not sound convincing even to her own ears.

“Then what happens to your love for intelligent conversation and your passion for archeology and adventure? How long will you manage to repress your passions without going mad? You are a passionate woman, Selina. I would hate to see your vibrant light snuffed out by a man who does not understand its value.”

“Unfortunately, that is the plight of women in our society. Very few women are privileged to marry men who love and cherish them and are willing to nurture their passions. The rest of us have to make do with what life gives us. Making a life out of what is available to us. The world—this society—is not kind to unmarried women. There are hardly lucrative jobs for them. It is as if society was designed to frustrate their attempts at independence and make sure that they remained under the thumbs of

men—the flow of their lives dependent on the whims of the men they rely on for food and board. I will do anything to protect Diana from suffering such a fate.”

“Selina, you won’t remain unmarried for long. There are many men out there—gentlemen who would be honored to have such an intelligent woman like you as a wife. If, at worst, you remain unmarried, I promise that you will always have a place at the manor, or with me.”

“While Elizabeth is a kind soul and would never complain, I would not stay in her matrimonial home, discomfiting her. And with the way she carries on with Stephen, I am sure that, in no time, they will have a brood of children who would need the rooms in the house,” she said dryly.

“The house had at least twelve bedrooms when I last counted. Surely they could never have that many children?!” Herbert said, his eyes wide with incredulity.

“I would not advise you to bet on that,” Selina said absentmindedly, adding a finishing touch to the rose that had come to life on the handkerchief in her lap.

Herbert was quiet for some time, probably deciding that she was right. But then why would he not agree? Their elder brother was absolutely in love with his wife, and they seemed to have trouble keeping their hands to themselves. In the early days of their marriage, Selina and her other siblings had learned quite quickly not to go into any room the couple might be in without prior warning because the possibility of finding them at several stages of undress was quite high.

While she admired their love and wished to have such a relationship, she understood that such a connection was quite rare. She did have something that resembled such passion with Richard, but he certainly did not love her, and neither was he willing to marry her. Hell, the man was helping her attract a suitor, for goodness’ sake.

Since such love seemed to have eluded her, she was going to turn to practicality and marry an eligible gentleman, at least for her and Diana's sake.

"I do not care what your reasons are. I will never allow you to marry Lord Finch. I would never give my consent or blessing to such a hellish union," Herbert continued in the same vehement tone.

"I do not require your permission to marry, Herbert," Selina said with a chuckle. "Stephen is the Duke, and he is the one who will give my hand away in marriage."

"Well, I will tell him not to allow you to make such a dreadful mistake."

"Stephen respects my decision and will allow me to marry when the time comes."

"Then I will interrupt the wedding," Herbert said stubbornly, a mischievous gleam in his eyes. "I will stand up when they ask who objects to the union."

"What will you state as your reason?" Selina asked.

"I will make something up. Perhaps I might even insinuate that he forged his title. By the time they manage to fetch a copy of Debrett's, I will have already escaped with you."

"You will do no such thing," Selina said, before throwing her head back and laughing. "Why are you so sure that I will follow you?" she asked between bouts of laughter.

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“You will if you know what’s best for you. Would you prefer to bear the embarrassment alone?”

He raised an eyebrow with mock seriousness, causing her to laugh even louder.

“I’m serious, Selina,” he said when their mirth died down. “I do not want you to marry that man.”

“And why would you not want her to marry?” Diana asked, breezing in like sunlight. Her fair hair and youthful skin glowed, offset by the crimson color of her gown.

“I never said I did not want her to marry. It is her choice of husband that I am against.”

“And what is wrong with him?” Diana asked, furrowing her brow with concern.

Herbert opened his mouth to answer, but promptly snapped it shut when Selina shot him a glare. It was obvious that she did not want Diana to worry.

“Herbert is just worried,” she spoke up, injecting a cheerful note into her voice. “He wants me to make a love match. I was just informing him that such matches are rare and not everyone is fortunate to make such a match, especially women.”

“Herbert, you are a good brother,” Diana said.

Herbert’s cheeks flushed with pleasure, but she soured his good mood with her next statement.

“But Selina is a grown woman capable of making her own decisions. She has the right to make her own choices. Besides, who would not love her? She is so nice and beautiful. I would be happy to attend another wedding in this house. Stephen’s wedding was lovely, even with all the tension in the air. I should hope that Selina’s would be free of such drama.”

Selina resisted the urge to roll her eyes. She loved Diana, but her sister was prone to daydreaming, and she did not always seem to be in touch with reality. It was just like her to be talking about planning a wedding when Selina wasn’t yet sure of receiving a marriage proposal.

“I think we might be getting ahead of ourselves here...” she began.

“I would never support a terrible marriage, no matter how grand the wedding is,” Herbert muttered, before getting up to leave.

The moment he stepped out of the room, Diana’s smile dropped, and she came to take his place beside Selina on the settee. She took her sister’s free hand in both of her own, forcing Selina to look at her in surprise.

Gone was the happy, carefree expression that she showed the world, and in its place was the expression of worry and wisdom that seemed to exceed her years.

“You seem to have some suitors whom you hope might propose marriage. It is my sincere hope that you will choose someone good for yourself even if it is not a love match. I do wish for a love match for you, but I am not so naïve that I do not know that it is rare.

“You have been like a mother since Mama and Papa died, and for that reason, you have been forced to mature faster than you should, sacrifice more than you should. I will not allow you to sacrifice your happiness for my sake this time. I will be very

angry with you if I find out that you did. I might even help Herbert ruin the wedding.”

“Just how long did you eavesdrop?” Selina asked, a chastising look on her face.

“Long enough,” Diana replied, studiously avoiding her gaze.

“Dearest Diana,” Selina began, patting the back of her sister’s hand. “I’m sure you know me well enough to know that I will always be practical in my decision-making. I would never make a decision that would be bad for me, I promise you that,” she said, keeping her tone as reassuring as possible.

Diana kept hold of her hand as she searched her eyes carefully for any signs of deception.

Everyone thought that Diana’s bright personality made her less sensitive to other people’s emotions. However, she was sensitive to every shift in emotion in every room.

It was why she had struggled in the early days of Stephen’s marriage, when the tension that came with him marrying the daughter of their former enemy underlined the time they spent together as a family. She had also been the first to accept Elizabeth into their family despite her lineage.

Diana seemed satisfied with whatever she had seen in Selina’s eyes because, in the next moment, she stretched. “I need to take a nap. I do not want to nod off at the ball this evening,” she said, before leaving the room and Selina alone with her thoughts.

Not for the first time, Selina envied the ease with which Diana conducted her life—pushing worry aside for what was important to her. She had been the bright sunshine that had kept them sane at home after they had buried their parents

following their gruesome murder.

She was the only reason why their family remained together despite the tragedy they had endured. That was why she deserved nothing but the best, and Selina was going to make sure that her sister got it, even if it was the last thing she did.

That evening, while she prepared for the ball, sitting still while Betsy brushed out and styled her hair, she planned her entrance with the concentration and strategy that a war commander might use to plan a siege.

She had to be flawless in both appearance and carriage. She had been reading books about deportment in her free time, and she was confident that she had gleaned enough knowledge to keep her afloat for a night in the ballroom.

She was going to be the enchanting noblewoman that Richard wanted her to be, so much so that everyone's eyes would be on her, including his. Knowing that he was going to be watching her ensured that she took special care with her appearance.

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Tonight, she had chosen a crimson-colored evening dress that would make her the center of attention. The color might not be favored amongst unmarried ladies, but it had been years since she had been a debutante. She wagered she had earned the right to dress how she saw fit.

Just as she had predicted, her entrance into the room that night was accompanied by a hush, as the eyes of everyone in the room swiveled to her. The intensity of their gazes stirred nervousness in her belly, and she could feel her fingers curling as they tried to grab onto the fabric of her dress.

She forced herself to keep her hands folded in front of her waist. Keeping her smile in place, she stepped into the room and made her way to the vacant seat in the dining room. The gentleman sitting to her right stood up and pulled her chair out for her.

“Thank you, My Lord,” she said, smiling graciously to the chivalrous gentleman.

He was the Earl of Pembroke, an eligible bachelor in his own right.

“My pleasure,” he replied with a charming smile. “It is a privilege to be in the company of such a beautiful lady like you.”

While Selina was sure that line was used several times to deceive many unsuspecting young ladies, she still found herself blushing in response. After all, which lady did not like to be told that she was beautiful?

“Thank you, My Lord. You flatter me so,” she said, making sure to cast glances at him from under her lashes like she had seen many ladies do.

“I always tell the truth. My apologies, My Lady. I do not know your name. Do you mind telling me?”

“I do not think we have been introduced, My Lord. I am Selina, the younger sister of the Duke of Westall.”

“Jefferson at your service, My Lady,” he said, taking one of her gloved hands in his and placing a kiss on it.

The dinner had only just begun, but Selina knew it was going to be an exciting one. She could feel Richard’s eyes on them from where he sat at the opposite end of the table, which added an undercurrent of excitement to her pleasure.

Perhaps she might enjoy this dinner if only she could banish the memory of his kiss and how it felt from her mind.

CHAPTER 10

Richard smiled as he watched Selina taking a turn about the room. She was doing amazingly well—even better than he had anticipated. He had been amazed when she had stepped into the dining room, looking as alluring as a siren. At that moment, he swore that everyone, including him, had become breathless at the very sight of her, confirmed by the hush that fell over the room.

He had seen the moment when her bout of nervousness had started and how she had brought herself under control by straightening the fingers that had been about to grab the fabric of her dress. At that moment, he was proud of her and her growth.

Walking at a sedate pace, she approached the dining room. But the moment the gentleman beside her pulled out her chair for her, Richard’s pleasure with her conduct had slowly faded away until it was almost nonexistent.

He was supposed to be happy that she had snagged the attention of an eligible bachelor. So he did not understand why, instead of being pleased to see her progress, he felt a weight in his chest that grew heavier with each moment she spent smiling and flirting with the young gentleman sitting to her right.

As far as he knew, her lessons had not extended to flirtation, but she had taken to the art like a fish to water—laughing and chatting with the man and glancing up at him from beneath her lashes.

Whoever the gentleman was, he appeared to be in her thrall. He had forgotten his food in favor of watching her while she spoke. His meal sat there, forgotten, as he took in the woman before him.

Even now, as she sat far away from him, Richard was captivated by the way her skin shone in the muted light of the dining room. The bodice of her crimson dress hugged her bosom, drawing his eyes to the creamy skin of her décolletage with magnetic force. He was entirely bewitched by her face, the way it glowed with health and flushed with pleasure.

His obsession with her lips made itself known as he watched her nibble on the edge of a pastry, the action sending heat down his spine as he remembered what it felt like to have her lips beneath his. How sweet she had tasted and how much he hungered to have her in his arms.

When her companion raised her hand to place a kiss on it, Richard's stomach flipped as the weight in his chest seemed to drop.

Angrily, he stabbed his fork into his beef, chewing fiercely in the hope of cooling the boiling blood in his veins.

“Richard, dear, if you stare at them any longer, they may burst into flames.”

His mother's voice interrupted his effort to burn a hole into the other man's head with his eyes from across the room.

"Besides," she continued, "do not take your anger out on the food. It is innocent."

Richard did not enjoy attending these occasions with his mother simply because of the wealth of scandal that trailed her steps like a hive of angry bees.

She had just returned alone from France when her latest paramour had refused to follow her back. According to her, he had wanted to "see the beautiful sights of the city" longer. Richard thought it more likely that he had stayed back to enjoy himself—probably with younger women.

Of course, he hadn't voiced that thought to his vain mother.

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There were very few things that Johanna Curtis, the Dowager Duchess of Seymour, took pride in, but her beauty topped the list. She had been stunning in her youth, but age had taken away much of her charm. She refused to accept that fact and still chased after younger men who sought her money in return. She was all too ready to accommodate them while they warmed her bed and pandered to her vanity.

Even now, she sat beside him, dressed in an expensive black dress that was cut scandalously low. She hid her wrinkles under heavy face paint. The only spots of color on her face were her lipstick and the rouge she applied to her cheeks. It gave the resemblance of a cross between a siren and a clown, and both were clamoring for attention.

“I do not understand what that innocent is doing with such a rake. Did her mother not teach her the consequences of playing with fire?” Johanna said absentmindedly, fiddling with her spoon before she drank some of her broth.

“Whom do you speak of?” Richard asked, his gaze still fixed on Selina.

“The couple on whom you are so fixated,” Johanna answered with a lazy flick of her finger. “Isn’t she a friend of yours?”

“You know the gentleman she is with?” Richard asked, his eyes widening in surprise.

“Of course! Who does not know him? He is the Earl of Pembroke. You would know him as well if you paid attention while attending social events instead of daydreaming about the moment you can return home,” she said, before popping a bite of beef into her mouth.

Ignoring the barb, Richard turned towards her so that he could watch her face. “I do not care about his bloody title. Tell me what you know about his character!” he demanded, barely keeping his voice low.

Johanna raised a finger to indicate that he should wait while she chewed.

The next couple of minutes were hell while he waited for her. Then, when she had finally finished chewing and swallowed, she answered.

“He is known to be a rake. An unrepentant one at that. We had something between us some years ago. He normally goes for experienced women, but perhaps his taste changed to include innocent young women as well...”

Richard did not hear the rest of what his mother was saying. A red haze had descended over his vision, and he could hear nothing over the rush of blood in his ears.

The fact that his mother knew the man was a red flag in itself. Not only did she know him, but she was aware of his character and took pride in being amongst the women who had warmed his bed.

Having worked his way through the ladies of the ton, he had probably grown weary and decided to cast his net for younger, unsuspecting women to feed his inordinate lust.

Richard was never going to allow him to make Selina a victim. Never.

As he watched them, he noted the moment Selina finished her dinner. Lord Pembroke, still playing the chivalrous gentleman, pulled back her chair and took her arm to lead her away from the dining area. Sensing danger, Richard stood up, determination radiating off him in waves.

“Where are you going, Richard?” his mother called after him as he stepped away.

He ignored her, not trusting himself to reply to her question at that moment without betraying his anger.

Following the path they had taken, he found them close to the balcony, where Lord Pembroke was still doing his best to charm Selina. Her laughter rang out clear and true, stirring pleasure and anger in Richard’s chest. The sound was music to his ears, but at the same time, he resented her for being so carefree with the Earl that she could laugh that loudly with him.

He approached them with determination, his anger increasing as he got closer. The Earl was watching her with a predatory hunger of which she seemed blissfully unaware. Richard had to give it to the man; he was a brilliant strategist, bringing her to this dark space. He was probably planning to lure her onto the balcony, where he might have the freedom to ravish her as he wished.

His hatred for the man was sealed when he stood in front of him. It was an injustice that such an immoral man was blessed with such handsome looks. He was a typical Adonis. He had a delicate, almost feminine face, startling blue eyes, and light blond hair. It was no wonder he was skilled at leading women astray.

“Pembroke,” Richard called, interrupting their discussion.

He noted the irritation that passed over the other man’s face with pleasure.

“I do not believe we have met,” Lord Pembroke said slowly, narrowing his eyes at him.

“We have not. Richard Curtis, the Duke of Seymour, at your service.”

“Seymour? You are Johanna’s son?” Lord Pembroke asked, a bewildered look on his face.

The ease and familiarity with which he used his mother’s name filled Richard with more anger, but he plastered on a cool smile.

“Yes, I am. So, you remember her? She told me about your... friendship,” Richard said in a tone that was almost too cheerful. His mood improved even further when he noted LordPembroke’s flush of embarrassment. “I cannot say I was too happy to hear about it.”

“What do you want?” Lord Pembroke asked in a low voice, stepping closer to him. He cast a wary glance at Selina, who looked bemused by the interaction.

So, he cares about his reputation, doesn’t he?

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“Me? Nothing. I just wanted to make your acquaintance. I had not realized that there was a new Earl of Pembroke. I heard that the previous one died from visiting brothels. The poor man must have overdosed on pleasure,” Richard said in a singsong voice, his eyes flashing with anger.

He heard a choking sound on his left but refused to look at Selina, keeping his gaze trained on the Earl.

“I won’t stand here and listen to you disparaging my family...”

“I have no intention of doing that, My Lord,” Richard said in a mocking tone. “I wanted us to be friends, considering you are verywellacquainted with my mother. I thought I’d share what I know about your family. What do you do for fun? Hobbies? Let me guess...” He placed a finger under his chin. “Hunting? Fencing? No, I doubt you would like those activities. You do not seem strong enough for them. It is a pity. Iwantedus to be closer. We’re practicallyfamily.”

By now, Lord Pembroke was as angry as Richard, his face contorting and red with rage. He stepped even closer so that he was a hair’s breadth away from Richard.

“If it is the girl you want,” he said in a dark whisper, “take her and stop trying to provoke me. She is not worth much to me anyway. Damn innocent.”

Bending his head close to the man’s ear, Richard whispered back, “I would thank you to stay away from her. The next time, I will not be so lenient.”

Lord Pembroke stepped away and left, and Richard dropped any pretense at levity.

Fixing his angry eyes on Selina, he grabbed her forearm before dragging her back to the ballroom.

For once, she did not struggle, and he was grateful for it. He was so unstable at that moment that he was not sure how he would have reacted if she had.

CHAPTER 11

“I certainly hope you have a good explanation for what you just did,” Selina spat out once Lord Pembroke had scampered away.

“You need to be careful with the kind of company you keep,” Richard scolded her.

The nerve of this man!

She was so irritated that Richard ruined a good conversation she was having with a decent gentleman with thinly veiled insults. She wondered how the gentleman hadn't boxed his ears.

But she calmed herself, not wanting to make a scene that would draw attention to their conversation. Already, a few eyes were turning in their direction, and she did not need any more.

And now he is scolding me!

“Indeed, I need to, or I would not be spending so much time with you,” she hissed. “Why did you insult Lord Pembroke? You wanted me to converse with a gentleman. I finally get the opportunity to do so without stumbling over my words, and you insult him!”

“I do not think he is right for you,” Richard answered, not looking in the least bit

sorry. "You can do way better than Lord Pembroke."

He couldn't even meet her eyes to deliver those annoying words.

What did he know about who was right for her and who wasn't?

Lord Pembroke had been perfectly polite, showing an interest in her that was a little overwhelming but not unpleasant. She hadn't ever known a man so willing to talk to her. Despite her stumbling through the initial parts of their conversation, he had been patient, asking all the right questions and making suggestions.

Besides, he was handsome, he was an earl, and his estate was in good condition. He was perfect by all standards.

"What do you know about who is right for me and who isn't?" she asked with a frown.

"All the advice that you've taken from me so far has brought good results, has it not?" Richard asked stubbornly. "Why do you insist on doubting me now?"

Indeed, but that does not mean you can predict my taste in men.

"That is different, and I find it hard to trust your judgment when you so blatantly pursued him."

"How so?" he asked with a raised eyebrow. "Selina, you have to understand that I am committed to seeing our deal succeed, but Lord Pembroke is not someone I will ever recommend. You can do far better. I would also advise you to keep your distance from him. It is what's best for you."

"You do not know what's best for me," Selina spat, folding her arms. "Lord

Pembroke looks like the only viable match I can hope to make here. He has shown interest in me. He was thoroughly pleasant and a gentleman to boot. He was also interested in my discussion on horticulture.”

“I’m pretty sure he was interested in more than your discussion on horticulture.”

“And what do you mean by that?”

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“Nothing you should bother yourself with.”

“Yet, it is important enough to have you cross Lord Pembroke off the list.”

“Indeed.”

“You’re insufferable!” she scoffed.

“And you’re not as knowledgeable about the ton as you claimed,” he retorted.

She turned away from him, and he sighed.

“I am sorry I cannot give you a better explanation than I already have, but you must believe that I only have your best interests at heart,” he offered in a soothing tone that cooled her anger. “You must not settle for any gentleman who is likely to gamble your dowry away—or, worse, resign you to a life of loneliness and grief you do not deserve.”

“I... I cannot just rely on your assistance to secure a match, Your Grace,” Selina told him, turning back to him, yet she was unable to look him in the eye.

She had begun to feel vulnerable, exposing her deepest fears to him.

“If I am to avoid marriage to a man much older than me who only seeks to use me as a broodmare, then I must be successful in this endeavor. I do not want to waste such an auspicious opportunity. I’m sure you understand.”

Richard nodded, the pity so obvious in his eyes that tears pooled in hers before she blinked them back. Now was not the time for a pity party, even though it was well deserved.

“I do understand, and that is why I will take it upon myself to teach you the necessary skills to convince a better man to marry you. Your skills are so desperately lacking.”

“What skills?” Selina asked, affronted.

His eyes glittered as a small smile that didn't spell good tidings crossed his face. She had seen that look on more than one occasion, and she was starting to resent it.

It seemed that he derived immense joy from scaring her with mischievous intentions.

Seeing as he didn't have many friends, she reasoned that he mostly used her for entertainment. After all, he didn't seem to have any hobbies.

“The good old art of flirtation,” he stated as though it was blindingly obvious.

“You're just being ridiculous now, Your Grace.” She laughed, unable to believe her ears. “Flirtation?”

“Yes,” he said with a nod. “It is one of the oldest tools women have used over the years to win the hearts of men they desire. It is rather powerful, but unfortunately, its effects wear off after a few months of conjugal bliss. Still, one cannot deny that it gets the job done.”

Surely he has to be jesting. Does he really view marriage through such a dark lens?

“I understand that you are trying to make me feel better about my situation by jesting, but I assure you I'm not so morose as to need it.”

He smiled and came to stand beside her, his eyes scanning the party going on around them. He adopted such a casual tone that one wouldn't suspect he was discussing a subject of such a scandalous nature.

“I see you still do not believe me.” He shrugged his shoulders, cutting a fine picture in his evening coat. “Look over there at Miss Pembley and Lord Salsbury. Note how he flushes and how her eyes are narrowed. Watch her body language and the way she uses her fan to speak of promises she should know nothing about.”

Selina watched and was amazed to see how Lord Salsbury appeared entranced by the fan, his eyes following its every movement.

She found herself growing warm with embarrassment at the impropriety Miss Pembley showed when she ran the edge of her fan along her collarbone, dipping it slightly lower, then all at once pulling it away, her smile turning innocent once her mother returned.

Her amazement grew when she saw Lord Salsbury pandering after her when her mother excused herself from the conversation. The trance might have been broken, but the spell had worked its magic. It was almost too unreal to believe that she had witnessed something so improper in the middle of the raging party, yet no one had spared them a second glance.

“You might want to close your mouth, dear. It is not very polite,” Richard said from behind her, amusement heavy in his voice.

Selina closed her mouth and turned to him, chagrined that she had been enthralled by Miss Pembley's skill. Still, she couldn't help but think Richard mad for thinking that she could ever hope to wield the skill as effectively. Even the thought of behaving so... crassly brought a hot flush to her cheeks.

What would Martha say if she saw her niece behaving so provocatively?

“I do not think this a particular skill I would like to learn, Your Grace. I must politely decline your offer,” Selina told him with a frown.

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“Why? You think it’s too brazen? Too desperate?”

That is putting it mildly.

She was reminded briefly of his words and how he had made her feel when he had put his hands on her and claimed her first kiss. She hadn’t needed any flirtation tactics then, and neither had she employed any with him for him to say the things he had.

If she were to employ such means, she wondered if he would pull her into his arms as he had before.

“No, you do not. You tempt me till I’m out of my mind with want. Perhaps you will understand better if you get burnt by the heated fantasies that have plagued me in recent days.”

Remembering how cold he had been towards her afterward was enough to make her angry with him again for being so...

“I don’t believe it suits my morals or my views on marriage,” she explained.

He laughed, slapping a hand on his thigh. “What do you think goes on in a marriage?” he asked incredulously. “Chaste kisses and walks in the gardens?”

“I... I am not unaware of what goes on in the marriage bed, Your Grace, but?—”

“You do not have any idea if you do not understand that desire is the greatest weapon

a woman has,” he interrupted. “Why do you think most men leave their marriage beds after producing heirs and spend longer days with their mistresses? Rather than shy away from sensuality, they embrace it.”

“But I do not intend to become a mistress,” she rebutted, wrinkling her nose at the example he had given.

“But surely you would like to keep your husband’s attention?”

She nodded, wondering where he was heading by buttressing his point so soundly.

“Men do not want a woman they feel they would have to educate on matters concerning the marriage bed,” he stated. “Contrary to what women believe, not every man desires a chaste bride.”

Selina covered her ears, deciding she had heard enough. It seemed as though he intended to scandalize her thoroughly or change her view on marriage.

“I believe we have engaged in this damning conversation long enough, Your Grace,” she told him. “I thank you for your concerns, but I believe I can do well without such education.”

“I know you will think about what I have said later tonight, and I expect that we will meet at this time tomorrow in the library,” he said stubbornly. “Come with an open mind.”

The library was fast becoming the place for their secret meetings, and soon, someone would catch on to the fact that they were usually alone. If they were discovered one day, she couldn’t for the life of her imagine an excuse she could give that would explain why she and the Duke were alone.

She turned away from him, giving him a look that she hoped conveyed her seriousness.

“I won’t be needing such an education, as I have said, Your Grace.” Then, with a curtsy, she added, “I wish you a good evening.”

Selina tossed and turned in bed, unable to sleep as her final conversation with the Duke echoed in her mind. She had witnessed the not-so-subtle flirtation Stephen and Elizabeth had engaged in at the breakfast table, which often led to hurried excuses and trips to their chambers.

She hoped she would find the same with whomever she married, but having to learn the skill before marriage had never crossed her mind.

After all, Elizabeth had never had to, yet Stephen had fallen in love with her almost at the very beginning.

So, why do I have to?

The idea haunted her.

She had none of Elizabeth’s quiet femininity and grace, which drew admiring eyes wherever she went, or her skill at wielding her husband’s affection.

Selina had always been described as sharp around the edges and lacking in feminine grace by all of her tutors, but she hadn’t thought it such a problem until the Duke pointed it out. She groaned into her pillow, kicking her legs furiously at the embarrassment.

Accepting his help would be no less embarrassing, but when weighed against how poorly she handled conversations with the opposite sex, she thought it a much better

option.

The door opened suddenly, startling her out of her thoughts. She sat up, wrapping the covers tighter around herself as she wondered if perhaps the Duke had snuck into her chambers. She frowned at the anticipation that had bubbled up inside her at the thought, remembering what had happened the last time they had been alone in his chambers.

Her cheeks burned hot as memories of that night flashed through her mind, leaving a familiar, liquid heat between her legs and the imprint of his hands on her body.

Did he perhaps want to repeat it?

“Have a good night, My Lady. I will see you at breakfast tomorrow,” a masculine voice said.

“Good night, My Lord.”

Diana’s giggle calmed her anxious heart even though disappointment welled up inside her. She pushed down the feeling and smiled inquisitively at her sister, who was startled to see her.

“Selina, I... I didn’t expect to find you awake,” Diana stuttered. “You retired early, and I... It’s not what you think. He just escorted me, and we were not unchaperoned... Do not think anything improper.”

Diana only rambled when she had been caught doing something she shouldn’t have, and it was a welcome pleasure to see how uncomfortable she was now. It wasn’t often that Selina got to see her sister’s perfect feathers ruffled, and now that the opportunity had presented itself, there was no way she would let it slide.

“I didn’t do any such thing, Diana, but now that you’ve pointed it out, I have no choice but to ask. Who was the gentleman who so kindly walked you to our chambers, unchaperoned, so late at night? Is he a new beau?”

“He is not a beau, and he is no one you need concern yourself with,” Diana answered, folding her arms. “If there’s anyone who should be answering that question, Selina, it is you. I have noticed that you and the Duke of Seymour have been spending time

together. Are you two courting?"

"No, we are not," Selina answered firmly. "We only talk because of his recent acquaintance with Stephen. It would be rude to ignore him."

"It doesn't look that way, Selina. I have seen him laugh with you several times, and from what I have observed, he looks at you even when you're apart. You look at him in the same way. Are you in love with him?"

The Duke looks at me?

A hot blush rose to her face at the thought that he had been watching her the same way she had been watching him. Did that mean he liked her the way she liked him?

Why, then, would he be helping her look for a spouse?

Realizing she hadn't yet answered Diana's question, she looked up to see the girl smiling widely.

"I am right, aren't I?" Diana squealed, jumping onto the bed. "I am so ecstatic for you, Sister. A duke! Aunt Martha will be so pleased, and you won't have to marry her friend!"

Selina didn't want to dampen her sister's excitement, but it had to be done, seeing as she had gotten such a strange thought in her mind.

"You're reading into things that aren't there, Diana," she told her, pushing down the grief that the words stirred. "There is nothing between the Duke and me. We have similar interests, and if he does laugh, it is because he enjoys my sense of humor."

"Sense of humor or not, Sister, the man never smiles, much less talks to anyone. He is

the same as Stephen—or, at least, Stephen before he married Elizabeth.” Diana wrinkled her nose.

It was not hard to see why the girl had hope. Selina had warned the Duke that their frequent interactions and his near snubbing of all other unmarried ladies would spark rumors, but the odious man didn’t seem to care.

“That he is, but we are not courting. I do not want the duties that come with being a duchess, and you know that, Sister. I detest the attention and unending conversations. It is just not for me.”

“But if the Duke were to propose, would not you accept?”

“I would not.”

Lies, her subconscious screamed.

Even as the words left her mouth, Selina knew them to be a severe untruth. Even though she hated to admit it, there was no one else, aside from her siblings and Elizabeth, with whom she had enjoyed conversation as much as she had with Richard.

“I am surprised because I thought I had accurately read the situation between you two. He is always by your side, and I was thoroughly surprised that you hadn’t chased him off with your sharp tongue or begged off the conversation.”

“How would you know, when you have disappeared over the last few days?” Selina said with a pointed look at her sister, who turned red and hid her face in her hair. “Are you keeping secrets now, Diana? Who is the gentleman that escorted you to your chambers? Unchaperoned might I add.”

Diana giggled and shook her head. "I can tell you're changing the subject to distract me, but I can answer your question," she said with a scolding look. "I might have made a new friend, but I cannot tell you just yet who he is."

"Oh?" Selina asked with a raised eyebrow. "And why is that?"

"Because there is nothing to it," Diana answered with a smile. "Besides, he has helped me escape the suitors that Aunt Martha has been foisting on me. That woman is relentless."

"If Mother were still here, I fear she would have been much the same."

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They giggled, then fell silent for a moment. There was no grief when they spoke of their mother, only a fondness of the memories they had gotten through recollections from Stephen and everyone else who had known her well enough.

“I trust you, Sister. I only worry for your reputation,” Diana added with a sigh. “If there really is nothing between you two, then you must limit the amount of time you spend in his company. Tongues are already wagging, and it will not be long before more people catch wind of it. You cannot afford such a scandal.”

“I know, dear sister, but I assure you there is nothing to worry about.” Selina squeezed her hand. “I will take your advice to heart and stay away from the Duke.”

“You should. He might be Stephen’s friend, but I doubt he would enjoy knowing that you two are spending so much time together.”

“You should get some sleep, Diana.” Selina smiled at her. “We have an early day tomorrow.”

“Alright,” Diana said, rising to stand in front of their mirror. “I am glad that my fears have no substance.”

If only you knew.

Selina would have to be incredibly careful when she met the Duke in the library. It would end terribly if anyone walked in on them unchaperoned, after all.

Her heart raced when she imagined him repeating what he had done before, and she

chided herself for thinking such terrible thoughts.

She should not be thinking about a man who was not her husband so improperly. She already feared that he would ruin the appetites only her husband was supposed to stir up in her with his subconscious seduction, and she wondered if she would feel the same for any other man.

She had been subconsciously searching to see if she would feel the same spark with any of the other gentlemen she had conversed with, but so far, aside from general feelings of disgust or bored acceptance, there had been no spark.

She would be careful not to get caught alone with him and not to drop her guard around the man who made her feel things she should not feel.

CHAPTER 12

“I thought you wanted us to continue the conversation later tonight?” she asked, frowning as he took her hand and led her along the garden path.

“The weather looked pleasant, and I thought it would be a waste to spend the day indoors.” He smiled.

He had come into the drawing room, where everyone had been recovering after the morning’s activities, and had requested her attention from her aunt, who had been all too willing to give it without even coming to chaperone them.

“I am sure my niece is safe with you, Your Grace.”

Selina hadn’t been able to ignore the knowing look in Diana’s eyes or the angry looks she got from the matrons and their daughters when she placed her hand in his.

“You didn’t have to cause such a scene in there,” Selina scolded. “I will have to answer another barrage of questions for which I am utterly unprepared.”

“Another?”

“My sister interrogated me thoroughly last night,” she said, shuddering. “I barely escaped it unscathed, and now your actions have ruined my efforts. What is the point of a secret pact if you choose to flaunt it? Do not tell me no one has approached you to inquire about our relationship?”

“They have,” he admitted sheepishly. “My mother, in particular.”

“I do not think that is a conversation you are keen to repeat,” Selina stated, reading his mood.

“No, I am not.” He nodded. “I will take better care in concealing our meetings, but we must take care to avoid a scandal we do not need.”

“Indeed. I would hate to imagine being at the mercy of the ton.”

He smiled and led them towards the maze. The Mulford’s really did have a beautiful estate, and the crispness of the air was most welcome.

“It is indeed too lovely a day to waste time indoors,” she admitted, running her fingers over a soft rose petal.

“I am glad you are receptive to the idea.” He looked visibly amused. “We shall begin our lecture.”

“Indeed.”

He straightened his shoulders as though he hadn't been walking ramrod straight before. Selina took the time to appreciate how well his clothes fitted him. He was dressed in a well-tailored dark coat, a burgundy velvet vest, and a crisp white linen shirt that gave him a distinguished air. She didn't permit herself to stare for too long at his linen-clad thighs.

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“So, where do we begin?” she asked, her eyes trailing back to his face.

There was an amused glint in his eyes, as though he had caught her staring, and she flushed, bowing her head.

“We begin by teaching you what men actually like in a woman.”

“I am curious to hear your opinions on this,” she said with a smile.

“Why? I thought you didn’t value my opinions.”

“I do not, but they amuse me.”

“You wound me, dear lady,” he joked, placing a hand on his heart, feigning hurt. “I am finally acquainted with your famous acid tongue.”

“Acid tongue?” she echoed incredulously.

“You are famed for your barbs and retorts among the gentlemen of the ton.” He smiled. “I see that hearing this surprises you as much as it did me because you seem so shy.”

“I can be confident, just not around certain men.”

He raised an eyebrow and leaned in closer, looking very mischievous. She tried to imagine him as a child, and it was not at all impossible. She saw a little boy with chubby cheeks and floppy chocolate locks making mischief with that amused glint in

his blue eyes.

“And what are the criteria for these ‘certain’ men?” he asked.

“They must be handsome,” she teased.

He grinned, shocking her.

He looked beautiful when he smiled, and the action made him appear much younger than the severe man he presented himself as. She was sure his face would haunt her dreams, just as his laugh had for the past few days.

“And...” he said, close enough to be entirely improper.

If anyone were to catch them, rumors would no doubt surround them till they were forced to marry. Knowing how scandals like that angered him, she knew there would be no happiness to be found in that marriage.

“Do you not find me handsome, Lady Selina?”

I do, she wanted to say.

“I would not deny that you are attractive, Your Grace, but you do not intimidate me,” she said instead.

He nodded again, rising to full height. “I am inclined to believe you, although my ego has suffered at your hands. But I will take the assessment in good stride.”

“I thank you, but we really must get back to the topic at hand so our prolonged absence isn’t noticed.”

He nodded. “Alright. I’ll begin by saying that men like a compliant, innocent woman, but they also like a woman who shows her interest in them. It is an ego thing, you see,” he explained.

“But just yesterday, you told me that they wanted a woman that they would not have to educate on matters concerning the marriage bed.”

“Are we on the marriage bed?” he asked pointedly.

Her cheeks turned red, and she looked around, hoping no one had overheard him.

“You confuse me, Your Grace,” she hissed. “And do you have to speak such crass words so loudly? Anyone could have heard you.”

“I will take care with my words then,” he conceded. “But you have to look beyond the surface meaning of my words and see the heart of them. Men want a woman who can strike the perfect balance. Shy, but not easily intimidated. Proper, but not a nun. Interested, but not uncouth. There’s a fine line between the two extremes. You just have to learn to toe it.”

Selina nodded, even though the entire concept seemed hopelessly lost on her.

“But how do I show interest without saying I am interested?” she asked, confused.

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“By smiling as though he is the most beautiful creature you’ve ever seen and looking him in the eye as he speaks,” he answered. “It shows that you are not shy and that you are paying attention to what he’s saying, even if it is utter nonsense.”

She shook her head, unable to help herself. “I find myself wondering why I happen to be the only person who hears the folly coming out of your mouth.”

“If everyone knew, then I would not be the revered Duke of Seymour now, would I?” he pointed out.

She withdrew her hand and folded her arms. “But you surely do not mean what you said.”

“Why do you presume so?”

“Because...” she trailed off as though it was obvious.

“Do elaborate.”

“You said men want more than a demure, submissive woman, yet they seem to prefer brazen women with nothing better to do than smile and look pretty and stare them in the eyes. I find the statements contradictory.”

“Yet, it is through the same contradiction that your mother got married and, by extension, almost every other woman in England.”

“It is unfathomable.”

“I assure you it is not,” he said stubbornly. “Do not judge what you haven’t tried.”

“I would not even know where to start.”

“Try looking me in the eye when you speak, for a start,” he suggested.

“I cannot.”

“Why?” he asked, curious. “I can play the part of a dashing suitor if it would make things easier for you.”

“That still doesn’t make things easier, Your Grace.”

“You have done this once before, so surely you can do it again?” he added, trying to encourage her.

“Yes, but it wasn’t on command. I just... did it.”

“Then you have to do it again,” he said with a smile. “Look at me, Selina. Do not hide your beautiful eyes from me.”

She knew he was only pretending with his words, yet they made her heart flutter. Was this how he spoke to Lottie Barnes when they had been courting?

She found herself jealous of the woman who had previously won his affection and had even gotten him to propose to her. Worse still, she was the daughter of her father’s rival, and she had treated her half-sister, Elizabeth, so poorly.

When Selina remembered how reserved Elizabeth had been when she came to live with them after her marriage to Stephen, she hated Lottie Barnes even more, and yet the Duke had decided to propose to her.

Perhaps he had terrible taste in women or was secretly as detestable as the Barnes family. After all, he had been a close friend of theirs before the hunting incident that could have claimed Stephen and Elizabeth's lives had Lord Dudley had his way.

"Would having a conversation make this easier?" he asked, oblivious to her inner turmoil. "Perhaps we could discuss archaeology or horticulture or whatever topics you find interesting. I must admit that my knowledge is rather subpar on those subjects, but I could try to keep up with you..."

She lifted her eyes to his and smiled brightly. He really was doing his best to help her, and it was admirable.

He wants to put on an act, doesn't he?

She smiled to herself. She would very well beat him at his own game.

"I doubt very much that you will be able to converse as well as me on such subjects, Your Grace," she stated with a mocking smile.

"Oh? Should we put that to the test?" he asked, not backing down from the challenge.

"A wager might make the challenge all the more tempting, Your Grace?"

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Her emphasis on the word had been deliberate, and she saw his eyes flick to her lips and then back to her face.

For a moment, she savored her victory, but all too suddenly, her lips went dry, and her tongue darted out automatically to moisten them. Clearly, that had been the wrong thing to do, as his eyes traced the movement, darkening as they did so.

Her breath caught in her chest, and she was unable to look away from his eyes as she remembered what had happened the last time they had darkened in such a way.

They had been blissfully alone then, and they were alone now, but they were likely to be caught at any time if someone chose to stray this far into the maze.

If not, maybe he would have pulled her into his arms the way her body was begging him to, and he would have ravished her now-stinging lips with his, and perhaps she would taste the punch on his tongue the way she had tasted the alcohol on his tongue that night.

Her body warmed as her heart pounded rapidly in her chest, sending hot blood to her most intimate regions. She felt her nipples stiffen beneath her bodice. The friction made her nearly frantic.

She wanted him to touch her again. To rid her of this incessant craving he had ignited in her since that night. She could tell he wanted her, too. She noticed the tension in his posture and how tightly his hands were clenched into fists at his sides.

If she touched him now, he would lose all restraint. She so desperately wanted to see

him come undone as he had before. To see him lose all sense of reason in such a dangerous place.

The thought thrilled her, and she took a step closer to him, watching his nostrils flare as his breathing became labored.

He was right that this kind of power was dangerous, and knowing now that she had such power over him delighted her. She wondered briefly if Lottie Barnes had had such power over him.

CHAPTER 13

“I see you do not require further instruction on this aspect,” he said suddenly, breaking the tension.

It was as though someone had sliced a hot knife through butter. The feeling was thoroughly unpleasant and had him picking at his collar to ease the irritation crawling up his skin.

Her face reflected what he felt, but he tamped it down, remembering how she had almost made him forget where they were.

He had awakened her feminine power, and now that she was aware of it, it would not be safe for him to be around her as often, especially if they were alone.

“Excuse me?” she asked, blinking.

“You have exceeded my expectations so quickly,” Richard said with a smile. “I guess the student has become a master.”

Yet, she watched him with a confused look that had him smiling. He knew she hadn't

yet recovered from the abrupt way he stifled the desire that had been flaring between them.

He hadn't recovered either, but if he hadn't put a stop to it, he was sure he would have taken her right there and then, and from what he had seen, the damned woman would not have minded at all.

"That was a jest," he told her. "You are supposed to laugh even if the joke isn't funny."

"Why?"

"Our egos are such fragile things that they need constant stroking to sustain them," he explained.

"Oh!" she answered, scrunching up her nose before attempting to laugh. "Are they truly that small that they require constant stroking? Couldn't you find fulfillment in yourselves?"

He tried to ignore the desire that shot through him when her perfect lips formed the word 'stroking.' His mind was flooded with images of a different kind of 'stroking' involving her small hands and his hardening member.

He cleared his throat, pushing the images out of his mind. He really should not be thinking about her in such a way.

"I will say something again, and I expect you to laugh when I do," he instructed.

She nodded and turned serious, a frown on her face.

She looked like a petulant child. He wondered if that was how she looked as a child

when she was at her lessons. He imagined her small face and round green eyes and smiled. She must have been a very pretty child.

“I still do not think this is a venture I should undertake,” she said.

“Why not? Every other woman does it.”

“I am not every other woman.”

“And that’s why you are still unmarried.”

She glared at him.

“That was a jest, and you were supposed to laugh.”

Her laugh was forced and sounded nothing like before. The look on her face was so odd that he found himself unable to contain his laughter. She frowned, which only made him laugh harder.

“What exactly is so funny about this situation?” she asked, looking offended.

“You had such a strange expression on your face.” He laughed again, unable to help himself. “I hadn’t expected to see it.”

“I am glad you find my discomfort amusing,” she stated with a frown and folded her arms.

“I apologize for laughing.”

“Your words and your expression contradict each other,” she pointed out.

“I truly do mean what I say. It is just hard to quell my mirth when you are so upset.” He laughed again. “You should learn to laugh, Lady Selina,” he said with a smile. “People are not always kind, but you need to learn to take their insults in your stride

and return them politely with a pretty smile.”

“I do laugh, but not at people.” She pouted. “And I do know how to take insults in my stride.”

“Do you think I’m laughing at you?” he asked, turning to her.

“Aren’t you?” she asked back. “I find it impossible to tell whether you’re not, since we’re the only ones here.”

“You have an odd sense of humor.”

“And you can be infuriating.”

He couldn’t help the smile that threatened to split his face. He hadn’t smiled as she had made him do with anyone for so long, and the thought made him smile even more.

Even though Selina was lacking in many ways, she had enough charms to win any man’s heart if he was patient enough to see them.

The thought of another man with her made him angry, his blood simmering, but he buried the feeling deep down in the pit where it belonged.

Selina watched him laugh, unable to look away. This wasn’t the first time she had seen him smile, but seeing it again made her heart flutter. He laughed with everything in him, not caring to maintain any poise, and she was thrilled that she had been the cause.

She liked the look he usually wore when he was holding court with his admirers. That bored look that made them scamper away as their pride was wounded. She also liked

seeing that expression soften when he approached her.

She liked every one of his expressions, but there was one in particular that she much preferred—that proud look on his face when she did something he had encouraged her to do. That look made her chest swell with pride and made her want to please him more just to see it again.

“I like that look on your face,” she muttered, then clapped a hand over her mouth.

He turned to her, his eyes dark, but he smiled nonetheless.

“What look?” he asked, placing a finger under her chin to bring her eyes up to his. “I taught you to look a man in the eyes when you speak to him.”

“I thought it was only for men in whom I have interest?” she asked with a smirk, even though his nearness left her breathless.

He was so close to her now that she was sure she would die if he walked away without kissing her.

He smirked and stepped even closer. So close that she could feel his breath on her lips.

“You really do learn quickly,” he said, before capturing her lips in a kiss that she felt all the way down to her toes.

She really did like that proud look on him.

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He pulled her closer to him, deepening their kiss, and she couldn't help the sound that escaped her lips, which he swallowed. He made sounds of his own when she wrapped her arms around his shoulders, burying her fingers in the hair at the nape of his neck like she had wanted to for so long.

His hair was as soft and silky as she had imagined. She couldn't help but tug at it, which he seemed to like, as he groaned into her mouth, his hands roaming over her body.

She itched to be rid of her clothes, as they felt hot, oppressive, and restricting all at once. He seemed to feel the same as his hands kept moving all over her body, one moving to cup her breast through her dress and the other moving to cup her buttocks.

She laughed, knowing that her aunt would scold her for wrinkling her dress and that she would have to make an excuse for why she returned looking so disheveled.

“What exactly about this do you find funny?” the Duke asked between kisses.

The frown on his face made her giggle again.

“I cannot help but worry about the scolding I'll receive when we return with my dress rumped.”

She gasped when his hands slipped under her skirts and ran along her thighs.

“Your Grace,” she whispered when he palmed her through her undergarments.

“You really do know how to bruise a man’s ego, don’t you, dear lady?” he asked, smirking as he pushed her against a stone wall.

The cold seeped into her bones, but she wasn’t worried she would catch a chill when his touch set her body on fire.

He kissed his way down her neck, nipping and easing the sting of his bites with his tongue, before stopping at the junction between her neck and shoulders that rendered her weak.

She ran her hands over his shoulders and up, wanting to touch him and feel him everywhere at once, but his damned clothes didn’t give her any access. He felt firm everywhere and much broader than her. The size difference between them should have scared her, but it only made her trust him more.

“I will give you something better to worry about, dear lady,” he said, going down on his knees and lifting her dress. “I have wanted to do this for so long, but I won’t have you bringing all of England to interrupt my fun. Put a hand over your mouth, and do try to stay quiet.”

He buried his head under her skirts before she could stop him.

“What are you—Oh God!” she nearly screamed, clapping a hand over her mouth.

Had he just licked her?

“Your Grace, I do not think—Oh!”

“I told you to stay quiet, Lady Selina.”

She whimpered as he licked her with one long stroke, and all too quickly, her knees

struggled to support her weight as he wreaked havoc on her. If his hands hadn't been supporting her, she was sure she would have fallen already.

He hadn't even thought to ease her into it, not even sparing her a moment to feel vulnerable. She didn't know whether to find his lack of concern worrying or attractive. Her body thought the latter as she felt a surge of liquid heat flood her sex and heard him groan as he tasted her.

His satisfaction with her had her squirming, her other hand moving to pull his head even closer to her. She felt him smile against her, and he resumed his feasting—an accurate word, considering the way he groaned his pleasure as he licked her.

She should have felt embarrassed because he saw her most private part, which she'd been taught to protect, but he didn't give her room to. He made her feel powerful. She had brought a duke to his knees, after all, and was pleasuring him if the sounds he made and the way he gripped her were anything to go by.

She felt him nip a pulsating part of her sex, and a bolt of desire shot through her, almost knocking her off her feet. It was getting hard not to make a sound, but the fear of him stopping had her firmly keeping her mouth shut.

She felt as though she would die if he left her now. She had felt the same irritation when he had ended their flirtation so abruptly, and that sick, oily feeling was not an experience she ever wanted to repeat.

She felt him nip her sex again, but this time, she placed a hand on his shoulder for support, leaning back against the wall so she didn't fall over. She did not want them to end up on the ground in such an unflattering mess. She didn't think she would live past the embarrassment.

She felt a finger slide into her, and then another, and soon, she was riding his fingers

as she discovered how skilled they were.

How many other women had he pleased this way to get so proficient at what he did?

The surge of jealousy had her holding his head firmly, almost painfully, as if to punish him for experiencing this with other women, not caring that it was because of such experience that he was as skilled as he was.

His fingers moved at a quicker pace. She felt an unfamiliar tension pool low in her belly, and soon, she had no control over her hips as she pulsed and writhed until everything exploded in a burst of color.

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Her body felt loose and languid, and all she wanted to do was get rid of her clothes and curl up in bed. Exhaustion wrecked her, but she also felt... blissful.

Was this what the books had described as being satiated?

Now that he had helped her see why she felt all those strange things around him, she could finally recognize the erraticbeating of her heart and the sudden dryness of her mouth as desire.

He took his time kissing down her thigh and back up before emerging from beneath her skirts with that same proud look on his face. She couldn't help but return his smile, even though it came weakly through tired eyes.

He rose to his feet, holding her while she regained her balance. His eyes were bright even though his expression looked haunted. She wondered what he was thinking, but she didn't want to pry.

“I think I might need to...”

Before she could finish, she heard voices approaching from the distance and quickly attempted to fix her dress and her hair.

“Do I look composed?” she asked, looking up at him.

He had gone silent and was not looking at her. She frowned, wondering why, but could not press the matter further, as they had to resume their ‘casual’ walk around the garden. They spotted some gentlemen in the distance and strolled at a leisurely

pace.

“Good day, Your Grace,” one of the men greeted. “Lady Selina.”

“Good day, Lord Frederick,” Richard responded.

“Good day,” Selina greeted with a smile. “It is a lovely day, isn’t it?”

“Indeed.” Lord Frederick smiled. “I see you are enjoying it as well.”

“Indeed,” the Duke answered.

“Might I interest you in some cigars later, Your Grace?” the other man, Lord Grainsbury, asked. “I have a new brand from Italy.”

“Alright. I shall join you after dinner.”

Lord Grainsbury preened and squared his shoulders, pleased that he had secured an appointment with the Duke.

Selina wondered if it was always like this with him—men vying for his attention. She watched him smile politely at them and couldn’t help but smile at how dignified he looked, unlike how he usually was with her.

She wondered if they knew that the ‘proper’ Duke liked to accost women in gardens or ‘help’ the said women find husbands.

She laughed to herself, drawing their attention.

“I am sorry, gentlemen,” she offered. “I just remembered something that amused me.”

“Do share it with us, My Lady,” Lord Grainsbury urged.

“Oh, it’s not something you should bother yourself with.” She smiled. “I should return to the house now. My aunt must be worried by my prolonged absence.”

“It will be a shame to have you go, Lady Selina,” Lord Frederick said, not looking in the least bit bothered.

She was sure his only concern was his conversation with the Duke, and if she chose to leave, he would be inclined to escort her.

“We can continue our discussion at dinner, Lord Frederick.” She smiled. “I find your conversation about your new gun riveting.”

The men coughed and stood straighter, feeling chided. They had excluded her from the conversation quite rudely, and now they at least had the decency to feel guilty for their mistake.

“I shall escort the lady to the house,” the Duke said to the men. “I did beg her company, and as such, I must see her safely returned.”

“We shall resume our conversation after dinner then,” Lord Grainsbury said.

The men bowed before they left.

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Selina couldn't contain her laughter, even though the Duke didn't share her amusement.

"I am sorry to have dragged you away from your delightful conversation," she joked. "I am sure you would much rather be there than escort me back to the house."

He snorted, taking her arm. "Your wit hasn't dulled just yet," he said with a small smile.

"Why should it?" she asked. "I haven't had any life-changing incidents."

He snorted again and kept silent for the rest of their walk back to the house. She patted her hair and tugged at her dress when they neared the door, refraining from grimacing when they stepped into the drawing room.

"Why do you look so tired, dear?" Martha asked as soon as they stepped inside.

Two pairs of eyes swiveled to them but then quickly turned away. She knew their conversation would be anything but private, and she had to make a good excuse, or tongues would start wagging.

"The Duke exercised me more than I expected," she said with a small smile. "He challenged me to a race with a very nice wager, and you know I can't resist such a challenge."

Laughter erupted around the room, proving that they were listening.

“Your Grace, you shouldn’t have,” her aunt scolded playfully. “My niece looks a fright. Go to your room at once, Selina.”

“And what was the wager?” Diana asked with a pointed smirk.

“That is between me and the Duke, and I have yet to decide,” Selina answered with a smile. “I will see you at dinner. Thank you for a wonderful afternoon, Your Grace.”

She curtsied and winked at the Duke, who still had a stoic expression on his face.

A frown crossed her face as she wondered whether he was already regretting what had happened between them. She pushed the thought out of her mind and returned to her chambers, deciding that they would discuss it after she had a much-needed nap.

CHAPTER 14

“The Duke exercised me more than I expected. He challenged me to a race with a very nice wager, and you know I can’t resist such a challenge.”

The lie had come so easily to her that it had surprised Richard because he had yet to recover from what had happened between them. He hadn’t meant to go that far with her, yet as he tasted her lips, he knew he wanted more, and she had been too willing a participant, touching him everywhere he liked to be touched.

He turned to leave the drawing room to brood privately but was stopped by an approaching group of ladies.

“Your Grace,” one of them bravely said. “May we interest you in a game of cards, perchance?”

“I have to decline,” he answered, bowing respectfully. “I need to rest from my stroll.”

“But...”

He walked away before the woman could start whining, retreating to the safety of his chambers. He slammed the door shut with a little more force than he intended, locking it to ensure that no one disturbed him.

“Damn!” he muttered, running a hand through his hair.

He should not have gone that far with Selina. And yet he had, all because he couldn't resist tasting her full, pouty lips, which had begged for his attention since he had first noticed them.

Damn.

She had been smiling when she had retreated to her chambers. He was sure she was already imagining a happily ever after for them, and if he were to refuse, she could very well claim that he had ruined her, and he would be forced into marriage.

It was not as though he was blind to the fact that she harbored feelings for him that she may not be aware of. But now that he had touched her the way he had, he had no doubt reinforced them.

He truly hadn't meant to go as far as he had, he told himself, trying to rationalize his actions. But her body had been begging for his touch, and she had been more than willing, or else she would have pushed him off her.

He had been teaching her to seduce other men, but he had fallen for her seduction himself, untrained though she was. He had noticed she was a passionate woman from the first time he had seen her in her brother's home, but he hadn't expected her to respond as well as she had or taste as sweet as she did.

God.

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She tasted heavenly. Sweeter than honey. Sweeter than even the punch they had served throughout the party. He wanted to flip up her skirts and taste her again when she had said those damned words with such a careless smile.

He wanted to see her come undone again, this time fully splayed out beneath him so he could see her and feast on her unhindered. He wished he could bury himself deep in her silken heat until he could fully rid himself of the burning desire he felt for her, but he could do none of those things. Not if he didn't want to be tied to her.

But marriage to her didn't seem as unappealing as it had previously, especially if he would have the pleasure of tasting her every night and kissing his way down her delectable body.

He felt the stirrings of desire in his blood again as his engorged member begged for the relief it would be sure to get if he begged off the party and returned to town to meet his mistress. The entire ordeal didn't appeal to him, but it was a much better option than sitting there and stewing in desire.

He dressed quickly, headed to the stables, and mounted his horse.

"Where are you off to?" Eli asked, folding his arms.

"I am heading to town," Richard answered. He ran a hand down his stallion's flank to calm the anxious animal, who was reflecting his burning need to escape.

"May I ask why?"

Eli did not look happy, but Richard couldn't care less. If he didn't rid himself of this tension, he would die from need or do something as stupid as seeking out Selina to douse the flames she had ignited inside him.

"I have an appointment I need to keep," he answered, not meeting his friend's eyes.

"And should I be expecting you to return?"

Richard said nothing, but that should have been answer enough.

"I will assume that whatever has you leaving as if the very devil is on your trail is important enough that you are willing to risk our friendship," Eli said with a frown.

"But I expect you to be back tomorrow."

"Mulford—"

"I will not listen to your excuses, Seymour," Eli snapped. "I shall expect you tomorrow or never at all."

He walked away without a backward glance, causing Richard to sigh.

Richard arrived later than expected, heading straight to the theatre, and was ushered quickly into his private box with no questions asked, though he earned a few glances for his disheveled appearance.

He watched Mariella sing and charm the audience, trying to admire the fullness of her bust and the elegant curves of her figure, which had first drawn him to her and made him consider her as a mistress—as well as the fact that she had no prior engagements with anyone else.

He remembered how their affair had started and that she had been smart, well-read,

and had an understanding of the nature of their relationship. She had also been flexible and had taught him things about his body that had their encounters ending on a very satisfying note for him.

She didn't come cheap, but he liked to see her turn down other men who waited outside her chambers for the opportunity to woo her with paltry gifts. He also enjoyed watching her put others—who attempted to assault her when she chose to leave the theatre for her house in town—in their place with a tiny blade in their thighs or wherever she pleased.

Thinking about her self-sufficiency and fiery spirit usually heated his blood, but now there was only a barely simmering appreciation for her craft.

She turned to his box, sending a discreet signal—which she usually did when she wanted to see him—and then turned back to conclude her performance.

Richard waited for her admirers to retreat in defeat and walked into her chambers without knocking. She was in a deliberate state of undress, with only her garters and stockings in place. She didn't like to waste time, and he appreciated the gesture immensely.

“It is a pleasure to see you today, Your Grace,” she said with a smile, leaning over her dressing table to reapply her rouge, giving him a full view of her weeping sex.

Still, the sight hadn't stirred lust in his blood the way Selina had. He only watched her, his hands unwilling to touch her. She didn't take his lack of enthusiasm to heart and continued her practiced seduction, turning to face him and sitting on the dresser.

“Will you only be watching today, Your Grace?” she asked, letting her hands run down her neck to cup her very generous breasts and then lower in a way that usually gave him satisfaction. “That would be a shame because I have missed you.”

He stepped closer before brushing her red hair aside and burying his nose in her neck, breathing in her scent. But her heady, spicy perfume did nothing to excite him the way Selina's soft floral scent did.

Damn.

He wasn't supposed to still be thinking about Selina, with this beautiful, naked woman before him. Other men would kill to be in his place, but here he was, and he was barely hard for her.

"Is something wrong, Your Grace?" Mariella asked, looking worried for the first time. "Do I no longer please you?"

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“I apologize for my lack of enthusiasm, Mariella,” he said, stepping away from her. “I am just not in the mood tonight.”

“But you came in such a rush.”

It was a statement, but there was also a question in it.

She put on a robe and headed to her side table to pour him a drink.

“You look like you could use a strong drink,” she said with a smile, extending the cup towards him, which he accepted. “Now, tell me, who has captured your attention?”

“Excuse me?”

“You have a floral scent on you.” She smiled. “And you look as though you are haunted by a ghost. It is quite obvious that you fear the affections of the woman who has branded you with her scent.”

“I have been in the company of many women all day,” he lied, not meeting her eyes. “It is almost inevitable that their scents would have clung to me.”

“But not like this.” She smiled knowingly. “This isn’t many scents. This is one scent. I am curious because you’re lying to me. There are no secrets between friends.”

Richard liked that she wasn’t moved to jealousy like other women would have been, but he shook his head, not wanting to think of Selina as anything other than an acquaintance.

“There is no such thing.”

“Yet, you could not touch me,” Mariella said, eyeing him over her cup with a smile.

“I was not in the mood for that. I only came to see how you were doing.”

“You rode all the way from the country to inquire about my well-being?” She laughed. “Are you perhaps in love with me, Your Grace?”

He rolled his eyes at her. “I can never keep much from you, can I?” he asked with an exasperated sigh.

“You can never keep anything from me,” she corrected. “Now, tell me. Which female has got you as confused as you are? I need to meet her.”

Richard raised an eyebrow and tried to imagine Selina and Mariella meeting. They were such polar opposites that he knew they would not get along, yet it might surprise him if they would. What would they bond over? Knowing how well he could use his tongue to bring a woman pleasure?

That didn't seem like a good topic of conversation.

“There is no female except my mother who vexes me,” he answered, sliding into one of the plush cushions in her room.

She chuckled, sliding into his lap. He leaned back in his seat and wrapped a hand around her waist, splaying his fingers over her hip.

“That is old news.”

“It is,” he affirmed. “I only needed a distraction, which you have provided.”

“Hmm.” She smiled.

“Will you be returning home with me tonight, then?” she asked boldly, sliding out of his lap. “My desire has been stoked, yet you refuse to put out the flames.”

“I’m afraid I will have to decline.” He smiled, rising to take his leave.

“You’re sure I cannot tempt you, Your Grace?” she asked, pulling her robe down one shoulder.

“You tempt me enough.”

She smiled and shrugged the garment back into place. “I suspect this will be the last time we see each other,” she stated. “In this way, I mean.”

He sighed, nodding. “It has to be. I might have to wed soon, if I choose to honour the desire of my predecessors and I do not encourage adultery.”

“Even if your wife cannot keep your bed sufficiently warm?” she teased.

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“Even then.”

“You are an honorable man, Your Grace.”

“And you have been a pleasing companion,” he told her, turning to the door. “I wish you happiness.”

She scoffed.

“Do you not want a home of your own?” he asked, turning back to her, his hand still on the doorknob.

She stilled, her hands clenching into tight fists.

He knew her father had abused her mother and then sold her as a child to pay off his debts to a man who had been no kinder to her. When she had matured and he noticed her beauty and her talent for singing, he sold her again to the owner of the theatre.

Richard had bought her contract and freed her the moment he had approached her. He helped her find her siblings. She had been grateful and showed him her appreciation with a night of pleasure that had kept him abed for two days but had never sought more than what she was given.

“I do not think I do,” she answered firmly. “I know I will not be young forever, but if I can save enough to take care of my siblings and myself before I am discarded for a younger beauty, then I will be content.”

He gave her an understanding smile.

“I wish you success in your endeavors,” he told her.

“And I hope you’ll tell your lady how you truly feel.”

He scoffed, before leaving without another word. He headed to his townhouse, startling his staff due to his unexpected arrival. The night hadn’t gone as he had hoped, and still, he worried that he had started an all too dangerous game with Selina.

He would help her, as he had promised, to secure a match that would make her happy, and after that, he would ensure that he maintained a healthy distance from her even if it hurt him.

But until then, he would permit himself to enjoy the memory of her sweet taste on his tongue and the feel of her perfect thighs in his hands.

CHAPTER 15

Midnight resolutions always felt possible and invigorating until the day broke and one was faced with the situation in question and the reality that some things were easier said than done. Richard quickly realized that. The burning sensation in his chest was rapidly spreading until he was sure that he would eventually burst into flames.

That feeling, he suspected, had something to do with Selina and how beautiful, irresistible, and unattainable she looked in the daylight, dressed in a golden day dress that accentuated her olive skin. That, in combination with her dark locks, made her look like a ball of bright light. A light that was threatening to burn him to cinders.

She was seated on a pony, the filly dancing close to the bored-looking stallion owned

by Lord Sanderson. The stallion ignored the eager, friendly filly while his rider smiled adoringly at Selina as they conversed.

The dratted man must have said something funny because she threw her head back and laughed, exposing the smooth, glowing skin of her neck. Skin that he had tasted, licked, and savored only yesterday while she writhed in his arms. He knew how she smelled there, her floral perfume potent, warmed by the heat of her body.

Her scent was addictive. Even now, he could swear that he smelled it, even though her horse was far away from his.

As he watched, Sanderson bent his head to whisper something in her ear, and the fire within him raged so strongly that he was surprised there were no singe marks on his body.

Sanderson stood so close to her that Richard was sure the man could smell her scent. Did she not know better than to allow men so close to her? But perhaps Sanderson's dark, handsome looks were enough for her to overlook some parts of her etiquette lessons.

Richard was tempted to ride over there and remind them to focus on their trail and ride instead of providing fodder for the tireless gossip mill that powered most of the ton's conversations.

The only thing that kept him sitting firmly on his restive stallion, Specter, was the fact that he had promised to find her a suitor, and Sanderson, despite his faults, was an eligible one, free from scandals as far as he knew.

He would make a fine husband for any lady he decided to marry, even though Richard was having a difficult time accepting the image of the two of them exchanging vows at the altar.

He was also struggling with imagining the dratted man being granted leave to touch her as he pleased. To sip from her sweet mouth and learn the curves of her body with his fingers. To fall asleep while inhaling her sweet scent. The thought added a dull ache to the burning sensation in his chest until he was positive he was coming down with some mysterious illness.

Shaking his head to rid himself of the torturous thought, he pulled at the reins, guiding Specter to a less populated part of the trail and allowing him to gallop freely.

The stallion seemed happy to be allowed this freedom after being cooped up inside the stables for several days. However, several minutes of galloping brought Richard no peace. Even as he panted for breath, his mind was insistent on bombarding him with images of Selina until he was positive she was engraved under his eyelids.

When it seemed that the physical exertion would not bring calm to his chaotic mind, he decided it was time he returned to the house to avoid harming himself and his prized stallion due to his distracted thoughts.

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Pulling on his reins, he guided his horse around to return. At first, the stallion resisted, throwing its magnificent head to show its preference to remain out in the wild.

“It’s alright. Good boy,” Richard whispered in his ear, leaning forward in the saddle. “Another time,” he said, patting the horse’s neck to calm it before turning back the way they came.

When he returned to the house, he found that most of the men had left. They were probably somewhere on the large estate grounds, displaying their riding skills.

The tables that were shaded by huge umbrellas were occupied mostly by matrons, who sat in groups, deep in conversation that he suspected had to do with whatever riveting stories the gossip mill had spun in recent days.

The only space available was at a lone table, a bit away from the others and, rather typically, occupied by his mother. Her presence there was surprising because she despised the sunlight, blaming it for every blemish on her skin and totally ignoring the greater effect of age and time on her beauty.

While it was surprising that she was there, it was no surprise that she sat alone. Scandal hounded her like a ghost. She was also well-known for her vanity and selfishness, which made her unable to make connections with other ladies in the ton. She looked down on them and felt that any comment they made was somehow a reflection of their jealousy.

His mother was a vain mess, albeit a beautiful one. He might prefer to avoid

her—going into the house so as not to interact with her—but he needed fresh air. No matter how much he disliked her, he would not snub her in public. It would be the easiest way to stoke the fire of the same scandal he was trying to prevent.

Marching with no little annoyance, he took a seat at her table, then proceeded to loosen his cravat and remove his cufflinks, which he slipped into the pockets of his trousers so that he could fold the sleeves back over his forearms.

“It would not kill you, you know, to bid your mother good morning,” Johanna sniffed.

“I saw no need to repeat myself, since we exchanged pleasantries earlier this morning,” Richard said coldly, examining his boots and trying to determine if he needed to return indoors to clean them.

“Yes, that might be true,” she said in a sulking tone that made his annoyance burn hotter. “Though it would not kill you to at least acknowledge me when you sit beside me.”

“I did not sit here because I wanted to keep you company,” he returned hotly. “This was the only available spot.”

“Why are you so defensive, Seymour? It would not kill you to enjoy a private moment with your mother.”

“And what would we discuss?” he asked, meeting the familiar indigo eyes that had stared down impassively at him when he’d struggled. They were filled with false cheer now. A feverish gleam that made him feel slightly sick. “I doubt you are proficient in the topics I wish to discuss. Since I do not wish to discuss the latest fashions and balls, I will skip any conversation you have in mind.”

His mother's vanity meant that she had an unhealthy obsession with material things. He had gotten his eye for fashion from her, and while he should be grateful to her for giving him the means to help Selina, he could not shake the resentment that came from knowing that she valued those fabrics more than she valued him.

Now, he watched with sardonic amusement as her hopeful smile dissolved into the sulky look she had used on many men in her heyday. Unfortunately, it did not quite suit her now. Instead of eliciting his pity, it made him feel something akin to disgust. He immediately turned his back to her, effectively ignoring her.

"What is it between you and the Wilkins girl?" she prodded, apparently not content to sit in silence. "You seem quite attached to her."

"Not that is any concern of yours, but she is the sister of a friend, and I am just looking out for her to make sure she has an uneventful Season," he said blandly.

The lie made his stomach churn, but he would rather die than give his mother any information she could use against him the next time she decided to manipulate him or the next time she requested money to fund her many addictions—the most current one being rum.

"You do realize that for a man who claims to despise scandal, you are actively courting one?" she warned.

"Pray tell, what do you mean by that?" he said, shifting in his seat so that his full attention was on her face.

"You and I know very well that her reputation is less than impeccable," Johanna said in that condescending tone that never ceased to irritate him. "She is a long-term spinster known for a sharp tongue that could cut grown men into ribbons. That is aside from the fact that she is a member of the bitter Wilkins family, who remain

enemies of the Barnes family. It took her elder brother marrying their enemy's daughter to secure a truce. Even that was broken when her brother came for revenge. Her family reeks of scandal. Apart from that, you spend so much time with her, and you watch her hungrily enough to cause a scandal.”

His anger roared like a furnace before simmering as he fought for control. When he opened his mouth, his words came out in a cold tone that was totally at odds with the fire that blazed in his chest.

“At least their scandal was a result of their determination to fight for their dignity. You, on the other hand, have been courting scandal for most of your life for the worst reasons. You just want to feed your vanity and selfish heart with no care of who you destroy in the process.”

He watched pain bloom in her indigo eyes, and a small part of him that still recognized her as his mother felt guilty. She might be the one whose name graced the scandal sheets often, but he suspected that his father might not have been completely innocent of her transformation from the young, cheerful lady she had once been into the bitter, vain person she now was.

His childhood was made up of bits and pieces of memories of the many times he had seen either his mother or father's lovers sneak in and out of their estate.

His mother's nursemaid had done her best to protect him. Whenever they had a confrontation, she took him into the nursery and sang to him in a loud voice, doing her best to drown out the sounds of breaking ceramics.

Sometimes, she told him stories and put him to sleep while keeping a smile on her face. She had played the role of his mother far better than Johanna had, and he was forever grateful to her, so much so that he kept in touch with her even when he left England for those long years.

She was probably the only reason why he had grown into a well-disciplined man. She had taken up his education when his parents forgot, reminding his father to provide the money needed to pay his tutors. She had been the angel that had been sent to protect him from the hell that was his childhood home.

That was the reason he could not forgive his parents. They had let their youthful exuberance push them into something they had regretted soundly once the appeal wore off and weren't bothered in the least bit to handle to responsibility they had earned themselves.

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His thoughts were interrupted by the sudden noise around him as the early morning riders returned, the sound of neighing horses and chattering voices breaking the relative quiet in front of the house.

His eyes were immediately drawn to a particular couple as they guided their horses towards the stables. A stable hand came to meet them halfway, offering to lead their horses to the stables.

Richard watched as Sanderson jumped down with athletic ease, obviously meant to impress Selina. The man tossed the reins to the stable hand before moving towards Selina. He raised his arms when he stood beside her filly and wrapped them around her waist to help her down. His hands lingered far too long on her waist even though she now stood on her own two feet.

The flirtatious smile she gave him as she thanked him roused the banked fire in Richard's chest. He wanted so badly to spring up from his seat, rush over to where the couple stood, and slap the satisfied smirk off Sanderson's face.

The impulsive thought stopped him short. Slowly, he realized that the emotion that had been riding him whenever he saw Selina with Sanderson was none other than jealousy.

It had felt foreign, as he had never felt this way before, even when his former paramours decided to move on. He had always been coolheaded and pragmatic, wishing them the best in their future endeavors. But with Selina, it felt different. Just the sight of another man's hand on her waist drove him close to insanity, and not for the first time, he wondered how he would survive when she inevitably married

another man.

Selina was having a great time.

Peter Wilford, the Earl of Sanderson, seemed to have taken a liking to her, slowing his horse down and striking up a conversation with her. The man was witty, mischievous, and intelligent.

In him, she saw a male version of herself. Their conversation flowed, jumping from topic to topic with the seamless ease of a well-choreographed dance.

They talked about horses. She had admired his stallion, and he had informed her that Thanos, his prized horse, was a thoroughbred that participated in races. Selina had been thoroughly impressed, and from there, their conversation moved to breeds of horses, before finding its way to horticulture, then politics and Society in general.

Evidently, Peter was an excellent conversationalist, and several times during their exchange, she wished there were more men like him in the ton. Perhaps she might have enjoyed attending social events, and she might have even been married by now. It was unfortunate that most noblemen were empty-headed idiots who were so confident in their self-importance that they did not see any need for improvement.

While she had thoroughly enjoyed her conversation with Peter, she was acutely aware of Richard's hot gaze on her, so much so that she half expected to find burn marks on the exposed skin of her neck. It was hot and not a little discomfiting.

His gaze brought to mind dark corners and the naughty things he did with his mouth and fingers. She was so distracted that it was a miracle she had managed to keep the conversation going, but Peter had been speaking so passionately about his horse that he had not noticed the non-committal sounds she made.

She knew when Richard left because she could no longer feel the heat of his gaze. When her eyes searched for him, she found him galloping down the trail like a man possessed. She immediately felt alone, the atmosphere turning empty.

For the rest of her conversation with Peter, she offered weak smiles while her mind remained preoccupied, wondering why Richard had left so dramatically.

In a little over thirty minutes, she begged Peter to return, stating that she needed to use the ladies' retiring room. That excuse was not necessarily true, but she honestly feared that the corners of her lips would tear if she smiled any longer. She realized that she was rapidly growing an attachment to Richard that prevented her from enjoying social events without his brooding presence nearby.

Peter was the perfect gentleman throughout, guiding her horse gently as they returned while asking about her well-being from time to time. The man was a sweet angel. If she could feel for him a bit of the attraction she felt for Richard, all would be well, and he might just become a good marriage candidate.

When he helped her dismount her horse, she admired his athletic grace while she felt that burning sensation on the back of her neck. Richard was watching, and somehow, she did not think he was pleased.

Focusing on Peter, she thanked him for his help.

“I had an amazing time with you, My Lord. Thanks for the company. I look forward to spending time with you on another occasion.”

“I should be the one thanking you, My Lady,” he said, lifting her hand to place a kiss on it. “You are not only beautiful but also intelligent in a way that is quite rare in polite society. You make exquisite company. Please allow me to take you on a drive sometime soon. I truly enjoyed your company.”

“Of course, My Lord,” she replied with a smile “Perhaps I might get to see Thanos again.”

“I am sure he would love that,” he said, chuckling. “I think he would love it more if you bring your filly along as well. I believe he has developed a liking for her,” he added in a mischievous whisper, leaning forward such that a dark lock fell over his eye.

Not for the first time, Selina was hit by his attractiveness even though it was only interest and nothing like the helpless desire she felt for Richard.

His assessment of his stallion might better explain why. Thanos kept coming closer while the filly shied away at first. She soon started sidling up to the stallion, forcing Peter to retain rigid control of the reins to keep them moving along the path.

“I will try to bring her along,” Selina said with a short laugh.

“Excellent,” he said with a smile that revealed straight white dentition. “Good day, My Lady.” He bowed before stepping away, his movements lithe and graceful like a panther.

By all means, he was a very attractive man who also appeared to match her intellectually, and he seemed to be a good person overall. If only he could make her feel half the way Richard did with just a glance.

Even now, she could still feel his gaze on her. As she turned to him, she was distracted by her aunt Martha stepping towards her, effectively blocking her field of vision.

“Well done, Selina,” Martha said, her face wreathed in bright smiles. “You might get married soon, especially since you have managed to catch the eye of the Earl of

Sanderson!”

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“I would not get my hopes up. The Earl has not declared his intentions towards me.”

“But he seems interested, doesn’t he?” Martha asked, arching an eyebrow. “He had his attention on you the whole time, almost like he was entranced. Trust me, he will propose to you. He is a perfect match. He is an earl—one of the highest ranks in England—and a gentleman, and he is quite easy on the eyes,” she said, wiggling her brows suggestively. “Trust me, I think you could have a potential husband on the cards.”

Selina might, but why couldn’t she keep herself from thinking of Richard whenever she thought about a husband and walking down the aisle? She was doomed, and she knew it.

CHAPTER 16

“It appears you have become quite skilled at seduction games. I wager you will not require my lessons soon,” Richard said.

That indifferent mask was back on his face, so Selina could not know what he truly felt about the situation he’d just pointed out.

She hated it when he shut her out like that; she was always tempted to grab his shoulders and shake him vigorously until he admitted to the emotions he kept hidden. Since they were in public, she could do nothing of that sort.

She was the one who approached him. After her aunt congratulated her, she walked away, muttering excitedly about wedding plans.

Selina had looked up to see him standing just a few steps away, staring intently at her, and she walked over to him. It definitely did not have anything to do with the fact that her body wanted a respite from fighting the urge to go to him all day, and it definitely had nothing to do with the fact that he had looked delicious standing over there, with his cravat missing and his shirt sleeves folded back to reveal his muscular forearms.

It did not matter why she had gone to him, but now that she stood before him, she had to compose herself enough to have a proper conversation with him.

“Peter seems nice and the type of man I want,” she said in a rush. “He is kind, interesting, intelligent, skillful...” She continued listing the Earl’s qualities, almost like she was trying to convince Richard of his suitability.

“And you call him by his Christian name,” Richard noted sharply, causing her gaze to flick to his face, which was as impassive as ever.

“He asked me to use his Christian name in private, since we are friends.”

“Friends? You seem to have grown skilled in this game, Selina. As your tutor, I am almost inclined to end my lessons here. I have no more wisdom to impart,” Richard said, his lips curling into a smile that did not reach his eyes.

“I still need your lessons, Ri-Richard,” Selina stuttered. “I’m far from being perfect.”

“What lessons could I possibly teach you? You have managed to snag a nice fellow. I do not see why you would require more lessons from me when you have evidently reached your goal,” Richard replied.

“I need to hold the attention of the ton for longer until I manage to get him to the altar. You said it yourself that men are hunters who are always looking for the best, so I still need to dazzle him a bit.”

If she had not been watching his face closely, she might have missed the anger that flickered in his eyes, which he quickly concealed, affecting his signature bored expression.

“So, which skills do you intend for us to work on?”

“I believe my dancing skills to be rusty. Perhaps dancing lessons to make them better?” she asked, trying to conceal the eager excitement in her voice.

“Alright then,” he said after a pause. “Meet me in the library for those lessons.”

It seemed to Richard that, at some point between the moment he met Selina for the first time and the present, he had developed a taste for playing with fire. That was the only explanation he could come up with in light of his latest decision.

Going by the events of recent days, he had a decent idea of what happened whenever he was with Selina in a secluded place. And, with every day they met and with each encounter, the tether that held his self-control unraveled until he was sure that he was very close to the end of the rope.

Any more intimate moments with her and he might not resist ravishing her in the way his body craved. He knew this, but somehow, he had still invited her to spend another evening with him. Alone. This time doing something that would require close proximity to her tempting body. Dancing.

Of course, it was ballroom dancing, but there was no way on earth he was going to teach her dancing without doing the waltz. In fact, when he imagined teaching her to dance, he had a mental image of waltzing with her.

It made sense that his mind would conjure that image. Of all the dances that had made their way to polite society, the waltz was the most scandalous and intimate of

them all. The matrons had kicked off against it, and frankly, he understood why. The dancers had to be so close that it was provocative by nature.

Given the desire that crackled between them, it was ill-advised to dance with her in private, especially when his body was clamoring for a dance of a different kind.

In retrospect, he knew there were other ways to improve her dancing skills. He could have simply sent a dancing master to the house, and they could have made use of the empty ballroom. But somehow, he could not find the will to do this. The devilish part of him that wanted a chance to hold her in his arms again insisted that he stick to the arrangement.

Soon enough, it was dark. Richard stood alone in the library, nursing a glass of brandy. Perhaps the drink would be bracing enough to prevent him from making a faux pas.

Not for the first time that evening, he found himself looking at his watch, wondering if she would come. Perhaps she had come to her senses and had decided to cancel their plans. If she had done that, she was wiser than he was at that moment. He struggled to remind himself that it was fine if she did, even though his body strongly opposed that decision.

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Just when he was about to conclude that she had breached their agreement, the library door opened to admit a small, cloaked figure, causing him to rise to his feet in excitement. Sure enough, when the intruder pulled back the hood of the cloak, he found himself staring into Selina's angelic face.

"Good evening, Richard," she said in that throaty voice of hers that never failed to arouse him.

Was it his imagination, or did her voice sound more sultry than usual?

"Good evening, Selina," he greeted from his spot close to the fireplace, his hands folded behind his back.

She gave him an odd look but soon turned away to hang her coat on the coat hanger at the door, revealing a lavender gown that showed her figure to great effect. The bodice was cut low, just like all her new gowns, and not for the first time, he regretted giving the order for them to be cut this way, revealing her cleavage in good light.

In the dim light of the library, her exposed flesh looked inviting, her olive skin glittering like the finest satin. She was temptation incarnate, and he was going to do anything to resist her, even if it killed him, because if he touched her tonight, he knew he was not going to stop until he had thoroughly ravished her. It was best that he held on to his self-restraint for his sake and her own.

"You promised me a dance lesson, Your Grace," she breathed, drawing his eyes to her lips. The plump lips that had become the object of his day and night dreams. Tonight, she had painted them red, and they glistened invitingly. "I bet you cannot

teach me to dance from over there.”

Her voice jolted him back to reality, reminding him of what he was supposed to be doing.

“You are to be my partner, yes?”

She had a knowing smile on her face, almost like she knew the internal battle he was fighting and she wanted to see just how far she could push him.

Just as soon as her knowing smile appeared, it disappeared so that she looked innocent, bearing no resemblance to the minx that might have easily undone him all those nights ago. He was going to keep the secret of how easily she affected him to himself, and he was not going to allow himself to fall for her charms so easily.

Approaching her warily, he stopped in front of her. He was immediately intoxicated by her floral perfume, tempted to bury his nose in her neck and gorge himself on her unique scent.

Clearing his throat, he fought to bring himself under control.

“Perhaps we would start with a waltz,” he said hoarsely.

He knew immediately that it was the wrong thing to say, especially as her eyes lit up with something closely resembling excitement. He knew at that moment that she was not going to make this easy for him at all.

Bracing himself and squaring his shoulders like he was preparing for a fight, he finally began the lesson.

“I do believe you know the basics of dancing. Every noblewoman of my acquaintance

has at least received rudimentary training in ballroom dancing.”

“Of course, Your Grace. I have been more of a wallflower in the past until only recently. I have received quite a number of complaints after smashing a lot of toes with my clumsy feet.”

“That could easily be solved,” he said, taking her hands in his.

The feel of her bare palm on his sent a heated sensation down his spine. He placed her hands on his shoulders, then wrapped an arm around her back.

“Let your partner lead the dance,” he said in a hoarse voice that held no resemblance to his usual calm tone. “Surrender your body to his, trusting that he will lead you the right way. If he is an excellent dancer, I promise you that you will glide across the dance floor with so much ease that it will look effortless.”

He stopped speaking when he noticed that his breathing had quickened. Selina’s breathing had quickened as well, and her gaze was fixed firmly on his lips.

The sight sent his arousal to higher levels, and somehow, he did not think that she had heard his instructions—so fascinated with his lips as she was. He would bet that she was thinking of the last time they had kissed and how heated it had been. So much so that when they broke apart, he had a hard time remembering who he was and where they were.

Watching her now, staring into her eyes, he was lost. He wanted so badly to sip from her sweet lips and ravage the delicious cavern of her mouth while caressing the length of her body. As he watched, she licked her lips, sending his arousal to even greater heights.

He was dying, and she was the reason. She was going to kill him with the desire she

stirred inside him.

CHAPTER 17

Richard had never thought it possible that one could die from excessive desire, but with every moment he spent in Selina's company, he was starting to see the possibility.

Perhaps he should never have convinced her to visit him that first day, but in his defense, he had just wanted to offer help when she looked so frustrated.

Wait. That is not entirely true.

Long before he had met her in the ballroom, he had found her interesting especially since he had observed her in the house party they had organized and how she hadn't swooned when the horror of what the Barnes' had done came to light. She had been brave and he found his eyes trailing her a few times when he visited her brother.

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She spoke and the other women instantly turned to her as though seeking guidance.

This young lady was comfortable being termed unladylike or even difficult simply because she wouldn't simper and pander to the whims of the simple-minded men who made up most of the ton.

Even while he had admired her, he had known that Society would conspire to frustrate her simply because she dared to be different.

Most men of the ton thought her rigid and not feminine because of her outlandish opinions. Instead, he had noted the passion that she had in abundance and had known that the man who managed to marry her would be lucky indeed to be the focus of all that passion.

Perhaps even then, he had wanted her for himself, and that selfish aspect of his personality had reared its head the next time he met her in the ballroom, away from the eyes of her elder brother.

The reason was simple—Stephen was a dear friend of his, and while they were good friends, Richard had known that the man would not react kindly if he heard or caught him sniffing around his sister's skirts. While the thought was foremost in his mind, it had not really stopped him. Instead, it added an edge of danger to their encounters.

He had decided to help her conquer the ton for two reasons. The first was because he was tired of them disparaging her and frustrating her when she simply wanted to secure her younger sister's future.

So, he had set about making them realize the beauty they had grown blind to. It had just taken a tweak in the color of her dresses to change everything, and it had satisfied him to no end seeing them stare helplessly in awe of her beauty and superior wit.

He had been proud to be instrumental in her transformation, but that euphoria lasted only until she started attracting suitors, and he found himself unable to agree that any one of them would make a good husband to her... which led him to the second reason why he had wanted to transform her.

He wanted her to be his—a primitive urge that surprised him to the core. He had taken over her fashion to transform her into the version of her that he dreamed of—Selina the siren, who held the ton in thrall. And she had taken to the role like a fish to water, decimating gentlemen with just a flutter of her eyelashes.

At that moment, he realized that while he had helped her become her most authentic self, he had created a problem. Now, he had to compete for her attention with the numerous gentlemen who swarmed her like bees.

Perhaps that was part of the reason why he had started those private lessons with her. So that he could spend quiet time with her. But it was dangerous, just like courting fire, because, at some point, without his knowledge, his interest in her had slowly morphed into an awareness of her as a desirable woman, before transforming into a full-blown desire for her.

A desire that grew even hotter with every moment he spent with her, taking over his thoughts and haunting his dreams such that he woke up many nights with a stiff member, drenched in sweat.

She had become the bane of his existence, and with every encounter they had, he came close to taking her innocence and making her his in all the ways that mattered. Somehow, he knew that even then, he would not be satisfied. She had embedded

herself into every inch of his being so that he was so attuned to her, so eager to keep her safe from harm, both physical and emotional.

It wasn't simply lust. He was familiar with it, and he knew just how to slake it and get it out of his system. He should know. He had sown his wild oats quite diligently as a young man. What he felt for Selina surpassed simple lust. In fact, it edged into something he did not want to think about.

Perhaps he loved her.

The thought was scary, just as it was comforting. He could not bring her into the chaos that was his life. He did not know how to love anyone; he had never had much use of the emotion. His parents, who should have shown him love as a child, had been so preoccupied with chasing their pleasures that they had no time for him.

He knew he looked composed on the outside, but he was a mess inside, destroyed by having a dysfunctional family and having to live with their suffocating indifference. He had learned early on that the opposite of love was not always hatred but an enduring apathy towards another.

Perhaps he had grown up cynical because of his parents, because they were big hypocrites. Two people who had convinced the whole world that they were in love but they could barely look each other in the eye.

Instead, they brought their lovers home in a cold competition to see who was hurt more and faster. It was a sick game that had affected him so much. He hated them because they made him live like an orphan, even though they were both alive.

They couldn't care less whether he was dead or alive, preoccupied as they were with their cold war and debauchery.

When he had come of age, he left home without a backward glance, content to leave the toxic atmosphere that pervaded their home. He had not returned until he had received a missive informing him of his father's death. Apparently, he had been found dead in his mistress's bed. He had probably died from an apoplexy caused by too much excitement.

While he should have felt grief at the news, Richard had felt numb, unable to summon even an iota of pity for the man. The previous Duke had only been a father to him in name. He had brought him into this world and made him heir to the dukedom, but apart from that, he had done nothing else for him.

So, Richard had returned home and did his duty. He buried his father and took over the dukedom. He had summoned his father's lawyers and associates, and while going through his father's will and documents, a small part of him had wished to see a note—anything addressed to him, anything at all to show that the former Duke had at least cared about his only son and heir.

It was not to be.

There was only his father's will, which mentioned him and gave instructions on how he wanted him to run the estate. That was the proverbial nail in the coffin. Richard had decided to forget his father and move on. That was why he had renovated the study, removing all traces of the former Duke, including the large portrait that hung over the fireplace, which showed his father wearing a forbidding expression.

When the study was devoid of every trace of the man, Richard replaced the furniture, and when everything was ready, he stepped back into the management of the estate. After summoning the butler, they went through the accounts, and he decided that, at the very least, the former Duke was good for something.

He had kept the books meticulously so that the estate was still productive and

prosperous. Richard had expected the coffers to be empty, given his father's lifestyle, but whatever his fault, the man was meticulous with money, and for that, Richard was grateful. Perhaps life might have been easier, if he had developed the skill of meticulousness earlier on in his journey.

While Richard grappled with his resentment towards his father, his mother was trying to get back into his good graces as simply as she donned her many fashionable dresses. When he had met her upon his return, she had still looked beautiful, but she had aged. When he looked into her eyes, he saw a loneliness so acute that it sent chills down his spine.

Perhaps he should have felt pity for her, but it was difficult when he thought she deserved it. Sometimes, he believed that it served her right, and at least the emptiness she battled closely resembled the one he carried around, pretending to be all right when he was not.

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He had tried to fill it with the usual things: friends, drink, and outright debauchery. He should have known not to go down that path. After all, it was the same thing that had led his parents to their destruction.

So, he turned to more constructive things when he came back to England. He picked himself up and started participating in the House of Lords, sharing the insights he had gathered during his travels. In no time, he had garnered a great following.

That was where he had met the Duke of Westall. He had been his rival, with opinions that differed greatly from his own. They were not enemies because he admired the man's intelligence, but their opposing opinions meant that they could not be friends either.

That was why he had been surprised when Westall invited him over for a house party. Richard had attended out of curiosity. It was there that he had first met Selina. She had just returned from a walk with an annoyed expression on her face, which he later discovered to be because she had to tell off an overeager suitor who had wanted a watered-down version of her to be his wife.

"Is there something on my face, Your Grace?" she had asked in a frosty voice, and he realized suddenly that he had been staring at her for quite some time.

"I apologize, My Lady," he replied.

He would have added subtle flattery if she was another lady, but somehow, he had known that he would get told off if he tried it with her.

She nodded in acknowledgment. “You are the Duke of Seymour?” she asked suddenly, fixing her shocking green eyes on him.

“At your service, My Lady,” he said with an exaggerated bow, then gave a half smile, and by some miracle, she smiled back.

It felt like a miracle watching her smile. The light in her eyes brightened, and her face became even more irresistible. Richard acknowledged that he could rapidly lose himself in her green eyes if he was not careful.

“... always wanted to meet you. Anyone who manages to discomfit Stephen must be interesting.” Her voice had jolted him back to reality.

“You find me interesting because I antagonize your brother?” he asked, his eyebrows shooting up in surprise.

“Yes,” she replied with a mischievous smile. “He is usually so rigid and unyielding. I rather like to see him discomfited.”

“You are an odd lady, Lady...” he trailed off.

“Selina. I’m sure you will confirm just how odd I am when you get to know me,” she said with a mischievous glint in her eyes.

She had kept her promise, entertaining him for the duration of the house party. He had grown attached to her, even though he was engaged to Lottie Barnes.

He looked forward to conversing with her. When it was revealed that he had only been invited to the house party because they suspected he was involved in the evil plot of the Barneses, he was almost relieved to have an excuse to end the ill-fated engagement. But he was sad, for it also meant the end of the house party, and he had

to leave even though he enjoyed Selina's company so much.

She chased away the darkness and emptiness in his soul simply by being present, and when he had to leave, he addressed the return of the demons that followed him like an unseen cloak.

It was easy to imagine his elation when he saw her again. He seized any opportunity to be with her. At the house party, he was surrounded by her family and forced to behave himself. Inviting her to private spaces unleashed his desire, and while he knew that his self-control grew weaker with every encounter, he could not stop himself. It was almost like he was addicted to her.

It was because he was so attuned to her that he noted the deep flush in her cheeks and the way she fiddled with her dress presently in the way that she only did when she was nervous.

But, now that he thought about it, she had been quite composed when she was with the Earl of Sanderson. She had been laughing and looked so deliriously happy that it was annoying, but there had been no sign of nervousness. She did not stand frozen in place, neither did she fiddle with her dress the way she did now. Her cheeks were flushed that afternoon, but it was more because of the sun than anything.

The thought confused him further. Why on earth would she be nervous with him? He had thought that they were always open with one another. The only thing that could make her nervous in his presence was the possibility that she had done something wrong.

The anger that rose within him at that moment should have scared him, yet it slithered through his veins, stretching muscles and skin until he was livid.

"You seem nervous, My Lady," he noted in a quiet voice.

But perhaps his rage had bled into his voice, because he saw wariness flicker in her eyes as she took a step back, then another.

“Why do I make you nervous? Do not tell me you have done something wrong?” he said, leading the dance and pulling her into him.

In a distant part of his mind, he knew that his rage was part desire and that he was fast on his way to combustion.

“It has been a long time since I last danced,” she said in a rush, studiously avoiding his gaze.

“You danced at the last ball. I recall seeing you,” he deadpanned.

“Well,” she said with a shaky laugh, “perhaps you might ask my dance partners about the state of their toes. I bruised them all with my clumsy steps.”

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“Nonsense. I am sure I would have heard tales of your clumsiness on the dance floor if that was the case.”

“Perhaps the gentlemen in question have dignity and would not be caught disparaging a lady,” she muttered.

“How many such men could be found among the ton? Pray tell.”

“There are many more than you might think,” she retorted.

“I am assuming that your dear Peter is among them,” he spat back.

“I would not know, since I have not danced with him,” she said defensively.

“You could have fooled me with how unrestrained you were with him, giggling so hard you could have been heard from Mayfair,” he retorted hotly.

Selina’s head jerked up so that she was staring into his eyes. Her expression underwent a dramatic change from shock to suspicion, then amusement.

“Do not tell me, Your Grace,” she said, giggling, “that you are jealous? That look certainly does not suit you.”

“Jealous? Ha!” he scoffed. “I couldn’t possibly be jealous. I just want the truth that you have been denying.” He stopped so that he could stare into her eyes.

“What truth?” she asked, averting her gaze. “I have always been honest with you

from the start.”

“Truly?” he asked. “Then why do you feel nervous around me but not around Peter, your favorite suitor? Tell me, Selina. Perhaps you have allowed him liberties, and that is why you are so unrestrained with him.”

“And what business of yours is it if I have? You are not my husband or my fiancé. You are just a friend. You have taken pains to remind me of this fact every single moment, so what right do you have to ask me such questions?” Her eyes flashed with anger.

She was magnificent in her rage, her beauty even more blinding. Her passion was intoxicating, and he wanted to taste it so bad that his body shook with the need to touch her.

Why should he not, when she had been tempting him all evening, poking at his ego and restraint more times than he could bear?

He could just have one taste. One taste, and he would let her go. But, even as he made that vow, he knew it to be a lie. He was too far gone to care.

He prowled closer to her. He noticed the moment she sensed his intentions and became wary. She took a step back, and he followed. She took another step back and another until her back was flush against the door. He placed his hands on the wooden surface so that he caged her in, staring into the eyes that threatened to drown him, inhaling the heady scent that made him delirious with desire.

“You asked if I was jealous. Perhaps I am, and you are about to discover just how dangerous jealous men can be.”

CHAPTER 18

Richard had spent the better part of the day battling the inferno of desire that flared even hotter in Selina's presence. He had tried. Oh, he had tried to keep his hands off her, but his body was keen on betraying him.

His body craved hers, the feel of her smooth, heated skin beneath his fingers, the sweet taste of her mouth, the breathy sounds that escaped her lips when he pleased her, the weight of her perfect breasts in his hands. He wanted them so much that he felt like he was dying, and her body was the only thing that could save him.

His self-control faltered even further when he became aware that Selina was aroused as well. Her pupils were dilated as she stared helplessly into his eyes and licked her lips.

That motion alone was what pushed him, making the heat that burned within him unbearable. In the next moment, she was in his arms, her lips under his as he devoured her.

At first, she was tense—perhaps because of how suddenly he kissed her—but soon she relaxed, her body becoming pliant and supple in his arms. She let out a moan and then started kissing him back.

Her fingers slid up his chest, making their way up his form until they were tangled in his hair. Grabbing a fistful, she dragged him closer, eliciting a grunt from deep in his throat.

He feasted on her lips, nibbling on them and soothing the sting with his tongue. He pressed his lips even tighter to hers until she gasped, and he took advantage, slipping his tongue into the delicious cavern of her mouth. The kiss turned wild, their tongues struggling for dominance, licking, nibbling, and sucking in between moans and groans of pleasure until he was lost in her.

His fingers slid down of their own accord until they curved over her bodice and dipped beneath her neckline. He stroked the heated skin of her breasts. His fingers found her nipples, twisting and toying with them until she was gasping into his mouth.

Breaking the kiss, his lips trailed down her neck as he inhaled her sweet scent.

“Tell me, Selina,” he said between kisses, “why you seem nervous.” He licked her earlobe, eliciting a shudder that shook her entire frame. “Do not tell me you allowed him to touch you like this?”

“No...” she gasped.

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“Perhaps you should speak up.” He raised his head from her neck, seizing her mouth in a kiss that stole her wits. “Did he kiss you this way? Enough that you forgot to be nervous?” he asked. “No?”

“Please,” she panted. “Please touch me, Richard.”

“Hmmm,” he murmured. “Perhaps you would prefer that it was your beloved Peter who was touching you.”

“No,” she said, writhing, fisting the fabric of his shirt.

“You will have to give me what I want before you are rewarded, don’t you think?” he said ruthlessly.

“Yes,” she whispered.

“Good,” he replied, his hand finding its way back to her breasts, squeezing and rubbing the tender globes until a gasp escaped her throat. “You want me to touch you here?” he asked in a hoarse voice.

“No, lower. I want you to touch me lower,” she panted, her head thrashing against the door.

She was magnificent in her passion, so beautiful that he needed to touch her, pleasure her, and bring her to the heights of ecstasy.

His hands moved to her knees, pulling her dress up so that his fingers could find her

inner thighs. His eyes were fixed on her face so he did not miss any changes in her expression. Every hitch in her breath, every moan, stoked a place inside of him while arousing him even further.

A flick of his hand and he was cupping her most intimate place. She was so soft and wet. Temptation incarnate. He wanted so badly to be inside her—he wanted to taste her there.

He wanted to do even more scandalous things to her, but with the strength of the lust swimming in his veins, he could not risk it if he wanted to keep her reputation intact. It was against what his body wanted, but for her sake, he withdrew the hand cupping her heat, ignoring her disappointed whimper.

“Tell me what I want to know,” he rasped. “Perhaps I might bring you to satisfaction.”

He waited, his body trembling with pent-up need while she regained her composure.

“What do you want to know?” she asked, panting.

“Tell me the reason you have been nervous around me.”

“You are the reason,” she said, staring up into his eyes.

He could feel himself drifting and drowning in those vibrant green pools.

“You make me feel uncontrollable—unhinged even. Perhaps I am not nervous around you. Perhaps I’m battling the urge to climb you and lick you all over and beg you to touch me,” she said in a rush. “I know that it is wanton behavior unseemly of noblewomen, but it is how I feel when I’m with you. I want you, Richard.”

With every word that fell from her lips, Richard felt himself falling deeper into the fiery pit of his lust. He wanted to devour her, ravish her endlessly until she forgot her name.

Since he could not do that, no matter how much he wanted to, he settled for a kiss. This one was rough and hungry. He devoured her lips, possessing her the only way he could.

His hand returned to its place, cupping her heat. This time, he rubbed her pleasure spot, swallowing her moans of pleasure until she convulsed with her orgasm. He kissed her, savoring her mouth till she came down from her peak.

In the silence that followed, he regained control of his thoughts enough to realize that he had just done what he had sworn never to do.

He had taken liberties with her, again. Pulling his hands from underneath her skirts, he stepped back far enough till there was a safe distance between them. Enough that he would not give in to the urge to touch her, seeing as what had just happened confirmed the fact that he had no self-control where she was concerned.

“My apologies, My Lady,” he said gruffly, studiously avoiding her eyes. “I should not have taken such liberties with you. It is an insult to your person. I shall make sure that it does not happen again.”

“You make it sound like you forced me,” Selina said, forcing out a laugh. “I was a willing participant—do not forget.”

“You are an innocent. I should never have seduced you or invited you to spend time alone with me. It was ungentlemanly of me, but I could not help myself. It will not happen again. You have enough knowledge now not to require my help or my lessons. I will step aside now to allow you to pursue happiness. Good night, My

Lady.”

With that cryptic remark, he walked out of the library and—if he was to be believed—out of her life.

At first, Selina was stunned, then she became angry. The nerve of the man to blame everything that happened on himself when she had been the one that had been begging for his touch, desperate for his kisses.

She was a grown woman, not a naive debutante who was unsure of what she wanted. She knew what she wanted, and what she wanted was the Duke of Seymour in any way she could get him. She was going to tell him that to his face just as soon as daybreak arrived and she had found him.

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Richard sat on the balcony, staring sightlessly into the darkness outside, nursing a glass of whiskey as he tried to bring his aroused, unsatisfied body under control.

He could still feel her lips on his, roving, sweet and sinful. He could still hear her cries as she writhed in his arms while he pleased her.

She was in his blood. He was addicted to her, drunk on her scent and body. He wanted her, and his body was reacting like an alcoholic who was trying to quit his favorite drink. It wasn't going well.

Damn.

He really had set himself up for trouble the moment he had insisted on repaying his debt to her.

Even though he sat here alone, his mind was still stuck on the last moment when he had her in his arms as he pleased her.

No matter how he thought of it, he would be a great fool if he believed that he could just leave Selina and allow her to marry someone else. He was going to go insane. What he felt for her was dangerous and unhinged, for sure, but he was not selfless enough to let her go and allow her to marry another man. She was his, and with every encounter, she became even more engraved in his memory so that she was all he thought about.

“Well, I would not say I'm not surprised to see you here.” Eli's voice came from behind him.

Richard raised his head and could make out his friend's tall figure in the darkness that blanketed the balcony.

"It is quite late for you to sit by yourself in the dark. I guess it is safe to say that all is not well?"

Eli came to stand beside him.

"What is the matter?" he asked, a note of concern in his voice. "I have never known you to sacrifice your sleep for no reason."

"Perhaps I should be asking you that as well? What are you doing here at this hour?" Richard asked back. "Perhaps you would be interested in some whiskey?" He picked up the bottle from where it sat at his feet.

"Please," Eli said.

Richard poured him a glass.

"I have been having problems sleeping for some time now. The physician says it's insomnia and prescribed some horrible-tasting concoctions. Took it once, then never again. A night of looking through the boring ledgers in my study does the job as well as any sleeping draught," Eli explained, chuckling.

"So why are you awake now?" Richard asked dryly. "Disturbing my quiet time."

"It did not work today—I have been a bit restless," Eli said with a sigh. "Besides, you need someone to shake up that stuffy personality of yours, even though I believe someone else is doing a better job at it than me," he finished in a suggestive tone.

"Who might that be, if I might ask?" Richard asked, a note of defensiveness in his

voice.

“I’m sure you know who I speak of,” Eli said with a mischievous smile. “But for the sake of clarity, I believe she is Lady Selina, the sister of the Duke of Westall.”

“Why would you come to that conclusion? We are just friends, nothing more.”

“Perhaps you might have better luck lying to someone else, but not me. You forget, Seymour, that I have known you since we were in leading strings. I can read you as easily as a book. So I know that you are very attached to her, and she is way more than a friend to you.

“Friends, in my experience, do not stare at each other hungrily, do not follow each other with their eyes, and do not turn green with jealousy when they see each other with someone else. The passion that burns between you two is so palpable that I have been tempted to request that the two of you share a bedchamber.

“It is just the issue of the lady’s reputation that stops me. She is unraveling you, Seymour, and I must confess that it gladdens my heart to see this.”

Eli chuckled, before knocking back his whiskey in one swallow.

“I admit I do feel something for the lady,” Richard decided to admit even if he was leaving out the entire truth of the matter. Eli would never let him hear the end of it if he were to know the severity of what he felt for Selina. “But it is just lust, which I will get rid of post haste.”

“But this is not just desire now, is it? I would wager it is more than that. You are in love with her, Seymour. Just admit it,” Eli pressed.

“Love?” Richard sputtered. “You know I do not believe in such sentimentality,

Mulford.”

Lies.His subconscious scolded.

He knew very well he was maddeningly in love with Selina.

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“Perhaps,” Eli relented, shrugging his shoulders. “But you might arrive at the same conclusion if you consider some things. You feel jealous when you see her in a man’s arms. You want to beat him up, even against your better judgment. You always want to protect her and keep her safe from harm. If you had your way, she would always be by your side, where you can guarantee her safety. If your answers to these questions are in the affirmative, then I am afraid that you are in love with the lady. Irrevocably, I might add,” he said, patting Richard on the shoulder before leaning against the wall of the balcony and folding his arms as he waited for him to realize this new truth.

“If I am in love with her,” Richard said in a resigned tone after a long pause, “I think the best course of action will be to let her go.”

To say that Eli was astonished would have been an understatement. He stared at Richard for some time, his mouth hanging slightly open in his surprise.

“Please do close your mouth, Eli,” Richard said dryly, turning to stare off into the darkness beyond the balcony.

“I am almost afraid to ask how you came to that conclusion. Perhaps it is the drink. Are you deep in your cups?”

“I am perfectly sober, Eli. I do not speak under the influence of whiskey. You know me. I am hardly the type to overindulge.”

It was a long time ago when he had thrown himself headlong into a life of hedonism. But since he returned to England, he had led a life of discipline and kept away from

overindulgence in spirits.

“No, you are not. Perhaps you might have to explain why your reaction to finding out that you are in love is to run, when it is something that many people struggle to find. Hell, the lady in question wants a love match. Why can’t you marry her when it is so obvious that you are both in love with each other? Why are you making the whole thing more complicated?”

“Because I want to protect her from the disaster that would come from her marrying me,” Richard spat. When the puzzled look on Eli’s face did not go away, he continued, “Love matches are doomed. I will protect her from that.”

“Love matches are not doomed,” Eli said softly, coming to stand nearer to him. “You just think that your parents’ marriage was doomed.”

“Eli, don’t...” Richard warned.

“Sorry, my friend, but we have to speak about this. I am tired of watching you and Lady Selina suffer simply because you decided to use your parents’ marriage as a yardstick for all love matches. Your parents were not a love match.”

That last statement earned Eli a sharp glance from Richard.

Richard was gearing up to counter it but stopped when Eli placed a hand on his shoulder. “Please let me finish.”

With a nod of assent from his friend, Eli continued.

“They are simply two people who did not understand what love means, and when they realized that what they had was not love, they set fire to their home with no thought to your well-being. They were two incompetent people who should never

have been allowed to procreate.

“This was why I used to be skeptical about matrimony. Helen saved me from ruining my only chance at happiness and I am glad to have taken that bold step with her and I am all the better for it. I know that such a union is rare, especially in the cynical society that we are part of. That is why I would be very vexed with you if you throw away what you have with Lady Selina simply because of your parents’ mistake. Consider her brother’s marriage also. There are far too many good examples for you to hurt both of you in this manner. You are not your parents. You have much more knowledge than they had at that age. The least you could do is apply it.”

“Perhaps you are right, Eli,” Richard said after a long pause. His tone turned reflective.

“My parents might not have been a love match, but they had passion between them. It was that passion that fueled their shouting matches. I have seen what an excess of emotion can cause—the damage, the chaos. The feelings I have for Selina are dangerous, uncontrollable even. They scare me sometimes.”

“Trust me, Seymour, you are nothing like your parents. You and Lady Selina would do well together. Sometimes in life, you have to take risks, and trust me when I say that this one would be worthwhile.”

CHAPTER 19

“You look positively radiant, dear sister,” Diana complimented as Selina added a final pin to her hair.

Selina couldn’t help but agree as she looked at herself in the mirror. She was wearing the burnt orange dress—a favorite among her new commissions. She had been saving the dress for the final ball, but needing to recover from how soundly the Duke had

shattered her heart yet again, she needed some armor that would guarantee she stood proudly in the hall.

Then again, she had worn it while hoping that he would see her and regret his actions.

The dress gave a creamy glow to her skin and brought out the golden highlights in her hair. Even her green eyes sparkled like jewels. She frowned, remembering that he had complimented her eyes once.

She squared her shoulders and put on the gloves that he had bought for her, reminding herself not to waste a single minute of her night thinking about him.

“Thank you, Sister.” She smiled, rising from the bench. “You look marvelous as well. Your beau is going to have a hard time keeping his eyes off you.”

She smiled as her sister blushed and dipped her head with an undeniably guilty smile.

“You exaggerate, Selina,” Diana retorted.

“I do not,” Selina rebuffed with a raised eyebrow and a wink. “Do not think that your long absences have gone unnoticed.”

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“Speaking of long absences, we’re nearly late,” Diana said, hurriedly changing the subject.

Selina did not push, considering they were indeed late.

They walked quickly to the ballroom, waiting till they were announced before stepping inside with slow, graceful steps to allow the guests to observe them.

Selina remembered to keep her back straight, allowing her eyes to sweep over the room with subtle interest. The small smile on her face painted her as approachable but not desperate, even though her heart pounded as she tried to interpret the expressions on the guests’ faces.

The guests watched them descend the stairs with wide eyes, and there were a few open mouths. She could only hope she wasn’t grossly overdressed for the occasion, or it would be even more of a scandal than being underdressed.

She allowed her self one last survey of the room secretly hoping she would spot the Duke’s dark head in the crowd, but there was nothing to be seen. A frown crossed her face, but briefly. It wouldn’t do to elicit whispers now.

She got to the bottom of the stairs and hoped her descent had caused a gentleman or two to take interest enough to assist her down, as that would show that her entrance had made a good mark.

Her fears were assuaged when a few gentlemen approached her before she even reached the bottom step, extending a hand towards her. She tried not to let her

nervousness show and accepted the hand of the gentleman closest to her. Lord Westbrook, if she remembered correctly. She smiled at him and curtsied to thank him.

He placed a chaste kiss on the back of her gloved hand, but there was no spark of desire or interest, even though he was handsome in a boyish way, unlike the Duke's more refined, mature look.

Stop it.

The night was supposed to be about her having fun and mingling with suitors, not comparing them to the Duke. The fact that they couldn't even compete on an equal plane would not help her forget him quickly and focus on securing an advantageous match.

"Thank you, Lord Westbrook," she said with a smile.

"You are most welcome, Lady Selina." Lord Westbrook smiled, still holding her hand. "Might I add, you look especially beautiful tonight. You put even the flowers to shame."

She feigned a blush as was expected, remembering to fan her face softly. She gave him a bold look over her fan and lowered her lashes. She saw his interest rise and smiled, knowing he had been caught in her trap.

The Duke had been right, after all. But the fact did not seem as pleasing as it had before.

"Might I interest you in a dance, Lady Selina?" Lord Bourne asked, bowing with an outstretched hand.

She gave him her dance card, and he wrote down his name. Lord Westbrook and Lord Dwight followed right after. She tried not to look at her nearly full dance card with surprise, as that would be the first time she had ever seen so many eager names on it, but she couldn't feel the thrill she had expected to feel at being highly sought after.

She felt like an imposter, using skills the Duke had taught her and employing the fashion tactics on which he had educated her. None of this was a victory she had secured on her own.

Two earls and a viscount sought her attention, yet they held no appeal for her. There was a gnawing numbness in her chest that did not allow her the pleasure of considering her newfound popularity as anything other than a chore.

The weight of the guests' eyes on her as she crossed the room and mingled made her feel uneasy.

Can they see through the act I am putting on?

She walked quickly towards the balcony, needing air as the weight of their gazes started to constrict her chest. She placed a hand on her throat as her heart started to beat rapidly from lack of air, hoping she did not faint and cause a scene.

“What being could have been so powerful as to put a frown on your face, Lady Selina?” a familiar voice asked, amused.

She turned to see that it was Peter who had walked up to her. He was holding two glasses of punch.

“Peter.” She smiled and curtsied. “It was the lack of your company that had me in a sour mood.”

He smiled brightly—her flirtatious words had hit their target.

She really wanted to feel something for this man before her, who happened to share her sense of humor.

“I am glad I was able to find you so quickly then.” He handed her a glass. “You should have this.”

“I do not feel parched,” she said stubbornly, but she accepted it nonetheless.

“You will soon.” He smiled and picked up her dance card, which dangled from her wrist, allowing his hands to brush against hers. “I intend to dance with you until then.”

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Her breath caught in her chest at his boldness, but other than that reaction, there was no spark. Her body remained annoyingly calm. She was grateful he was busy filling the remaining spots on her dance card, or he would have surely been put out by the frown on her face.

“Oh. I seem to have come a little too late,” he said, frowning as he spotted the names that had taken up most of the slots on her card. “There are barely any available slots left, but that is to be expected, considering you look as wonderful as ever tonight.”

“You flatter me.” She smiled as shyly as she was supposed to, lowering her eyelashes.

He looked taken aback by her reaction, a flush climbing up his cheeks, and then he coughed into his hands, shaking his head.

“The dances are starting, and I see your first partner waiting for you,” he said with a smile. “I shall be patiently waiting my turn.”

She handed him her glass and turned to see Lord Bourne waiting to lead her to the dance floor. She accepted his arm, nodding her thanks, and took her place as the first strains of the galliard started.

The dance was a mid-paced one, which she followed with precision, remembering to smile and look up at her partner, who smiled in return. When they stepped closer, he kept a proper distance.

“You dance beautifully, Lady Selina,” he praised as the dance came to a close.

“You dance even better than me, Lord Bourne.”

“Lady Selina, shall we?” Lord Westbrook asked, interrupting.

Was she not going to have even a moment of respite?

She nodded, placing her hand in his, and by the time the dance came to an end, she was tired. Her next partner came, and soon she was silently begging for the freedom she had enjoyed before.

She quickly stepped off the dance floor as the next dance started, dodging the eyes of Lord Fein as he looked through the crush for her.

She pressed a hand to her chest and darted towards the balcony, where she hid behind a velvet curtain like a coward, in an alcove that was too small and uncomfortably hot. But she weathered the storm, preferring it to the one she would face if she stepped out of her hiding place.

She heaved a deep sigh of relief as she heard the first strains of the next dance.

“I take it you’re fed up with tonight’s festivities,” a voice said from above her.

She looked up quickly in surprise, then relaxed when she saw that it was Peter.

“You’ve caught me in one too many improper places, Peter.” She smiled, shaking her head as she stepped back into the ballroom.

She didn’t want to be in such a confined space with him, where anyone could walk in on them and catch them alone.

“I won’t tell if you don’t.” He winked.

She nodded. “Still,” she insisted, “I feel I must fix my reputation. It is really unflattering to be seen in such a light.”

“I assure you, dear, that your reputation has suffered no blows on my part,” he said.

“You’re much the same in my eyes—charming with a wicked sense of humor.”

“Wicked sense of humor?” she gasped.

“Indeed. You can’t deny the opinion fits.”

“Unique is the word I would have used.”

“If you say so,” he relented.

The dance came to an end, and he held out a hand to her with a comical flourish that had her smiling.

“I am your partner for the next dance, My Lady.”

“You won’t spare my aching feet the pleasure?” she asked, hoping he would.

“I promise not to step on your feet.”

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She frowned but took his hand nonetheless. Her aunt Martha's glare was scalding even from across the room.

"I can see you do not care much for the attention you have been getting," Peter noted as he led her through the steps.

"I do not," she admitted, feeling that she could trust him not to use that information in a cynical manner. "It is all so..."

"Overwhelming?" he supplied.

She nodded.

"It is the same for me. I would never have come had it not been for my mother's constant pestering to find myself a wife." He sighed. "But I believe my search will end soon, and I will be spared the effort."

"You won't be allowed to shun the Season even though you are married," she pointed out.

"Yes, but I can at least use spending time with my bride as an excuse for the first few years," he answered, a mischievous glint in his eyes.

She couldn't help but giggle conspiratorially at the impropriety of his words. It seemed that she tended to attract men who were so thoroughly improper. Not that she minded.

She had never really liked the stiff conversations with prim and proper gentlemen and their archaic views of society's value system.

Selina wasn't ignorant of the double meaning behind Peter's earlier words and hoped he did not intend to propose too quickly.

She hated the fact that even though he seemed like the best possible match she could ever hope to make—considering his pedigree and how well they got on—he did not bore her and press her to conform to the ideals of Society. Rather, he shared her opinions, and she liked his company, but after having experienced everything that she had with the Duke, it just wasn't enough.

There was no inkling of desire in her blood. Not even Peter's touch had made her crave more. His presence did not cause her to lose her train of thought or spark anything more than the warmth of seeing a good friend.

Friendship wasn't enough to start a marriage.

She would not be able to fulfill her wifely duties when even the thought of him kissing her had her cringing inwardly. The idea of him seeing her or touching her the way the Duke had was entirely inconceivable.

She finally understood why the scriptures said that it was better not to stir up love until it was time.

The appetites she had developed as a result of her dalliances with the Duke had her searching for something she might never experience again. For all she knew, he was one of few gentlemen willing to be so improper with a woman, and she would be stuck with a subpar marriage bed.

She should never have indulged the way she had.

“It will only be permissible for the first year.” She smiled despite the feelings raging inside her.

“I highly doubt that. Everyone knows that it takes much longer for a man to grow bored with his bride. I do not intend to be that sort.” He added the last part quickly, which made her laugh.

“It still wouldn’t be an excuse to miss so many balls.”

“Shall we put a wager on it then?” he asked with a wink. “I really want to test that theory.”

His eyes were bright and happy, and she saw the feelings in them quite clearly. He was smitten with her. She wasn’t so blind that she couldn’t see it, and it scared her how obvious his feelings were.

“I must warn you, Peter,” she cautioned. “I never lose, and I am truly tempted to see whether you are right on this matter.”

“We shall see then.”

He bowed to her while she curtsied as the dance came to an end. He led her by the hand to her aunt, bowing over it and placing a kiss that lingered long enough to show his affection before he left.

Martha smiled proudly as she watched him retreat. “I hear wedding bells,” she crooned, linking her arm with Selina’s. “You have done well, dear girl. That man is taken with you.”

Selina smiled as her aunt expected her to, but there was no mirth or joy behind her smile. Those words did not please her as much as they would have a week ago, when

she hadn't felt the things she did for the Duke.

“Good evening, Lady Riddington,” his familiar voice said from behind her.

She shivered at his proximity, incensed that he could still elicit such a reaction from her when he had hurt her so badly. She turned around, putting some distance between them, but it still wasn't enough to quell the annoying flutter in her chest.

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She felt hope. Hope that perhaps he had decided that he did not want to be without her and that he felt the same way she did. But she quashed it as soon as it came.

She had allowed the vapid thought free rein before and had been hurt soundly. If she were that foolish again, she would have no one else to blame but herself for thinking such.

After all, he had only showered her with physical attention and had not shown a real interest in her likes or anything that a man interested in a woman would ask about. Everything she felt had been a result of her desperation for a match, misconstruing what had otherwise been a temporary lapse in judgment on his part.

“Good evening, Your Grace,” Martha said with a curtsy, glaring at her so she did the same. “I feared we would not have the pleasure of your company tonight.”

“I was a little occupied, but I am here now.” He smiled politely at her. “Good evening, Lady Selina. I hope the ball is to your taste?”

“It is, Your Grace,” Selina answered, surprised at how cold her voice sounded.

He wasn't unfazed by her cool response, but he nodded. His next words stunned her even more than the polite bow he executed as he extended his hand towards her.

“May I have this dance, Lady Selina?”

“May I have this dance, Lady Selina?”

Selina’s surprise was evident. Even Martha’s presence hadn’t been enough to stop her mouth from dropping open. The last she had seen of the Duke, he had made it clear that they would never be alone together again, and now he came to ask her to dance where she couldn’t berate him as freely as she desired.

He really was the worst sort there was.

“She would be delighted, Your Grace,” Martha answered for her, shooting her a look that promised a major scolding once they were alone.

Why would her aunt give her so willingly to the Duke? If she knew the scandalous nature of the activities they’d engaged in, she would no doubt have banned her from speaking to him.

“Give the Duke your hand, Selina,” her aunt instructed with a polite smile.

“I’m afraid my dance card is full, Auntie,” Selina answered stubbornly.

She frowned when the Duke smiled wickedly, picked up her card, and scanned it. She hated the way she admired his long, elegant lashes and how the serious look on his face made him even more handsome.

She saw a flicker of emotion cross his face and wondered if he was jealous of the names he saw on her dance card. If he was, she hoped it hurt him as much as he had hurt her.

“I see one available slot,” he said with a smile at last. “And it’s coming up now.”

She frowned, taking the offending card from him. True enough, there was still a slot

available that just happened to be a waltz. The thought of being so close to him had her heart racing in her chest as she remembered everything that happened between them over the past few days. Her cheeks flushed, and she saw a knowing look cross his face.

“I will dance with you, Your Grace,” she said, handing him the card.

She would use the time to ask him why he thought he could keep confusing her the way he did. Since he asked to end their agreement, he should stick to what he had asked for.

She took his hand, pushing down the feelings that rose inside her, and allowed him to lead her to the dance floor. She looked up into those familiar eyes that had seen her at her worst and most vulnerable.

“Why are you doing this?” she asked once the music started, keeping her voice low enough so no one would overhear them.

“Doing what, Lady Selina?” he asked, feigning ignorance.

“This. Dancing with me,” she pointed out, refusing to play his game.

“Because I need to make sure that our final lesson has yielded results,” he answered, not looking at her.

“If you had watched me at all tonight, you would have known that it paid off.”

“I have been watching you, and I can tell that you put all of our lessons to good use.” His eyes ran down her frame, the heat evident in them. “I have been watching you a little too closely.”

His admission shocked her, as she hadn't seen him all night. She had thought he had decided to leave early instead of waiting for the ball. It made her face heat up, knowing he had seen her flirt with other men using the skills he had taught her.

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“And what is your conclusion?” she asked boldly. “Have I sufficiently exercised your education?”

His eyes darkened, but she didn't cower under the wave of his desire. She had no reason to.

“You have the next few minutes to show me everything I taught you,” he said with a smirk. “Think of this dance as a test, if you will.”

“Are you sure this isn't just an excuse to spend time with me, Your Grace?” she purred. “I hear I can be very arresting company.”

His eyes lit up at the challenge.

She had to admit that she had missed seeing that look on his face, but still, her anger flared. He only wanted to dance with her as a test? The man was as pigheaded as they came.

She sincerely hoped that seeing her with other men had been enough to annoy him if he felt an iota of anything other than desire for her.

“Indeed?” he asked with a raised eyebrow, spinning her and pulling her back to his chest. “I wonder who would have alluded such. I am yet to see what they refer to.”

“You have a mean sense of humor, Your Grace,” she said with a wicked smile. “A lady like me might find it insulting to call me out on my charms.”

“I mean no offense, My Lady,” he said seriously. “But your charms are overflowing such that a man like me can’t hope to exhaust them even with carefully worded insults.”

“Indeed?” she asked.

“Indeed.”

“To make up for the insult to my charms, I expect a well-worded apology.”

“What if I chose to wax lyrical about the said charms instead?” he asked, leaning closer. “Surely that would please the lady more.”

“It would.” She nodded, curious to hear what he would say.

“You learned your lessons rather well, Lady Selina.” He smiled again, before leaning down to whisper in her ear. “I rather like this dress on you. Your fashion sense has improved.”

“Why must you always be so critical?” she asked, frowning at how swiftly he had changed the topic.

“It amuses me greatly,” he said with a smile. “I like seeing you angry. It is one of my favorite expressions.”

“You’re insufferable.”

“And you’re too easy to annoy.” He tsked. “I thought we had talked about this.”

“You’re the only one I forget my training around.” The words were out before she could think, and when the reality of that statement hit her, she stepped back.

Even when she had been annoyed in the past, she had always been able to maintain her composure and keep her wits about her, resorting to cold responses that conveyed her ire.

The Duke had been the only person, aside from her siblings, who had ever gotten her to feel different ranges of emotions that she had been taught to repress. Even Peter had elicited nothing more than calm happiness, while the Duke had made her ecstatic with joy.

The feel of his eyes on her stirred heat that threatened to consume her whole, and the feel of his hands on her, even small touches, when in polite company had her wanting things she had only read about.

She never should have admitted that he could make her lose her composure, not when it put such a horrified look on his face. That was giving him much more power than she should have given to him or anyone else.

The music ended all too quickly, but neither of them looked away or attempted to move. Selina noted emotions shifting and flickering in his eyes, warring for dominance, and she hoped he would make the right choice.

Them. Together.

He blinked, taking a step back, and she knew then that she had lost him to his stubbornness.

“The student has impressed the teacher,” he said with a smile that didn’t reach his eyes. “There is nothing left to teach you. I am... proud to have had such an excellent student.”

“Your Grace...”

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“I wish you happiness in your search for a match, Lady Selina.” He bowed before he even finished speaking and quickly walked away without so much as a backward glance, not knowing that he was taking a large piece of her heart away with him.

How could he walk away so casually when he, too, was uncomfortable with the decision he was making? Or was he not?

Could she have imagined the look in his eyes?

She felt tears well up in her eyes at the thought that she had imagined she had meant something to him. That she was anything more than a woman he had effectively seduced under the guise of helping her secure a match. That she would never hold his affection enough to secure a match the way Lottie Barnes had.

A lone tear escaped her eye, but she caught it quickly with her kerchief, hoping no one saw it. Feeling more tears threatening to fall, she fanned her face, hoping no one would see her. That would be a scene she didn't want to cause.

Selina was angry that he had walked away so easily when everything in her wanted to box his ears and tell him that she wasn't going to let him go so easily.

How could she?

She had never met another gentleman who made her feel so many different emotions in the space of a minute. He infuriated her, excited her, and knew just how to make her laugh. He hadn't judged her inexperience.

She tried to picture a future with anyone else, but all roads in her mind led back to him. He was all she wanted for a happy future.

He is all I want.

She gasped, clapping a hand over her mouth as she realized that somehow, in their farce, it had become so real that her heart had prepared a snug place just for him and was stubbornly holding on to it.

Somehow, she had fallen in love with the one person she couldn't have.

“My Lady, are you alright?” an unfamiliar voice asked.

She didn't look but merely nodded.

“I am well, thank you,” she said, remembering that it was rude not to answer properly, even though she left out the vital part of looking at the person to whom she was speaking.

She turned quickly, hurrying to the balcony and allowing herself the luxury of weeping, clapping a hand over her mouth to stop the sobs that threatened to escape. She waded deeper into the darkness at the edge of the balcony once she heard voices approaching, not wanting anyone to see her.

“Stop, My Lord.” A feminine voice giggled. “They'll see us.”

“I do not care,” the masculine voice responded.

She lifted her head to see the two lovers kiss quickly before dashing off into the gardens. A smile crossed her face at the playfulness between the two, and then her tears came again, knowing she might never again experience the sweetness of

flirtation the way she had with the Duke.

Why couldn't he just admit that he liked her?

She knew she was lacking in many ways and might not be able to perform well as a duchess, but she learned quickly and could adapt. She loved him enough to try, so why couldn't he like her enough to see that?

“My apologies, My Lady. I should not have taken such liberties with you. It is an insult to your person. I shall make sure that it does not happen again... You are an innocent. I should never have seduced you or invited you to spend time alone with me. It was ungentlemanly of me, but I could not help myself. It will not happen again. You have enough knowledge now not to require my help or my lessons. I will step aside now to allow you to pursue happiness.”

His parting words had been apologetic, but they still didn't dull the sting of separation.

She sighed, running her fingers through her hair. If she intended to escape unscathed, she would have to learn to live in a world without the Duke.

CHAPTER 21

The heart, Selina realized, is the most stubborn organ in the body because it does not listen to logic. It chose someone it wanted, not considering things other than the feelings this special person evoked.

Falling in love was a novel experience for her. Growing up, she could have easily been elected as the most logical young woman of the ton just based on her pragmatic approach to various matters. She had lost a lot of suitors simply because of her chaotic, unapologetic love for logic.

All that disappeared when Richard was involved. He stripped her of her walls as easily as he removed his shirt. He was a fever in her blood, a fever that flared hotter every day, taking away her common sense and inhibitions whenever she was with him.

It seemed like another lifetime when she had judged young couples who were being suspected of anticipating their vows. But falling in love with Richard had made her a little empathic towards them.

She understood now, with the wisdom of a woman, the power of a lover's touch. How easily it could send inhibitions and common sense flying out the window, leaving one a happy puddle at their lover's feet.

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This love made her willing to do anything, be anything, to make him happy. Somewhere in the distance, the carcass of her long-abandoned pragmatism whispered that she was letting him play games with her emotions. Pulling her forward one minute, then withdrawing the next.

She knew she should be angry about this, but for the life of her, she could not. He was addictive, like laudanum. She wanted him for herself, and her only consolation was the fact that she was not the only one who was affected by the desire that coursed through her veins. She lived for the moments when he lost control and kissed her deeply.

She had never thought of playing the role of a sensual minx for him, but she contemplated it simply to watch the ultimate battle of his self-control against his desires. She loved it when his desires overpowered that legendary self-control.

She had come to realize quite painfully that the fact that he desired her—and was helpless against his desire for her—did not mean that he loved her or wanted to build a life with her.

The signs were there. Them meeting under the cover of the night while he trained her to attract a suitor, and him apologizing after each delicious interlude while referring to her need to attract a suitor.

The signs were quite glaring, but she was too blinded by her love and lust to see it. She had thought that, eventually, he would give in to his desires and marry her, but whatever stopped him from making an honest woman out of her was more powerful than his feelings for her.

While the idea of waiting for him was tempting, she could not. Time was against her. She was growing a little longer in the tooth, and her chances of finding a suitor decreased with every day that passed. She needed to secure a proposal soon, for Diana's sake, and it seemed there would be none coming her way from the Duke.

She had to secure a marriage proposal soon, even if it was not the one she desired. She would simply have to settle for what was available, since the one she wanted was out of her reach.

When she came in from the balcony, where she had been sitting for the better part of thirty minutes, she saw Peter standing near the staircase with her aunt, their heads bowed together, their faces wreathed with smiles.

Martha kept shifting her weight from one foot to the other, and her body, Selina could see from a distance, was vibrating subtly. Her aunt was excited and was making a serious effort not to break into dance the way she wanted to. The fact that few things on this earth could excite the elderly woman caused Selina to walk a little faster to reach them.

When Selina was a few feet from them, Martha noticed her and flashed her a blinding smile. "Come, my dear," she said, taking both of her hands.

"Good evening, My Lord," Selina greeted Peter with an awkward curtsy, since her aunt was still holding her hands.

"Good evening, My Lady," Peter replied with that charming half-smile that had half the ladies of the ton swooning.

The man was lethally handsome. So why couldn't he inspire even a third of the desire that Richard did with just a smirk? Why couldn't she desire him? All her problems would be solved if she did.

“I just received the most fantastic news, dearest,” Martha said, drawing her attention back to her.

“What might that be, Auntie?” Selina asked.

She already has an idea of what could inspire such happiness and contentment in her aunt, but she held back from assuming things and waited for her to break the news.

“Selina, my dear, it seems that you will soon be a countess,” Martha said, bouncing on her feet.

That announcement took some time to sink in.

“The Earl has just asked for your hand in marriage. He would have asked Stephen, but he is away. So he asked me,” Martha said, her voice brimming with such excitement and enthusiasm that she reminded Selina of a child standing before her unopened Christmas presents.

Martha looked her best when she was happy. Too bad that Selina could barely summon a smile. Surely this is what she had longed for and attended lessons for, so why did she feel so empty now?

Turning to Peter, she plastered on her brightest smile. Bobbing a curtsey, she gave him the sultry look that Richard had taught her—the one from beneath her lashes.

“I would be honored, My Lord, to be your wife, but perhaps this is a little fast. We have only just met, after all,” she said, ignoring the painful pinch Martha gave her.

She understood the reason for the pinch. She was committing the ultimate faux pas of looking a gift horse in the mouth.

“Yes, My Lady,” Peter said, lifting her hand and placing a kiss on it. “I am sure it is a little discomfiting that I am proposing this quickly. But I am fascinated by you, Lady Selina,” he admitted, smiling a little shyly at her. “I admire your wit—your intelligence is quite refreshing. You are the embodiment of everything I have been looking for in a wife. I am convinced of it. I want to marry you and bind you to me before any other man discovers what a rare gem you are and snatches you away.”

“Surely you do not mean that?” she tried to argue, uncomfortable under the affection in his eyes.

“Oh, but I do,” he said, holding her hands. “My words are rational, and you cannot say you do not know my heart by now. I love our conversations. They make me question the norms and put a lightness in me I have not felt with anyone else. You truly are a rare gem. It would hurt me if I were to miss eternity with you.”

Perhaps if he had made a declaration of love and had tried to flatter her by extolling her beauty the way some of her suitors did, she might have found it easy to refuse him.

But, on paper, Peter was a perfect match. He was handsome, titled, intelligent, and an excellent conversationalist who was interested in most of the topics she liked. Marrying him would be like marrying her best friend.

Their marriage was guaranteed to be filled with laughter and happiness, with many good-looking children running around their feet. She could see it now. Peter was going to be a great father, nothing like Society’s perception of parenting. She suspected that he would be content to play with his children.

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He was perfect. Why, then, was she not happy? Why was she reluctant to accept his proposal when it was evidently the answer to all her prayers?

“Your proposal is highly welcomed, My Lord,” she said at last, noting the relieved smile on his face. “However, I will need time to think about it.”

“Take all the time you need, Lady Selina,” he said with a smile. “But please do not take too long. I might grow a bit impatient.”

That was another reason why the man was a perfect gentleman. He was unlike the ones that made up most of the ton, who believed that they were nature’s gift to women and, as such, should be prostrated to.

In contrast, Peter was a unique blend of humility and confidence, and his offer would have been attractive if she were not so romantically entangled with a certain stubborn duke.

“Please keep in touch,” he said with a bow. “I look forward to a positive response.”

With that, he walked away, leaving her to the privacy of her thoughts.

At some point, Martha had retreated while they were speaking. But just as quietly as she had disappeared, she reappeared.

“Why did you do that?” she asked, a thoughtful look on her face.

“Do what?” Selina asked innocently.

“You tried to scare off the Earl!”

“Why would I want to do that?” she retorted.

“Because you are afraid,” Martha said quietly, a shrew look on her face.

Suddenly, Selina felt naked in front of her aunt, as if the woman could see into her soul just by looking at her. The sensation was not comfortable, and Selina squirmed in embarrassment.

“You are afraid to give him the chance to love you because you won’t be available to wait on your lover.”

“That is not—” Selina started defensively.

“Please do not lie to me. I have seen the looks the two of you exchange when you think no one is looking.”

Selina deflated at that comment. So much for being discreet.

“Oh, you thought I would not know? Dear girl, your room is just across from mine, and I am a light sleeper. I always knew when you snuck off to see him. I did not comment on it because I wanted you to be happy, and I trusted that you had a good head on your shoulders. I support love—young love, especially—but I must be frank with you, dear Selina,” Martha said, raising her hand to tuck an unruly lock of dark hair behind her niece’s ear.

“Your Duke might be a little too damaged to ask for your hand. I do not blame him, what with the parents he had. I know he might be scared and overwhelmed by the intensity of his feelings for you. Unfortunately, there is little you can do about it. It is a path he must walk alone, but you cannot allow him to waste your productive years,

both for your sake and Diana's. Peter is a nice enough man with a good moral compass. You will be happy with him. But in the end, it is your choice to make. I can only offer guidance. Good night, sweet girl," she said, patting Selina's shoulder before leaving her to her thoughts.

No one had told Selina that navigating the marriage mart might be so treacherous. This was harder than learning to conjugate verbs in Latin. Her father had given her the best education, but even that could not save her from her dilemma.

She was caught between two men—one that she loved and one that wanted to marry her. And while it pained her, there seemed to be only one way to settle the matter. It might be best to marry Peter and hope that her interest in him might turn into love and affection. But what would happen to her heart?

To do what she wanted to do, she had to, first of all, stop thinking about Richard. Stop imagining and dreaming of his hands on her body and how exquisite they had felt.

She had to cure her addiction to the man if she had any hope of marrying Peter. Because while she was willing to be pragmatic, she did not think it was fair to marry one man while imagining another man as her husband. It would be cruel to a good man like Peter, and frankly, she would feel terrible for it.

Even now, she could still remember what it felt like to stand in Richard's arms and flirt with him. To watch the gleam in his eyes as they bantered on the dance floor, all the while dreaming of his kisses and wishing they were alone. She was even going to suggest it before the music ended and Richard bade her farewell, wishing her the best in her endeavors.

It had felt like a bucket of cold water thrown over her, bringing her to her senses with stinging clarity. While Richard embodied the qualities of a good gentleman, he was

also ruthless in his ability to torment her.

It was cruel of him to devastate her body and senses so frequently that she was positive he had tied her to himself in ways that were not easy to see. She had fallen irrevocably in love with him, but he had found it quite easy to walk away from her. She had wanted to scream at him for the emotional turmoil he was forcing her through, even though he had never made her any promises.

She had made the unfortunate mistake of assuming that their feelings were enough to make him marry her. But Richard seemed even more wary of matrimony than he was of losing her love and attention. She had assumed that their feelings would be enough, and no matter how it pained her to admit it, she had set herself up for heartbreak by doing that.

Perhaps if Richard saw that Peter was interested in marrying her, he might be motivated to toss his excuses out the window and marry her. But the selfishness in that thought stopped her short.

Was she truly willing to take advantage of an innocent man's sincerity to make an insincere man jealous?

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The fact that she considered it told her what she knew. She had to meet with Richard and try again, this time being brutally honest and direct. The outcome would decide to whom she would walk down the aisle.

Was it going to be Peter or Richard, the love of her life?

CHAPTER 22

As he left the ballroom and headed to the library, Richard came to the conclusion that he was, in fact, his own worst enemy. The evidence of this notion lay in the fact that he kept attending social events, knowing full well that Selina would be in attendance. Hell, he attended those events just to watch her while his chest burned with conflicting emotions.

After each event, he promised himself that it was going to be the last, but every single time, he broke that promise. Like a masochist hungry for a fix, he found himself attending these events, seeking her out with his eyes the moment he stepped into the ballroom, enduring the burn of jealousy that tortured him as she twirled around the dance floor in the arms of eligible bachelors.

It was precisely because they were eligible that he could not disparage them and convince her to get rid of them. The truth remained that she would have a happier life with any one of those men than she would have with him. He knew himself best, so he knew that the scars in his soul were dangerous—disastrous even. He was damaged and unfit to take such an innocent maiden as a wife.

He knew this, but he could not bring himself to let go. She was like the brightest light

shining amid the dying flames and he was the daring moth who did not mind dancing so close to the light, even if he ran the risk of being burnt badly.

Like an addict, his body wanted a piece of her any which way he could get it. A glimpse of her smile, the taste of her mouth as he kissed her senseless, the feel of her supple body in his arms. He wanted her with a hunger that was frightening, and that need was fast transforming into obsession.

It was that obsession that had pushed him to dance with her and flirt so carelessly with her, knowing how close to the fire he was playing. It was also that obsession that fanned the flames of his jealousy, which had made the ballroom unbearable to stay in after he released her for the next dance.

Watching as other men held her, their paws on her back, taking a glance down her bodice as they guided her into the dance, he went a little crazy. His insides burnt, and when he noted the besotted glances they gave her, he felt the burn growing sharper while his hold on his self-control slipped with every moment. So he left before he gave in to the urge to inflict harm on those gentlemen for the simple crime of dancing with Selina.

He walked blindly, not particularly caring in which direction he went as long as he was far away from that ballroom and the torture it held. Somehow, he had found himself on the threshold of the library. In recent weeks, the library had become his favorite room in the house, but not because of the mind edification he might receive from the huge, dusty tomes that lined those ancient shelves.

His fascination lay more with the memories the room held. Memories of him pleasuring Selina, listening to her low moans as she hit her peak. Watching with fascination as she laughed at something or watching the passion on her face when she talked about something she loved.

Standing at the door, the room looked innocent enough, burying secrets that no one might ever know. But when he closed his eyes, he could still see her in his mind's eye.

Her back flush with the door. Her dress undone, exposing the delicious mounds of her breasts. Her skin flushed with pleasure. Her green eyes glittering with mischief. That look, more than anything, haunted him night and day, tempting him with the need to replicate it.

He was doomed because, somehow, he knew that it was not going to be possible in the future for him to enter the room without being bombarded with erotic memories of Selina. Even now, he could feel himself getting aroused, the bulge in his trousers proof that his manhood was eager to bring his fantasies to life.

He had waited for so long that he was not certain he would ever be able to resist making her his if he ever had the opportunity to touch her again. That was why he intended to avoid her like the plague, because the next time he was alone with her, he might ruin her, and he would be forced to marry her.

Walking straight to the decanter that contained brandy, he splashed some into a glass and knocked it back in one swallow, welcoming the burn in his throat and totally ignoring the frightening sense of peace inside that told him that he was not truly averse to marrying Selina.

But no matter how much his whole being craved her, he could never bring her into the chaos that was his life. He was better off watching her hate him than destroying her life.

He might have reconsidered the idea if he had not witnessed broken marriages firsthand, but he had, and it would be the height of selfishness to subject such a creature of light like Selina to the pain and heartache that would surely ensue.

Even though he had done his best to separate himself from his parents through the grooming of his actions, personality, and composure, in the end, he was still related to them by blood, and their tainted blood flowed through his veins.

There was this fear in the back of his mind that one day, no matter how hard he fought it, he would still turn out like them—bitter and selfish.

When that happened, he didn't want to leave Selina at the mercy of the monster he was. She deserved a man who loved and appreciated her light and was ready to nurture it. A man who would worship the ground she walked on. Not a man who had dark corners in his past, too numerous to count.

Perhaps that man might be Peter, he thought bitterly, because even though he hated the man, he had to admit that he was worthy of her. The Earl came from an influential family and had a clean criminal record, as far as Richard knew.

He was also handsome in a way that reminded him of a young Adonis. He was the epitome of charm and wit. No woman was able to resist his advances, and he had his eyes on Selina.

Somehow, Richard knew that it was more than a simple affection. The Earl was besotted with her, staring at her when she talked as if she hung the moon.

Richard should know because he stared at her in the same way, but the Earl seemed to have better intentions than him.

He would not be surprised if the Earl asked for her hand in marriage; he had the look of a man who had found a soulmate, and who wouldn't be in a hurry to snatch up the person with whom they had such a connection?

With the man's looks and flair for good conversation, Richard would not be surprised

if he managed to woo Selina by simply stimulating that beautiful brain of hers. The fact that he knew how best to woo her and his certainty that she would appreciate the gentleman's unique wit annoyed him no end, because it meant that she would soon belong to another man.

He would be forced to watch her walk down the aisle while smiling happily at her ridiculously perfect husband. The image did nothing to quell his anger.

He was not going to attend her wedding; there was nothing to do about it. He planned to get roaring drunk the night before. He would rather endure the deathly headache that would follow in the morning than suffer the torture of watching her get married to another. Forever out of reach.

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But then she had never been his, no matter how his heart sang that she could be. His heart was known to want impossible things. It had wanted his parents to get back together at some point, but looking back now with the jaded eyes of an adult, he knew that even a miracle would not have saved their marriage. They were mismatched from the very beginning. Their union was always meant to end in tragedy, and he swore he would never repeat that mistake.

Just then, he heard footsteps in the hall outside the closed doors of the library. Whoever it was, he hoped that the person did not deem it fit to come in because, at this moment in time, he did not feel like he was in the right state of mind to accommodate anyone.

Anger, jealousy, desire, and alcohol roiled like a toxic cocktail in his gut. He just wanted peace and quiet to recover enough to don his stoic mask and endure the rest of the evening.

The passerby might have heard his prayer because the footsteps stopped for a few moments and then continued, getting louder as the person came closer to his door and passed it. He was about to heave a sigh of relief when the door opened, and he was staring once again at the bane of his existence.

“Oh, you are here,” she exclaimed softly, her eyes sharpening with surprise when she saw him standing close to the table, turned halfway towards the brandy decanter, the stopper in his hand.

“I am here,” he replied as he replaced the stopper, sealing the decanter once again.

When he turned back, he saw that her eyes were fixed on his hands where they still were on the decanter.

“Do you want some?” he asked, lifting the decanter slightly.

“No,” she said, startled, her eyes darting away.

“Well, I advise you to come in. I am sure you would not be glad if we were caught alone,” he said, watching as her eyes widened with panic.

It was as if she had not realized that she had been standing in the doorway for almost a full minute.

She closed the door behind her, then walked in, her eyes darting around as if she was seeing the room for the first time. She was avoiding looking at him. Instead of feeling smug about it, he was irked.

“What are you doing here, Selina?” he asked bluntly. “I would have thought you would be happier out there, entertaining your suitors. Perhaps that way, you will be walking down the aisle soon.”

He knew that his tone was accusatory and taunting, but he could not help himself. He expected her to take offense, but he was not ready for the rage that blazed in her eyes when she turned back and stomped towards him. She did not stop until she was almost pressed against him.

“You, Richard, are a cad,” she spat, jabbing her finger into his chest. “You promised to teach me how to attract a suitor but not how to attract the suitor I want. You are quite content to throw me to the wolves while claiming you have taught me everything. You are no gentleman!”

Her chest heaved with her passion, a becoming flush spreading across her face down to her exposed bosom. Nothing spoke volumes about his madness more than the fact that he found her even more tempting at that moment, his arousal flaring even as he reminded himself that this was the reason he could never marry her.

The passion between them burned too close to the surface, and he could see that passion turning into destructive anger as easily as it could turn into maddening desire. No matter how he craved her, marriage with her would be a disaster, and no matter how selfish he was, he never wanted to watch elegant and logical Selina transform into something else under the passion that threatened to take over their senses most of the time.

He did not need to take the chance to know, and he would do anything to avoid dragging anyone into that hell.

“Selina, I have taught you everything I know. Look,” he said, waving his arm so he was gesturing in the direction of the ballroom. “You have a ton of suitors waiting in that room who would do anything to dance with you and marry you. I fail to see what the problem is.” He furrowed his brow in confusion.

Instead of calming her down, his words only threw fuel onto the burning fire of her rage.

“But I do not want any of them!” she hissed. “I have listened to your lessons, dressed in clothes that are not always comfortable, danced until my feet are covered with blisters, and learned how to play the game that the ton loves. But in the end, it failed to give me what I want.”

“What do you want, Selina?” he asked softly.

“I want a love match,” she said, her voice rising along with her rage. “I want to marry

a man whom I love and who loves me back. I want everything—the butterflies that take flight in my belly at the sound of his voice, the warmth and peace that I will find only in his arms. I want to belong to him, feeling safe in the thought that he had married me for me. Not my dowry, not my title, or because I am popular. I want him to fall in love with the person I am when I do not wear my finery.

“I do not want to marry a man simply because it is convenient to do so. I want passion, and I want love. No matter how hard I have tried, I have failed to find it, at least not in the marriage mart. So, no, you are not done giving me lessons, Your Grace. You still have quite a lot to cover in order for me to get the suitor I desire. You promised me this. You promised that you would help me get married before the Season ended, but you did the opposite. You abandoned me in that wolves’ den they call the marriage mart. You left me feeling empty and alone. You are a cad.”

By the time she paused her tirade to take a breath, Richard was thoroughly dumbfounded. He had known on some level that Selina felt attached to him as he did her, but not this much.

Somehow, despite all her bluster and anger, he knew that at her core, she was hurting just as much as he was every time he told her to focus on finding a husband—because he wanted to be that husband. He wanted the legal right to touch her how he wanted. He wanted her to belong to him. His to protect, his to cherish, his to... love.

Every night, as he tried to sleep through his heartache, he wondered if he would ever desire another like he desired Selina. Would he ever feel the same sense of awe and euphoria with another woman? He doubted he would, given that it had taken thirty decades of his existence to meet a woman who made him feel that way.

Every night, he went to bed with the fear that he might end up married to a dull young lady. At one point, it had been part of his plan to marry a woman so dull that she had no chance of inspiring any kind of passion in him.

He had wanted a cold, hard marriage of convenience. But then he met Selina, and somehow, such a marriage was starting to feel like hell. It was difficult to reject the light after years of darkness and isolation.

Selina made him feel alive in ways he could not put into words, and every day that he'd led her on, he felt guilty, but he could not stop. He would not stop no matter what he told himself. He was too selfish to stop.

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He had known the danger of seducing her and had watched the desire deepen with her love every day he'd pleased her. He knew that she was falling for him, and while the gentlemanly part of him advised that he keep away from her, the primal part of him craved her with everything, insisting on keeping her for himself.

In fact, a part of him was happy that she was so lost in him that she could never have such feelings for another man.

It was wrong because he was sabotaging the same process that he claimed to be preparing her for, but the truth remained that, deep in his heart, he had always wanted her. Training her to find a husband was a ploy to spend more time with her. Only, those innocent meetings soon turned into impassioned meetings that still made him wake up at night with a raging erection.

His selfishness and desire had eventually brought him to a crossroads, and the question remained: was he going to give in to the overwhelming want that he felt for her, or would he endure the never-ending pain of letting her go?

CHAPTER 23

Staring into those unique green eyes that were fast on their way to becoming as important to him as his existence, he suddenly knew what he had to do, no matter how much he didn't want to.

“You are perfect, Selina,” he said, forcing a reassuring smile as he placed his hands gently on her shoulders, hoping to chase away the frustrated look in her eyes. “You are not quite as awkward as you feel you are. You are beautiful, you are elegant, and

you have the entire ton at your feet, as evidenced by the number of suitors you have attracted in so little time. I wager that you will find a man you could love before the end of the Season.”

That last statement caused a dull ache in his chest, but he swallowed the pain and kept his smile in place. Whatever he suffered was his fault, and he was going to suffer it quietly and with grace.

His smile fixed, he continued, “I know you think you need my help, but you do not. I have taught you everything I know. There is only one thing remaining for me to do to help you find your match.”

He watched as her eyes brightened with fragile hope. He felt like a cad crushing it, but it had to be done.

“What would that be?” she asked, hope spilling into her voice.

“I have to let you go, Selina,” he said hoarsely, watching as the sparkle in her eyes dimmed till it disappeared completely. “It is only when you are completely free of me that you will be able to find your true match.”

“Why?” she asked, her voice rising to a wail. “Why can’t you stay by my side and help me find my match? You are supposed to be my tutor. You can’t mean to abandon me. Why can’t you stay with me?”

“Because I am a distraction,” he said quietly. “With me gone, you will have a better chance of securing the husband you want.”

“But you are not a distraction,” she replied with a short laugh. “You are my friend, and you are helping me find the suitor that I desire.”

“But that is just it,” he said with a shrug. “You want more.”

He watched as she started to shake her head in denial.

“It is so obvious for even the blind to see. You tremble in my presence, you feel empty when I am not around, you seek me out at events, and you are willing to meet me in secluded spaces like the one we stand in, even under the threat of potential ruination. At some point, Selina, you have fallen for me, and I know this because I feel the same.”

He paused at the glitter in her eyes. He knew how she felt. How difficult it must be to stand before another person when emotionally vulnerable. He swallowed thickly, forcing himself to continue.

“Unfortunately, dear Selina, even though I want you so acutely that I feel I might die without your presence, we would not suit one another, and it is best that we go our separate ways now. A few more of these meetings and it might be impossible to do so because a few more of these meetings,” he said, gesturing between them, “and I might not be able to hold back from taking your maidenhead. I scarcely have control where you are concerned. Even now, I am fighting the need to pull you close and kiss you senseless.”

The tears in her eyes finally spilled out and fell in a straight track down her left cheek. The sight of her tears felt like a stab to his heart. He had done this simply because he had not been courageous enough to leave her earlier.

“I know. I know I am an absolute cad for doing this. I think I might have fallen for you a very long time ago, even before we met again in the ballroom. I had just used the guise of teaching you etiquette to justify my need to be close to you.

“I should never have led you on, but I could not help myself. I am addicted to you,

Selina, and it is evil of me to tie you to myself when I do not have the intention of doing right by you. You deserve better. You deserve a man who will love you and adore you. A man who would be proud to declare to the whole world that you are his. Every part of my being wishes that I could be that man, but it is not meant to be. That is why I need to let you go.”

Slowly, he let her go. Stepping away from her was the hardest thing he had done in his life. His face turned away, he walked towards the door, but he was halted by the sound of her voice, raspy but firm.

“Wait!” she called.

It had been difficult enough to walk away from her, and the allure of her presence told him that he knew he should flee, never stop, and never turn back because he might not be able to break free of the temptation twice.

But he ignored the warnings in his head, and even before he decided to turn around, he was already doing it.

She looked so beautiful in the candlelight, fragile like his mother’s expensive china. Her face shone with her tears, and he wanted to pull her into his arms, dry her tears, and tell her that he would be with her forever, but he knew that was impossible even as the thought came to mind.

He was not prepared for the next words that escaped her delectable lips.

“Kiss me,” she said as if she was asking for a dance.

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It was a simple request with a multitude of consequences. The cocktail of emotions that flooded his bloodstream meant that it was dangerous to even stand close to her, not to think of placing his lips on hers. She just might end up spreadeagled on the table while he ravished her, and there was no guarantee that he would stop until he made her his.

“I hardly think that is a good idea,” he said quietly, remaining near the door, maintaining the distance between them.

“But I want you to,” she replied.

“It is dangerous,” he said, swallowing thickly.

“For old times’ sake. Please,” she said, her voice breaking in a way that worsened the ache in his chest. “It would be goodbye for us. I promise to let you go after this.”

“Selina...” he started to protest halfheartedly.

“Please,” she begged, her tears falling in earnest now. “It would be my memory to hold onto when you leave me.”

The sight of those green eyes swimming in tears gutted him, and at that moment, he was ready to do anything to soothe her, even if she demanded the same thing that had been the genesis of this pain. So he took a step forward, then another, until he was finally standing in front of her—temptation made flesh.

He cupped her face, and with his thumb, he wiped her tears, making soothing sounds

in the back of his throat. He waited till she had calmed down enough, and she pressed her face into his warm palms like a kitten.

He dropped his forehead to hers with a loud groan. “You tempt me, Selina Wilkins.”

Instead of replying, she pressed her cheek into his palm. Then, rising on her tiptoes, she placed a kiss on the corner of his mouth.

The furnace within him raged such that he trembled with need, and when she placed a chaste kiss on his lips, it raged even harder. He might have been able to hold on if she had stepped back then, but she lifted her lips to his ear and whispered to him in the most sultry voice, “Kiss me, please.”

He lost any semblance of self-control he had at that moment. In the next, he was hooking an arm around her waist and pressing her body to his. He dipped his head and took her lips, moaning at the mix of relief and desire he felt as he tasted her, enjoying the moans that escaped her lips. He urged her lips to open, entangling his tongue with hers.

He caressed her breasts through her dress, tugging at her laces until he had access. He cupped her breasts, kneading them and twisting her erect nipples until she moaned and gasped, melting in his arms.

Carrying her to the settee in the library, he laid her there and bent his head to take one nipple into his mouth, sucking and nibbling on it while he worked its twin with his free hand.

Releasing her breast, he stared down at her with sultry eyes, his hand sliding up her leg until he touched her core. He caressed her there, spreading her folds to find her hidden pearl. He strummed it, enjoying the screams of pleasure she tried to muffle against his chest.

Touching her pearl with one hand, he played with her erect nipple, sucking and nibbling on it until she was a mass of sensation in his arms, gasps of pleasure escaping her sweet lips and inflaming him in turn. When her peak came, she convulsed, her pleasure bathing her with liquid warmth. He kept touching her, prolonging the sensation until she came back down to earth.

He gathered her into his arms, bringing her to sit in his lap. She stretched to kiss him, inadvertently moving against his erection and eliciting a hiss from his lips.

“Take care, love,” he said between gritted teeth.

“You did not take your pleasure,” she said, staring into his face. “Show me how to give you pleasure,” she demanded in a husky voice, tempting him to take what she offered.

“You do not have to do anything, love.”

“I can pleasure you just like you do for me,” she said, boldly caressing the bulge in his trousers.

He groaned loudly, shutting his eyes against the tide of pleasure that flowed through his veins.

He felt her fingers unfastening his trousers, and he helped her until his hardness sprang out ruddy and eager into her hands. At first, she caressed it tenderly, then she fisted it lightly.

“Tighter,” he grunted. “Hold it tighter.”

He showed her how to touch him, guiding her hands over his length, alternating between a loose and a tight grip until he was groaning his pleasure and spilling his

seed into her hands.

“This has to stop,” Richard said in a whisper when he had regained control of his sanity and realized they had once again fallen into the temptation he had always tried to avoid.

“Are you willing to let go of everything we shared for some unknown reason?” Selina asked, standing up to look out the window into the night.

“I will do anything to protect you, Selina. I will do what I must,” he replied, watching her back as she studiously avoided his eyes.

He knew she was crying, and it was confirmed by her next words.

“Goodbye, Richard,” she said in a voice that shook with emotion.

Pain clawed at his chest, but he had to leave.

Selina heard the door open as he left, her heart aching as she waited for the second slam of the door that would announce his departure, but when it didn't come, she knew something had happened. Sure enough, when she turned around, she found Richard standing still in the doorway, staring at someone.

They had been caught. At that moment, Selina could not decide whether she wanted to laugh or cry.

CHAPTER 24

Selina had always imagined what would happen if they were caught alone, even while she crept down lonely hallways late at night to meet Richard.

She had always known that they would be caught—it was almost certain—but the reality of it was not as frightening as she had thought it would be.

Perhaps it was because, at that moment, she was emotionally numb, unable to feel anything after Richard had quite successfully shattered her heart into pieces.

It was difficult to feel fear when your heart was in pieces, or maybe it was hope—frail and insistent—that this situation might force Richard to marry her.

It was unfortunate that she did not want him that way. She wanted him willing,

asking for her hand because he desired her and could not imagine a future without her by his side.

But if everything went downhill the way it looked like it would, she might not have a choice in the matter, and neither would he.

The silence was broken by the library door slamming shut as Herbert stormed in, pushing Richard back into the room. Now, she could see Herbert's face. He was furious, and he had Richard's collar in his hands, threatening to strangle him.

Richard was not doing anything to defend himself, allowing his body to be easily tossed around by Herbert. Herbert had slightly toned muscles due to sparring, but Richard was built like a Roman sculpture with pure muscle everywhere, and he didn't want to hurt him.

"You will marry her," Herbert said with finality. Cold and unyielding, just like their elder brother.

"I am afraid I cannot do that," Richard replied, a note of apology in his voice.

His response seemed to anger Herbert even more, as his eyes blazed with rage.

"I took you as a man of honor, but you have shown that you are not. We duel at dawn," he said decisively.

"I accept," Richard said simply.

Selina arched her eyebrows incredulously. "You cannot mean to duel. It is outlawed in England!" she said in outrage.

"We would meet in a secret location," Herbert said offhandedly.

“It is a barbaric custom unfit for English nobility,” she shot back.

“Nobility has nothing to do with this, Sister. He had dishonored you. I must demand satisfaction to preserve your dignity.”

“Dignity?” she asked with a bitter laugh. “What good will my dignity do me if either of you died or sustained life-threatening injuries because of me?”

“It is what has to be done, Selina. Please stay out of it.”

“Please, Herbert,” she begged, stepping forward so she could loop her arm through his. “There is no reason for you to duel with him. I was the one who found him here. I wanted to meet. I promise you that nothing untoward happened. We only shared a kiss. That was all,” she said, staring earnestly into his face.

It was more than a kiss, of course, but what her brother didn’t know could not hurt him.

She kept staring into his face, using her most persuasive voice, and soon, his resolve faltered, bringing a smile to her lips.

“There will be no duel,” he said reluctantly, still eyeing Richard with distaste. “But the deal only remains if the Duke proposes to you.”

Richard opened his mouth to answer. Selina already knew what his answer would be; he had been saying it to her for the past few hours, and she knew it was not the right answer to give Herbert if they were to preserve the fragile peace she had managed to broker.

“I do not want to marry him,” she blurted out, effectively shocking Richard, who turned to her with an astonished look on his face.

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“But Selina...” he started in a cajoling tone.

“I will marry the Earl of Sanderson. He has expressed to Aunt Martha his wish to court me and make me his Countess. I shall be very happy, indeed,” she said with a laugh that was supposed to be joyful but sounded false and bitter to her own ears.

She knew already from the look on Herbert’s face that he did not believe her fake enthusiasm. That was the disadvantage of trying to fool a sibling who knew her so well. They could spot her prevarications from a mile away.

“I never knew that the Earl had asked for your hand in marriage,” he said, furrowing his brow in confusion.

“Yes, he was not able to tell you. You were not there at the time, so he asked Aunt Martha for her permission to court me.”

“Well, Aunt Martha told me nothing.”

“Perhaps she had forgotten.”

She forced a laugh, but it came out fake as well, and she closed her eyes briefly in mortification. Herbert was watching her closely with suspicion.

She forced a smile and continued, “You know how Aunt Martha is. She was probably so preoccupied with planning my supposed wedding that she totally forgot to tell you.”

“Perhaps I should go and ask her when we are done here,” he said, turning his cold gaze on Richard.

Herbert had known for some time that something was burning beneath the surface between his sister and the Duke of Seymour. It was there in the glances they exchanged from across the room. It was there in how close Seymour held her when they danced and how he growled under his breath whenever he spotted her in another man’s arms.

Those two wanted each other, and it was annoying watching them circle each other in public instead of announcing their engagement. Herbert had guessed that they met secretly because the attraction he sensed between them did not seem like one nurtured with few public meetings, especially not when they were at a house party together, with ample spaces for private assignations.

He had guessed, but he had hoped that his logical sister and her lover were level-headed enough to save themselves from ruin. That was until he had found them in the library.

He had decided to take a walk down those lonely corridors to clear his head and give himself a respite from the suffocating air of the crowded ballroom. He was enjoying his solitude until he came to the library door and heard distressed voices. He was contemplating opening the door when it opened and he found himself staring at a disheveled Duke of Seymour. Over his shoulder, he could see an equally frazzled Selina. It didn’t take a genius to put two and two together.

But something about Seymour’s expression gave him pause. For someone who was caught in a compromising situation with a lady and faced the possibility of a confrontation with the lady’s brother, he showed no signs of panic or remorse. Instead, his expression was blank, except for flickers of hope, as if he wanted fate, something other than himself, to force him to do what he wanted to do.

He looked like hell. His eyes were rimmed by dark circles, as if he had not had a good night's sleep. Perhaps the lack of good sleep had made him slow to realize the gravity of the situation.

Well, Herbert was there to rectify the situation.

“You will marry her,” he said, injecting all the anger and outrage he could muster into those four words.

After all, that was the role of the affronted brother, even though he was not quite as incensed as he pretended to be. His older brother was not in residence, and in his absence, he was going to be as protective as possible of their sisters. Never mind that he was rooting for Seymour to marry Selina.

Pushing his way in, he became even more perplexed because, apart from looking disheveled, Selina looked frazzled, her face blotchy and wet with tears. Whatever their reason for meeting privately, it had not ended well.

His annoyance with Richard turned into full-blown anger. While Seymour was a friend of their family, he had no right to cause Selina distress for any reason.

“We will duel at dawn,” Herbert barked, and this time he was really angry.

The reply he got was strange because the Duke accepted with a resigned, numb look in his eyes, like he didn't really care what the outcome was. Like he was already in hell and could not imagine a failed duel being worse than his present situation.

It was his sister who begged, insisting that she was fine marrying the Earl, who had already asked for their aunt's permission to court her. But Herbert knew something was wrong because her smile was overly bright. It did not reach her eyes, and she stole glances at the Duke as she spoke as if willing him to react to the presence of a

rival suitor. He saw her disappointment when Seymour showed no reaction, his head still bowed as he leaned against the wall.

“Have it your way then, Sister,” he said at last, eager to give them space to sort out their problems. “Seymour,” he called, waiting until the other man raised cold eyes to his before continuing. “I will come back to demand a proposal if Sanderson does not propose. This time, I will not hesitate to demand satisfaction if you fail to propose.”

He waited for the Duke’s nod of assent, the movement slow as if it cost him a great deal of strength to make it.

Richard always knew they would get caught; the possibility was there, lurking under the surface while they started being careless about their meetings. He had allowed passion to get the better of him and pleased her in semi-private locations. He had known that one day, they would get caught, and perhaps the thrill of doing the forbidden made it sweeter. Perhaps he had even wished for them to get caught so that he would have an external reason to hold on to her.

Because she would be ruined if he did not, and their reputation would be destroyed if they did not. So when he had encountered her brother just outside the door while he could still taste her on his lips, he had been calm. A tranquility that was strange as he waited for his outburst—and he knew it would come because no self-respecting older brother would be happy to discover his sister in a compromising situation with a man, family friend or not.

Perhaps he should have been grateful that Stephen was not the one who caught them. He very much doubted that it would have ended with threats of a duel and furious warnings. He was sure that, by now, he would be nursing a sore face from well-placed blows from the man. Somehow, he even wished he had been punched in the face. At least he would have physical pain to distract him from the throbbing in his chest, which worsened when Selina turned wounded eyes on him.

“Goodbye, Richard,” she had said in a hoarse whisper. “I wish you happiness.”

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With that, she turned and walked out of the library without a backward glance. Perhaps she shouldn't have bothered to wish him happiness.

He was in hell. Men in hell did not need happiness. He certainly did not deserve it.

CHAPTER 25

Selina watched the Mulford estate through the carriage window as the vehicle carried her away from the building that had sheltered her for the past fortnight.

It felt surreal that it had only been that long, even though it felt like a lifetime since the first day of the house party. She guessed that her perception of time might have been altered by the changes that her life had seen in such a short time. She had fallen in love, had a torrid affair, and had her heart broken.

She should probably turn her gaze away from the window, since the Mulford estate was now like a dot in the distance. But she would rather stare at the uninteresting scenery than see the pity in their eyes.

The concern in their eyes had been suffocating from the moment she stepped into the carriage, and she feigned a fascination with the scenery to avoid them.

If she had to endure the looks they gave her any longer, she feared she would burst into tears, even though she felt there were no more tears to shed, considering that she had wept through the night and her eyes were still swollen.

Logically, she knew she was supposed to be angry with Richard for leading her on

and then leaving her lonely when she had fallen for him, but emotions were a fickle thing, and they hardly flowed with logic. She missed him not just because of his physical presence but the fact that he was her soulmate. She missed speaking with him, listening to the timbre of his voice as he spoke on subjects he was passionate about. She craved his touch and the feel of his arms around her.

She was in love with him, and she had no other option than to hope that the dull ache in her chest might lessen with time and she would be free of this torment. But for the moment, she had to take one careful step after another, moving on with her life, until it didn't feel as painful and she could be her normal self again.

"I hope that the Earl will propose as soon as we return home," Martha piped up, probably tired of the silence. "We must prepare the house to receive suitors once we return," she continued, vibrating with excitement.

Selina could imagine that her aunt had a huge smile on her face, complete with that dreamy look she always wore when she was excited and lost in happy daydreams.

"I cannot tell you how happy I am about this union. At least all those mamas will eat their words when they realize that my niece bagged an earl. An earl!" Martha emphasized the title like it was one of a god.

"He is yet to propose, Auntie," Selina said quietly. "I do not think it prudent to count our chicks before the eggs are hatched. He might decide not to propose. After all, it is the prerogative of the gentleman to change his mind."

"He will propose," Martha said stubbornly. "You did not see how besotted he is with you. He will not entertain the possibility of another gentleman stealing you from him. Trust me, my dear, you are as good as a countess already."

Perhaps Selina should be happy. Many young ladies in the ton would kill to land an

earl and become a countess, but she wanted to be a duchess to a duke in particular. It was a pity that he did not want it to be so. Because she knew in the depths of her heart that she would be content to be his wife even if he was not a peer.

But no matter how much you loved a man, you could not force him to accept adoration. Not when he was in love with his own misery and was content to stew in it, even if it cost him precious time that he could have spent in your arms.

Richard was foolish, stubborn, and aggravating, but he was still the man she loved, and perhaps she was even more foolish for allowing herself to fall in love with a man who had told her over and over again of his inability to marry.

Perhaps in her stupidity, she had thought that the passion between them was enough and could change his mind on the subject, but it did not. So, she had broken her own heart with her own hands. But despite the pain that felt like a permanent weight on her chest, she could not bring herself to regret anything. Every moment she had spent with him was precious. If she could go back in time, she would not change a thing, even while knowing that the outcome would be painful.

“Are you well?” Diana asked tentatively, her voice brimming with concern.

“I am,” Selina lied.

Perhaps if she did so several times over, it might become true.

Her eyes met Herbert's. There was an unspoken pact between them to keep what he saw in the library a secret, and she could see the concern in his gaze. She quickly looked away, returning her gaze to the window.

“You do look wan, my dear,” Martha noted. “Perhaps a bath will be just the thing to bring back color into your face.”

“Yes,” Selina replied simply.

It would be nice if she could return color to her life that simply. Perhaps she wouldn't feel so much despair.

Richard was not himself, Johanna came to that conclusion when they returned home. The charming, handsome gentleman who usually avoided her like the plague was gone, replaced by a stranger who just happened to wear her son's face.

His face was blank, and he spent most of his days in his study staring into thin air without getting any work done. She knew this because the butler had complained to her about work piling up. She had told him to complain to Richard, and she was surprised when he told her that her vibrant, usually compassionate son had taken to snapping at servants and giving curt replies to any complaint.

That had made her raise an eyebrow, and she had stormed into his house, dismayed to see that he looked unkempt, his beard untrimmed and his clothing askew—evidence that he had shunned the servants and they were now wary of entering his study.

“Seymour,” she called quietly. When he raised red-rimmed eyes to hers, she continued. “I require your presence downstairs. I would call for a bath, so wash and come downstairs. You will have breakfast with me.”

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He stared blankly at her for a long minute, and she half expected him to ignore her.

Richard had not done well with orders, at least since he went off to college and returned as a man of his own. So, she was surprised when he rose from his seat. His shoulders were a little hunched, dwarfing his usually tall figure. He staggered past her towards the door like a drunk.

Perhaps he was drunk because the stench of alcohol she caught as he moved past her was so potent she was convinced that it could kill.

Turning on her heels, she left his study and instructed the servants to draw a bath for the Duke and clean his study.

She sat at the breakfast table, waiting until he joined her. He dragged his feet in, like a man being dragged to his slaughter, and dropped into the seat opposite her without bothering to greet her or acknowledge her presence. That act further cemented her theory that he was not himself. It was no news that Richard loathed her, but he at least made sure to acknowledge her, and he valued propriety above his hatred, at least.

Now, he had taken to pushing his food around on his plate, hunched over as if there was an invisible weight on his shoulders preventing him from keeping his back straight.

“Do you not like your food?” she asked. When silence greeted her, she tried again. “Perhaps you can sit up straight. Slouching is unseemly.”

That got his attention, as he fixed her with rage-filled eyes.

“Why? Because it offends your sense of propriety? This is my house, Madam, not a dinner party. Nobody cares if I sit up straight like a rod was stuck up my arse.”

Johanna flinched at the vulgar word, but he was too angry to care.

“Nobody cares if I do not use the right spoon to eat my soup or if I am holding my fork too tightly. I am tired. Tired of all these rules. I am too exhausted to adhere to these worthless rules. Besides, I think you are the worst person to educate on propriety or the lack of it. I wager you require the lecture more than I do, with the numerous scandals you have under your belt,” he said bitterly, before popping a piece of potato into his mouth and proceeding to chew it viciously.

The force of his outburst left her speechless for some time. He might hate her, but he never used outright vulgar words when speaking to her because his training strongly suggested that he should be mindful of his language when speaking to a lady. Not that he thought her worthy of the consideration. The fact that he had abandoned even that tenet of propriety was concerning.

“Propriety is everything, Richard,” she said in an admonishing tone. “It is what makes us nobility. It is what differentiates us from the common folk. You should know this; you are a duke, after all.”

“And did Father care so much about propriety?” he asked, a cold smile touching his lips. “He was, after all, a duke as well, wasn’t he? I do not think the two of you cared about propriety as much as you preached it.

“Did you value propriety so much when both of you were comfortable having your lovers come in and out as they wished? Or when you both seemed to be running a competition for who had the most love affairs? You are hypocrites, both you and

Father.”

He dropped his cutlery, so it fell onto his plate with a noisy clatter, briefly startling her.

“We definitely were not saints,” Johanna began, clearing her throat, her head bowed so that she avoided his eyes. “We did care about propriety and our reputations. That is why we were most discreet with our affairs. We kept it away from the eyes of the ton.”

“Truly?” he asked in a darkly amused voice, sitting up and then leaning forward on his elbows, his angry eyes meeting hers. “You truly think you were discreet? What about the servants? You did not think they had eyes?”

“They dare not—” she began.

“You must be delusional if you believe that you can control them. How did you think that your secret affairs became known to the ton?”

“It is just a rumor. No one believes it, since no one can provide proof,” she said with a triumphant smile.

Richard’s sardonic smile turned into one of disgust. “The two of you were very shallow and weak.”

“Language...” Johanna warned.

“You did not care about your marriage or your only son. Instead, you were more concerned with what the ton would say, checking if they noticed what you did and making sure that your masks remained intact. Making sure that all your dirty deeds remained buried in the estate so that nobody could guess how broken we were under

the surface.

“That is why you were obsessed with etiquette lessons. You could not be bothered to care about your son’s upbringing, except for his manners, so that I would be the perfect foil to silence all the whispers. So that it would be difficult for them to believe that you were so terrible when you had a perfect son. I have to give it to you and Father. You two were excellent manipulators. It is high time I stop allowing you the privilege of manipulating my life.”

“You paint us as the villains,” Johanna said defensively. “But we were young once, too, and in love before our marriage turned into one of convenience, and we each turned to other lovers for comfort. It is common among the nobility—I am sure you know.”

“Yes, I do, but I doubt that those families abandon their children to pursue pleasure, and it is laughable that you did not think me worthy of your affection, but you thought me worthy to be your decoy. The perfect son who threw all the rumors about you into shadow. No matter what story you came up with to help you sleep at night, the truth remains that you valued your reputation over your own flesh and blood, and if that is not the height of hypocrisy, I do not know what is.”

With that, he stormed off, walking blindly until he found himself in his study. He went in, splashed some whiskey into a glass, and drank it at once. The burn in his throat cleared his thoughts.

He had always thought that he could not be with Selina because he didn’t want to be like his parents. He didn’t want to hurt her and turn her into a bitter person because of his need to have her for himself, but perhaps he was seeing everything the wrong way.

Yes, he was his parents’ son, and he had a healthy fear that he might turn out like

them, but if there was one thing he had noted from his argument with his mother, it was the fact that he was nothing like them.

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They had used him for the better part of his existence. He knew the pain of that rejection, and he knew that he was not capable of subjecting anyone to it, no matter what. He had let them win for years. He had let them prevent him from experiencing true joy, only doing things by the book. It was time to take his life into his own hands and refuse to let their mistakes stop him from experiencing the rare form of love and joy he felt in Selina's arms.

He had to go to her, grovel, and win her back before she married another man and was lost to him forever.

Standing upright, his eyes shining with determination, he retrieved his coat and walked to the door. Just as he opened it, he spotted his mother trying to gain entrance.

“What do you want?” he asked as he donned his coat, before closing the door behind him and locking it. He headed towards the entrance, forcing her to hurry after him.

“I forgot to tell you that I found the perfect girl for you to marry.”

He ignored her and kept walking.

“Did you hear what I said?” she asked in an annoyed tone, causing him to stop at the door.

“Yes, I did, Mother,” he said, turning to flash her a bright smile. “I am going to propose to that perfect girl.”

He turned back and nodded at the butler, who opened the door, and he stepped

outside.

“But you do not know who I speak of,” Johanna called after him.

Richard was not listening.

CHAPTER 26

All Selina wanted was the opportunity to return upstairs so she could curl up in her bed, nurse her aching heart, and reserve some of the energy of which she had very little. But alas, that was not to be, as Martha had woken her early in the morning, ordering her to have her bath and be ready to receive guests in the drawing room.

Selina tried everything, feigning a headache and a multitude of other ailments—anything to remain in her bedroom—but her aunt refused. She was positive that Peter would visit early in the morning to propose.

The idea that the Earl was so eager to ask for her hand that he would not take a day to recover from the long house party they had just returned from was ridiculous.

She had certainly been resting since they had returned the day before, requesting privacy. Diana had visited, doing her best to cheer her up, but her attempts did not yield any good results, so she left her to rest.

A distant part of Selina felt guilty for not even trying to enjoy her sister’s presence, but she was too emotionally exhausted to feel anything. She would have said she was numb, but the pain in her chest proved otherwise.

She knew the moment when Stephen returned with his Duchess. The household became busy, and she could hear the cheers of welcome that indicated their return, but she could not bring herself to go downstairs. She loved her brother and his

beautiful wife, but perhaps it was better she did not show her face so as not to put a dampener on their happiness with her gloominess.

She knew they would come to check on her, so when she heard their voices outside the door, she immediately closed her eyes, pretending to be asleep. She heard the door open before clicking shut. She guessed that Elizabeth had peered in. She recognized her unique, exotic scent.

Perhaps she should have exchanged greetings with her. After all, they were now friends as well as sisters, but that would require her to explain why she did not come downstairs to welcome them, and knowing her friend's nature, she was sure to notice her mood and make sure to wheedle information out of her. She did not think she was ready to talk about Richard and everything that had happened. Not yet.

Were it not for Martha insisting that she come downstairs, she would have remained in her bed, especially when she was not certain that Peter would visit.

But true to her aunt's hope, Peter did come. He looked dashing in his gold embroidered jacket and waistcoat. The color was a perfect foil for his golden looks. He was excellently groomed as usual, yet she felt nothing other than a fleeting admiration for a good-looking man.

"Good morning," he greeted with his charming smile, taking her hand in his and placing a kiss on it. "You look ravishing, as always," he complimented.

"Thank you, My Lord," she replied, fully convinced that he was lying.

She had woken up with a swollen face from all her crying, and even though her maid had managed to conceal the puffiness of her eyes with some well-placed powder, she was aware that she did not look her best. Peter was simply being a gentleman.

When he offered her a bouquet of roses, she accepted it gracefully, forcing a smile on her lips, but she guessed it didn't appear as good as she had expected it to be because he furrowed his brow in concern.

He seemed ready to ask her questions but was interrupted by the arrival of her family. Someone must have informed them of his presence because everyone came down, including Stephen and his pregnant wife.

She would have thought that they would be resting from their journey, but she was sure that news of a suitor coming to ask for her hand was too sweet to resist.

“Good morning, Your Graces,” Peter greeted, accepting Stephen's handshake and bowing to the Duchess before placing a kiss on her hand. “You were notably absent at the house party, but I understand you went on a trip with your beautiful wife. I hope the journey was enjoyable and safe?”

“It was splendid, thank you, Lord...?” Elizabeth trailed off with a smile.

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“Sanderson, Your Grace,” he supplied.

“Welcome to our humble abode, Lord Sanderson,” Elizabeth said, flashing her best hostess smile.

“I dare say it is more than humble,” Peter teased, eliciting a short laugh from her.

Stephen was still eyeing him suspiciously. “I am sure you have business here. I hardly think you came here simply to ask about the well-being of me and my wife. I appreciate the thought, but I would prefer that we move on to the reason you are here.”

He spoke matter-of-factly, earning himself a chastising look from his wife, but his eyes were fixed on the Earl, so he didn't see it.

“I do have something to speak to you about, in regard to Lady Selina.”

“A suitor?” Stephen asked with a raised eyebrow, easing his wife onto the settee before taking a seat beside her and wrapping a protective arm around her shoulders.

Perhaps Selina should have felt insulted that her brother was surprised to see a suitor on their doorstep, but then she guessed that it was not quite out of place for him to be surprised or skeptical of her history with unmarried gentlemen.

“Lord Sanderson had asked for my permission to court our dear Selina, since you were not available. Forgive me for not bringing it to your attention,” Martha said, beaming with pride for having been the first recipient of the news.

At least her explanation caused Stephen to relax, and Selina could see the tension leaving Peter's shoulders. It was definitely not easy dealing with overprotective elder brothers.

"I deeply admire your sister, Your Grace," Peter began, trying to present his suit. "I would love to?—"

"It seems that we went to the same school, Sanderson. I didn't realize it. I heard it during one of these balls," Herbert interjected, startling him and drawing surprised looks from the other occupants of the room.

"Yes, I went to Eton," Peter answered with an indulgent smile. "But I fail to see how this is connected to?—"

"I'm curious about the customs when you were a student. Do tell me if they were always that rigid in their ways or if they were a little more liberal when you were a student?"

"I do not think they have compromised standard. I am here to?—"

"Perhaps you developed your love for riding there? What better way to escape all their rules?" Herbert said, ignoring the warning look Stephen was giving him.

Suddenly, Selina understood what was happening. Herbert was doing his best to prevent Peter from proposing, knowing full well that her heart belonged to another.

"I wouldn't say so?—"

"Perhaps we could ride someday?"

"Herbert," Stephen said, shaking his head in warning.

Herbert deflated, leaning back in his seat.

“I am here to ask permission to marry Lady Selina,” Peter said.

There was total silence in the room as all eyes turned to Selina. Diana and Herbert’s eyes conveyed worry, Elizabeth was curious, Martha was excited—eager for her to accept the proposal—and Stephen’s expression was passive but watchful.

“Tell me, Lady Selina, will you make me the luckiest man in England by agreeing to be my wife?”

Peter knelt down to ask her, his warm eyes shining with hope.

Hope that she might very well destroy.

It was tempting, very much so, for her to accept. The man kneeling before her was handsome, funny, clever, titled, and well-connected. He was the perfect suitor for her.

But the problem remained that he was only perfect for her on paper. Her heart belonged to a duke who didn’t care about her. It would be a sin and a disservice to him to marry him while she carried another man in her heart.

It would be a disaster waiting to unfold, and she knew it. Because every day, she would compare him to Richard, and he would fall short. It would be evil to condemn them both to a life of misery simply because he was available. Peter was a good man, and he deserved a woman who loved him wholeheartedly.

Perhaps she had taken too long to decide because her aunt smiled brightly.

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“Don’t mind my niece. I am sure she would be grateful to marry you.”

“Auntie,” Herbert said in a warning tone.

“She is old enough to make her own choices—do not force her,” Stephen said quietly from beside his wife.

“Actually, I would love to hear her answer,” Peter said, looking up at her hopefully.

Selina took a deep breath. “My Lord, you are a wonderful man.” She swallowed. “Any woman would be happy to marry you, and I am not exempted.”

Hope shone in his eyes.

She looked away and took another deep breath, readying herself to smash that hope into pieces.

“But I do not love you.” A heavy silence followed her announcement, but she forged ahead. “Like I said, I would still like to marry you if you are interested in a marriage of convenience.”

There was a gasp of disbelief now, and it flew across the room. She summoned the courage to look at Peter. He was still on his knees, but the hope in his eyes was dead, disappointment and pain edging his weak smile.

“I thank you, My Lady, for your honesty,” he said, rising to his full height. “I am highly tempted to accept your offer, but I desire a love match, and I had hoped I had

found it with you. Thank you for being honest enough to clear my delusion. I wish you the best in your endeavors.”

With that, he gave her a deep bow, then took her hand and placed a kiss on it. The gesture brought tears to her eyes. He was a gentleman through and through. It was unfortunate that she could not bring herself to fall in love with him.

With a deep bow to her family, he left the silent room, and in a few moments, she heard the front door opening and closing, signaling that he was gone—away from her life and the possibility that he might be her husband.

Maybe she should have felt a sense of loss, but instead, she felt like she had lost a chance at friendship if she needed further proof that she did not love the poor man. This was it. It was better this way.

The room was silent for a while after Peter left. She waited patiently for the dreaded questions that would come with her decision, and they didn't disappoint.

“Well, that did not go as I imagined,” Stephen began, a perplexed look on his face. “I thought you liked Lord Sanderson. I did hear some talk about your interactions at the house party. I had high hopes of you making a grand match with him. He certainly seems intelligent enough to match you.”

“And how did you know this?” Selina asked dryly. “Do not tell me that you have taken to sending people to watch me?”

“I am a duke, Selina,” he said with that arrogant curl of his lip that seemed to have become more common in recent months. “I have my ways of getting information without resorting to underhanded tactics.”

Somehow, she knew that Martha was part of those ways. It wasn't above her to keep

sending messages to Stephen about the happenings around the family, even when he was supposed to be enjoying alone time with his wife.

Selina should have known that her brother was so used to playing a father figure for over a decade that he was less likely to drop such a role, even for a short vacation. The man was given to perfection with a predilection to being controlling.

Not that he would have needed to control Martha or instruct her to do anything. Her aunt was a natural gossip, and she was unlikely to keep quiet when Peter appeared and she saw a chance of realizing her dream of having Selina secure a good match. She was too excited to hold onto the news. Perhaps that was why she was deeply disappointed and speechless at the moment.

“I thought you had a goal to get married this Season? I had thought that the Earl was the answer to that prayer. What happened?” Stephen asked. This time, his tone was one of concern.

“I would like to know the answer to that as well,” Martha said, a note of anger in her tone. “You are more likely to end up a spinster now than secure another good match. You just had a chance at a great match. Tell me why you ruined it!”

“Because I have been lying to myself all this while. I thought I could sacrifice my heart for family and Society, but it is better this way. If I had married the Earl, I would be condemning him to life with a bitter woman because I want a love match. I have realized that it is better for me to be truthful to myself than to live a lie. If the price is spinsterhood, I will not complain. I am fairly tired of the pressure and pretense of the ton anyway.

“But finding love matches is often as difficult as finding a needle in a haystack. Perhaps I am one of those ladies who is destined never to marry. Perhaps it is best that I accept my fate and save myself all the trouble. I am too exhausted now to

consider continuing the hunt for a husband. I will just try and find my way in this world as an unmarried woman. I am sure it will be tough, but it has to be better than an unhappy marriage, do you not think?"

Selina caught Elizabeth's eyes, but she had to look away because the pity in them threatened to drive her to tears.

She should have known that Elizabeth would see through her bluster to the pain she was trying so hard to conceal.

Elizabeth knew that, even beneath her logic and cynicism, she was a young girl given to daydreams and romantic fantasies but was forced to toughen up by the circumstances surrounding her. She was too soft-hearted for her own good. That was why she had allowed herself to get attached to a man who had been clear that he wanted nothing to do with marriage from the start.

Perhaps she had been so blinded by the sweet feelings of first love that she had not realized she was setting herself up for heartbreak.

Now, she was left with the task of picking up the pieces, one jagged piece at a time. Somehow, she knew—even as she gathered the pieces—that she would never be whole again and that she might never be as she once was. Giving, trusting, and loving wholeheartedly without reservation. She hated Richard for taking that part of her away.

At some point during their conversation, Diana had left the room, but Selina had been so engrossed with her emotional struggles that she had not noticed. She looked up in surprise when she heard the sound of running feet outside the drawing room.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:09 am

Diana was standing in the doorway, flushed and panting slightly, a bemused look on her face. She opened her mouth to speak, and the words that fell from her lips took some time to arrange themselves enough for Selina to understand.

“The Duke of Seymour is here.”

Perhaps the villain was not done torturing her and had come to complete his mission.

CHAPTER 27

Richard urged his driver to move faster, pushing the team of horses hard so that they arrived at the Wilkins’ townhouse in no time. Somehow, there was this urgency in his blood that pushed him to get to Selina as fast as possible before she was snatched up by the suitors who hovered around her like flies.

His fear was proven not to be unfounded when he stopped in front of the Wilkins’ townhouse and spotted the Earl of Sanderson being ushered out of the building by the butler.

Richard felt his heart beating fast—so fast that he was scared that he was too late.

He could feel the sweat on the back of his neck as fear constricted his chest. He was almost certain he was too late. Perhaps Selina had already accepted the man’s proposal. She might very well be betrothed to the Earl at the moment and only a few steps away from becoming a countess.

He immediately jumped down from the coach and started walking towards the house

to at least confirm his suspicions. His anger with himself grew with every second. It would serve him right if he was too late. He just prayed that fate wasn't cruel enough to punish him this way.

He could not blame Selina. It was almost impossible for her to reject a marriage proposal from such a perfect man instead of waiting indefinitely for a damaged man who was too wrapped up in his misery to appreciate the gift that she was giving him. He did not deserve her love—not when he had so callously dismissed her, breaking her fragile heart in the process.

Because Selina was indeed fragile, no matter how she loved to pretend that she was tough. A consequence of the difficulty that came with growing up an orphan, especially given the brutal way her parents were murdered. She was given to logic because she thought it was the best way to protect her heart. But she had let her guard down to love him wholeheartedly, and he had broken that trust because of his petty fears.

His excuses appeared ridiculous now in the face of the possibility that he had lost her. He just prayed that he was granted the opportunity to fix his mistake.

He was now standing in front of the steps leading up to the house. He ascended the steps, meeting Sanderson halfway.

“Good morning, Sanderson,” he said, forcing a smile on his face, but it might not have looked authentic because the man did not return his smile.

Now that he stood closer, he noticed a coolness in the other man's countenance.

“I am not sure I share your opinion about the morning, but perhaps I am not in the best of moods. I presume you are here to see Lady Selina?”

“Yes,” Richard answered simply, his eyes glued to Peter’s face to catch any changes in his expression.

You are here to see her as well. What did she tell you? Is she now your betrothed?

“I believe she would be most glad to see you. You make her smile in ways even I cannot.” Sanderson smiled ruefully. “That is probably because you have something I do not. You have her love. You are truly a lucky man. I hope you realize that before it is too late,” he said, patting Richard’s shoulder on his way down.

It took Richard some time to recover from the shock, but when he did, he realized that Selina was still unhitched. She had not said yes to the Earl!

His relief was so acute that he felt dizzy, realizing at that moment how tense he was with the thought that he had lost her.

Looking up into the clear skies, he swore that the sun was winking at him. He thanked the good Lord for the rare opportunity to make amends, promising never to let her go if he could convince her to be with him—to marry him and become his Duchess. Because he knew that he wanted her by his side now and always.

He just prayed that she would listen and be willing to forgive him. He didn’t quite mind groveling several times if it could buy her forgiveness and love.

Shrugging his shoulders, he held tightly to this second chance and climbed up the rest of the steps. He took a deep breath before he ventured into the lion’s den because he knew it wouldn’t be easy.

Perhaps he might be lucky enough to meet with Selina without having to encounter her overprotective brothers—maybe at least Herbert—because he did not want to experience Stephen’s wrath.

He had probably betrayed their friendship by touching his sister inappropriately when he was supposed to be guiding her. He would be lucky to leave with only a black eye if he encountered the Duke.

He wouldn't blame him if he decided to batter his body as punishment for his crimes. He had no sisters, but he did know that every lady deserved to have protective brothers by her side. Selina had them in abundance, and he had provoked their wrath when he allowed his lust for her to take control.

Fighting the urge to flee like a coward, he raised his hand to knock, but before his hand could touch the door, it swung open, and part of his fears became real. It was Herbert, brewing withanger. Someone must have seen him through the window and informed Herbert because he looked hostile and unfriendly.

“Good morning, My Lord,” Richard said with a wry smile, bowing slightly.

It was a little too formal, and Herbert should be the one greeting him because of his higher rank, but beggars could not be choosers. In this case, Richard was the beggar, desperate for the chance to storm into that house and find the love of his life.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 3:10 am

“What do you want?” Herbert asked, his expression drawn and unfriendly.

“Is Lady Selina here?” Richard asked hopefully.

“I fail to see how that information will be of use to you. I believe you might have taken the wrong turn on your way home.”

“I do know the way back to my house. Thank you,” he said with a smile, pushing down the irritation that rose in his chest. “I am here to see Lady Selina. Could you please inform her of my presence?”

“I fail to see why you would be at the home of an unmarried woman who you swore you could never marry,” Herbert said with a cruel twist of his lips. “I believe you have done enough damage. Go home, Your Grace. Do not return here again.”

He remained at the door, effectively preventing Richard from entering the house.

Being a duke meant that all doors in the kingdom were open to Richard, but at this moment, the Wilkins’ mansion front door was the most important one.

“I cannot leave until I have completed my mission here.”

“And what might that be? You have hurt my sister deeply. What more do you want?” Herbert asked, his eyes flashing with rage.

In his anger, Richard could also see the pain the younger man felt, witnessing his sister’s heartache, and at that moment, the guilt struck him anew.

“Please stay away from my sister,” Herbert said in a firm tone.

Richard was about to argue but was halted by the sound of Selina’s voice. She had probably heard their altercation and had decided to intervene.

“Herbert, please,” she said.

Looking up to where she stood at the top of the stairs with the poise of queen, he was entranced once more. Her dark hair fell over skin that glittered with health. She was still the beauty that haunted his dreams. The woman who he was hopelessly and madly in love with.

Well, she was still the same, except she was not quite the same. Her bright, vibrant energy was missing.

There was a stillness to her, as if she was far away, even though she stood right there with them in the flesh.

“Thank you, Herbert, but I can handle it from here,” she said softly, ignoring the mutinous look that Herbert gave her.

In a matter of moments, her brother had gone back into the house, and they were left alone.

“How are you?” Richard asked, for a lack of something to say.

“How do you think I am faring?” she shot back, facing him squarely.

He looked closely at her, and suddenly he was able to see the toll heartbreak had taken on her. She was still beautiful, but her eyes were empty, entirely lacking the mischievous light he had fallen in love with.

In its place was a cool look that was a testament to how jaded she was becoming. Her face was drawn and pale, as if she had fallen sick or had spent a lot of time crying.

He had done this. He had turned a beautiful, spirited young woman into a shell of herself simply because of his cowardice. He wondered how he would start to make this right, but he had to try, both for her sake and his.

“I am sorry, Selina,” he began haltingly. “I am sorry that I threw away our love simply because I was afraid of the unknown. I love you so much I can barely breathe without you by my side. I promise to spend my life with you, apologizing for my mistakes while loving you. I am no longer going to be a coward. I am willing to embrace this journey no matter where it takes us, so long as I have you by my side. Please, marry me?”

He could feel her thawing with each word he said; it was there in the tension that left her shoulders and in the subtle trembling of her hands as she tucked a lock of hair behind her ear.

The last part caused her head to jerk up, her eyes searching his. Fragile hope bloomed in those green depths. But just as soon as the hope appeared, it disappeared, replaced by a wary look. His heart broke that he had turned her into this wary woman who was now afraid to trust easily.

“Why have you changed your mind about marriage? I thought you were firmly averse to it.”

“I am not averse to marrying you, my love. It is you I want to be with for the rest of my life. If you will have me.”

He held firmly to the hope in his heart that she didn't decide to turn her back on him.

At first, her expression remained blank, then tears gathered in her eyes, spilling over her cheeks. Her hands tightened into fists by her sides. She raised one of them and punched his arm again and again until she was sobbing in earnest.

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He gathered her into his arms at that moment, whispering gibberish in her ear as he sought to soothe her, patting her back until she calmed down.

“You do know you are a fool, Your Grace,” she muttered against his chest, causing him to chuckle in relief.

“Yes, but you are not my naive bluestocking anymore.”

“I still love reading,” she said in protest.

“I will endeavor to buy you all the books you want. I will even listen to you review them.”

“Promise?” she asked, stepping away to stare at him with trusting eyes.

His heart soared with love as he replied, “I promise. Does this mean you accept my proposal, My Lady?”

“Yes, of course I do, you oaf,” she said, punching his arm again.

He was so relieved and happy. He held her tighter and buried his face into her sweet-smelling hair. He never wanted to let her go. If he had his way, he would absorb her into him so that she became one with him.

They were interrupted by someone clearing their throat rather loudly, and they broke apart to see Stephen standing at the top of the stairs, his arms folded over his chest.

“I should hope that you plan to make an honest woman out of my sister, with the way you are embracing her in broad daylight. I never would have expected it of you. I always thought you were a stickler for propriety,” he said with an arched eyebrow.

“I do not think he is anymore,” Selina said, her musical laughter bringing a smile to her brother’s lips.

They had been forced to endure her gloominess over the past few days, and hearing her laugh was a welcome change. Richard obviously thought so as well because he was staring at her helplessly.

“Perhaps I no longer care what they think,” he said, staring into her eyes, his love for her shining bright.

Not when the prize is having you in my arms.

“Oy, love birds,” Hebert called, clapping his hands to remind them of his presence. “You can moon over each other later. I believe we have more pressing issues at hand.”

“Such as?” Selina asked, still making eyes at Richard.

“There is the matter of the dowry,” Stephen answered dryly, forcing them to focus their attention on him. “I also have somescores to settle with Seymour before he becomes my brother-in-law. He has to pay for his crimes,” he added firmly.

“And what crimes are those, if I might ask?” she asked.

“He should have known better than to touch his friend’s sister, especially when I had instructed him to ‘guide’ her.”

“That is ridiculous. He didn’t do anything untoward.”

“Your opinion on this matter does not count. This is a matter of honor between two gentlemen.”

“How did you know that he had anything to do with me, Stephen?” she asked, shooting Herbert a suspicious look.

“Sorry, Sister, you know how persuasive brothers can be,” Hebert said with a sheepish smile.

She did know he was a trained warrior and quite adept at wheedling out information.

“The faster we have this conversation, the faster the matter is settled, and I can return to my wife,” Stephen said, turning to head to his study.

“Do not worry, my love. I am made of sterner stuff than you know,” Richard said with a reassuring smile.

“Stay safe,” Selina said, a concerned look on her face, before pressing a kiss to his cheek.

She stood there for a while, watching him walk into the study.

Men were such contrary creatures at times, she thought with a shake of her head.

CHAPTER 28

“You look absolutely ravishing in that dress. I must say that green is your color!” Diana exclaimed as she watched the modiste drape lace over her sister’s body.

In order to make dresses and other pieces of clothing that would make up her wedding trousseau, Selina had been standing on the platform for the better part of the day, being prodded with pins as the modiste worked to get her measurements for the dresses, including her wedding gown.

“Trust me, mademoiselle,” the modiste said in her thick French accent. “I will make sure to make the most beautiful wedding dress, never seen in England. I will make sure they watch you in awe. Trust me, your man will devour you when he sees you in that lingerie.”

Selina blushed when she remembered the samples the modiste had shown her for what was to be her night rail as a married woman. They were provocative, tiny scraps of lace that left little to the imagination, even though she would deny it if anyone suggested it.

She accepted in her heart that she did want to see how Richard would react when he saw her in one of those provocative garments. Would he be overcome with desire for her and ravish her hungrily, or would he stalk her across the room, pleasuring her slowly until she lost her mind? Her vivid imagination was raising her body temperature, and she shivered with arousal.

“Are you cold, Selina?” Diana asked.

Selina's blush only deepened because she knew that her thoughts were far from innocent. With every day she saw Richard, she grew more wanton, her desire growing in leaps and bounds so that they were both looking forward to their wedding night, where they could finally be in each other's arms and devour each other the way they wanted.

The wedding plans were going quite well, especially since Martha was only too glad to supervise everything and remind everyone who cared to listen how grand it was that her niece was marrying a duke, even if she didn't like the mother of the said Duke.

Against her nature, Martha had shown maturity in her decision to overlook the age-long feud between her and the Dowager Duchess in the interest of organizing a wedding that she termed to be one for the ages.

Selina did not care so much about how perfect the wedding would be. She just wanted to be joined in holy matrimony with the love of her life and be left to live out the rest of her life loving him and being loved by him.

She was lucky to have an aunt like Martha, who was so genuinely happy for her and was willing to take up the responsibility of planning the wedding. Since her mama was no more, it was a welcome development that allowed her the chance to just focus on personal things, like designing her wedding dress and trousseau and meeting her future mother-in-law.

No matter how she wanted to pretend, Selina was terrified of the possibility that the Dowager Duchess would not like her. She was well aware of the tumultuous relationship that Richard had with his mother, but she believed that in the depths of her heart, the Dowager Duchess still cared about her son. If she didn't, she wouldn't be trying so hard to be part of his life.

Every parent wanted the best for their child, and Selina wanted the woman to like her because she did not want to live in a house with family members who hated her.

For the first time, she felt genuine empathy for Elizabeth and how she had endured their thinly veiled hostility when she came newly wedded into the family. But in that time, Selina had only seen her as a relic of the family they were at war with—the same family that rendered them orphans—but they eventually thawed towards her when they realized that she was a victim of her own family as well.

Now, at this moment, as Selina contemplated meeting the woman who would become part of her family, she better understood how difficult it must have been for Elizabeth to adjust to a family of three who scorned her because of her lineage. At that moment, Selina's admiration for the woman reached greater heights.

She left the modiste's soon after, extracting a promise from the seamstress that their dresses would be available very soon. She boarded the coach and waited outside while her mind ran through different scenarios. It did not help her anxiety that most of the scenarios involved the Dowager Duchess not liking her.

When she got home, she did her best to clear her mind, focusing on the small tasks of doing her toilette with the help of her maid. In no time, she was ready and boarded the family coach, where the rest of her family sat, waiting for her to join them so they could begin their journey to the Seymour estate.

“Well, that took a while,” Herbert said with a yawn. “For a while, I was convinced that you had grown cold feet and did not want to come and see the Dowager Duchess anymore.”

Selina scowled at him, but he only grinned unrepentantly, content to poke at her already frazzled nerves.

“Stop it, Herbert,” Elizabeth said in a chastising tone. “I would not choose this moment to needle your sister if I were you.”

At that, Herbert relaxed in his seat, choosing to stare out the window, since the Duchess had just gotten rid of his recent source of entertainment.

“I am so nervous,” Selina whispered to Elizabeth.

“Do not be. All married women go through those emotions when meeting their new families. You will do well, Selina. Do not worry,” Elizabeth said with a reassuring smile.

“What if she does not like me?” Selina blurted out. “What if she takes one look at me and decides that I am not a good match for her son?”

“No one can make that decision for the Duke. He is a grown man who makes his own decisions, and he has chosen you. His mother will love you for the simple fact that you make him happy. Just be yourself. She will have no choice other than to love you.”

“Or I could bore her to death with my boring topics.”

“You couldn’t be boring even if you tried, Selina,” Elizabeth replied.

“I am so sorry, Beth,” Selina said quietly after a moment.

“What for?” Elizabeth asked, furrowing her brow with confusion.

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“For the way I treated you when you first joined our family. I did not realize how difficult it is to join a new family. I should have been more welcoming.”

“I come from your enemy’s family, Selina. I would have been more wary and afraid if you had embraced me at first sight, especially knowing the bad blood between our families.”

“Thank you for taking a chance on us.”

“Nothing good comes easy,” Elizabeth said, rubbing her growing belly. “I had the chance to meet the love of my life,” she added, staring adoringly at the resting profile of her husband. Turning to Selina, she continued with a smile, “The gift of meeting my Duke and this beautiful family is worth more than a few weeks of discomfort. However badly you thought you treated me, just remember that I was treated ten times worse by my own blood. Family is more than blood ties, my dear, and I know you are about to acquire new family members who will love you wholeheartedly.”

Selina had always dreamed of having an elder sister, and fate had given her Elizabeth. She firmly believed that she could not have asked for better.

In no time, they were at the Seymour estate, and when they stepped down from the coach, Selina took a deep breath to gather her composure. It would not do to appear anxious before the Dowager Duchess.

She walked to the door, matching Elizabeth’s pace. Her sister-in-law walked a little slower because of her delicate state.

By the time they got to the door, Stephen was already annoyed. The short tapping of his shoes on the marble threshold was evidence of his impatience. Nevertheless, he smiled widely when his wife came into view, wrapping his arm around her shoulders as he pulled her to him.

It was those small movements, those small changes in his expression, that told the story of how in love the Duke of Wilkins was with his Duchess. Selina thanked God every day that he had married Elizabeth; she was the only woman who had smoothed his hard edges.

He was practically putty in the woman's hands, and he did not care. She was grateful to her friend for the transformation she had wrought in such a rigid man.

Stephen lifted the heavy knocker and rapped two times.

The door was opened by Felix, the elderly butler.

"The Duke of Westall and his family to see the Dowager Duchess," Stephen announced.

"Right this way, Your Grace," the butler said, opening the door wider to allow them in.

He led them into a drawing room where the Dowager Duchess sat, sipping her tea. She looked up when she saw them, then stood up to greet them.

The woman was in her fifties, but even Selina could attest to the fact that she looked good for her age, with her high taste in fashion and her natural gracefulness. She was sure the woman still attracted the attention of men.

Seeing her in her home shed light on the rumors that she had many lovers. Selina

wondered how on earth she was going to get along with a woman who was from a different league of women and had higher taste than she could hope to acquire.

“Good afternoon, Duke,” the Dowager Duchess greeted, approaching Stephen.

He accepted her handshake with a bow.

“Good morning, Duchess. We are glad you took the time to receive us,” he said, releasing her hand.

A shadow of a frown crossed the older woman’s face, almost like she had expected him to kiss her hand.

But then Stephen was not the sort of charming gentleman who paid attention to all those rules. The only woman who had his attention was his wife, and everyone in the ton knew this, so they didn’t take offense when he acted a little outside the books of etiquette.

“I have been expecting you,” the Dowager Duchess continued, retaking her seat. “Please make yourselves comfortable.” She waited till they were all seated comfortably before she continued. “Perhaps you could introduce your family to me.”

“Forgive my manners, Duchess. May I present my wife, the Duchess of Westall,” Stephen said, gesturing towards his wife. “My brother, Herbert, and my sisters, Diana and Selina,” he continued, waving in their direction as he introduced them.

“Which one is to be my daughter-in-law?” the Dowager Duchess asked, taking a tiny sip of her tea.

“That would be Selina, Duchess,” Stephen replied, tugging his sister forward so she stood before the Dowager Duchess.

Selina bobbed a deep curtsy, then stood still while the Dowager Duchess scrutinized her from head to toe, her eyes remaining uninterested in whatever it was that she saw.

“Do you have any talents, young lady?” the Dowager Duchess asked.

“I’m good at embroidery.”

“Do you play the pianoforte?” she asked hopefully.

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“No, I am afraid I do not, Your Grace.”

“I suppose you will do,” she said.

Stephen’s jaw worked as he gritted his teeth.

Oblivious, the Dowager Duchess continued, “I do not really have a say in this matter. I am sure you know the state of my relationship with my son?”

Not knowing how best to answer that question, Selina kept quiet and retook her seat.

They sat in silence for some time before her siblings opted to leave to give her the chance to ‘bond’ with her mother-in-law.

Selina panicked, doing her best to convey with her eyes her need for their support, but they ignored her and left.

The silence after they left was deafening, and she could feel herself perspiring with anxiety. It was uncanny how easily the woman opposite her could reduce her from her bold-speaking ways to the timid person she now embodied.

“Tea?” the Dowager Duchess asked, startling her out of her reverie.

“Yes, thank you,” Selina said, rising to pour herself some tea and adding a spoon of sugar to sweeten it. She stirred it and then took a sip, sighing at how relaxing it was.

“Chamomile tea,” the Dowager Duchess explained. “It is quite refreshing, isn’t it?”

Selina nodded.

“It is my favorite tea.”

“I do not recall coming across it here in England,” Selina said.

“It is not quite as popular, my dear,” the Dowager Duchess replied.

And so the conversation began as she told Selina about her travels and all the things she had discovered on the way.

The Dowager Duchess had definitely led a colorful life, and she was proud of it.

When Richard came home from his errand, he was surprised to see them deep in conversation. Greeting his mother offhandedly, he walked straight to where Selina sat on a separate settee. He sat beside her, throwing an arm over her shoulders.

“So, tell me what you ladies were discussing.”

“Nothing that concerns you, I’m sure,” Selina answered, giggling.

“Impossible. I am sure that my mother must have regaled you with tales of my sillier moments as a child by now.”

“You? Silly?” Selina teased. “I would never have guessed it. I was under the notion that you were born serious and unyielding, hanging onto propriety with your tiny fists.”

“That would be you. With your logic, I wouldn’t be surprised if you were lecturing the midwives the moment you were born.”

“But babies do not talk, Richard,” Selina protested between bouts of laughter.

“You don’t say,” Richard said with an exaggerated gasp. “I never would have guessed so.”

In the following moments, Johanna sat watching her rigid, unyielding son flirt with his betrothed, his face glowing with happiness.

Her son was stubborn and rigid at times, but at this moment, he was the most relaxed he had ever been. It was so obvious he was in love with the young lady beside him. He kept giving her fond looks as she talked. She loved it for him, and for his sake, the Dowager Duchess hoped they had a happy, long-lasting marriage because Richard looked his best when he was happy, and she wanted him to remain that way.

EPILOGUE

“You may now kiss your bride,” the bishop intoned.

Finally, Richard could give in to the urges he had been fighting since he saw Selina approaching him, looking beautiful and delectable. He had always wanted to ravish her, her mere presence stirring his lust.

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He was grateful for the coat he wore, for it helped conceal his arousal. He had barely listened to the sermon, with how engrossed he was with his wife and wishing to whisk her to somewhere private where he could ravish her with no restraints.

But then he could not do that without going through the process of marrying her and enduring the wedding breakfast that would follow. He was so distracted, thinking up ways to skip the process, that he almost missed the moment when they were about to exchange vows.

“Your Grace?” the bishop called, dragging him out of his daydreams. “Do you, Richard Nathaniel Curtis, take Selina Elena Wilkins to be your lawfully wedded wife, to love and to hold, in sickness and health, till death do you part?”

“I do,” Richard answered, his voice clear. His eyes were glued to Selina’s, her green eyes an entire galaxy he would not mind getting lost in.

“Do you, Selina Elena Wilkins, take Richard Nathaniel Curtis to be your lawfully wedded husband, to love and to hold, in sickness and health, till death do you part?” the bishop asked Selina.

“I do,” she intoned, her voice high and clear as she smiled brightly at Richard, her eyes luminous and brimming with unshed tears.

Those were happy tears, he knew. When he thought about the hurdles they had jumped over because of his cowardice...

He thanked the good Lord that he had not missed the chance to marry the love of his

life because of his stupidity.

When the bishop gave him permission to kiss his wife, he wrapped an arm around her waist and pulled her to him, bent his head, and took her lips in a deep kiss that conveyed his adoration in ways that words could not.

But just like all his encounters with her, he soon lost his head when she kissed him back. He devoured her mouth with no care for their audience.

It was only the sound of the bishop clearing his throat loudly that called them back to their senses, and they turned to wave to the crowd as the new Duke and Duchess of Seymour.

His former self, who was a stickler for propriety, would have been scandalized to see such a display of affection in public, but he had discovered something he loved more than the appearance of perfection—the beautiful sprite beside him that was now his wife.

Weaving through the crowd, they greeted their guests, thanking them for witnessing the happiest day of their lives.

“At long last,” Herbert said when it was his turn to greet them. “At least now we will be spared the drama.” He rolled his eyes with a smile. “I would advise you to treat her well,” he whispered to Richard conspiratorially. “Trust me when I tell you that her black moods are super gloomy.”

The whole family laughed.

“Herbert,” Selina warned, but the culprit just smiled unrepentantly with the joy that only troublesome brothers felt when they had succeeded in discomfiting their sisters.

“I will miss you so,” Diana said, drawing Selina into a tight hug. “Please write me often. The house will be dull without you.”

“I doubt that,” Selina said with a reassuring smile, taking her sister’s hands in her own. “Herbert will be there to trouble you, and as for a sister, you will have Elizabeth. Stephen will offer guidance. Besides, I believe you will make a match soon and move to your own house,” she added, drawing her into another hug before releasing her.

“And it appears I am only valued for my guidance. I do not know if I should take offense at that,” Stephen said, eliciting a laugh from her. “You look absolutely beautiful, Sister,” he added, pulling her into a hug. “I wish you every happiness.”

“Thank you,” Selina whispered with a watery smile.

She looked into his eyes and saw that they also shone with unshed tears. Stephen might not be given to emotions, but she knew that he probably felt like a proud papa walking her down the aisle and giving her away.

He quickly blinked, masking the vulnerable look, and turned to Richard.

“Congratulations!” he said, drawing him into a bear hug and slapping his shoulder in that rough way that men liked. “I do not need to remind you to be careful with my sister, do I?” he asked, arching an eyebrow in challenge.

Selina tensed up slightly at the thought that they might decide to engage in one of those matches of strength that annoyed her to no end. The last one that was done on the day her dowry was negotiated resulted in Richard coming out with a slightly swollen face where her brother’s blow had landed.

It was well healed now, but she didn’t want a repeat of it. She was going on her

honeymoon, and she preferred to have her husband intact and free of pain. Just as she was about to inform her brother of her preferences, Richard capitulated.

“Yes, of course. I promise to love and protect her with all my being.”

“You better,” Stephen said, slapping his shoulder again.

Elizabeth was the last to step forward.

“Congratulations, Selina. You look absolutely beautiful,” she said with a watery smile. “Please write me often, or I will come visit unannounced. Do ask Stephen how violent pregnant ladies can be. You do not wish to incur my wrath.” She chuckled, gathering Selina into a hug.

“I will. Thank you so much,” Selina replied, feeling her eyes well with tears as she slowly realized that she was leaving her family to become one with Richard.

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While it was not forever, and she could always visit them or they could visit her, it could never be the same as living in the same house with them.

She felt Richard squeeze her waist, and she decided that there was no one better that she could embark on this journey with.

With his hand on her waist, he led her to the wedding breakfast, where they ate and drank. He made an early announcement that he wanted to take his wife home, since the journey to the estate in the countryside was long.

Amidst cheers and tearful goodbyes, they boarded the coach that would take her to her new home.

When the coach had finally moved far from the prying eyes of their guests, Richard stretched out his arms and pulled her onto his lap, eliciting a gasp of surprise from her.

“Finally,” he groaned. “I can have some privacy to ravish my wife.”

He buried his face in her neck and proceeded to kiss and nibble on the sensitive skin there.

“Why do I have the feeling that the country estate is not as far as you made it out to be?” Selina said, chuckling.

“I always knew you were clever, my love,” he said, before sucking her earlobe into his warm mouth, slowly loosening her grip on her sanity. “There was no better way to

make them give me privacy. It was either that or carrying you like a caveman out of that place.”

“You wouldn’t.” Selina giggled.

“You underestimate me, dearest. Perhaps I should show you why you shouldn’t,” he said with heated eyes.

He swooped in and claimed her lips, moaning slightly with relief and desire. Licking her lips and nibbling on them, he urged them open, then groaned when he gained access to the warm cavern of her mouth.

The kiss caught fire as he explored the heated depths of her mouth, his desire climbing to new heights.

His hand moved to the back of her dress, loosening her stays with desperation, pulling on the material until he heard a tear and it fell open, giving him access to her breasts. He immediately cupped them in his hands, kneading them and pinching her nipples, causing her to whimper and writhe on his lap, encouraging his aroused member to harden even further—almost to the point of pain.

His hand found her knee, fighting with her voluminous skirts until it touched her skin. He stroked the inner side of her knee, enjoying the gasp of pleasure that escaped her lips as he worked his way upwards, his thumbs forcing her thighs open until he was touching her core.

She was hot and wet and so tempting that he had to fight the urge to lay her down on the cushion and rut her like an animal. Instead, he stroked her sex, spreading her folds until he found her pearl and strummed it, enjoying the screams of pleasure she tried to muffle against him.

He slid a finger into her warmth, growling with pleasure at the tight fit. The thought of pushing his hard member into her tight core almost blinded him with desire.

Panting against her mouth, he fought for control, concentrating on bringing her pleasure. He nipped her lips, once, twice and then moved lower to her chin then neck and lower to the nub of her desire which starined with her arousal. Her scent nearly undid him but he knew her taste would be the end of him and he laved at her with his tongue, groaning at the sweetness of her.

He wondered if the desire he felt for her would ever dim because he craved her more with each day that passed with an intensity that winded him at times.

Her hands went into his hair and he knew she was close by the sounds pouring from her lips and the way her legs shook around him.

“Richard.” She gasped, spasming in his arms.

He laved at her until she calmed, gathering her into his arms and pressing a kiss to her forehead, as he tried hard to slow his breathing.

“I shouldn’t have done that. You make me lose control, you minx.”

“Whatever will the driver think?” Selina giggled.

“Whatever he chooses to.”

“That is not very proper of you, Your Grace.”

“I believe you have stripped me of all my pretense of propriety.”

Selina laughed loudly at the accusation.

Her eyes widened when the coach jolted to a stop, and she realized that they were home. She looked out the window to admire her new home.

She was in awe of the sheer architectural wonder. It was built with the majestic boldness of the previous century. Its facilities were renovated to match the pleasure and comforts of modern times, and the combination was nothing short of mesmerizing, much like the master of the estate.

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“This is your new home, Duchess,” Richard said, refastening her dress and fixing her hair so that she did not look like she had just been ravished by her husband.

She did not think that it helped much.

When they stepped out of the coach and headed to the house, they were greeted by an elderly butler, who welcomed them with a surprised smile. A look around confirmed that the servants had been expecting their master to arrive later.

Perfect, Richard thought. He wanted alone time with his wife.

“We were not expecting you this early, Your Graces. Perhaps I could go and inform the others to come and greet the new Duchess.”

“Do not bother, Robert. Please do your best to hide the news of my arrival. I do not want to be disturbed,” Richard said.

He grabbed Selina’s hand and pulled her forward so that they were running up the stairs, laughing with exhilaration. Selina barely had time to admire the house before he was ushering her into his bedroom, closing the door, and turning the key in the lock.

Backing her up against the door, he proceeded to kiss her with reckless abandon, fanning the embers of her desire until she was writhing and moaning in his arms.

He suddenly pulled back. She whimpered in protest, but he simply pulled her forward, turning her so that he could divest her of her clothing. In no time, she was

standing naked in the middle of his bedroom.

His eyes roved over her body with admiration and desire, leaving a trail of fire wherever they touched.

“Your turn,” she said, her voice raspy as she unfastened the buttons of his shirt, her hands suddenly clumsy.

He took over, removing his shirt, and for the first time, she saw him shirtless. He was magnificent, his chest a solid wall of muscle, trim and rippling, with softness in sight. She wanted to touch him and kiss him all over, laying claim to him like he had her.

He unfastened his trousers then, and she stared, lost in the work of art that was his body. Prowling towards her, he carried her to the massive bed that dominated the center of the room, before climbing in with her. He pulled her flush with his body and nibbled on her neck, licking and kissing it as his hands squeezed and kneaded her breasts. The sensations drove her to new heights of pleasure.

“Beautiful. You are so beautiful,” he murmured in her ear. His voice amplified the shivers that ran down her spine.

He moved lower, sucking her breast into his mouth while he tortured its twin with his free hand. She was whimpering and gasping, writhing on the bed as she arched into him and then away from the intense sensations he was wreaking on her body.

The hand on her breast trailed down her stomach to her aching core, his talented fingers stroking her there until she bit his shoulder to muffle her screams of pleasure.

He was ruthless now, driving her to the brink, then slowing his strokes so that she did not fall off the peak. He did this several times until she was a mess of sensation, sobbing and begging for the climax that was so close.

“Please,” she moaned. “Richard, please.”

She didn't know what she was begging for, but this time, he withdrew his fingers and replaced them with the blunt head of his manhood.

He stared down into her face, the frown on his face proof of his need. He pushed into her a little, eliciting a low moan from her, before sliding in to the hilt. She squirmed at the strange pressure inside her.

“Are you well?” he asked, his voice hoarse.

“Yes,” she replied, and he must have taken that as his cue to move.

Rocking into her, he withdrew almost entirely, then surged back in. Her pleasure grew with each thrust until she reached her release, gasping and writhing with the overwhelming waves of pleasure coursing through her.

Moments later, she clutched his shoulders as he found his pleasure, groaning as he spilled his seed inside her before he fell onto the bed beside her. Their panting breaths were the only sounds in the room as he gathered her into his arms.

“That was absolutely wonderful.”

“I do aim to please, my love,” Richard answered, smiling with adoration at the flushed face of his wife.

Gone were the days when he cared so much about pleasing the ton. He had pledged to please one woman, and it was much more rewarding, he must admit.

The End?