



Duke of Chaos

Author: *Violet Hamers*

Category: Erotic, Romance, Adult, Historical

Description: "The moment you let your guard down, I will ravish you, little wife..."

Lydia would do anything for her sister. Even if it means offering herself to the most dangerous man of the ton in her stead...

Duke Ezra is in need of the perfect wife. Only... instead of the Diamond, the one that grabs his attention is her spinster sister. And he always gets what he wants...

Their marriage is supposed to be nothing but a business arrangement. Yet tasting his wife's lips is enough to turn her into his new obsession...and he cannot stop until he claims every inch of her...

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

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CHAPTER ONE

“I am sure that my sister misspoke her words,” Lydia Knight laughed nervously as she smiled at Lord Tarren.

To her relief, he smiled back, but when she turned toward her little sister Juliet, she frowned at her blank expression.

“Juliet,” Lydia urged, forcing her smile back on her face, “Perhaps you would elaborate for our guest?”

“I meant precisely what I said, Lord Tarren,” Juliet replied coolly with a raised brow. “I do not find insects at all thrilling, not even butterflies. And I could not possibly feign interest in any research you so obviously want to go on and on about.”

Lydia gasped as Lord Tarren cleared his throat and ducked his head, a deep blush overtaking his handsome face.

“Juliet,” Lydia whispered in horror.

“My deepest apologies,” Lord Tarren said, his voice trembling as he rose, “It is clear that I have wasted everyone's time this evening. I shall no longer bother you ladies.”

“Lord Tarren, wait,” Lydia implored as Juliet called out, “’Tis most appreciated, my lord.”

For a moment Lydia felt herself torn in two; unsure whether to run after the Earl of

Peamont and his bruised feelings or shake her little sister until her brain rattled back into place. Deciding that going after Lord Tarren would only lead her to comforting a grown man, which she did not feel inclined to do, she turned back toward Juliet and fixed her emerald green eyes on her little sister.

“What in heaven’s name has gotten into you,” Lydia scolded her as she took in Juliet’s irked expression.

“I did not like him,” Juliet replied with a shrug as she inspected her nails. “He wants a wife that will swoon over every boring word he says, and I haven’t the patience.”

“Is that not what you want to be for your husband?” Lydia asked, knowing what her sister was looking for: A match. A traditional but loving marriage where she could fulfill her wifely duties happily and willingly.

Juliet looked up at Lydia, her green eyes mirroring her own, and raised an inquisitive brow.

“You want me to swoon over bugs?” she asked, then chortled, “I will listen eagerly and even swoon over my future husband’s stories, to be sure, but they must be about something more exciting than butterflies.”

Lydia opened her mouth to argue, but the truth was she saw her sister’s point. Lord Tarren seemed to be obsessed with creeping, crawling things, and it would take a woman equally obsessed to genuinely enjoy everything he had to say about them. Still...

“Did you have to be so rude with your response, though?” Lydia asked finally. “I do not see why you had to be so, so...hateful.”

At this, Juliet sighed in irritation, turned in her seat toward Lydia, and said, “Lydia,

It tried to change the subject. You tried to change the subject. There was attempt after polite attempt to change the conversation, but he refused to allow it! Finally, I could not take it anymore! And if his reaction was to sulk like a scolded boy then it only confirms my ill regard for him. I do not want to marry a boy! They are more emotional than women!”

Again, another point she could not argue. Sometimes Lydia wondered what her mother might have said or done if she were still here. She did not doubt that she would have been better equipped to handle Juliet’s first season. Unlike Lydia, their mother had the experience of being part of a marriage. As the eldest of the three daughters, Lydia was the spinster. With their mother gone, their strict but distant father had allowed Lydia to remain unmarried.

Lydia knew it was only because he could not be bothered with the daily involvement it took to raise three daughters, but she was thankful for it all the same. Like Juliet, she too thought that the men of her time were far more emotional than they used to be and were quick to become offended by any intelligent thoughts. It was wearisome.

However, like their middle sister, Alice, Juliet was to be married and would not be allowed to follow Lydia’s footsteps into spinsterhood. Alice had tried to remain single before she’d met her husband Duncan, the Duke of Baxter, and had found her love match. Now Lydia was trying desperately to help Juliet find the same.

“Is it just him?” Lydia asked, speaking a tad kinder to her youngest sister as she moved a little closer to her. “Or is it something else? Lord Tarren is not the only gentleman suitor you have discarded as of late. You were most excited to come out this season! What has happened?”

Juliet’s eyes softened as she let out a heavy breath and unclenched her fingers from her own arms. However, before she could speak, a knock came from the doorway and the sisters turned toward it.

“My ladies, forgive me,” said Cora, one of their servants, as she curtsied toward the two of them, “But the Lord Knight would like to speak with you, Lady Lydia.”

She paused, her young, pretty face flushing as she added with a timid whisper, “He seems most urgent about it, my lady.”

“Take a rest, Cora,” Lydia responded kindly as she rose from her seat. “Why don’t you take these leftover cakes back to the kitchen and have yourself a treat?”

Relief flooded the maid’s face, and she quickly curtsied again before bustling to collect the trays. Lydia knew how intimidating and impatient her father could be. They tried to hire male staff as much as possible, but their turnover rate for maids was incredibly high due to them becoming frightened of his temper. Lydia found through the years that they were inclined to stay longer if she offered the maids little breaks after being cornered by her father.

“May I go to my room now?” Juliet asked, sounding both bored and annoyed.

Lydia turned back to her sister just as she reached the door.

“Absolutely not,” she replied sternly, becoming more maternal than sisterly, “This conversation will no doubt be about you. You will stay here until I find out what Father has to say.”

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Juliet grumbled something incoherent as she slumped into her chair, her pretty pink lace dress wrinkling horribly with her poor posture. Lydia thought of correcting her, but knowing it was futile, she simply shook her head and walked away. She found their father Owen where he usually was when he was home; in his study.

“There you are,” Owen grumbled, his eyes moving from his paperwork to Lydia as she walked into the room. Unlike her colorful sister, Lydia wore a simple cream dress with capped sleeves and a ribbon hem below the bust. Her long, wavy, light brown hair was twisted up above her neck into a respectable style that was neither harsh nor complimentary, but practical.

Her face was pretty like her mother’s had been. Soft pink cheeks with subtle cheekbones, a slightly pointed chin, a small nose, and expressive brows. Also similar to her mother, she had a dusting of freckles across the bridge of her nose and a slim, almost sprite-like frame. Lydia knew that when Owen looked at her he saw his late wife, and something about that angered him deeply.

Throughout the years she had learned to take his aggression in her stride and was rarely bothered by her father’s snide insults or his dependence upon her. Her ongoing stoicism meant she would not be compelled to marry, and for her, that was a price worth paying. Once Juliet was married, she had no further obligation to stay and take care of her father.

“What may I help you with, Papa?” Lydia asked kindly as he threw her a displeased look.

“How did it go with Lord Tarren?” he asked, pulling a letter out of an envelope.

Lydia smiled at him calmly.

“It went well, to be sure, but I do not believe it is a stable match,” she replied, the lie coming smoothly.

Owen grunted at this and then, with his eyes still on the correspondence, he replied “Perhaps that is for the best, as I have found a superior suitor for Juliet, who is on his way here as we speak. Tarren is an earl. Noble, yes. But the gentleman arriving shortly is a duke. Your sister Alice did well with hers and now look at her. Make sure that Juliet does the same.”

Owen gave the command quietly and without much of an edge to his voice, but it was a command all the same. Sorrow filled Lydia as she realized what this meant for Juliet. Her time to choose a husband had run out. The decision was now being made for her.

“Alice had three seasons to find a husband, Papa,” Lydia said, cautious with her tone. “This is Juliet’s first season. Perhaps it would be easier to help convince Juliet to marry a duke if she was allotted the same time?”

“This is not up for discussion,” Owen countered matter-of-factly, “The duke has made a request to call upon your sister and I will not only honor it but try my damndest to get her married off to him. Alice had three seasons, yes, but she had not been approached by a duke in that time. Juliet now has, and that is that.”

“Are you saying you have already accepted a marriage contract on her behalf?” Lydia asked, apprehension tunneling through her at the thought.

Owen rose from his desk, his eyes growing dark as he looked down from his full height at Lydia.

“You may be five-and-twenty, girl, but you are still my daughter, and if you question me like that again I will remind you of your place,” he warned, his voice low.

Lydia recognized the powerlessness of her reality, and though her mind itched to snarl right back at her father, she only bowed her head and apologized.

“Be sure that your sister has no ill remarks on her tongue this evening,” Owen said as he made a dismissive motion toward her, “I have heard from others she has grown quite derisive.”

Lydia turned back to him at this, her stomach clenching, and Owen gave her a final warning look.

“Do not lie to me on your sister’s behalf again, Lydia,” he stated sternly. “I understand that I have given you certain freedoms, but they can be taken away in a single moment if you should prove unworthy of them.”

Lydia felt a chill go down her back, but she only smiled and curtsied at her father before taking her leave. Back in the sitting room, Juliet became boisterous at the news, much to Lydia’s surprise.

“Please tell me this means you shall act more ladylike this time,” Lydia asked as she watched her younger sister primp in a nearby mirror.

“Of course I am,” Juliet gushed as she pinched her cheeks and practiced her smiles. “If it is a duke it is most likely one of Duncan’s friends. Ambrose is off the market now thanks to Barbara, though I do love that it was she who caught him. Surely it is not Ezra. Morgan is the most agreeable. I am sure it is him and I am sure I can converse with him.”

Though Barbara was not their sister by blood she was loved as such, and her new

husband Ambrose had indeed become another big brother figure to join her family. Neither Ambrose nor Duncan particularly cared for her father and would often engage with Owen simply to get him to stop badgering his daughters. It was a relief, one Lydia relished, but the thought of Morgan or possibly Ezra marrying her sister made her grimace.

Morgan was fun, boyishly handsome, and light-hearted, but he was as foolish as he was pretty and was often the one getting his little band of dukes in trouble. He was a rake through and through and seduced his ladies with flattering talk and a smooth voice, and often left them pining, broken-hearted, and loose in tongue. His stories of raking had become a well-discussed topic of conversation amongst the women of the ton.

On the other hand, though, Ezra was the complete opposite. Dark. Stoic. He had a sense of humor, yes, but it was wry and required a certain level of wit to comprehend. His jokes had never fallen short on Lydia and though they were at times vulgar she did indeed find them clever...but he was motionless. Void. Empty. And although the details of his ways with women had never been discussed, many had suspected that his proclivities were of a dangerous variety.

Lydia did not want either for her sister. She was sure Juliet did not want that either, no matter how good-looking both of them were.

“It could very well be a different duke,” Lydia replied, busying herself with organizing the books Juliet had pulled from the nearby shelves. “We do not know that it is Lord Frampton or Granthill.”

It could not be them. No. Neither of them would dare. They were not friends, per se, but...they just wouldn't!

“What other dukes are on the marriage market this year that you are aware of?” Juliet

asked glancing at Lydia through the mirror. “Aside from Lord Dennings.”

Juliet stopped as her eyes grew wide and turned toward Lydia with a grimace.

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“You do not think it is Lord Dennings, is it?” she asked timidly.

Lord Dennings, a duke of which even Lydia could not recall, had been one to corner Helena and Barbara last year uttering threats. It was Ambrose that had saved them from Dennings’ ill intentions, and while they had kept the incident to themselves, there was not a single member of their little group who felt inclined to be friendly toward the man.

“If it is Dennings I will forbid it,” Lydia stated adamantly, wrapping her arms around her little sister.

“You cannot forbid Father anything,” Juliet replied wearily as she accepted her sister’s embrace. “Let us just hope that it is Morgan.”

Before she could reply, they both heard their father’s voice in the hall and went rigid. Juliet gave her a frightened glance before the two let go of each other, smoothed their dresses, and fixed their smiles as the two men entered the room. Lydia felt Juliet stiffen at her side as she saw her father and the handsome, raven-haired, black-suited man enter the room. Lydia felt her panic suddenly rise as she recognized the suitor.

It wasn’t Dennings, thank God. But it wasn’t Morgan either. It was Ezra.

“Your reputation precedes you, Lord Knight,” Ezra said smoothly as Owen walked him toward the drawing room. “As does the reputation of your daughters.”

Owen Knight, a tall, rather rotund man who was the father of Ezra’s best friend’s wife, seemed to shrink and blush under the cool words. Ezra was not particularly fond

of him and found him rather...lacking in many areas. He felt a shudder of disgust as he watched the man's reaction but ignored it.

"If I may say so, Your Grace, your reputation precedes you as well," Owen replied respectfully. "I was quite honored and surprised that you wanted to pay a visit to my Juliet. I was not aware that you were even looking for a wife this season."

"I do not find it necessary to share my intentions with our little society," Ezra countered matter-of-factly, "I shall not make a scene or fuss when it comes to securing a wife."

Ezra would never admit it outright, but Thomas's earlier words had been correct. After months of research and thought, Ezra had concluded that a wife was just what he needed to turn his devilish reputation around. Now he simply had to acquire one.

The boy had smirked wildly at him when Ezra had explained that he would be busy for a few months, as if knowing exactly what Ezra would be up to. And although Ezra had been annoyed that he'd been educated by a fourteen-year-old, the respect he had for the young orphaned duke only rose in response.

Ezra was a good head shorter than Owen and could likely fit into the man's clothes twice over, but the man still walked beside him as though he would need to lunge away at a moment's notice; as if Ezra was a predator seeking his kill. Ezra was used to this response and preferred that his acquaintances be scared rather than comfortable. Things were always easier that way. If that tactic did not achieve what he wanted, that was when his future wife would step in and tip the scales in his favor.

"Yes, of course," Owen agreed, stumbling over his words, "Well, as I said, I am beyond pleased that you have taken interest in my Juliet. She will surely be the girl you are looking for."

Ezra said nothing as he walked with Owen into the sitting room and saw Lydia and Juliet waiting for them. Juliet, as ever, was pretty and delicate. But Lydia's coldly beautiful, harsh stare was what made him smile. With an added flourish, he bowed toward the two young ladies.

"Lady Lydia, Miss Juliet," he greeted crisply. "I appreciate you seeing me."

"It is not as if we had a choice," Lydia retorted in a low, icy tone.

"What was that?" Owen grunted as Ezra let out a low chuckle.

"It is an honor for our family to be your choice," Lydia said, louder and sweeter this time with a pained smile.

Ezra nearly laughed out loud at this but chose instead to turn his unreadable face toward Owen.

"I appreciate your guidance, but I believe Lady Lydia shall be a sufficient chaperone," he said to their father. "You may go now."

Owen's heavy brows momentarily rose in surprise as his cheeks grew ruddy and a frown formed on his face. As Owen began to voice his objection, the arch of Ezra's brow and the set of his jaw shifted subtly. Little, inconspicuous movements that took his impassive expression to one of primal challenge. Owen's angered look slid from his face as if it was made of oil and he merely nodded.

"I do not know what game you and your band of musketeers are playing now, but this is not amusing," Lydia hissed at him the moment Owen left the room.

"What game?" Ezra drawled, sliding his hands into his pockets once more. "I have decided to take a wife and that there would be no better woman than a sister of

Alice's."

He then tilted his head slightly to the side, one brow arched in mock disappointment.

"I would have thought you would be pleased to know that you are highly regarded," he mused, adding a bite to his mocking tone.

"We are pleased," Juliet whispered, visibly shaking beside Lydia.

Her eyes remained fixed on the floor, only glancing up at him every few seconds, as if fearful of meeting his gaze. Ezra felt his amusement dissipate as he absorbed Juliet's countenance. Juliet was a good girl. Perhaps too good, too meek, to ever become unafraid of him.

Had she always been this small? Childlike? He had not paid much attention to her person when he had done his research, at ease with the ton's general talk of her beauty. It was their acceptance he needed, after all, for his plan to work.

"We are allowed to be pleased and surprised at the same time," Lydia retorted, giving him a level stare as she tilted her chin slightly higher.

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“We were hoping you would be Morgan, at least, not...you.”

At this, Ezra let out a genuine but short laugh, making Juliet jump and Lydia narrow her eyes.

“Admittedly, that is not the first time I have been addressed with such distaste, but I must say, Lady Lydia, I do rather like it when it comes from your mouth.”

Lydia glowered at him, and it hit him right in his groin. Vicious, he mused silently. Not meek at all.

“My sister means no disrespect,” Juliet replied quickly before Lydia could let loose the retort so obviously readied on her tongue. “We are...it is just, our father gave us little information about who we were meeting today. Perhaps seeing that it is one of our brother-in-law’s friends has caught us...off guard.”

Ezra felt a sliver of annoyance as he forced his face to remain impassive.

“Your father did not specify it was I who would be visiting?” he asked calmly as he turned his cool gaze to hers.

Juliet began to tremble harder; her eyes and nose reddened, and her chin began to quiver. Unable to tolerate her emotional reaction, he looked to Lydia for an answer.

“He did not,” Lydia replied in her usual polite tone. “However, that certainly should not surprise you. So, now that we are here, let us get down to it, shall we?”

“Get down to it?” Ezra asked, his lips twitching.

“Yes, the discussion at hand,” Lydia replied, gracefully gesturing her arm between the three of them.

“Juliet, darling, do you want to marry this man?”

It was rare that Ezra was ever surprised enough to not control his features, but at the bluntness of Lydia’s question, his eyebrows flew toward his hairline. Juliet all but squeaked before she found her voice, riddled with trembling tones and fear.

“Lydia, what has gotten into you?”

She risked an apologetic look toward Ezra then added, “Please forgive her, Your Grace, she is usually not like this! My sister taught Alice and me impeccable manners.”

“Do not apologize to him for me, Juliet, I am quite capable of offering it on my own if the duke has earned it,” Lydia quipped back, not taking her eyes off of Ezra.

“Surely, Your Grace, someone of your stature cannot be easily offended by a woman,” she added, raising a challenging brow.

Something...something like joy, but not as exuberant, filled Ezra’s heart as he accepted Lydia’s challenge. He had known of both Lydia and Juliet for nearly two years now, and though Lydia had once been as frightened of him and Duncan as Juliet was of him alone, that certainly no longer seemed to be the case.

Her vivid emerald eyes flashed with flecks of gold and bronze as she stared unabashedly at him, making her power known. If he was certain, and he was sure he was, he even saw a small smile tugging at those full, rounded lips.

“Certainly not,” he replied in a slow, patronizing tone as he tilted his head toward her.

Lydia arched a single eyebrow at him, begrudgingly impressed. It was only then that he noticed his mockingly gentle tone had caused Juliet to stop shivering and finally look at him for longer than one second.

So young. So innocent. Ezra thought, taking in her wide-eyed stare. She had her sister’s hue of iris, yes, but aside from that, there was no other similarity between them. Too young. Too innocent. He knew that she would suffer a fatal coronary if he pursued her further.

“This visit has been most intriguing,” Ezra mused, looking from Juliet to Lydia, “I thank you, ladies, for your time, but as the night draws forth so does my work.”

“You are leaving?” Juliet asked, speaking for the first time.

The relief on her face was evident, but there was no offense for Ezra to take from it. He knew he’d terrified her and would not blame her for it. Admittedly, there was something about him to be terrified of, was there not?

“Consider it a perk of becoming my wife,” he replied dryly, “Due to my many duties, our times together would be brief unless your presence was required.”

“You are still pursuing her?” Lydia asked, her smug look deteriorating into annoyance as she took a step toward him.

“The young lady did not say no to your question,” Ezra replied, and before Lydia could railroad Juliet into an answer he added, “Therefore I shall call again tomorrow.”

“Oh no, you are not leaving,” Lydia demanded, her skirts swishing as she walked

swiftly toward him. “She is going to tell you...”

“You want me to stay?” he asked, using his earlier mocking tone.

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“Certainly not,” Lydia seethed, “but I want you to...”

Freckles, he mused, unfazed by the bristling woman’s forward manner. How...adorable.

“You must understand something, Lady Lydia,” his deep, clear voice cutting her off mid-sentence. There was no mockery this time. “I am in control of this situation. Not you. This visit was...complimentary on my behalf. But there is no discussion to be had here.”

She looked at him with pure fury at first, but as he let the black void of his soul take over and reposition his features, he saw her anger change to alarm.

“I...I apologize, for my brashness, Your Grace,” Lydia stammered, breaking her gaze away from his, “But I must insist we...”

“As I stated, I am out of time,” Ezra replied, his tone cutting through hers like a knife.

He walked to the doorway of the sitting room, but as he was about to step into the hallway, he paused and turned back to Lydia with a taunting look.

“That was a valiant effort to save your sister from my wicked claws, Lady Lydia,” he remarked. “Truly.”

Ezra stifled a grin as he watched the fury return to her eyes and he slipped out into the hallway.

CHAPTER TWO

“Juliet, I swear to you I do not know what came over me, I just...I just...I became enraged! Consumed! I...I completely lost myself!”

Lydia stumbled over her words as she paced back and forth in Juliet’s room. Her younger sister watched her worriedly from the bed. At dinner, their father had talkedatthem the entire time about Ezra, and before Lydia could do anything, he had pulled Juliet into his office for a private conversation afterward. She’d waited impatiently in Juliet’s room for her to return, and the moment she did so, she began to spill her thoughts.

“You just looked so frightened, and I suddenly remembered, you know? All those things we hear about him. Not just from the ton,but from Duncan and Alice too, and the others! Oh, I know they love him for whatever reasons and that is fine, but his reputation is accurate. He is a vile man. He...he is reputed to be soulless. It is worrisome how he is repeatedly able to climb out of his father’s debt...”

“Debt?” Juliet asked, interrupting Lydia for the first time. “What debt?”

Lydia grimaced. While Juliet knew about the four dukes and their fathers’ deaths, she did not know the specifics. Lydia preferred to keep it that way.

“Never you mind,” she replied hastily, returning to her pacing, “What I meant to say is that he is horrid. Absolutely horrid.”

“It does not matter what you think anyway,” Juliet laughed sadly, shaking her head as she looked down at her hands. “He could have the perfect reputation, and I still would not want to marry him. But what can I do? Papa has made up his mind. He told me so after dinner tonight. I am to be the Duke of Frampton’s wife whether I wish it or not.”

Papa. During the flurry of emotions in which Ezra had wrapped her, she had completely forgotten about her father's final say in the matter. It was as good as law, and even if Juliet had managed to say no to Ezra in the sitting room earlier, it would not have mattered. Not if Ezra had chosen her and their father had agreed.

"Oh, darling," Lydia sighed, going to Juliet.

Like she had since she was a child, Juliet opened her arms and let her oldest sister scoop her into a tight hug. There were some things, no matter their age, which would never change.

"I cannot do it, Lydia, I cannot," Juliet sobbed, clinging to her. "I...I must confess something. I have been holding the truth from you, sister. Trying to find my way to happiness, but now I...I must tell you and you...you must help me."

"Juliet," Lydia gasped, pulling away to look at Juliet, "Tell me what is going on this instant, please."

"I am in love," Juliet confessed, her eyes shining with fear as her tears ran unchecked.

Lydia deadpanned.

"Wh...what? But, if you have found your match and he is noble...Juliet, I do not understand!" she sighed, exhausted. "Why would you go through the charade of accepting suitors if you are already set? Why didn't you confess this earlier to Father and me? Is he not noble?"

"His name is Edmund Perth, and he will be a baron," Juliet answered through her sniffing, "But his father forced him to join the Navy for two years as a demonstration of his loyalty before he was allowed to claim his title. He left a few months ago, just as he was about to approach Father, and it was so sudden that he only had enough

time to get a short letter to me, asking me to wait for him. I did...did not even get to say goodbye. But I have to wait for him, Lydia, I have to!"

"Hush, now, Papa will hear you," Lydia whispered insistently, covering her sister's mouth as she looked toward the door.

Juliet's voice had risen so suddenly from a trembling plea to a frightened, desperate cry that Lydia had not been able to catch her in time. They waited anxiously until they were sure their father was not coming, and then Lydia let out a sigh and dropped her hand from Juliet's mouth.

"I am sorry," Juliet rasped, her eyes filling with tears again.

"Do not be sorry," Lydia whispered back, patting her youngest sister's cheeks dry, "I just do not want Papa to hear you."

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“Not just about raising my voice,” Juliet replied, “About keeping this secret from you, from Papa. Perhaps if Edmund and I had handled the situation better we could have wed before he left. But it got so confusing so fast that neither of us could grasp control. And now, now Papa is basically selling me to the Duke of Frampton. I hear the rumors of him too, sister. They do not fall on deaf ears, I assure you.”

Lydia’s mind reeled as she took in her sister’s secret. It would be awful to have Juliet wed Ezra even without the news of her love for Edmund, but now? Now she had to make sure Ezra would not pursue her. She did not know this Edmund Juliet spoke of, but any man worth his salt would fight for Juliet, and Ezra was just the type of man to put a bullet through his chest with glee.

“I will run away. I will talk to Alice. I will...”

“No,” Lydia said softly, pulling herself from her thoughts.

She reached for Juliet’s hands and took them into her own, squeezing gently.

“I will handle this, Juliet. I promise you.”

Lydia said her words with as much confidence as possible and when she saw the look of relief on Juliet’s face, she knew she had lied beautifully.

“Lady Lydia Knight,” Ezra mused, taking a slow measure of the woman standing before him. “Tell me, is it customary for elder sisters to make house calls to their sisters’ suitors? Or have you interpreted the name Lady Knight as possessing a different meaning?”

The milk and honey flesh below Lydia's freckles heated into a soft pink as she glared at him, but she tilted her chin upward in defiance. His meeting with Juliet had admittedly went as poorly as he'd expected, but he was still both amused and curious when his valet, Caleb, informed him that Lydia was his late-night visitor.

"I am not even going to honor that question with a response," Lydia replied coldly, still standing in her hooded cloak. "What we have to discuss is of much higher importance than your putrid sense of humor."

"Oh, dear," Ezra drawled, turning away from her and toward his drink cart, "What vile words from such a prim lady. Duncan and Alice made you seem quite proper, but I see you have them completely fooled."

Ezra took his time pouring his drink and when he finally turned back to Lydia he saw her rage. The look of it, the feel of it, stirred something deep inside him, so much so that he had to hitch a breath. He had seen her many times since Alice had become a part of their little orphaned family, but never like this. Never so bold, so fearless, so icily beautiful that even he could feel the chill of it.

His mother Sophia had been beautiful and cold as well. Still was, he was sure of it. And yet, somehow, Lydia was so different from her. Not vain or greedy, but pure and righteous. He knew what she was here for; to dissuade him from marrying Juliet, just as she had tried to dissuade Alice from wedding Duncan.

"Under normal circumstances I would proudly be the model of primness, Your Grace," Lydia told him with an air of her usual respect, "But as you have created an unusual circumstance I am not so dimwitted as to simply approach you with pretty manners."

"I am...almost impressed," Ezra could not help but admit as he raised his glass to his lips.

Lydia untied her hooded cloak and let it slip from her shoulders, revealing her simple dress from earlier, but the sight made Ezra's glass freeze before he tipped it back. Her long, lightgolden-brown hair was unbound, tendrils escaping and curling around her shoulders and down to her elbows. He'd never seen her like this before. Normally every hair was pinned properly into place and above her neck.

He suddenly imagined what it would feel like to slide his fingers into those locks of inviting hair.

She has never been touched, he realized with awe as the fantasy continued. Of course, she would not let anyone touch her. Not a woman like her. Ezra suddenly imagined how many men had tried and failed to woo her. There must have been dozens. But with him...

Lydia would tremble under his touch, perhaps gasp at how profoundly gentle he could be. He would stroke his fingers behind her ears, over the back of her skull, and then down her spine until she melted into his touch. Then he would gently take a fistful of those silken strands and give them just the slightest of tugs. He'd watch as her eyes sparked, and her lips opened in an aroused gasp as she felt the sharp, small pain.

"Could you please do me the courtesy of at least pretending to listen to me?" Lydia snapped at him, pulling him from his thoughts.

Alarmed at how deep he'd fallen into such a tame fantasy, Ezra let a sneer slip from his lips before he returned to his drink and emptied the glass in one swallow. As the alcohol cleared his head he let out a growling cough and returned his stare to its usual dead-eyed expression.

"You interruptedmyevening, not the other way around," he replied numbly. "If my attention is not on you it is then apparent it is somewhere else, is it not? You shall

need to say something more enticing to capture it.”

That flare of gold and bronze leaped from her green eyes again, and she stormed toward him like a goddess on a rampage. Without preamble, she closed the space between them, clutched hold of his chin, and tilted him down until he was incapable of avoiding her stare.

“My sister,” Lydia stated, pronouncing each word clearly, “You will let her go from this marriage contract.”

Ezra felt an ache rise in his jaw as his body suddenly blazed alive from her touch. Desire, lust, the need to bury himself in something was a sensation he suffered from, every minute of every day. He had trained himself to exercise restraint and control, as most proper men do until he could address his needs at a more appropriate time. But now...now if he was not careful, he’d crush the glass in his hand and tear a hole in his trousers.

“No,” he purred, his gaze unmoving from hers. Even if she was affecting him, he would not let her know it.

He could easily move away from her touch. With a simple hold on her wrist, he could loosen her grip on his chin and pin her to the wall. Yet he stayed where he was, immediately addicted to this new and delicious torture, and was rewarded when Lydia gripped his chin harder as rage poured from her glittering eyes.

“What do you need her for?” Lydia demanded.

“I need a wife,” Ezra replied, pretending a bored shrug.

Lydia laughed condescendingly as she let go of his chin with a little push. It sent a hot, lightning-like sensation through his entire jaw and down the muscled column of

his neck, and he had to stop himself from reaching up to touch where her fingers had just been.

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“I know you need a wife,” Lydia replied with an exasperated look after putting some space between them. “I know more than you think.”

“Doubtful,” Ezra retorted, though he already suspected otherwise.

“Let me guess, oh Duke of Chaos,” Lydia replied, her voice dripping with a healthy dose of sarcasm, “You have exhausted most of your business ventures because your reputation has grown a bit too frightening? Made your threats of evil spirits under your bidding a little too believable?”

Now Ezra was thankful that his deadpan expression was identical to his bored one because he was not expecting Lydia to call him out so bluntly. Yes, he had anticipated she’d drop a polite hint or two about his situation but had not been prepared for her unbridled deliverance of truth.

Still, he would not let her know it.

“Oh, I do love a good theory,” he replied mockingly, taking a seat. “Go on.”

Ezra sank into a relaxed position in his chair, letting his legs splay wide as he leaned into its cushioned back. He rested an elbow on his pectoral and touched a finger to his lips, then flicked his brow as if to say, well?

Lydia studied him closely a moment longer, as though trying to determine his next move. After determining he was being genuine, she gave a single nod, took a seat across from him, and sat at its edge with a straight back.

“Two of your best friends have gotten married in the last two years and their businesses have increased exponentially,” Lydia observed, “Duncan’s, especially, and he was most similar to you in reputation before his marriage to my sister, was he not? When his marriage to her softened that image, it opened him up to wider markets, correct?”

Ezra was forced to nod, which earned him a smug look from Lydia before she continued.

“I believe the Duke of Darkness has pushed himself as far as he can go on his own. Do you believe that if you have someone as sweet as Alice on your arm, it will provide you with the same opportunities Duncan was afforded because you will appear more trustworthy, reliable...perhaps even a little softened?”

“Do not use that word again,” Ezra warned, having heard enough.

Lydia’s brow perked up again as she innocently asked, “What? Soft?”

“That is enough,” Ezra stated, the word grating on his ears like sand. “So, you know what I am doing. I am impressed, no doubt, my lady, but how does you being aware of what I’ve planned deter me from taking Juliet as my bride? You are right, I cannot have Alice, nor do I want her. That is my brother’s wife, and I will only ever regard her as such. But Juliet is like her in many ways, and she seeks a husband as I seek a wife.”

Lydia began to speak but this time Ezra did not permit her the opportunity.

“Iamsoulless, as they say, Lydia,” Ezra stated, leaning forward to brace his elbows on his knees, “but I am not dimwitted. If I ever hurt Juliet, Duncan, or Morgan, Ambrose would beat me until my bones were ground into pebbles. Nor would I want to. Many people at many times deserve the infliction of pain, but that path is not for her. She

would be kept as safe and content as possible in the ample time she would have to herself, but yes, she would be required to attend events with me, boost my reputation, and be a buffer of purity against my well-established black heart.”

“She cannot marry you, she is in love with someone else,” Lydia burst out in a determined bark, though he noticed her eyes had slid down to his chest as if she could see the actual darkness there.

At this, Ezra felt a brush of pure light upon his blackened, ironclad boundaries. It startled him for a second, catching him off guard, but vanished as quickly as it came, and he quickly collected himself.

“That is unfortunate,” he admitted, “But that is not my concern. Whomsoever the young gentleman is, had his opportunity before I came along. If he did not pursue her correctly that is no fault of mine.”

Lydia balked as if she was unsure how to argue that particular point, so he continued.

“Young love dwindles all the time, especially with distance. In time your sister will adjust to her new life. You, and Alice of course, are always welcome to visit with her, and I believe I would be roasted alive if I attempted to keep Barbara or Helena away. I assure you, I will not hurt her.”

“You are hurting her by taking away her preference,” Lydia replied calmly, regaining her composure. “She is in love with someone else. Let her have her chance and marry someone else.”

“I do not want someone else,” Ezra mused.

It was true. After he had concluded that little Thomas, despite his youth, was quite right about the potential ventures that could open up for him, he had done thorough

research and found Juliet to be the best candidate. Or, at least, he had until he'd tried to converse with her today. Admittedly, he found her fear of him to be pitiful instead of amusing, but it was she who could lighten his reputation the most.

"You truly think there is someone better suited than your sister to help me with my goal?" Ezra asked pragmatically. "Let us speak on this seriously, shall we? What other young lady do you know that has absolutely no stain on her civil reputation and has her grace and beauty? What mother do you know that has not raised her daughter to hunt for a husband as a woodsman hunts for his meal?"

"Is that not what you are doing?" Lydia retorted, folding her arms as if daring him to deny it.

He huffed a laugh, yet again amused by her boldness. "But I am a hunter, my lady," he said darkly, letting his gaze wander to her lips again. "And I have set my sights on my prey."

Like the hunter he truly was, Ezra noted the subtle shift in Lydia's body language the moment his words met her ears. The slight dilation of her pupils, the softer, hitched breath that was not quite a gasp as a tremble passed through her. Her back arched and her neck tilted slightly to the left, as if heat had suddenly risen from below. It was subtle but he'd caught wind of it, and it pleased him greatly.

"And...what if a better specimen was to walk into your line of sight?" She asked. Though it was clear she was still a bit intimidated, Lydia took a smooth step toward him. "Would you still pursue your original quarry?"

Ezra felt flames of desire heat his blood as he imagined pursuing Lydia in the forest. Naked and vulnerable.

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“If you are insinuating there is a better target then you’d best get to the point,” he spat out, annoyed with how little control he seemed to have over his mind this evening. “Who is this perfect lady of whom you speak?”

Lydia, her gaze still locked on his, answered, “Me.”

“This is no laughing matter, Ezra,” Lydia said desperately, watching the otherwise stoic man start to laugh.

“Are we already speaking one another’s first names?” He quipped. “My, you move fast.”

Her cheeks burned with shame as he continued to laugh at her idea. She had known it was a risk coming to him like this but after hours of thinking it was the only option she could come up with. If her theory was proven correct, which it was, and all he needed was a wife to soften his appearance, then she would do. She was older, yes, and a known spinster, but her reputation of kindness and grace was highly regarded throughout the ton.

Still, she had not expected Ezra to laugh at her. Ezra rarely laughed and seldom reacted to anything, but he was laughing at her now and it stung her more deeply than she wanted to admit.

“If you want to be addressed as a nobleman,” she spat out, “Then act like one.”

“I was merely startled at your suggestion,” Ezra replied, still chuckling, “You are...well, you are a spinster. A well-behaved spinster, yes. Perhaps you will even

have some mothers vie for your skills as a governess in the future. Still, you are a noblewoman who has a history of purposefully rejecting marriage. The wives may understand, perhaps even empathize, or feel jealousy about your freedom. But I need a lady who will impress my gentlemen counterparts. I need someone who has not made themselves so clearly...independent.”

Lydia’s mind raced as she tried to minimize her injured feelings and concoct a reasonable argument. What Ezra said was hurtful, yes, but it was the truth, and the freedom of her youth was now costing her the chance to save her sister. Men, especially older men of the ton truly did seem to despise women who did not desire a husband.

“Ezra, please,” Lydia breathed, pushing all her bravado aside as she met his level stare.

“Tell me how to fix this. I cannot let you have my sister. Juliet is...she is not like me or Alice or Helena. She is purer than any of us and she is in love. I cannot...I cannot...”

Lydia lost her words, emotion winning over her, and she felt her throat grow tight as a stinging sensation annoyed her eyes. Feeling the tears start to well up, she looked back down at the floor, defeated. There was no arguing Ezra’s point. What was true was true in English society, and a spinster, no matter how pretty and well-behaved, was still looked down upon.

She did not expect to feel Ezra’s fingers curl under her chin, nor did she expect to feel the jolt of warmth that made her veins hum from his touch. It did not spark or burn but soothed and comforted her wounded pride. When she had touched him in a similar way earlier, it had felt different. Aggressive, but enjoyable, like claiming power. But this felt entirely different. She felt vulnerable. Safe. But with Ezra?

Her mind spun with confusion as Ezra tilted her chin up until she was forced to look into his fathomless, frozen blue eyes, and she shivered at the ice she saw in them. Cold. So cold. But she could not look away. Not even when her mind screamed at her to do so. Those dangerous eyes. No wonder he needed to soften his image. A death stare from him would no doubt prove fatal.

He had become too wild and untamed. The man had let his claws and fangs grow too sharp, and he needed someone gentle and sweet to file them down. Someone who would not betray him in his rare moments of vulnerability.

“You truly wish to take Juliet’s place?” he asked calmly, his deep voice low and curious.

She forced herself to nod and whispered a silent plea to herself to stop trembling. She had been so fierce, so powerful just moments ago; where had that all gone?

“Yes, I do,” she replied evenly, keeping her eyes on him. “No matter the cost.”

Ezra’s eyes unlocked from hers as he pulled back an inch as if to survey her person. He studied her so closely that she realized she’d slipped out of her unladylike seated position, and her spine was arched forward toward him. She tried to correct herself, but Ezra’s grip on her chin tightened, and his eyes snapped back up to hers.

“Even if I ask you to remove your dress and offer yourself to me right now?”

He said the words in such a low, practical manner that Lydia almost didn’t catch them. When she finally did, she felt every muscle in her body grow tight with warning and excitement. She wrenched from his grip, and jumped to her feet, exclaiming “I beg your pardon?”

Ezra smirked as he let go of her chin and an emotion she could not read flittered

across his eyes.

“Not at any cost, apparently,” he answered dryly, sitting back.

Lydia’s cheeks flamed, but she was not sure if it was from his words or the way his fingertips still felt branded on her chin.

If she did not give him what he wanted then she just proved his point. If she did do it, not only would she forfeit her modesty, but also risk falling prey to a cruel trick that would leave her and Juliet all the more desperate. It was not uncommon for men to seduce young ladies into early consummation, only to abandon the promise of marriage as soon as the act was over.

“You ask for a price no woman should forfeit,” she replied with venom. “But seeing as you are...you, I should not be so surprised. Perhaps if you were to marry me, I could show you that there are better ways to get what you want.”

Ezra’s eyes lit up at her bold response, but he only continued to study her in that intense, almost invasive way.

“I shall tell you what,” Ezra said finally, rising from his hunkered position to walk back to his drink cart, “Since this has been so entertaining I shall propose a counteroffer. A serious one.”

Though still wary, Lydia perked up immediately, rising to her feet.

“Present your proposal,” she demanded. Ezra looked at her for a moment in his usual calm manner, then obliged.

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“I have a list of potential partners that I am trying to secure who are a bit apprehensive about joining me. There is a ball coming up, at which one of these prospective partners will be in attendance with his wife. If you can persuade her to convince her husband that I am more gentleman than devil and accept a meeting with me, I will accept your proposal.”

“Yes,” she agreed, the word flying from her mouth before he even finished his sentence. “Yes, I accept your offer.”

Relief flooded through her, happy that he had not pushed his earlier suggestion further. Still, she did not want to give him any time to bring it back up or change his mind about his offer. She gathered up her cloak from her chair and pulled it over her shoulders.

“Just send me the name of the woman you need me to convince and where she will be,” she requested, her eyes on her trembling hands as she tried to tie the ribbon at her neck.

The trembling stopped the moment Ezra’s hands slid over hers, and Lydia’s breath caught as her eyes darted up to look at him. He appeared as impassive as ever as he moved her hands down, then brought his own back up to securely tie her cloak’s ribbon strings around her neck. His fingers, so steady and gentle, took their time forming the knot and drew it into a perfect bow.

Something warm and delicious unfurled inside of her as his fingers moved from the ribbon to her neck, and she gasped at his touch. She waited, breathless, for him to wrap his hand around her throat and crush it. After all, he was Ezra Fernside, and his

pleasure for cruel games was widely known.

But the crushing and the gasping under his ruthless grasp never came. Instead, he reverently stroked along the column of her throat as though fascinated by how she was formed. Her thoughts went blank as his thumb massaged against her pulsing vein and she felt her body sway forward into him. The crackling of the fireplace and other sounds of the room went silent as a throbbing began in her lower belly. It spread with each new beat, rising until it met her ears, and it was all she could hear.

“I like that you did not agree to take your clothes off,” he rasped, his tone no more expressive than usual. “It tells me many things about you.”

Despite the new, pleasurable pulsing in her body, Lydia blushed; feeling conflicted about being pleased at passing his test and furious at being secretly tested in the first place.

“If there are any more tests in the future, Your Grace, I prefer you not trick me into them,” she replied, her voice low and slightly shaky.

At this, Ezra bowed his head toward her.

“Noted,” he replied.

For an instant, when his eyes met hers again, Lydia was certain he was about to kiss her. Then his hand vanished from her throat, and he was suddenly at the door, holding it open for her.

“I shall send you the details of my target first thing in the morning. The event is a ball at the Earl of Leeds Mayfair estate on Thursday evening. See you then.”

His voice was back to its usual lifeless tone and his deadened expression had slipped

back into place so perfectly that Lydiawondered if he had ever actually changed it in the first place. Her first footsteps toward the door felt strangely awkward, as though she was not completely in her body, but by the time she'd reached the threshold she had regained her stride and her senses.

The Earl of Leeds ball. Yes. She and Juliet had already confirmed their attendance.

“See you then, Your Grace,” she managed to say in a smooth, unflustered tone.

As she passed him, though, she could have sworn she could once again feel that low, deep throb and nearly stumbled through the door.

CHAPTER THREE

“You were quite the beast tonight, Your Grace” Maria panted, still sprawled out and exhausted on her bed. “More so than usual. What has gotten into you?”

Her words came out in slow, uneven breaths; her depleted body still trying to recover from what Ezra had done to her. He had been ruthless with his possession of the paramour's body in every way possible. They had paired before and when he had walked up to her in the gaming hell hours earlier, her eyes had lit up with desire. She knew what he wanted and had all but pleaded with him to take it from her.

Pulling his black shirt back over his muscled shoulders, Ezra looked over at Maria and agreed that she deserved an answer to her question. Normally he left a few marks on her buttocks and breasts, yes, but this evening had been different. His red, defined handprints marked the flesh of her backside, inner thighs, and breasts. His fingerprints had left a ring around her plump, now obviously sore throat and her wrists and ankles were red and bruised from the restraints.

“I overdid it,” Ezra stated matter-of-factly, but Maria laughed at him softly and let her

head loll back among the pillows once more, her tight black curls springing everywhere.

“That is not what I asked, Your Grace,” she responded, writhing on the bed like a cat as she smiled up at him. “You know that I enjoy the...firmerside of things, especially with you.”

“But?” Ezra asked, more out of politeness than interest.

Maria nibbled her poor, bruised lower lip, marked by his teeth and other parts of him.

“It is just, you are normally not this...passionate about it.”

Ezra arched a brow.

“Excuse me?”

“You are ordinarily so distant, like a physician performing a procedure. Cold. Detached. But this evening you were...you were like a wildfire. Consuming. Scorching. You burned me from the inside out as though you wanted to etch a permanent brand upon me.”

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She rolled over until she was on her stomach, propping her chin on her forearms. Her dark eyes, framed with heavy black lashes, looked him up and down hungrily.

“Do it again.”

The invitation was plainly spread out for him, but he ignored it. Amusement and a smidge of relief flowed through Ezra as he dared a twitch of his lips; the closest thing he would ever offer as a smile. Though grateful for her proposition, Ezra donned his jacket and retrieved his billfold from his inner pocket.

“I need to get to work,” he stated, pulling out a fifty note. “This is for a week of rest and eating. Red meat will make the bruises go away faster.”

He pulled out another fifty note and handed it to her.

“This is for your discretion.”

Though Maria had accepted his first payment gratefully, she turned her nose up at the second and flung it back at him in a crumbled ball. She got up from her bed, her heavy, bruised breasts bouncing as she stormed to retrieve her robe and cover herself.

“You disrespect me by doubting my discretion, Your Grace, and I take your payment as an insult. This hell provides protection for all of us working girls, and I would never divulge a client.”

“It seems I am set on offending all women today,” Ezra muttered, so low Maria did not hear him as she continued to dress with loud huffs of irritation. Knowing his time

with her had ended, Ezra straightened his jacket and let himself out of her room. In truth, he was relieved to end things this way.

Maria had been right, he had been different tonight, which meant that they could never be together again. Now, though, her anger would at least make her feel as if it had been her decision.

He was both annoyed and amused that his fascinating interaction with Lydia had driven him to the gaming hell he and Ambrose operated together. He'd not gone to gamble or box, but to lose himself in sex. The only problem was that this time, there was no black void staring back at him as he released his carnal rage. There was only Lydia, with her glittering eyes, innocent freckles and long, flowing hair that made her look simultaneously wild and pure.

He had asked her to disrobe, and although he had expected her to refuse, it had stirred a startling response within him when he observed her mulling over his request before he let her off the hook. It impressed and aroused him to witness her willingness to save her sister from his supposed monstrous claws by contemplating such a degrading act. Then, before he'd realized it, he had offered her an alternative option.

"Ezra."

Ambrose's voice sounded curt and annoyed as he approached Ezra from behind. Ezra stopped and turned to see his friend and business partner march toward him wearing a deep-set frown.

"Evening, Ambrose," Ezra greeted blandly. "How is Barbara and the babe? You named him Titus, did you not?"

"Do not even try to dissuade me," Ambrose snapped back, his dark blue eyes nearly silver with annoyance. "What is this I hear? That you are pursuing Alice's youngest

sister, Juliet?”

“Why the concerned frown, brother?” Ezra replied mockingly, slapping his hand lazily over his heart. “Surely I thought one of my fellow orphans would love me enough to see me as a man and not the monster everyone believes me to be. Would she really be so horribly off married to me?”

Ambrose’s dark gold brows drew down as he huffed out a breath and crossed his arms.

“Do not do that, Ezra,” Ambrose warned. “You are our brother in every most important way and we accept you for who you are. You know that. But Juliet is...she is off limits, do you hear me?”

Who I am, Ezra mused silently. You have no idea who I am. I have no idea who I am. Perhaps I am not a man at all, but the demonic creature everyone already believes me to be.

“Are these your orders or Duncan’s?” Ezra asked, “Because if they are yours, you have no authority in this matter. Barbara is the Knight sisters’ friend. Not family.”

“It is an order from both of us,” Ambrose growled, snatching up Ezra’s collar.

Ezra gripped a firm hand over Ambrose’s and tilted his gaze in a silent challenge. As hotheaded as the four of them were, it was not a rarity that they would go at one another in the boxing ring, and Ezra was wondering if this was going to be a similar occurrence. Suddenly, he realized he hoped it would be. With thoughts of Lydia still springing up randomly in his head, perhaps he could use this moment as another outlet for his frustrations.

“Shall we have a round in the ring?” he asked with a wicked grin. “You have been

opting out of practice lately and I think it's because of Barbara and the babe, yes? But that rage, that darkness you keep pretending is gone? It is still there. And you better let it out to play before you take it out somewhere else."

Ambrose let go of his collar as if suddenly disgusted, but he did not step away.

"My darkness is gone, Ezra," Ambrose stated, giving him an honest look. "What I have with Barbara...what she has brought out in me, what she has healed in me...It has driven all such darkness and rage away. As Alice has achieved with Duncan. I know you and he were the "twins of darkness" for a while, but he has become someone else. Something better."

The truth sliced through Ezra like a dagger, but the only thing in his demeanor that changed was his wicked smile. It dropped back to a thin, unreadable line. Better. Yes. Duncan had gotten better, and he had not.

"You also deserve a woman who can chase away that darkness from your mind and soul," Ambrose went on with a weary sigh, "so, pick someone else, Ezra. Someone uniquely suited for you. And as for my status, Duncan might be Juliet's brother-in-law, but I also carry some weight in this game. Do not forget that I am your business partner here in this gaming hell I can change that whenever I please."

Ezra bristled at the only threat that ever hung over his head. Last year, Ambrose had toyed with the idea of shutting down the hall when he began to fall in love with Barbara, but Ezra had talked him out of it. Ezra took on more control over the hell so Ambrose could spend more time with his new family. But even in his increased role, Ambrose could still kick him out.

"You do not come in here for months, allowing me to take on the sole responsibility of this place, and then you threaten to withdraw me from it?" Ezra asked, steepling his fingers together calmly. "That's not very brotherly of you, Ambrose."

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Ambrose's eyes darkened once more, and it was clear he was finished being toyed with.

“You want me to be brotherly? Then heed my words, brother. Stop pursuing Juliet.”

“Do not forget how I earned my moniker, Ambrose,” Ezra warned, his voice low and deadly. “You may have your connections, but it is my reach into the lowest levels of humanity and the highest levels of royalty that has kept this establishment well-hidden and well-serviced.”

Ambrose's nostrils flared as he took another step back from Ezra, but Ezra was not finished. He afforded his friends a longer leash than most when it came to threats, but it was clear Ambrose needed a reminder of just how vicious he truly was.

“I can have this and three more of your businesses shut down within the night if I wished,” he continued.

He raised his hand and snapped his fingers.

“Like that.”

“Ezra,” Ambrose said warily, slowly raising his hands, “Stop. This is not about business. You are right. I was wrong to tangle it up with family matters. But the fact remains, brother, that...”

“The remaining fact is that this discussion is over,” Ezra stated, cutting him off.

He drew in a deep breath and allowed his customary blank calmness to cover him once more.

“Your words are noted, Ambrose. Now, follow me to the ring and go a round with me the bloody way, or trot off to your business.”

Ezra watched Ambrose grind his teeth so hard that his jaw clicked, and he wondered if he would start the fight without delay. Suddenly, without a further word, Ambrose stormed off. Ezra silently watched his friend take his leave, more angry now that Ambrose had refused the fight than his earlier threat to his business.

Walking to his office alone, Ezra kept his face a mask of pure boredom as the impact of Ambrose’s words began to wound him. He had expected his friends to be caught a little off guard upon hearing the news, but their absolute disapproval of his choice was a surprising blow. None of them, he realized, truly saw any good in him. Perhaps there was no good to see.

Good or evil, Ezra still had an objective to fulfill. One way or another, he was going to marry a Knight daughter.

“I came into your room late last night to talk to you,” Juliet whispered. “But you were not there.”

Lydia looked up from her embroidery, scanning the sitting room for any sight of her father or his servants. When she saw only their handmaids accompanying them, she laid down her embroidery and gave a warning look to her little sister. Juliet, too, set down her embroidery, and the two sisters rose and opened the glass door to the patio.

“I was remedying your situation,” Lydia explained quietly, despite the added privacy. “I believe I have found a solution.”

Juliet's face, wrought with worry lines, eased into its smooth, youthful beauty once again as her entire body sagged with relief.

"Do not make me wait," Juliet urged, starting to bounce on her feet. "Tell, do tell!"

Lydia felt her cheeks heat as she thought of Ezra and his request that she disrobe. She had hated it. And yet, something in her had become enticed by his suggestion. The opportunity to meet his challenge and stand, proud and bare, before him. Little had she known that by refusing his dare she had earned his respect, whatever that was worth.

"It is best not to share the details until the contract is sustained by both parties," Lydia replied, forcing a placating smile as she pushed the thoughts away, "but I shall need your assistance."

Although Juliet was a bit reluctant at first to relinquish hearing the details, she eventually abandoned her questioning and adhered to what Lydia had instructed. One hour later the missive from Ezra had arrived, and Lydia had snatched it from the butler's hands. After making an excuse to Juliet, she quickly left and opened it. Disappointment rose in her as she saw it was simply a name. Lady Poppy Ferris, Countess of Charmaine. She knew the young lady and had even played cards with her at a few ladies' events.

She was soft, pretty, and a bit skittish. Someone, Lydia realized, would be terrified of Ezra. Of course, you would not make this easy, Lydia thought as she tucked the small card into her sleeve and retreated to her room to prepare.

"Lydia," Owen said from behind her just as she reached her door.

Lydia froze, the small card in her sleeve burning into her wrist like a brand of guilt, then turned toward her father. She smiled as prettily as possible as she met his

suspicious gaze, and begged her cheeks not to turn red.

“Good day, Papa,” she replied as pleasantly as possible, “How are you?”

“Annoyed,” Owen stated flatly, holding up a card that looked identical but larger than the one hidden in her sleeve. “The Duke of Frampton has sent word that he has canceled today’s visit. You’d best tell me you had nothing to do with this, girl. This match is the ticket for our family. Not one, but two daughters married off to powerful dukes.”

Anger replaced Lydia’s bashfulness, and the woman she truly was, the one who had proudly raised her younger sisters on her own with little to no help from her father, smiled back at him as she batted her eyes.

“Oh, yes, Papa, I was meaning to tell you about that,” Lydia replied calmly, taking her father’s arm as if he were harmless. “The duke had mentioned wanting a chance to dance with Juliet, and we had discovered that the three of us would be attending the Earl of Leeds’ Mayfair estate ball, which as you know is just down the street and to which we’d already been invited. It is tomorrow evening, so he suggested that we meet there. He did mention that he was going to tell you on his way out, but I do suppose as busy as he is, he simply forgot. Apologies for worrying, you, Papa, but all is well.”

Lydia watched Owen’s annoyed expression dissolve into happiness as she spun him her pretty half-lie.

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“Well, then, that would explain a lot of things,” Owen grumbled, letting the hand holding Ezra’s card slowly fall to his side. “Tomorrow evening, though, I must be elsewhere. You will need to keep a sharp eye on your sister, understand? Do not let her nervousness destroy this opportunity.”

He paused, scoffing as he shook his head.

“Absolute little bird of a thing. Nervous as a newborn mouse.”

Only around certain men, Lydia thought, but replied confidently, “I shall see that everything goes perfectly, Papa.”

His business concluded, Owen merely nodded before turning and walking away, already mumbling to himself about something else he had to do. Once he’d turned the corner at the end of the hall, Lydia let herself into the room, burned the missive from Ezra, and flew to her closet. She would have to be brilliant and elegant tomorrow evening. Her shine would have to cancel out all of Ezra’s darkness, and that would be a difficult task indeed.

Lydia’s hands paused on her dresses as her mind jumped from formulating a plan to something she had avoided thinking about all night and day for more than a few moments at a time: Ezra’s touch. The sensations she’d experienced the night before bloomed inside her, making her heart throb and her skin tingle with longing.

Lydia did not realize her hand had slipped from the array of dresses to her own neck until she felt her fingertips slide directly over where Ezra’s had been. Something strange had happened to her when he’d touched her. Where had it come from? She

squeezed her neck slightly, trying to make it reappear, and disappointment welled in her as she felt nothing.

She should be afraid, she knew, that a man, Ezra, of all men, had held her throat and yet here she was, trying to recreate the sensation he'd awoken in her.

"What am I doing?" she whispered aloud to herself as she flung her hand away from her neck.

"Gather yourself, woman!" she continued to scold aloud to herself as she returned to her tasks. "This is not what we need to be thinking about. Juliet. Juliet is what matters."

CHAPTER FOUR

The Ball

"Every time you join my table you speak of the Duke of Frampton, Lady Lydia? Why?" Poppy, a soft, plump countess bedecked in a heavy, brightly dyed dress of multiple colors looked at Lydia quizzically.

Jeweled rings covered every finger, and a silver necklace of precious stones clung tightly to her neck. Her earlobes, which now looked painfully red and drawn down, also dripped with large pendant jewels.

She was the earl's second wife, the first having died two years earlier from a stillbirth. The babe had been a late-in-life pregnancy for the previous countess and had left the earl saddled with two young daughters who were only a couple of years shy from coming out. Now Poppy, barely older than the oldest daughter, had become their stepmother.

“Well, it is just that I find him fascinating, you know?” Lydia asked with a polite laugh, “And with his penchant for rare gems, I feel as if he would make a good friend to you and your family.”

“Perhaps,” Poppy mused, sounding a bit bored, “But he is quite...terrifying, is he not? I hear he is...well, never mind, I do not wish to discuss such gruesome things. What I would prefer at the moment, however, is to discuss your beautiful dress. What a bright, lovely color and so refreshing yet natural! Normally I prefer jewel tones, you know, now that I am married, but your gown is just so...so...”

Lydia stopped hearing Poppy’s words as her eyes scanned the crowd to locate Juliet in the throng.

“Countess...”

“Oh, do call me Poppy, darling, as we were friends once. You are too polite for comfort!” Poppy gushed.

Lydia let out another laugh, this time more forced, and gave her a small curtsy as she stood up.

“Poppy, please do forgive me, I seem to have lost sight of my little sister again.”

Poppy frowned a little at this, but then nodded and made a shooing motion with her hand.

“You should get a bell for her,” Poppy scoffed, clearly annoyed at yet another interruption. “Very well, then. Hurry though, for I may not be able to hold your seat.”

Although Lydia felt sweat begin to bead at her temples, she smiled back calmly and promised she would return quickly, before heading toward her friends.

“This is not going at all as I’d planned,” Lydia hissed, fanning herself as Helena, Barbara, and Alice shuffled her away from the crowd. “Where in the world has Juliet gone now?!”

She had instructed her younger sister to keep away from suitors, yes, but not to disappear. She’d instructed her to stay with herself, Helena, Alice, or Barbara at all times, but for the third time that evening, they had lost her again. Her disappearance act always seemed to occur right at the moment when Poppy was letting down her guard.

“I am sure she is just as nervous as we all are with this predicament,” Helena stated quietly once they’d reached a private space along the wall. “What on earth is Ezra thinking?”

“He is not,” Alice scoffed, throwing a glare toward the general crowd as if knowing he was somewhere within it. “He cannot be thinking at all. I nearly had to tie Duncan to the bed to get him to stop going after Ezra, and that role is rarely reversed.

Though stressed, Lydia let out a laugh at her sister’s wicked commentary. She had given up trying to teach Alice and Barbara manners, and since they were now both happily married, it seemed all for the better that she had.

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“I just do not know how I am going to do this if every time I get close I have to leave to look for Juliet. She has no idea she is sabotaging her own happiness by doing this!”

“Perhaps that is why you should tell her?” Barbara asked, but when Lydia threw her a look she muttered, “Or not.”

In truth, Lydia had not told them everything either. They did not know she would become Ezra’s substitute bride if she were to succeed. The guilt of keeping such a secret hung heavily upon her, but she could not let them know. Not yet.

“Let us worry about Juliet,” Alice said helpfully, “You can do this, Lydia. You could tame a wild bear with your manners, this is nothing for you!”

Feeling empowered by her sister’s speech, Lydia raised her head high and smoothed her hands over her dress. Alice was right, and she looked as pretty and welcoming as a peach on a sweltering day. As Helena often did, she’d chosen the fruit-hued dress to draw the light but not be the center of attention. She’d also carefully highlighted her eyes, cheeks, and lips with just a touch of rouge that was so light it nearly matched her dress. Only a single strand of three diamonds hung from each ear and a simple, pearlescent teardrop hung from a peach-hued ribbon around her neck. Simple, but elegant and welcoming.

“Thank you, my darlings,” Lydia replied warmly, looking each of her friends in the eye.

“I shall go look for Juliet now,” Helena offered, “Ambrose will help me and will be discreet.”

“And Barbara and I shall make sure nothing interrupts your next conversation with Poppy,” Alice added. “Now, go!”

Her confidence renewed, Lydia turned from her friends, set on making her way back to Poppy’s table, when a gentleman clad in black from head to toe stepped into her path.

“Hello, Lydia,” a familiar voice purred, sending warmth flooding through her veins as she looked up into his icy blue eyes. “It seems you have failed in your task.”

“The evening is not yet over, Your Grace,” Lydia told him calmly as she stood before him in all her regal beauty.

Ezra took a moment to study her change of appearance up close. This evening, she was not the modest oldest sister he had seen two nights earlier, but an angelic vision in peach. While ruffles, frills, and feathers were taking over the style, Lydia’s satin dress was well-fitted in the bodice and the sleeves, short and thin and simply draped on the outside of her shoulders. It was a gown befitting a crown, which Lydia substituted for a coroneted braid. Beautiful, yet understated.

“I have watched you,” he replied, admiring her confidence, “given you ample space to work your charms. And still, the countess has yet to agree to speak with me. You have failed.”

He held out his hand to her then, bowing slightly. When she looked back at him with hatred, he let his eyes wander around the room as if to say, you think embarrassing me is going to help your cause?

In response, he was rewarded with the gold and bronze flecks igniting in her eyes as she smiled sweetly and slipped her hand into his. Quietly and with grace, he led her a few paces onto the dance floor and swept her into the song.

“The evening may not be over but the time to accomplish your task is,” Ezra murmured as he took the lead. “It was a valiant effort, and I saw that you came close to accomplishing your goal on a few occasions. But the countess has not been swayed, and if my sources are correct, she is more interested in your gown than my business.”

Lydia followed his steps beautifully, her body becoming the image of feline grace as she moved under his instruction.

“You underestimate me, Your Grace. You have no idea the miracles I can work within the last dwindling moments of this evening.”

Lydia spoke her words so sweetly and so calmly that her voice felt like a soft caress across his mind, soothing the heckles that always harbored there. Ezra nearly faltered in his step at hersweetness, but he reined in his surprise and in response, sent her for a sudden twirl in an effort to offset her.

To both his chagrin and amusement, Lydia handled the twirl as gracefully as a ballerina and even added a flourishing flick of her wrist before her hand delicately touched his shoulder again. As the music stopped, they let go of one another, and as Ezra bowed to her, he again experienced the intense, heated sensation she’d created on the night she’d visited him.

“Oh, Lydia, darling, what a beautiful dance! And, Your Grace, who knew you could step so eloquently?”

Ezra turned and bowed low at his waist to Lady Poppy Farris, Countess of Charmaine. He had spotted the woman the moment he had entered the room, dripping with the rewards of her husband’s multiple gemstone mine stocks. If he could convince the earl to let him buy stocks at his desired rate, the turnover in just one year would easily reduce half of his father’s remaining debt.

“Countess Charmaine, your praise is an honor,” he said with as much feigned warmth as he could muster. “Perhaps you would like to be next?”

Ezra could have sworn he caught the briefest of eye rolls from Lydia before he turned his attention toward Poppy. She had begun giggling and blushing at his suggestion and was sputtering winsome excuses about being married but flattered.

“You could do me another honor, though, Your Grace,” Poppy finally said as she resigned from her fit of giggles.

“Anything,” Ezra said willingly.

Though Poppy seemed not to notice, he was very aware of the multitude of stares their conversation had attracted. The Earl of Charmaine himself had stepped toward them to watch. Perhaps Lydia did succeed, he mused, keeping one eye on the earl and another on his wife.

“This is my dear stepdaughter’s first season out,” Poppy explained, giving him a pout, “She is so shy, pitiful thing, and it would do her so well to be courted by someone like you. Could I please bother you with an introduction?”

Ezra gave her an appreciative smile as he bowed to her again and said, “Forgive me, my lady, but I must refrain as I am now officially off the market. I would, however, love for my soon-to-be wife and I to join you and your entire family for a meal. Perhaps my darling lady could help your daughter find a suitable gentleman. She is, I must say, the most upstanding young lady I have ever had the pleasure of meeting.”

Lydia paled at his side as Poppy’s face moved swiftly from disappointment to pleasant surprise.

“No.”

Lydia whispered the word so softly that even he did not hear it, but he did not have to. He saw those plump, round lips form the word of despair so clearly on her suddenly pale face that she might as well have shouted it.

“What joyous news! I did not realize that you had become engaged, Your Grace,” Poppy said in a rush as she attempted to recover from her shock. “Pray, do tell us who the lovely lady is!”

“Is it not obvious?” Ezra asked, clasping Lydia’s hand and holding it up.

“It is the lovely Lady Lydia Knight.”

Slap him.

The command rang in Lydia’s mind so loudly that she nearly raised her hand to obey it. Her name. Ezra had said her name, not Juliet’s. A breath rushed out of her chest, one she had not even realized she had been holding as she forced herself to smile happily. Her hand tightened like a vice around Ezra’s as she nodded politely toward Poppy and said as sweetly as possible, “Yes, it is true.”

“Oh, you naughty girl!” Poppy exclaimed before laughing loudly and swatting Lydia’s arm with her fan. “That is why you were buttering me up to talk to him, hmm? So that our husbands could do business together and we could rekindle our former friendship! Well, why would you not? I have missed you! And what lady does not love jewels and gems?”

“I can think of none,” Ezra said from Lydia’s side.

If he was bothered or hurt by her tight grip he did not show it and softly drew his thumb over the back of her hand. Like an adder’s tongue, she thought, then shivered, but not with the disgust, she had intended.

“Do forgive me for not telling you sooner, Poppy” Lydia pled in her most apologetic voice, “I was just not sure when the duke would be comfortable sharing the news. And though I do hope our husbands can find common ground I most certainly hope you and I may speak together again soon, as I so enjoy your company.”

“Consider it settled,” Poppy said enthusiastically to them both. “We shall have dinner next week. Tell me, to what address should we send the invitation? The Frampton Estate in Mayfair?”

“You may send it to this address,” Ezra stated as he pulled a crisp white card from his pocket. “The Frampton Estate is...occupied by another family member and would not do me the kindness of passing on the invitation.”

“Hmmm, sour family, I do understand,” Poppy said pityingly as she plucked the card from his hand.

Lydia watched the woman who had been so opposed to meeting Ezra just a few moments earlier, now practically making eyes at him. Annoyance flashed through her, and she had to look away. To her relief, she saw Juliet back with Helena, Barbara, and Alice, all of whom were smiling widely. Suddenly she realized that her friends must have gotten Poppy to notice Ezra and her dancing and had turned the tides in her favor. Gratitude soared in her heart, and she smiled back at them before returning her attention to Poppy and Ezra.

“Might I have a quick moment with Lydia?” Poppy asked, just as Lydia regained

focus.

“But of course,” Ezra agreed happily, releasing Lydia’s hand.

Lydia immediately felt the loss of his heat but pushed the thought away as she and Poppy stepped to one side.

“Lydia, my dear, I thought you were settled in your life as a spinster?” Poppy asked in hushed tones. “Now you are engaged to the Duke of Darkness? I know I jested a moment ago, but honestly, this is quite shocking news.”

Knowing Lydia needed to prove herself now more than ever, she took Poppy’s hands in her own and replied, “My darling friend, I am grateful for your concern, but truly, he is not the dark and twisted man they make him out to be! You have known me since I was a girl, have you not?”

“Yes, and fondly,” Poppy replied quickly.

“Then you know I would not entertain a man who was truly as dastardly as the ton makes him seem,” Lydia said in a kind but slightly chastising tone. The tone that reminded all young women of their mothers and stirred them toward obedience.

“Yes, of course,” Poppy agreed, nodding her head, then added, “You know I only stopped speaking to you because my husband does not approve of friendships between married women and spinsters.”

“Precisely,” Lydia replied, grateful that Poppy was playing right into her hand. “Now we can be friends again, as you said. There is no need to worry, I assure you.”

With that, what little doubt remained in Poppy’s eyes instantly disappeared, and she let out a little giggle before congratulating Lydia on her engagement again.

“I shall keep silent on your news until your announcement,” Poppy whispered as her husband came to sweep her into a dance.

Lydia sighed in relief as she heard Poppy’s parting words, reassured that she would be able to deliver the news to Juliet and the others personally.

“That was a spectacular performance,” Ezra praised as he appeared by her side.

Silently, as if they shared the same thought, they began to make their way toward the open balcony door. Lydia caught her friends looking at her questioningly as they walked by, but she raised a staying hand toward them, willing them not to come to her rescue as they likely wanted. To her relief, they swayed on their feet, eyes still full of worry, but remained where they were.

“I believe it was you that had the most surprising play of all, Your Grace,” Lydia retorted dryly, refusing to look at him as they walked, “Tell me, do you enjoy these little games you play with me? You must, though I do not understand why.”

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They kept their eyes forward and their bodies apart as they walked from the balcony and down the steps toward the gardens.

“Whatever do you mean?” Ezra asked with mocked innocence, turning his attention to the rows of roses they now strolled through slowly.

“You pulled me into that dance to tell me that I had failed, then you tell Poppy I am to be your wife? And what about your little test the night before last?” she hissed in a low breath. “You truly must enjoy vexing my senses, Your Grace, as you toy with them like a cat torments a mouse.”

Ezra’s fingers slid around her wrist so quickly that she did not even realize she’d been caught in his grip until she stumbled backward. He’d stopped strolling, and even though they were walking slowly, the solid stillness of his stature had her falling. Ezra caught her easily, twirling her around so that her breasts were pressed tightly to his chest and her lips were mere inches from his.

“Is that not what you wanted, little mouse?” he asked, his blue eyes glowing in the night.

He grazed his nose lightly against hers, causing her breath to hitch and her heart to hammer as she felt the warmth of his breath against her lips.

“Did you not want to take your sister’s place?” he practically purred, his deep, coaxing voice calling her to answer.

“Yes,” she breathed.

Ezra drew in a slow breath through his nose, taking in the scent of her, and then met her eyes. Fear laced with desire filled her veins as she lost her irritation toward him and became entranced in his gaze. Even when his eyes moved to her lips, when he subtly shifted closer, she remained still and mystified.

“Games or not, you were right,” Ezra whispered against her lips, so close she could feel them, “You are the right choice for me.”

It was not a kiss Ezra gave her as his lips did not touch hers. But his teeth had found the lower left corner of her mouth, and when he bit down on the delicate, virgin flesh, pleasure laced with the softest of pain flooded her veins and made her entire body grow warm. His teeth were sharp and precise, and as she pulled away, she tasted copper.

Ezra’s eyes were luminescent as he pulled away from her, the tiniest drop of her blood on his lip. She watched, transfixed, as his tongue slowly drew out to lap it up, and her knees quaked with a sudden and strange need. It was not a kiss and yet it was somehow more intimate, more personal, than any kiss she had ever read about.

Her lip pulsed where he had placed his mark, and as if he could see it do so, Ezra pulled her close again and suckled her bottom lip, nursing the small hurt with every dreg until she felt nothing but dizzying pleasure.

“I shall be calling on you soon to make the arrangements,” Ezra said in a low voice, with a slight pant to his cadence as he backed away.

Lydia snapped herself out of her trancelike state as Ezra began to step away from her. When had he stopped? When had he released her?

“You...you truly accept my offer then?” she asked, taking a quaking step toward him.

Ezra paused just long enough to focus his eyes on her once more, making her body tremble.

“You succeeded, Lydia. Congratulations.”

Without another word, Ezra turned back and headed away from the balcony entrance, to the path that led to the carriages. She had done it. Her plan had worked. She was going to be the Duchess of Frampton.

“She is over here,” Helena’s voice sounded a moment later, quickly followed by Barbara proclaiming, “Oh, thank heaven. Where is the brute?”

Lydia laughed softly at her friends’ protectiveness and turned to see the four of them making their way toward her through various garden paths.

“We know you can fend for yourself, but we were starting to get worried,” Alice explained as she pulled Juliet along with her. “Ezra did not seem mad, but he did seem...different.”

“What did he have to discuss with you?” Juliet asked anxiously. “Was it me? Has he dropped his pursuit?”

Lydia looked around to see that everyone was waiting for her answer just as anxiously as Juliet was.

“He is dropping his pursuit of you,” Lydia announced and was quickly swallowed up by her friends’ hugs and sighs of relief for the next several minutes.

“Thank you for all of your help in there, I could not have done it without you,” Lydia told them all warmly, but they paid her appreciation no mind and began demanding details.

“Tell us why he needed to speak with you out here,” Barbara demanded.

“Does Duncan need to talk to him?” Alice asked, her fists on her hips.

“Ambrose has been quite testy anytime Ezra’s name is mentioned. I am sure he would be happy to speak with him too,” Helena offered next.

Love and warmth gushed through Lydia as she smiled at each of her friends and slowly but calmly brought their questions to a halt.

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“My darlings, I promise you I will explain everything soon,” she assured them, “But for now let us put this evening to rest while it is still on a good note. Juliet and I need to be heading home.”

CHAPTER FIVE

“You did what?” Juliet’s whispered voice narrowed into a high-pitched shriek as Lydia told her the full truth of her deal with Ezra.

“Hush!” Lydia hissed, her eyes darting toward the door.

Her father would find out about the duke’s change of heart soon enough, but he did not need to find out like this. When she was sure no one was coming into Juliet’s room, Lydia looked sternly back at Juliet. Her sister gave her an apologetic glance and blinked as her eyes filled with tears.

“This is not what I wanted,” Juliet sobbed quietly, reaching for Lydia’s hands. “Sister, your freedom is everything to you! You cannot trade it for me!”

Love and sadness poured from Lydia’s heart at her sister’s kind words. It was not what she wanted for herself either. In fact, it made her heart race and her mind reel with anxious thoughts, so much so that she was not sure if she needed to cry or be sick. But, despite her own terrors, Lydia gave Juliet a hesitant smile and pushed her own feelings aside. She would deal with them later. Much later when she was certain that no one would need her or search for her.

“My dearest, my freedom is mine to trade,” Lydia replied warmly, then placed a

quick kiss on Juliet's fisted knuckles before patting them. "And if it earned you your happiness, then it was a trade most worth making," Lydia let out a little laugh as she stood up and busied herself with getting Juliet's hair undone. Normally a maid would do such a thing but since Lydia would soon be leaving she wanted to do it as much as possible.

"The Duke of Frampton is a brute among men, to be sure," Lydia went on, "But in the years that I have had to interact with him at parties, I have noticed that he can collar that brutality when he wants to. I shall simply have to find a way to entice him to do so."

Juliet turned toward her with an incredulous look as Lydia began to brush her hair.

"Do not underestimate such a task, sister," Juliet warned, "He may be "collared" by his friends, but that took them years. They are also men."

"And all of them would tie him up to a horse and whip its flanks if he ever laid a cruel hand on me," Lydia replied, hoping to soothe the tense conversation with a dash of humor and truth.

She felt relieved when she heard a soft laugh leave Juliet's mouth as she shook her head.

"Duncan and Alice will not be living with you," Juliet insisted, her voice again quiet and worried, "They will not always be there to protect you."

Unable to assuage the fear and worry in her sister's voice, Lydia quickly finished the simple braid in Juliet's hair and let out a deep sigh as she walked around the bed to smile at Juliet.

"Do not do this, Juliet," she commanded softly as she knelt before her and held her

gently by her shoulders. “What is done is done. You now have another chance to wait for your darling baron. This was the one and only chance I could give you to wait for him. Use it wisely.”

Juliet’s eyes filled with tears again, making her appear even more childish and innocent.

“You speak as if you are saying goodbye,” she rasped. “Are you going to be leaving so soon?”

Lydia swallowed a sudden, hard lump in her throat and forced a nod.

“The duke had wanted a swift wedding with you. I am assuming that will not change. He only made his decision tonight, but I suspect that he will be alerting Father as soon as tomorrow.”

“The duke will never let me see you again,” Juliet sobbed, then put her hands to her face.

Lydia’s heart broke for her little sister as she wrapped her arms around her and put her down on her bed.

“That is not true,” she soothed, “That is simply not true.”

As she did for her when she was little, Lydia gently stroked her fingernails down Juliet’s back and sang her one of their mother’s lullabies. Eventually, Juliet’s sobs slowed, then so did her sad little hiccups, and by the time Lydia finished the final lyrics to the third lullaby she was sleeping deeply. Gently, so as not to wake her, Lydia slid out from around her sister’s smaller frame and positioned her head comfortably on the pillow. Lydia caught the drying tracks of tears still visible on Juliet’s cheeks and she felt her heart hurt again. She had done the only thing she

could to save her sister from heartache, and yet she had somehow broken her heart anyway.

“Lydia,” Owen called as Lydia was gently closing the door to her sister’s room.

Lydia felt her stomach clench as she heard her father’s deep, slightly slurred voice. Why? She pleaded silently, drawing what little strength she had left into her with a breath. Why now?

“Good evening, Papa,” she greeted him cheerily. “Did your engagement go well?”

Owen glared at her, his ruddy cheeks ruddier from the alcohol.

“Mind your business. I ask the questions not you. Now tell me. How did your sister perform this evening? Has she won back the duke’s attentions?”

“I believe the duke will be gracing us with a visit to our house as early as the morrow,” Lydia replied, choosing her words carefully.

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Relief flooded through her when Owen did not question her, but instead laughed and clapped his hands together gleefully.

“I knew it,” he boasted, smiling wide. “See what happens when you girls obey me? Things go right!”

The start of a laugh came out so sharp and so quick that Lydia barely had time to turn it into a pretend coughing fit. If he only knew what news Ezra would be delivering. She prayed that she would be present in the room to see her father’s face. The surprise. The confusion.

“Yes, Papa, of course, you are right,” Lydia only agreed, curtsying toward him.

“Indeed, I am,” he murmured, nodding more at the wall than her, “now go to bed. We shall need to be up early tomorrow.”

Lydia quickly bid him goodnight and all but collapsed against her locked bedroom door once she’d finally made it inside. Away from her father, from Juliet, away from everyone, Lydia let her thoughts about all else fall away and called forth her own feelings.

She pushed past the moments when she’d wanted to slap and strangle Ezra for his taunting and his games; past her sense of relief, shock, and accomplishment when he’d announced her as his bride-to-be and onward, to the kiss. But it was not a kiss. Not really.

Lydia brought her fingertips up to her lower lip and gingerly felt around until she

touched upon the small ridge of the bite mark. It had not hurt at least not really. It was not like the pain she usually felt when accidentally biting her lip or cheek whilst eating. Even now, although it still throbbed under her fingertips, it did not hurt. It just hummed and throbbed, mimicking her heart.

After their encounter she'd looked at herself in the mirror at her earliest opportunity, believing that he had marked her although her friends had said nothing to that effect, there were no marks on the outside of her mouth, no visible proof at all that Ezra had grazed his teeth on her lips and claimed her as his own. And yet she felt it in her entire body. It was strange, frightening, exciting, and she wanted to know one thing more than the rest: what did it mean?

"Your Grace!" Owen sputtered, choking on his morning tea as Ezra strode confidently into the Knight's dining room.

Ezra felt a rush of enjoyment as he watched Owen sputter and cough as he dabbed at his wet face and ruined surge, but instead rolled his eyes away from him as bored and focused on the two ladies in the room. Juliet still looked as wide-eyed and fearful as usual, but Lydia's face was a mask of cool, even haughty ease. She kept her eyes on him calmly as she slowly brought her cup of tea up to her mouth and took a slow sip.

Their moment in the garden the previous night flashed vividly in his mind. He felt his manhood stir to life as he recalled the warmth of her body against his; the taste of her lip as he left his mark and the way her body shuddered. Not in fear but in pleasure.

"Welcome to our home, Your Grace," Lydia greeted politely after enjoying her tea. She rose gracefully and offered him a charming curtsy before motioning him toward a seat.

"Yes, Your Grace, please," Owen urged, still coughing. "Forgive us, our butler normally alerts us that we have..."

“I insisted I show myself in as I am terribly busy today and have little time,” Ezra announced, cutting him off.

Ezra paused for a moment and gave Owen a look that dared him to delay the purpose of his visit any longer.

“Proceed, please, Your Grace,” was all Owen could manage.

“I have decided that I shall indeed take a Knight daughter for my bride, Sir, but my preference has fallen to Lady Lydia. I applied for an early license first thing this morning and we shall be wed in four days. A private affair. No reception.”

While Owen paled and began to sputter his dissatisfaction at the news, Lydia only continued to eye him coolly. The bronze and gold flecks in her green eyes were not ablaze today, but he knew she was ready for him. She would attack and defend Juliet at a moment’s notice if he misbehaved. He almost smiled at the thought.

Ezra slowly dragged his blue eyes from Lydia to Owen, the subtle shift in his face making the patriarch stop his sputtering in an instant.

“Your disappointment is noted, Sir, and as recompense, you may keep your daughter’s dowry. But my plan remains as it is, regardless. I have business to address in Frampton directly after the wedding, so a trunk carriage will be arriving in two days for Lydia’s things. Now, my solicitor has drawn up an agreement and I suggest you sign it so that we may all move along.”

Ezra produced the document from his inside jacket pocket as well as a portable pen and laid them both on the table in front of Owen. The man spared one more pleading glance toward Ezra, but with a simple raise of his brow, Owen bowed his head and signed his name on the document.

“You are sure it is Lydia that you desire?” Owen asked as Ezra plucked the pen from his hand to sign his own name.

“Juliet is younger and sweeter. She will be the better wife for you, I promise you, Your Grace.”

Ezra finished his signature with a flourish and then tucked the pen back into his pocket before he coldly replied, “Tell me, Lord Knight, do you intend to be so open about your dependency upon your eldest daughter’s parenting skills, or are you truly not aware that you are so obvious?”

From behind him, Ezra heard Lydia’s startled laugh, and this time he could not help the smile that grew on his lips. He could not love her or be tender with her, but he appreciated that they seemed able to impress one another. As she’d proven last night, she would do well in drawing him the business he needed to get him out of his father’s debt and had decided he had indeed made the right choice.

“Please forgive me, Your Grace. I...no, of course, I do not feel such a...I mean, I love my daughters, truly, but I...”

“That is enough,” Ezra sighed boredly, tucking the now-dry document back into his pocket. “Our business has been concluded. I shall send you the details of the ceremony by the end of the day. Lady Lydia? Walk me out, would you?”

Ezra did not check to make sure that she followed him, but he could not help feeling a sense of relief when he heard her heels clicking behind him in a slow, ladylike fashion. He paused briefly outside the dining room, waiting for her to catch up, and bowed his head toward her.

“If I did not despise the position you have put me in I would say that I was impressed with what you did to my father,” Lydia said by way of a greeting.

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Her blatant welcome shocked him as much as it impressed him, and he huffed out a breath of a laugh.

“If only,” he retorted dryly, letting his eyes roam down her figure.

She wore a long-sleeved, soft, creamy-white linen dress cut close to her lithe figure, with a neckline that ended just at the base of her throat, where a cameo dangled on a thick black ribbon. Her brown hair was once more styled primly and prettily atop her head; never too gaudy or overdone, just neat and clean. And yet, somehow, she was so much more than what the eye could behold.

His sights fixed on the cameo again. It was a young woman carved into the ivory; a silhouette so similar to Lydia’s it was uncanny. But what drew him more was the intense black of the thick, glistening ribbon that kept it strung around Lydia’s slender neck.

Delightfully slender, Ezra silently noted, then wondered what it would feel like to hold such a delicate neck in his grasp; to feel the pulse in her jugular vein beat rhythmically into his palms as he squeezed.

“You will have to forgive the rush but as I stated before, your presence will be required in certain social and business situations,” he forced himself to say as he pulled his eyes back up to her face. “Now that you have won our little game, I suspect that will not be a problem for you?”

“Not at all,” Lydia replied.

Though her voice was serene, the bronze and gold flecks illuminated her eyes once more.

“However, once my responsibilities are fulfilled, I will be sending for my sister for an extended visit.”

So fierce, Ezra chuckled silently to himself. He shrugged in response and studied his nails.

“Do what you wish as long as it does not interfere with my plans,” he replied in a bored tone.

Lydia balked at his retort as she had expected him to put up a fight, and he smirked as he bowed with mock enthusiasm.

“See you in four days, Duchess,” he said in a cold taunt.

Without another word, Ezra turned and left. Deep need railed inside of him as he climbed into his carriage, his entire body reacting to Lydia. When he had first caught her scent he had mistakenly believed it to be lark. He now realized her skin wafted with the heady scent of black heart cherries, which contained juice so dark and potent that it would stain everything crimson. It was so intense, so pure, that he could not believe it emanated from Lydia.

He recalled he’d smelled the same scent the previous night. It had been part of what had driven him to do what he had done to her. Even for him, the bite was much more forward than how he would normally go about being with a woman. This morning, when he’d smelled her intoxicating aroma for the third time, he had nearly launched himself at her.

She was going to be an annoyance, he realized darkly, as well as a distraction. Then,

as if understanding it was already becoming an issue, he snapped his attention back to his valet.

“Start from the beginning,” Ezra demanded curtly, knowing he had not heard a single word.

“Yes, Your Grace,” the valet replied dutifully and obeyed. As the servant began to reread his notes, Ezra’s mind kept flashing back to Lydia and all the tiny details he was gathering about her. In the back of his mind, he wondered if he had made a grave mistake.

CHAPTER SIX

“Alice, Duncan, I cannot thank you enough for opening your home to us,” Lydia said warmly as she hugged her sister goodbye.

“Oh, please, I would have entered the boxing ring with Ezra himself if he had refused me,” Alice replied with a laugh as she squeezed Lydia tightly.

It had indeed been a relief when Alice had visited Lydia the day after Ezra met with their father to announce that the wedding ceremony would be held in the London Banfield House. Her sister had also pried a short reception out of Ezra, which Lydia knew, no doubt, had to do with Duncan’s insistence.

Lydia looked up at him as Alice released her and he smiled warmly as he opened his arms. Their relationship had changed so much in the last two years. Though she had started out fearing and hating Duncan, Lydia now saw him as a doting husband to her sister and a brotherly protector of both her and Juliet.

You let me know if he misbehaves,” Duncan said as he embraced her warmly, “We’ll put him in his place quickly and properly.”

“I know you would,” Lydia rasped, feeling yet another sudden bout of emotion wash over her.

They had come in waves all day between moments of estranged numbness. First when she, Juliet, and Alice were having their private sisters-only moment at the wedding. Then again when she saw Ezra look at her from the pulpit. There was no love. No approval. There was nothing. Just those dead, glittering blue eyes that remained as impassive as ever, although he did keep them on her throughout the ceremony. His touch was surprisingly gentle as he picked up her hand and slid her wedding ring onto her finger, but there was no affection. Though she had been happy with her life as a spinster, it was only in that moment that Lydia realized her option to someday marry for love was now and forever sealed off.

“We must be going now,” Ezra stated, appearing by her side from nowhere.

Lydia watched Duncan and Alice’s eyes flatten as they regarded Ezra.

“You are playing a dangerous game here, Ezra,” Duncan warned, his voice suddenly low and commanding.

“I did not realize getting married would reveal the true feelings of my friends,” Ezra said disinterestedly.

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Lydia looked up at him just as he tisked his tongue and shook his head.

“Here I believed you all thought better of me, but it is obvious you see me as evil as everyone else does.”

“Duncan, please,” Lydia found herself saying, surprising everyone including herself. The three of them stared at her wide-eyed as she said, “This is not necessary. Ezra is not some creature dragging me off to a cave in the woods.”

“Do not be so sure,” Morgan mused, making his presence known.

Lydia turned around and saw that Morgan, Ambrose, Helena, Barbara, and Juliet had all circled them, suspiciously watching Ezra. Empathy twisted in her as she shot a compassionate look at her new husband. She observed that he only stared back at them with impassive detachment. Suddenly, feeling protective of him, Lydia squared her shoulders and raised her chin defiantly.

“I would like to kindly remind you all that Ezra and I have mutually agreed to this marriage, and although I appreciate just how much love and care is coming from each and every one of you, it has become a bit overwhelming.”

She turned her focus to Ezra as her friends’ faces began to turn pink, then red with sheepish realization.

“I believe you said it was time to go, husband?” She asked.

Lydia could have sworn she saw something akin to admiration flash in his eyes.

“Indeed, I did,” he agreed, impassively, taking her by the hand. “Let us depart.”

“That was not necessary,” Ezra stated dryly.

They were nearly at Frampton Hall and had traveled most of the journey in silence. He had not been surprised when his friends had begun to growl and snap at him at the wedding, but he had been caught off guard by the way Lydia smoothed over the caustic situation. He had never been saved before; not even by his duke brothers. He had always been the one to do the saving, although his efforts were usually focused on Morgan, and, back in the day, Duncan.

He had tried to ignore the small kindness that Lydia had performed for him, but the more he sat with it, the more it annoyed and pressed upon him. Finally, when he could not take the agitation any longer, he broke his silence.

Lydia’s green eyes slowly rose from her book, giving him a look as if annoyed by his interruption. It somehow pleased him that she looked at him in that way, but he kept his face frozen in its usual mask.

“Pardon?” she asked calmly, closing her book in the same slow fashion she had raised her eyes.

“Your intervention at the reception. It was not necessary. I can speak for myself,” he stated in a clipped tone.

Lydia raised an amused brow and made a show of smoothing her gloved hands down her soft pink wedding dress.

“You are not a dimwitted man, Your Grace, so I am confused as to why you believe that was not necessary?”

Now it was Ezra's turn to be confused. He crossed his legs as his manhood suddenly pulsed and leaned forward to give her an intimidating look.

"I beg your pardon?" he growled.

Lydia looked back at him, unfazed by his voice and tone.

"You married me to soften your image, Your Grace. To smooth things over when they would normally become complicated. We have a contract, you and I, and I am not one to break a contract," Lydia replied with cool confidence and grace.

"You did not need to..."

"Did I not perform my task as you intended it to be performed?" Lydia asked before Ezra could continue.

He glared at her as the carriage stopped, but begrudgingly admitted, "Yes."

"Welcome home, Your Graces," the footman greeted as the door opened a heartbeat later.

Before Ezra could command him to shut the door again, Lydia was out of her seat and taking the footman's hand.

"Hello, I am the new Lady of the House, Her Grace Lydia Fernside," Lydia greeted the footman diplomatically as he helped her safely to the ground, "And you are?"

The footman, a young man in his early twenties, smiled wildly when he was spoken to so politely. Though Ezra was still greatly annoyed with Lydia, his frustration at the servant's bumbling annoyed him more and he gruffly commanded, "Answer her," as he got himself out of the carriage.

“Gerald, Your Grace,” the footman finally burst out, bowing low at his waist toward Lydia. “My name is Gerald, and I am at your service.”

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“That is most wonderful, Gerald,” Lydia answered politely as she lifted her skirts and began to climb the steps, “You will not mind then that I ask you to alert the rest of the staff that I shall meet with them tomorrow? I am dreadfully weary and need to rest right away.”

“You have no idea where you are going,” Ezra noted as he calmly kept up with her on the steps.

His staff had bowed low around them as they entered the foyer, but they were already raising their heads and whispering as Gerald followed closely behind and delivered Lydia’s message.

“I am sure you are more than adequate to show me to my rooms,” Lydia remarked to Ezra as she continued up the steps as though she did not care whether or not he followed her.

Though he was still annoyed with her interference, amusement was starting to work its way through him as he watched her stride so confidently through his home. He caught up to her in several easy strides, then took the lead. If she wanted to play cool and aloof so could he. In fact, he preferred it.

“I assume you are not heartbroken that we do not have adjoining rooms?” he asked as he veered off to the right on the third floor.

“Certainly not,” Lydia retorted. “It is more suitable for our situation.”

“Our situation?” he echoed.

“Yes,” she breathed, turning to him with a smile that did not meet her eyes. “We are partners, not lovers.”

Ezra nearly chuckled but regained his composure as he stopped at the suite door. With a small flourish, he opened it and beckoned her inside. Lydia walked into her rooms with her shoulders back and her beautiful features held regally. The sitting parlor was already alight with several oil lamps which displayed a rather dark, bland room that was neither feminine nor welcoming. Ezra watched Lydia’s face closely as she studied the room, looking for any sign of dismay or regret. Yet...he saw none. Only quiet acceptance.

“You may redecorate if you like,” Ezra said dryly, getting down to the rules. She was right, they were partners, not lovers and every partnership had its guidelines.

“The suite is yours to do with as you wish. Have your sisters over whenever you like, or anyone else for that matter. You are not to go into my suite unless I invite you. I shall have my valet coordinate a diary for you, so you know when I expect you to be by my side, but when your presence is not required you are free to do as you wish on the grounds.”

“What if I want to leave the grounds?” she asked, raising a challenging eyebrow. “Are you going to stop me?”

Ezra’s lips twitched, but instead of a sarcastic answer, he chose to give her an honest one.

“If it impedes my business? Yes. There will be times you will need to be at my disposal, Lydia, and I cannot have you a day’s ride away when an opportunity suddenly arises.”

He expected Lydia to argue with him over this, but she only gave him a firm nod.

“I suppose that is practical,” she admitted.

Ezra deadpanned, unsure what to do with her acceptance.

“You must be tired,” he stated, almost wishing now that she’d argued with him. “I shall leave you to rest, and you and I will coordinate in the morning over breakfast. You will meet me in the main dining room at seven. Your handmaid will show you where it is.”

Deciding the conversation was over, he gave her a respectful bow and moved toward the door.

“I do not want children with you,” Lydia said as his hand reached the doorknob.

The blunt randomness of her statement had truly caught him off guard. As he turned back to her he could not help his wry smile and chuckle.

“That was quite the non sequitur,” he mused, but Lydia only acknowledged him with a level look of her own.

“If we are discussing your rules,” she replied calmly, unfazed by his teasing, “Then we should also discuss mine. Our agreement is to have me help you gain more business in exchange for not marrying Juliet. This is not a traditional marriage, so I will not provide traditional things. Children. A shared bed. You may take other women if you like. I genuinely do not care, but do not bring them here. This is not just our home now, it is also where we discuss business. We cannot have distractions.”

For the first time in his life, Ezra felt as if he could have been knocked over by a feather. The honesty, the practicality; even from Lydia, was not at all what he was expecting. His shock transformed into curiosity, then lust as he looked her up and down.

“You are...certainly quite the interesting woman, Duchess,” Ezra mused, sliding a hand in his pocket.

As he did so, her fingers brushed against the length of his hardened manhood, and he shivered.

“I am a woman of my word,” Lydia replied matter-of-factly, then with a bit more annoyance, spat, “and stop looking at me like that!”

“Like what?” Ezra teased as he took a step toward her.

A pink blush rose from under the freckles on Lydia’s cheeks, and his smirk turned into a wolfish smile. He had to admit he was beginning to enjoy making her falter. Lydia, the fearless, practical woman who had just rattled off her demands, then swallowed slowly as her pupils dilated and her lips parted. He took another step, close enough to catch her black heart cherry scent. It instantly made his mouth water, and he had to grit his teeth against the sudden balloon of lust that burst inside of him. It caused him to let out a small grunt, making Lydia jump a little.

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“Are you sure you do not want to share a bed with me?” he asked, his free hand sliding around her throat.

He nearly growled at the way the lace collar impeded him from touching her bare flesh. He wanted to rip it away, shred it until he could place his palm on her bare pulse as he had the night she’d made her offer, but he didn’t. Keeping the lace intact, he settled for stroking his fingers over the fabric. He noted it was blessedly thin although not thin enough, as he located her pulse once more. He felt Lydia tremble beneath his touch, but she kept her hands at her sides.

“I am...certain,” Lydia panted, her lashes fluttering as he caressed his fingers along her throat again.

He tickled her softly as he pulled her closer, letting his hair fall and tickle her forehead.

“Your tone and breath say otherwise,” he rasped into her ear as he stroked her throat lazily with his thumb. “I think you are most curious to discover what it is I do to ladies who share my bed; how I make them gasp and tremble.”

Ezra abruptly tightened his grip, procuring the sweetest gasp from Lydia’s lips. He smirked in satisfaction as he received the reaction he’d wanted.

“Perhaps you would like me to make you gasp and tremble too?”

He grazed the tip of his nose over Lydia’s top lip, their temples gliding against one another as her erratic, shallow breaths enticed him to kiss her.

“You truly think you could please a woman like me?” Lydia asked boldly, her voice barely above a whisper.

Ezra let out a dark chuckle as her bluntness once again pleased him.

“It would certainly be interesting to try.”

“It truly would,” Lydia purred teasingly, her confidence gaining in their wordplay, “It is a shame you are denied the opportunity.”

A dark chuckle erupted from his chest once more as he brought his fingers up to trace along her jawline. He felt her quiver under his touch; her reaction declaring her words a lie.

“We shall see about that,” he rasped.

He slipped his hand to the back of her neck, the other sliding around her waist to pin her to his chest. Lydia willfully bucked her head away from him at first, but when he merely grinned at her response, he felt her body relax and she tilted her lips toward him.

“Mmmm,” Ezra murmured with pleasure as he accepted her offering.

He did not bite, not like before. His kiss was seductive and sensual. It lured her to his darkness like a wicked lullaby she secretly loved. Ezra’s chiseled lips slid possessively over her plump ones as he held her tightly to him, teaching her through experience how and when to apply different pressure and go deeper.

How long had it been since he kissed virgin lips? Had he ever? Unlike Morgan, he was no flower hound and preferred a woman with a profound understanding of giving and receiving sexual pleasure. And yet, as he so carefully gave Lydia her first lesson

in kissing, his desire to show her more exploded from an ember into a white-hot flame.

Another soft gasp and a gentle push at his chest was all he felt from Lydia before her body melted in his grip and she parted her lips for him.

A deep and primal hunger consumed him as his tongue dipped between her lips and he tasted her for the first time. He had been certain that there was no conceivable way she would taste as she smelled, but the moment he swept his tongue against hers he tasted those sweet, black cherries.

Somehow, Lydia worked her hands free from between them and slid them up to his neck, pulling him down to her height. Ezra's penchant for their little games suddenly vanished as he became aware of her willingness, once again completely throwing him off guard with her ability to instantly transform from sweet to wicked as he pressed her back tightly to the nearest wall.

Lydia's lips, full and plump as the black heart cherries she tasted like, parted for him willingly as he kissed her despite her brave words a moment ago. He suddenly realized he could make her acquiesce, and continued the kiss as his hands began to slide down her waist to her skirts. Just like all the others he'd had before her.

I will pull her into my darkness, stoke her fear into pleasure, and take everything. I will...

The sting of pain erupted in his lower lip so suddenly it surprised him, and he drew back with a gasp. Lydia's green eyes, now sparkling with those bronze and gold flecks, looked back at him with a hazy smugness. A fleck of his blood stood out on her lower lip as she smiled at him slowly.

"A repayment, Your Grace," Lydia purred, drawing her hands up slowly to primp her

hair.

Ezra watched Lydia's tongue slowly lap up his drop of blood as though it was an afterthought. His focus narrowed as he watched her throat bob, as she swallowed the drop. As he watched her, something powerful exploded inside of him and he nearly rushed her again.

Instead, he drew out a dark chuckle, straightened his wide shoulders, and took another step back.

"I suppose that is fair," he replied, taking a slow measure of her. When he reached her eyes he allowed his own to deaden into their customary glaze. "But do not do it again."

"Do not be so casual with my honor," Lydia replied, shrugging as if completely unfazed by his change of demeanor. "And I will not have to."

Ezra studied her for a long moment, unsure of how to continue. Lydia was not the first woman to feign disinterest in him, but usually by the time he had them trapped in a kiss he had them whimpering and begging for more. Yet here she was, marking him as he had marked her, and refusing to apologize for it.

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Ezra suddenly beamed a genuine smile and let out a chuckle as he shook his head.

“You are going to make me a lot of money, you are you not?” he asked, looking at her with approval as he drew his hands into his pockets and feigned a relaxed stance.

Lydia seemed taken aback by this, but her briefly widened eyes quickly narrowed with confidence as she crossed her arms and replied, “If you can behave.”

Ezra chuckled again, more mischievously this time, and let out an audible sigh.

“I wonder, my dear Duchess, if it is I that will try to resist you, or it will be you trying to resist me?”

Lydia’s haughty expression flattened into one of annoyance, and she stomped to the door to open it for him.

“Trust me, Your Grace,” she huffed, “I will have no issue resisting you.Ever.”

“We shall see,” Ezra purred, feeling more playful than he had in a long time, and strolled casually through the doorway “Sweet dreams, Lydia. Try your best to not make them about me.”

“Arrogant...pompous...rake...” Lydia could get out words, but proper sentences were beyond her reach as she viciously yanked the pins from her hair.

Her body still felt warm and tingly from Ezra’s possessive touch, and she was as annoyed by her reaction as she was by Ezra’s arrogant behavior. Suddenly though,

she paused in her fury and smiled ruthlessly into the mirror. She had bitten him back, and it had filled her with a delight unlike any other she had ever felt.

It still shocked her that she did not mind the taste of his blood, but it had been his reaction to her retaliatory blood kiss that had thrilled her. His shock and her fury; the pure satisfaction that had flashed between them for just a second was priceless. Ezra, like any predator, had always attacked so quickly and viciously with his teeth, that no one had ever dared to bite back, but she had.

Lydia's anger started to dissipate as she began to brush her hair, her touch gentler now as her thoughts progressed to the memory of their kiss. She had lost herself in Ezra's touch before she had sought her retribution. She had forgotten every warning, every thought of self-preservation, and had given in to the pleasure of his embrace.

She had known he was strong and well-built. All of the orphaned dukes were, thanks to their shared passion for boxing, but she had not been prepared for how small she had felt in his arms; how light she would be for him to simply pick up and do with as he pleased. And, for the briefest of moments, she had wanted to.

A knock at her door pulled her from her thoughts, and before she could answer Alice appeared in her bedroom with a big grin. Lydia gasped, unable to believe her eyes, and jumped from her stool to embrace her younger sister.

"What are you doing here?" Lydia asked as she laughed along with Alice. "Did you follow us?"

Alice grimaced as they pulled back from one another, still holding each other's hands.

"Would it be dreadful if I did?" she asked.

“But Duncan and Beau?” Lydia asked, glancing toward the open and empty doorway.
“Surely you did not come alone?”

Alice smirked and led Lydia to the settee.

“As if Duncan would ever allow such a thing!” she laughed, rolling her eyes. “No, my overprotective husband would never let me leave Beau’s side again even if I begged for it. He is downstairs, no doubt boxing with Ezra by now, and Beau is with his nanny in the room adjacent to ours. The poor love is simply done in and fell asleep a few hours ago. You shall see him in the morning, I promise.”

“Boxing?” Lydia asked, feeling suddenly alert. “Why are they boxing? Is it because of what happened at the wedding?”

Alice sighed, then motioned for her to stand.

“Come, I shall help you dress for bed while I tell you. The dukes’ history is...well, complicated.”

“I thought they were like brothers?” Lydia asked as Alice helped her out of her wedding dress.

Although she had told Ezra he would never be allowed to do so, Lydia felt a small wave of disappointment that he was not the one undressing her.

“Like all siblings, they fight,” Alice replied, carefully pulling away the dress so as not to tear the delicate fabric.

Not at all like Ezra would have, Lydia suddenly thought as she watched her sister handle the gown with care. It would surely be in shreds by now.

“The others are angry at him for not discussing his plans with them beforehand. From what I have gathered from eavesdropping on Duncan and Ambrose, Ezra is also the one left in the direst position because of his father’s financial neglect. Oh, and his mother is apparently so wicked...”

“Alice, darling,” Lydia sighed, taking her sister’s hands. “Stop, please.”

Alice’s eyes widened before drawing her brows down in concern, “But, Lydia, you need to know...”

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“I will know what Ezra wants me to know when Ezra wants me to know it,” Lydia soothed.

I know my sister is speaking from a loving heart, and that I should probably listen to her, but...

“I cannot thank you enough for coming all the way out here,” she continued in a soothing tone, “but Ezra and I have an agreement. There is no pretense of romance here. I know exactly what type of man Ezra is and I went ahead with my choice all the same.”

“You expect me to leave you here?” Alice hissed, pulling her hands away.

“I want you back here and with Juliet very soon,” Lydia replied calmly, “But for now I have to work to do, as did you and as did Barbara when you both became duchesses.”

Alice looked positively displeased at hearing this, but gradually her expression shifted to resignation. She linked her arm through the one Lydia offered, and they both began walking toward Alice’s rooms.

“He is not like the others, Lydia,” Alice offered, her last effort at dissuading her older sister. “The rumors about him being a son of the devil or a demon are questionable, yes, but what they say about his feelings is true. He has none. He is...loyal, I think, to a small few, but that is it.”

“Well then,” Lydia sighed, giving her sister’s arm a warm squeeze, “I shall have to

become one of the small few.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

“The Earl of Charmaine said that Poppy is absolutely demanding yet another dinner with us,” Ezra stated, keeping his eyes on his diary as he sliced through his sausage. “Tell me we can host them the day after next.”

“No, no,” Lydia replied, shaking her head as she mirrored his body language, “We have the French gold merchant and his wife, the Barbiers, coming into town and staying with us for four days. She is very needy and requires my full attention, and as I recall her husband is quite the same with you now that he deems you his friend. It would not do well to bruise any egos.”

This was how nearly each one of their breakfasts had been conducted for the past six weeks. The two of them sat apart from one another, both studying their diaries closely to coordinate new plans of attack. Though the kiss on their wedding night had been an interesting one, Ezra had quickly discovered the next morning that his new wife cared not a whit for such things. Over her first coffee, she’d immediately begun discussing their course of action. During that first breakfast, he had tried to tease her and had called her a shrew. Once he saw just how seriously she took her role as his partner he’d stopped with that particular form of jest. That was a trait he could and did respect.

“Blast,” Ezra hissed, chomping down on a bite of hash, “You are right. The problem is, however, every time Poppy does not get her way she squeezes her husband’s nether regions and he then squeezes mine in the profit margins.”

From her seat at his left, Lydia’s head suddenly popped up as she snapped her fingers. In the six weeks that they had acclimated to their new lives, Ezra had come to enjoy such moments. It always meant she’d found a solution to his problem, which

she had proven very good at solving.

“We shall play them off each other,” she explained, “Make them believe we coordinated it as a surprise gathering. Monsieur Barbier could surely benefit from another gem supplier anyway, and the wives are so alike that with the proper conversation topics on my part, I shall have them becoming best friends in no time.”

Both families are conceited enough to believe that we brought the other for their entertainment,” Ezra mused with a rueful grin, “Aside from the opera house, is there anywhere else we can take them? Somewhere public?”

“Sir Courtney and his wife are hosting a salon,” Lydia replied with a knowing smile, her eyes alight with a rather wicked and gleeful glint. “You know how he is with his homemade pear wine. With that and their usual form of entertainment, our guests will be knackered and joyful with the company.”

She loved this as much as he did, he realized, watching her practically glow from her chair. Lydia was indeed the gracious and beautifully mannered woman she boasted to be in public. But in private, she was cunning, quick, and just manipulative enough to make Ezra grin wickedly to himself whenever he thought about her tactics.

“Excellent,” Ezra stated, placing his silverware beside his now empty plate. “It shall work beautifully. I will have my valet send word that we are looking forward to receiving them both.”

“I agree,” Lydia replied, giving him a sly smile as she gathered her things and rose. “And I shall inform Mrs. Bonair that the maids should prepare an additional room and have the cook make some of those honey cakes Poppy seems to love. We never seem to have enough when she visits...”

In her excitement, Lydia did not seem to notice her footing in the way Ezra had. As

she spoke, her voice suddenly became muffled as he focused on the fall about to occur. It all seemed to happen in slow motion; the way the heavy chair caged her one leg in; the way as she pivoted and caught her foot under one of the elaborate table legs. Before he knew it, Ezra was out of his seat, his arms sliding around her back as he heard her gasp of pain and felt her body pitch forward. In one swift motion, he had her foot freed from its pinned position and seated her on the table.

“Blast!” Lydia hissed, her hands flying to her bruised foot. “Stupid...clumsy...”

Annoyance flashed through him as he watched her roughly grasp her injured foot. He gritted his teeth and let out a low growl when Lydia released another hiss of pain.

“Be still,” Ezra barked sharply, catching her hand in a fierce grip.

He simply could not take her floundering anymore. As smart as she seemed to be, her touch was going to cause her more pain if she was not careful, and he simply could not have her injured right now.

Lydia’s eyes were filled with pain and narrowed at his sudden command, but she pressed her lips together and let him minister to her injuries. Drawing his focus back to her foot, Ezra slid off her shoe and stocking. He heard Lydia’s breath hitch as he gently lifted her foot and inspected it. As a boxer and complete opportunist for a fight of any sort, Ezra had dealt with all sorts of wounds. He immediately knew from the bruising and swelling that all would eventually be well. Uncomfortable, but not broken. He let out a huff of breath, surprised at the relief he felt.

“It shall be sore for a day or two, but you shall be fine,” he told her, his tone its usual dull cadence.

Before he even thought about it, he slid one hand up her leg and gently massaged her calf. Her flesh felt warm and smooth beneath his palm. Pleasure skittered through his

fingertips as he continued his massage, this time feeling her lean muscles twitch under his touch. He slowly raised his eyes to hers, though suddenly realizing what he had done, he pulled his hands from her leg and offered her one to help her to stand.

“Have one of the maids run to the icehouse for you and stay still until I return around four.”

He gave the command quietly and without feeling, though inside he was anything but numb.

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Lydia blinked, as she too had been caught up in his touch. She shook her head as she protested, “But there is too much to be done! I have to go to the kitchens. I have a meeting in town with the modiste for my masquerade dress. Oh, and the...”

“You have an entire staff of servants at your disposal,” he interrupted in a quiet but firm tone. “And you are the Duchess of Frampton. You should not be traveling to meet with anyone in the first place, it is they that should be coming to you.”

“My study has an adjacent room that has a spare desk. Have Mrs. Bonair set you up in there and she will make sure every person you are supposed to speak with today will find you.”

“I...thank you,” Lydia replied, caught off guard by his generosity.

Ezra felt uncomfortable with it as well and merely grunted in response.

“When I return I shall assess your foot again,” he said in warning, drawing his eyes down to the bruised appendage. “I will know if you follow my word or not, Lydia.”

“And if I do not?” Lydia asked tauntingly.

Ezra’s eyes flashed to hers again, lust barreling through him at her insolence.

“Then you will be punished.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Bonair, those curtains will be lovely for the Barbiers’ quarters; they do love the Fleur-de-Lis pattern. Have the servants change the rest of the tapestries

and linens to match and have yellow roses and bluebells in vases.”

“A beautiful suggestion, Your Grace,” Mrs. Bonair replied with enthusiasm. “If that is all then, Your Grace. I believe we have finished.”

“I believe we have,” Lydia agreed, smiling back at the housekeeper, “Thank you for your dedication as always, Mrs. Bonair. You may go. I shall ring for Laura when I am ready to be taken to my quarters.”

“Very good, Your Grace,” Mrs. Bonair replied, curtsying, “And might I say, I most enjoy our work together. It is all quite exciting!”

“As do I, Mrs. Bonair,” Lydia beamed, beyond happy that she and the housekeeper worked so well together.

Mrs. Bonair smiled back, offered her another curtsy, and left.

Satisfied with the day’s work, Lydia sighed, leaned back in the massive chair and thought about her time in Frampton thus far. In the last six weeks, she had learned much about her new staff. Ezra, as she had expected, was a strict master. Yet, despite that, Lydia found that every person in his employ was deeply dedicated to him and their work. Mrs. Bonair had once told her that anyone not doing their part was swiftly terminated.

During her time in Frampton, she had only seen one servant dismissed, and when it was done, even the fellow servants seemed relieved to see the man leave. Following the servant’s dismissal, Mrs. Bonair had explained that their work was important and there was only room on staff for those with pure dedication.

Lydia came to realize that the staff did not fear Ezra. At least, not the sort of distress that most would think of. There were no crying maids running away from him like

there had been at her father's house. However, there was a healthy tinge of wariness hidden somewhere among the deep layers of respect they all seemed to have for their master. Such respect had created a deep loyalty within them that they in turn showed to her when Lydia had taken her place as duchess.

Then there was Ezra himself. Over the last few weeks, she had studied him and had come to know him better. She had learned to read his emotions (even though he put very little into his voice or facial expressions) and had learned to discern when he was in a teasing mood, or when he purely wanted to know about business and give commands that were to be obeyed, and when he did not wish to speak at all. During the times he was silent, Lydia wondered if he was fully present, for even though his body was beside hers, his mind seemed far, far away.

During those quiet moments, Lydia had begun to feel the urge to reach for him and comfort him, though she was unsure what she was consoling him about. Even when it was all she thought about she never found the nerve to try.

However, he was neither quiet nor teasing following the event with her ankle this morning. He had made it clear that he expected to be obeyed. At first, Lydia had nearly asked Mrs. Bonair to help her into the drawing room, just to rile up Ezra. She was not afraid of the punishment he had mentioned, and in fact, was quite curious about what it would entail. Nonetheless, Lydia found herself obeying Ezra's orders, and he made his satisfaction known when he returned to the room a few moments later.

"Ah, right where you are supposed to be," he mused, leaning his black suit-cladded muscular body against the doorframe.

Lydia smirked at him, dismissing the now familiar tingle she felt every time they talked.

“I hated the ice,” she retorted in a snide fashion. “The cold was harsh and made my foot go numb.”

“That is the entire point of the process,” he purred, leaning against the doorway. “When you receive a bruise it forces the muscles to swell and heat. Ice forces the muscles to cool and shrink back into place.”

Ezra’s calm, edifying responses were something that Lydia had come to enjoy. Though she had seen him become utterly ruthless with others a time or two since their marriage, he had not been so with her. Instead, he took the time to explain things to her and never in a way that made her feel dimwitted afterward.

“I suppose it was just discomfort then,” she sighed dramatically.

“Did you move today?” Ezra asked, getting directly to the point.

Lydia ignored the clench of her lower belly as his voice dropped to a deep, slightly condescending tone, and used her good foot to slide the chair away from the desk.

“See for yourself,” she offered with a flourish toward her foot.

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Ezra pushed his shoulder away from the doorframe and casually strolled inside. He kept his eyes on her the whole time, a slight smirk perched on his chiseled lips as he rounded the desk, then dropped to one knee to inspect her wrapped foot.

Just as it had been that morning, Ezra's touch was tender as he first undid the wrapping and then placed her heel lightly atop his bent knee. Ezra kept his eyes on Lydia for a moment longer, as if giving her one more chance to admit she disobeyed. When she only drew up her brow, Ezra's lips twitched, and he dropped his gaze to her foot to inspect it.

She was surprised and deeply satisfied when Ezra finished his inspection and grunted approvingly.

"You were looking forward to punishing me, were you not?" She teased as he gently wrapped up her foot again. "Tell me, what did you have planned if I had disobeyed?"

Ezra's little punishments were both infuriating and amusing to Lydia, and they were never what she expected. The first punishment she received was for going into Ezra's office for a blank diary; too impatient to wait for his valet to bring her one. When he had found her looking through his shelves, he had said nothing after she'd offered her explanation. The next day though, he'd had hundreds of blank diaries delivered to her rooms, so many that they nearly filled the floor space of the sitting room even when stacked.

The words *Do not disobey me again* were inscribed beautifully with red ink on a card tucked into the singular diary left on her bed. She had smiled at the card, but she did not enter his office again without his permission.

Her most amusing punishment thus far was a week and a half ago, when she had ignored his request to wear a crimson red gown to dinner instead of the buttercream yellow one she had picked. As before, he said nothing and went about his business. But the next day, as her maid was helping her dress, they discovered he had gone into her closet and stolen every corset she owned.

He did not give them back until Alice, Duncan, Beau, and Juliet came for their visit four days later. It had been most annoying at the time, what with her and her maids flying about to fashion some sort of substitute garment, but she now thought it had been a rather clever play.

“Perhaps I would have stolen every pair of shoes you have so you could not walk anywhere,” he mused aloud.

Lydia shrugged as though unimpressed.

“That may keep you from leaving the grounds, Your Grace, but being barefooted is only faux pas when others are present,” she replied haughtily.

Ezra’s ice-blue eyes darkened as a subtle shift took over his features, making him appear less gentlemanly and vastly more rakish.

“Then an old-fashioned spanking will have to suffice.”

Ezra’s words and tone sent a shiver down Lydia’s spine as her imagination quickly worked the image up in her mind. She felt her cheeks flame at the thought and her fingers slowly began to curl into her palms as her middle and ring fingers worried her pale flesh. Ezra beast, yes, but would he take things that far?

She had learned how to follow along with his wry humor when he was in a playful mood, but there was no playfulness in his threats, only a warning and a promise of

things to come.

Ezra suddenly cocked his head and drew his lips back from his white teeth, revealing a hungry, wolfish grin.

“Perhaps something like that would not be a punishment to you at all,” he mused, his hand traveling once more along her calf, massaging it meaningfully. “Perhaps you would...enjoy it.”

Like it had this morning, his touch sent a rush of warmth burrowing deep into her, and she fought the urge to let out a soft breath in her throat. Though they had not kissed since their wedding night, the memory had become a dream that visited her three to four times a week. It had been possessive and vicious, and yet somehow tender and deep.

“Well, I did not break your command, so it does not matter in the slightest,” she replied bitingly, sliding her foot off of his knee.

“No?” he mused, giving her a mock look of confusion, “But you were so curious before.”

“Consider my curiosity satisfied,” Lydia remarked with a huff, turning from him.

Ezra let out a low chuckle, but he rose from his hunkered position and took a respectful step back.

“I sent word to Barbier, and the Earl of Charmaine and they responded that they are most looking forward to the united visit. Is all ready?”

Lydia was grateful that he turned the conversation back to business, and yet she could not help but notice the lilt of disappointment she felt when he did so.

“Yes,” she replied, “The menus are set, the rooms are readied, and the entertainment is secured. I have three wives on a tight schedule during the day so you three gentlemen can focus on your business and, well, whatever it is you men do; but your impression of being a kind and doting husband must be spot on in the evenings.”

“Are they not always?” he replied in his usual bored tone.

Yes, Lydia would give him that. When needed, Ezra could put on a rather convincing show of being an honorable gentleman.

“Then we are set,” stated Lydia in a dismissive fashion. “I shall let you get on about your evening.”

Lydia then tried to stand on her own, but she had barely braced her hands upon the desk and chair when Ezra stepped in and lifted her as before.

“Enough of this,” she hissed in annoyance as her body instantly responded to his touch.

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“I am fine. You said I only had to stay off it until four and I did! Put me down right now!”

“Make me,” Ezra chirped, but when she began to push at his chest he let out a warning growl as he carried her toward the stairs.

“You are an absolute beast!” she seethed, crossing her arms defiantly while still in his hold.

Ezra merely shrugged as he continued walking.

“You knew this when you agreed to marry me.”

Annoyed, livid, and embarrassingly aroused, Lydia bit the inside of her cheek and continued to mumble her dissatisfaction as he carried her into her rooms. Upon reaching her bed, he let her drop onto it, somehow keeping her foot elevated so it would not land with a soft thump like the rest of her body.

“You are no good to me broken and bruised,” he told her as she glared at him. “Take the rest of the day to let it heal. I will need you in the morning.”

“And if I do not?” she hissed.

Ezra gave her that wolfish grin again, and this time he leaned in so close to her face that she could feel his warmth and catch his musk. She breathed in the heavy, masculine scent, and though she was annoyed, the image of his lips on hers flashed through her mind again.

“Remember that punishment we were discussing?” Ezra whispered, his gaze riveted to hers.

She tried to come up with a sarcastic response but found herself unable as she became caught in his mesmerizing blue eyes. Instead, she only gave the slightest of nods. Would he truly spank her? And if he did, would he force her to lift her skirts? Heat flooded through her at the thought.

As if he was reading her mind, Ezra’s lips twitched, and he let out a low murmur of approval.

“I must confess,” he said, his eyes slowly raking down her figure. “I do enjoy this partnership that we have created. I truly suspect that if I had stayed with my original choice of Juliet, things would not be going so swimmingly.”

“That was almost a compliment,” Lydia retorted sarcastically.

“And I almost meant it,” Ezra purred with a playful if not dangerous look in his eyes as they made their way back to hers.

Lydia felt a fever pulse through her veins as Ezra continued to study her intently, and she knew he needed to leave soon. Their playfulness was fun, yes, but only to a certain point. Once they passed that, Lydia had noticed that her attention span shortened, her body tingled with heat, and her pulse seemed to slow and drum rhythmically in her ears. Goosebumps would then erupt, her skin would become hypersensitive, and a warm wetness that made her blush would form between her legs.

“You want something,” Ezra stated, and lowered himself to take a seat on the bed next to her.

Lydia jerked and blinked rapidly at their sudden closeness.

“I beg your pardon?” She breathed, sliding herself up onto her pillows. He was far too close.

“My accountant,” he stated flatly, still gazing at her intently. “He said you spoke with him about accessing my accounts.”

Lydia drew in a sudden breath, relief flooding through her so fiercely that she had to stifle a relieved laugh.

“Oh, yes,” she replied, gathering herself. She had nearly forgotten.

“I was having Mr. Porter show me the expenditures of the Earl’s and Barbier’s visits to try to gain an understanding of what I needed to request,” she explained, “and when I compared them, I realized that both families are quite expensive guests and there were several additional purchases that needed to be completed tomorrow.”

She paused, deciding that now was just as good a time to bring up the topic, and added,

“Also, when I first arrived you said I may change my rooms if I desire, and I have decided that I wish to do so. I want modern furniture, new wallpaper, tapestries, all of it, and I want it to be exactly the way I envision it.”

Ezra suddenly barked out a laugh, surprising her so much that she crossed her arms in annoyance and demanded to know what was so hilarious.

“You were so polite in the beginning but got rather demanding toward the end,” Ezra chuckled, rubbing the bridge of his nose. “You truly are the most interesting creature, Lydia.”

“I am not a creature, I am a woman,” she huffed, growing more annoyed.

“Not like any woman I have ever met,” he replied, a smile still lingering on his lips.

“Another almost compliment.”

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“The way you point them out, I am beginning to think you might like them,” Ezra stated matter-of-factly, then, turning back to the matter, he said, “I shall permit you access to my accounts for our guests, which is a given. You have proven yourself worthy of my trust in such matters.”

Lydia knew that his words were not a compliment but a fact. She knew what she had to do to honor her end of their bargain, and she was determined to do it gracefully and with integrity. Thus far, she had done exactly that.

“And my rooms?”

That darkly handsome wolfish smile, one she was starting to see from him more and more, flashed back at her as he leaned a little closer.

“You shall have to make a trade for that,” he whispered, his eyes dropping to her throat.

Lydia felt a tremble pass through her as that undeniable lust for him began to rise again. Damn him! Why did he have to stare at me like that? As if I was a meal to be devoured?

“And what trade do you seek, Your Grace?” she asked. Though she tried to sound calm and unruffled, even she heard the slight tremor in her voice.

“Firstly, that you stop calling me Your Grace,” he replied.

His request caught her off guard. She had not expected something so simple.

“What do you want me to call you then?” She asked.

“I am your husband, after all,” he replied, his voice descending into a sudden serious tone. “And you are my wife. Calling each other “Your Grace” these past few weeks has been amusing, yes, but I tire of it now.”

Though she could have taken the opportunity to tease him about growing soft, Lydia chose not to and nodded her head.

“Very well, husband,” she replied smoothly. She tried to say the word as casually as possible, but as it left her lips she felt a soft tremble pass through her.

Something between a hum and a moan rumbled from Ezra’s chest as she uttered the word, and Lydia felt her cheeks heat up again. He needed to leave. Now.

“Well, if that is all,” she sighed, then forced a fake yawn. “I believe I shall retire early this evening.”

“I have one more request,” Ezra replied, his blue eyes darkening, and before she could ask what it was he added, “Allow me to help you change into your nightgown. Surely with your bruised ankle, the task would be difficult on your own.”

Anger and lust swirled together as Lydia suddenly pictured him undressing her. Her curiosity began to wage war with her determination to keep their relationship as professional as possible as she imagined what she would feel, think, and experience if a man like Ezra would do something so intimate to her.

There was time for none of that, though. For her anger, her lust, or her curiosity. He was teasing, surely. Drawing on her most wicked smile, Lydia drew toward him and, as sensually as possible replied, “And take precious time away from your beloved paramours? Come, husband. I am many things, but I am not greedy.”

Ezra's expression drew back to its usual blankness as he let her catty comment hang in the air. Then a deep, purely amused chuckle tumbled from his lips as he grinned at her wickedly, shaking his head. Somehow, his reaction only made Lydia's body react even more, and she cursed herself for her involuntary response.

"The access to my accounts is yours," he said, continuing to chuckle as he rose from the bed. "For decorating, hosting, whatever you wish."

Lydia couldn't fight the sense of triumph and enjoyment she took from his reaction and managed a sly smile at him together with a seated curtsy.

"I do have work to get to," he admitted as he reached her door. With a wry smile he added, "But I will find time to tell my paramours you send your regards."

Lydia did not expect the tiny stab of hurt she felt in her chest at his jest, but she kept her expression steady and simply curtsied again from her seated position.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Two Weeks Later

"You chose the ice blue for your costume," Ezra mused, obviously satisfied by her selection. "I am flattered that you minded me."

Lydia tossed him a heated glance, something she could not seem to stop doing lately, and dryly replied, "Well, I did not wish to risk having my corsets or something else stolen as repayment for a different choice."

Ezra chuckled deeply as he once more took in her costume, his eyes glowing with approval. As he had requested, she had chosen an ice-blue gown with gold and silver embroidery. Despite her insistence on having the neckline raised a little higher, it

dropped low to the swell of her cleavage, revealing the two soft mounds of peach flesh just above her nipples.

The mask was an intricate gold cat-eye piece with flecks of silver and matched her shoes. Since the mask was so ornate, she had chosen to wear only a simple diamond star pendant on a thick piece of ice-blue ribbon around her neck.

In turn, Ezra had worn his usual black-on-black suit and shirt. He did, at her suggestion, allow a silver trim to be added to his jacket shirt lapels, and his black cravat. He had chosen a mask that covered his entire face; one half painted silver, and the other half black. His ice-blue eyes glittered brilliantly behind it as they snapped up to hers.

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“Lydia! There you are!” Alice called, interrupting the moment.

“They must check on you,” Ezra said dully from behind his mask, “to make sure I have not been drinking your blood or something equally as sinister.”

Lydia smirked, recalling their first kiss.

“Well, have you not?” she asked coyly.

Even with his mask on, Lydia could see Ezra’s wicked smile light his eyes.

“As you have tasted mine,” he murmured, low enough for only her to hear. “Or have you forgotten that wicked little nip you took of me?”

Heat pooled in Lydia’s lower belly as she recalled the small fleck of his blood that she had tasted on their wedding night. Hot, coppery, and delicious. It should have repulsed her, but even now, remembering it filled her with excitement.

“Behave yourself, husband,” Lydia purred, letting her voice drop to a sultry tone.

“You behave yourself, wife,” he warned darkly right back, though his voice was full of admiration.

He then bowed toward her, catching her hand to graze it across the bottom of his mask, and left her just as Alice, Juliet, Helena, and Barbara surrounded her.

“Where have you been, we have been hunting for you since we arrived!” Juliet

exclaimed worriedly, leaning to drop a kiss on each of Lydia's cheeks.

She was wearing a pale purple gown with a matching mask, one of the more modest ones Lydia had seen thus far at the party.

"We have been here for twenty minutes already," Lydia laughed, moving from friend to friend to hug and kiss them, whatever are you so worried about?"

"You know good and well why," Barbara retorted icily.

She had chosen a glittering green gown with a fascinating half-mask of crushed pearls, tiny emeralds, and amethysts, encompassed by a thin, gold metal band.

"You have been refusing a visit from us for nearly three weeks, of course, we are worried," Helena added, her delicate brows drawing down.

As usual, Helena was wearing a shade of pink; rose this time coupled with a matching glittering mask. A crown of gold roses rested atop her pretty head.

"Good heavens," Lydia laughed, motioning for them to follow her to the table of refreshments, "I simply do not know what the four of you have imagined, but I assure you I am well!"

And she meant it, she realized, with a swell of emotion. Lydia picked up a glass of wine as she continued, saying, "Ezra and I were quite clear with one another about what this relationship would be, and we are both holding up our end of the bargain. Our work takes up much of our time."

She paused, took a sip of her wine, and added, "It, well, actually, has been quite fun being married to Ezra."

Around her, her friends gaped, none of them even remotely interested in the drink table.

“Fun,” Barbara echoed.

Lydia nodded her head and took another sip of her wine.

“Oh, indeed,” she confirmed happily, “It turned out that we are quite capable of working well together.”

“But,” Alice said reluctantly, looking from their friends to her older sister, “If you are so well, why deny our visit?”

Lydia looked at Alice curiously as she lowered her wine.

“Darlings, I was honest with you all in my letters. I...we...truly have simply been too busy to host a family gathering! As I said, Ezra and I have discovered that we work quite well together, and I have been able to seal up many ventures that he has been chasing for months if not years.

“That is why I wrote and insisted we all meet here at the masquerade. Tonight, Ezra and I are not obliged to work. I wanted to be able to speak with you, as I am sure Ezra also wants to speak with his friends.”

Lydia’s sisters and friends all looked at one other curiously, as if they were not sure she was telling the truth. Deciding that she would not let them linger on her any longer, she pushed for a new subject.

“I have missed you,” she said enthusiastically, reaching for Alice’s hand with her free one, “I have missed all of you! Do not let our night be heavy with worry. We should be joyous! Now that I have made it clear that I am not in distress, please, let us speak

of your lives. Surely there is news to tell.”

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“If you are sure,” Juliet said warily, her frown finally breaking a little. “I...I do have something to share.”

“Yes,” Lydia urged, moving from Alice to her, “I am most certain. Now tell me! What is your news, dearest sister? I pray it is good.”

Juliet looked sheepishly around at their friends as if asking for their permission to move on. Lydia ignored the sliver of annoyance that went through her as she saw Barbara and Alice give her a cautious nod. She really did wish they would stop stressing. Did they really think she could not handle Ezra?

Their flirtations had increased steadily by the day, but no matter how wicked either of them became, every time she warned him to stop, he would. It would often leave her bristling and sensitive, with an unsteady hand on both her temper and her thoughts, but he had not laid an inappropriate hand upon her. Even though she sometimes secretly wanted him to do so.

“I have heard from Edmund,” Juliet continued, as a small but genuine smile began spreading across her face. “He has sent Papa a proper wedding proposal and Papa has agreed!”

Lydia, delightfully shocked at Juliet’s news, felt as if she could have been knocked over with a feather.

“That is...Juliet, that is amazing!” she said with awe, opening her arms to hug her younger sister.

“How? When? Why did you not write me about this?”

Juliet let out a soft laugh as she hugged Lydia back enthusiastically, and Lydia finally found their usual ease around one another slid back into place.

“I wanted to deliver the news in person,” Juliet explained, “And it took place under the strangest of circumstances. Edmund’s letter was delivered by his father about a month ago. He’d apparently made Papa an offer he could not refuse if he allowed the engagement to take place, although the details beyond that are not known to me. All I know is that I officially met the baron for the first time after he emerged with Papa from his office, and after he made his introduction he invited me to call him father.”

“But where is Edmund?” Lydia asked.

Her mind was already reeling with the added details, but she needed more.

“Still at sea,” Juliet explained, “Apparently he coordinated this all with his father after he wrote a brutally honest letter about how much he cares for me and means to make me his wife. He even offered his father an additional two years of service in the Navy if he could secure our marriage.”

“Is it not the most romantic story?” Helena sighed.

Lydia glanced away from Juliet and was relieved to see that the others had also relaxed.

“It truly is,” Lydia agreed heartily. Then, hoping to keep the momentum of the new topic going, she quickly added, “Now all of you, tell me everything.”

“She seems to be in one piece,” Morgan mused, his eyes on Lydia. All of their eyes were, to Ezra’s annoyance.

“A rather fine piece at that,” Morgan continued, “Heavens, chum, she looks downright gorgeous. Has she always been so lovely?”

Ezra slapped the back of Morgan’s head, followed by a gritted, “Get your eyes back in your head, you fool.” In a low voice, he added, “Of course she has always been.”

“Morgan has a right to be confused,” Ambrose countered, coming to his friend’s defense, “After two months of no contact, we have every right to wonder what had become of her.”

Ezra turned a bored look toward Duncan.

“Were you and your wife not in my home barely three weeks ago? Did you not find sufficient evidence of her good health?”

“Indeed, I was,” Duncan, agreed, swirling the scotch in his glass, “But I know how strong Lydia is, and she is very capable of putting on a good show.”

A deep, black anger sliced through Ezra, and because he was wearing his mask, he allowed himself to bare his teeth.

“The woman is a saint,” Ambrose acknowledged, tilting his glass toward Lydia and the other women in their lives. “To put up with all that you do. But word has spread. Your reputation already appears to be transitioning from Monster to Honorable Husband.”

“All that I do?” Ezra drawled, if for nothing other than his own morbid curiosity.

“Your...proclivities,” Ambrose muttered, having the grace to at least look away from Lydia before he said it.

Ezra's anger suddenly twisted into amusement as he recalled Lydia's jest on that topic, and he let a wicked chuckle slip past his lips.

"The last time I checked, you had some interesting proclivities yourself, old friend," he replied dryly.

"Yes, but I stopped," Ambrose replied, his tone low and edgy as he threw a tentative look toward Barbara and Helena.

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So have I, Ezra thought to himself. Maria had been his last. Ceasing his intimate activities had not been a conscious decision. Indeed, after the blunt talk he and Lydia had on their wedding night, he knew he had her blessing to continue, but he no longer wanted to indulge in his former pastime.

It was not that he had lost his urges, if anything they had amplified, and annoyingly so. Most mornings when he awoke, he was so hard he could have used it to pound through a stone wall. It did not help that his dreams and his waking thoughts vividly portrayed a naked and panting Lydia. Though solo play was something he never enjoyed, he found himself needing to imbibe so that he could leave his rooms in the morning.

He knew that he could avoid all of these issues if he simply demanded that Lydia assume all of her wifely duties... But he did not want to force her, even when he sometimes felt her curiosity pique during their teasing. No, he would not do that. Working with Lydia had become too enjoyable and too successful to draw away from, and he would not threaten what they had created.

They did not know that, though, and Ezra decided they did not need to, either.

“Good for you, Ambrose. It takes a strong man to discontinue bad habits,” Ezra offered wryly, raising his glass toward him.

Ambrose gave him a flat look, then shook his head.

“While I am honored that it is still obvious that I am feared and revered in some circles, I am afraid the rest of our darling society is changing its collective mind,”

Ezra replied in his usual bored tone, “Think whatever you want of me. All I know is that Lydia and I are succeeding in our work, and that is all I care about.”

His friends began to chirp their sarcastic remarks, but a booming voice muffled them from a few paces to their left.

“Your Grace! My heavens, what a delight to see you here!”

All four dukes turned toward the rather loud and cheerful shout from their left, and Ezra smiled from beneath his mask as he saw Lord Issac Watergate, his new client, and his wife, Nora, smiling at him with joy as they approached.

“They are speaking to you?” Morgan asked, the surprise obvious in his voice.

“Of course they are,” Ezra retorted, before turning and providing a gracious bow to the couple.

“Lord Frampton, what a happy coincidence!” Lady Watergate said enthusiastically, offering her hand to him.

After slipping off his mask, he laid a chaste kiss on her knuckles, and as he turned to Lord Watergate he replied, “Indeed it is! How did you know it was me?”

Lady Watergate laughed in her usual high-pitched, birdlike manner, and flittered her hand at him.

“No one could pull off such a devilish costume but you, Your Grace,” she replied.

“It is true, though, I am surprised I do not see any horns atop your mask,” Lord Watergate added, his tone playful.

Ezra noted the second his friends' bodies subtly shifted as if getting ready to step in if he took things too far.

"I thought it would be a little too on the nose...orhorn," Ezra jested, giving the man a wink.

The couple laughed as the jaws of his friends collectively dropped, and he smirked before he continued with the show.

"Lydia will be most joyous to see that you are here, Lady Watergate. I believe she is just over there with some friends."

Ezra, playing the game he and Lydia had created so well, provided proper introductions among his small group of friends as well as the band of ladies surrounding Lydia. As he did so, he did not miss the skeptical, surprised looks his friends kept throwing at him. He stunned them again when he complimented the couple's costumes.

"They all sound so lovely," Nora gushed, "I shall go join them and leave you gentlemen to it. Oh, I am so happy you are here! I thought I was going to have to be stuck with my husband all evening with no one to talk to."

"Oh, I am so boring, am I?" Lord Watergate asked though he was clearly teasing as he smiled down at his wife.

In turn, Lady Watergate reached up and cupped her husband's cheek affectionately and winked.

"Only when you speak business, darling."

"So, always, then," the lord replied with a sarcastic grin.

Ezra watched their interaction with amusement. He had never pictured the wives or children of his associates before, nor had he assumed any strong emotions existed amongst them. Now, though, he'd begun to notice these things between couples; how they looked at one another; whether or not they jested. During the last two months, he had observed that the men with families were far more dedicated to making money than those without.

“I do hope you do not object if I insert myself into your group for the evening,” Lord Watergate said with an apologetic look, “But, as my wife inferred, we have been suffering through business talk. I would most appreciate a recess if you would permit me.”

“Of course,” Ezra replied, waving over a servant carrying a drink tray.

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“Bloody hell. Who are you, mate? And what have you done with Ezra?” Morgan murmured to him as the others quickly pulled Watergate into talk of hunting.

Ezra smirked as his eyes focused on Lydia. She was, as usual, making her new guest feel welcome and accepted.

“Whatever do you mean, Morgan?” Ezra drawled lazily.

A few hours later, Ezra found himself grateful for his mask. Lydia had gone beyond the call of duty with the Watergates, but she had also achieved something else, something far more important, and she deserved something to acknowledge her success.

With one eye on her and the other on his friends, Ezra watched as the mood of their little party shifted from one of concern to joy. Lydia’s responses had been curated to soothe and calm every worry they expressed. She appeared simultaneously cautious and at ease, just as he did. She never became ruffled or annoyed, even when Duncan and Ambrose made remarks about his demonic nature and created a welcoming space for the Watergates to fully become a part of their conversations.

“Might I steal my wife for one moment?” Ezra mused, stepping between Ambrose and Helena in the circle.

The two of them, as well as most of the others, gave him a careful look. Now, though, there was no vitriol in their eyes. Lydia’s eyes, though, were the only ones he was truly focusing on; and when those gold and bronze flecks glittered back at him, he felt that usual tug and heat in his groin.

“You will bring her back,” Alice said almost worriedly as Lydia stepped toward his offered hand.

“Of course, he will,” Lydia answered before Ezra could retort. “Honestly, sister, you act as though my husband is intimidating.”

Ezra nearly laughed aloud as she slipped her hand into his, giving it a tight squeeze. At her touch, Ezra felt heat shoot from his palm up his forearm, and he gave her hand a gentle squeeze in return as he guided her toward the hallway.

CHAPTER NINE

“Where are we going?” Lydia whispered, smiling as she and Ezra strolled arm-in-arm down yet another corridor.

“To find some privacy,” Ezra remarked in his usual tone.

His eyes were searching the hallway and its many doors as they walked, looking for something she could not fathom.

“Privacy for what?” she asked warily.

The only reason she could think of why he needed a private moment with her was for a reprimand, but she could not recall doing anything wrong. They had not expected the Watergates to be there, but she thought she had expertly managed their unexpected addition to their group and had even seemed to soothe their friends’ strangely hostile tempers.

“For your reward,” he replied matter-of-factly, finally stopping at a door and opening it.

Curiosity burned in her as she removed her mask, revealed a side smile, and raised one eyebrow. Ezra also removed his mask, revealing a playful if not wicked smirk. He looked almost pleased to see caution flitting across her face.

“Go on,” he urged gently, pointing his chin toward the darkened room.

Lydia walked past Ezra’s bowing figure and into the room. Reward? That word certainly had not been used by him before. The room was dark and unoccupied, far away from the party and its guests. Ezra said nothing as she lit a candle and slowly walked around the room, but after she’d finished her inspection, she turned back and saw that he was staring intently at her in his usual relaxed position, one leg slightly out from the other, hands in his pockets.

Lydia felt the now-familiar stir of desire as she took in her unmasked husband and offered him a wry smile. He was teasing her, surely. Perhaps even playing a little trick on their friends just to get back at them, by taking her out of their sight so they were left with their most worrying thoughts. It was not above Ezra to play such a move.

“Is this room my reward, husband?” she asked, waving an arm around the empty space. “For if it is, I am grateful, but I need no respite from our unexpected work. Indeed, I am enjoying the evening quite immensely.”

Ezra chuckled darkly at her response, making her cheeks grow warm.

“Quite the contrary, my darling,” he purred, taking a step toward her, “You see, I think you do.”

Ezra’s deep, coaxing voice slid around her ears and made her shiver as he continued to approach, and she realized he was not jesting. As she’d demanded, they had neither kissed nor truly embraced since their wedding night. But now, as he walked up to her

with pure satisfaction in his eyes, she let her arms slide around his neck and her body settle against the front of his.

She trembled with pleasure as she felt his warmth press up against her and his arms wrap around her waist.

“You have asked me to stay away from...certain marital practices,” he mused, his fingers trailing seductively up her spine, “But I believe that it may be time to make an exception.”

Alarm slithered through her, but Lydia let out a raspy chuckle as she felt Ezra’s hand slide to the back of her neck and massage her muscles there. Despite the release of tension and the dizzying sensations, she managed to get out a sarcastic, “Ah, so this is a reward for you, not me.”

A small, slightly condescending chuckle left Ezra’s throat as he shook his head. He began to step forward then, and though she nearly stumbled at first, Ezra gripped her securely to him and started walking her backward.

“Not all such practices are designed for pleasing men, you know,” his deep voice teased as he brushed the tip of his nose against her own. “Though I will thoroughly enjoy this.”

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Lydia shivered and gasped, and when his lips came down on hers, she could not even pretend to want him to stop. It had been amusing at first, keeping herself out of his reach. But now, as he parted her lips and massaged his tongue over hers, she realized that she had been denying herself as much as she had been denying him.

The moment his wild, untamed taste hit her tongue, Lydia let out a strangled moan and pressed herself more tightly to him. A snarl and a whispered curse she could not understand broke free from Ezra's lips before he deepened the kiss, pressing her into him as if he could combine their two bodies into one and then he stopped.

Panting, breathless, and with lips swollen, Lydia could not grasp what was happening as she felt herself being lowered into an extremely cushioned reading chair. She blinked, her vision hazy with lust, and in the low light, she saw Ezra on his knees before her.

"Ezra-" she panted, but he interrupted her with a soothing "shhhh" before leaning forward and kissing her again.

This time, though, Ezra's hands did not stay in one place but instead wandered and roamed over her corseted waist, her breasts, and her neck. His lips soon followed, taking their time to stop and suckle or nip at whatever expanse of flesh he could nuzzle into until Lydia felt nothing but longing and oversensitivity.

How could his lips at her neck steal her thoughts? How could his teeth teasing her cleavage render her body nothing more than a jumble of trembling nerves? Such questions flooded her mind as Ezra slowly continued his exploration along the length of her body.

“Wait,” she gasped as he began to slide the ample skirt of her gown up to her waist, “What are you...”

“You have no idea how greatly it pleased me that you did not wear the red,” Ezra rasped, curling his fingers around her knees.

Lydia remained silent as she let him slowly spread her legs, her eyes unable to leave his face. Ezra’s normally cloaked expression was now full of wonder and hunger as he viewed her.

“You have no idea how much it pleases me when you obey,” he went on as his fingers first trailed down her stockings, then up again, past her knees, her thighs, until he reached her secret place.

“Oh!” Lydia gasped.

Pleasure, unlike anything she had experienced before, jolted through her as Ezra’s fingers; so very gentle and skilled, began to move against that little sensitive bead between her legs.

“What is...eunn” Lydia’s question turned into a moan as Ezra’s fingers worked a little faster, and she felt a wet warmth splash against her thighs.

Ezra let out a guttural sound of approval as Lydia’s fingers began to curl into the arms of the chair, but he continued his slow ministrations; his smile growing more and more wicked as he brought her closer to a final frenzy.

This is wrong.

The thought came from somewhere deep inside of her mind, pulling her away from the pleasure of the moment. They were at a party in someone else’s house, and this

was one of their rooms! What if someone walked in and saw them?

The thought vanished as Ezra dipped his tongue between her legs and replaced his fingers. Pleasure, far more than before, tore through her body so vividly that she arched her back and let out a strangled cry.

“Hush, darling,” Ezra’s deep voice drifted from under her skirts, “We don’t want any interruptions. Not that it would stop me.”

Lydia gasped at his threat, but she quickly became unable to think, unable to do anything but give in to her pleasure. She pressed her lips together tightly and pushed the back of her head against the cushioned chair, trying her best to stop the little noises coming from her throat.

Lick. Suckle. Thrust. Lick. Suckle. Thrust. Ezra’s tongue stayed in perfect tempo, raising her pleasure to a peak with every small suckle of her clitoris, then bringing her back down again with gentle, insistent licks to her vulva.

His mouth was hot and needy against her most sacred flesh. Low, guttural noises of approval began pouring from his throat as Lydia felt her juices start to flow more freely as he reveled in the taste of her.

“Give it to me, darling” he murmured into her, sounding almost desperate for whatever “it” was.

Before Lydia could question it, Ezra’s tongue and lips found her clitoris again as his left middle finger slid between the warm, wet folds of her mons. His mouth, combined with the rhythm of his skilled hand, soon had Lydia arching backward into the chair, her mouth open in a silent scream. Her orgasm, her first ever, tore through her like an unstoppable flood, forcing spasm after convulsing spasm to course through her body and make her dizzy with euphoria.

A low moan of pure satisfaction broke from Ezra's throat as she clenched her thighs together from the pleasure, trapping him against her as she rode out the waves of ecstasy.

It took long moments before her thighs unclenched their grip on Ezra. Ezra pulled back, his gaze immediately landing on hers. With a wicked grin, he ran his tongue over her bottom and savored the taste of her.

"Verygood," he purred, satisfaction written all over his face.

"What..." Lydia panted, still trying to get her body to calm down, "what was that?"

"One of the many wonderful things I can teach you," Ezra replied, wiping his kerchief across his chin.

His eyes glittered with unbridled lust as he added, "If you are interested."

Before Lydia could think of what that could mean, Ezra took her hands and gently helped her to her feet. Her legs trembled and swayed as she first stood, and Ezra chuckled knowingly as he held her steady.

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“Normally I would send you back out there just like this: weak and stumbling; mind numbed and useless from pleasure,” he went on as he soothed some of her rebellious tendrils back into place, “But...seeing as we might have more work to do, this time I shall give you a moment to recover.”

Though it was out of Ezra’s normal character to stay with a woman after enjoying himself, he helped Lydia gather herself together. With an eye on the minute details, he fixed her skirts, tidied her hair, and teased her with their usual banter until she was laughing more and trembling less. He was quite pleased when he pulled her back out into the hallway and found that she still shook slightly under his touch.

The art of tasting a woman was something he had used as a weapon many times to get what he wanted, but with Lydia, he had lost grasp of what the act could do for him and had dedicated the entirety of his thoughts to maximizing only her pleasure. Each subtle shift, each muffled moan as his tongue lapped at her delicious juices, only made his hunger for her intensify.

“I do not think I can stand very long,” Lydia confessed quietly as she held on tightly to his arm.

Though he’d been sure to make her appear as tidy as before, there was not much he could do about the expression on her face. It was one that made him want to turn them back around and return to the privacy of that empty room. More. She wanted more, and he wanted so badly to give it to her.

“Lean on me if you have to,” he whispered into her ear, “Then, perhaps, after we have concluded our business here, we may take ourselves home and continue.”

Ezra's ability to focus on anything besides Lydia evaporated as he watched excitement and longing fill Lydia's eyes. They had often teased one another about him seducing her, but he had never pushed the matter once she'd instructed him to stop. Now, though, when he had expected to hear another refusal, he was met with eagerness.

He was so consumed with what was unfolding between himself and Lydia, that Ezra did not notice they had rejoined the crowded party. He paused, wanting to take a better look at her.

Lydia, I..." his words transformed into a visceral yelp as he felt a stinging pain slice through his free hand.

He turned at once, pressing Lydia between his back and the wall as he looked for his assailant. He'd been cut, and deeply, too. So much so that blood was running freely from his palm, but he paid no mind to that. His focus was only on the elegantly dressed crowd around them, trying to figure out which masked partygoer had cut him. The blade had hit his hand, yes, but he knew it could not have been the original target. His femoral artery, perhaps?

"Ezra, Ezra you have been cut," Lydia cried out from behind him.

Already her hands were on his shoulders, trying to get him to move so she could come out from behind him.

"Do not move," he warned, but Lydia ignored his instructions, slithered out from behind him, and came around to grab his hand.

Fury at her disobedience roiled inside of him, eating away his earlier thoughts. Lydia paid him no mind, though, as she lifted his hand and quickly wrapped it in her kerchief. Worry flooded him as he drew his eyes back to the crowd, making sure no

one tried to slide something into Lydia's back, and he pulled his hand away from her gruffly.

"What the hell do you think you are doing? Enough of your fussing, it is time to go," he growled, feeling the sense of danger loom closer.

Anger sparked in Lydia's eyes before a calmness came over her expression.

"We will discuss that tone later," she whispered threateningly but began to walk with him, her skirts carefully hiding his hand.

Amusement shot like a thin arrow through Ezra's annoyance as he picked up her tone, but before he could get her outside he heard Alice's words ring out.

"Where are the two of you off to?"

Ezra's annoyance spiked as Alice's voice came from behind them. He had promised to bring Lydia back, and now that they had been caught leaving he was sure that Alice was about to berate him for it. Together, he and Lydia turned back toward her sister and his best friend. Lydia though, had tucked his wounded hand between the many folds of her wide skirts to hide his freely bleeding wound.

"I am tired, sister," Lydia replied, her tone matching her words as she painted on a sweet smile.

"My husband had tried so sweetly to find me a quiet place to rest but the party is simply too large to find such a respite. I am afraid I am fading by the moment," she added with a tired laugh.

Alice's eyes jumped from Lydia's to Ezra's warily, as if unsure whether or not to believe them. Duncan, though, was not even slightly convinced. Even with his mask

on, Ezra knew he did not buy Lydia's excuse. The disgusted stare from his alleged friend and brother shortened what little fuse he had left, but just as he was about to open his mouth and unleash his fury, Lydia made a wonderfully impressive whimpering noise as she snuggled into his arm and nuzzled her head onto his shoulder.

"Take me home, husband," she pouted, "I am barely able to stay on my feet."

Though he knew it was not real, Lydia's tone and carefully placed touches rivaled that of any actress. She appeared spoiled and safe at his side as well as pitifully weary and drunk. She leaned on him like it was something she did often and without forethought like the intimacy had existed between them from the start. She looked...in love.

Alice and Duncan's expressions dropped from judgmental to embarrassed in an instant, a deep blush flooding both of their faces as they realized their mistake. As he watched this, Ezra felt his icy calm slide back into place, and he stifled the ticking explosion inside of him.

"As you can see, my wife needs her bed," Ezra said, shrugging his free shoulder in his usual bored manner. "And as her husband, is it not my duty to see that she gets to it safely?"

"I...my apologies, brother," Duncan muttered, his eyes falling to the ground as he bowed his head toward Ezra. "Of course."

"We will visit tomorrow, while you are still in town," Alice said, though this time her tone was more imploring than forceful.

"Fine," Lydia yawned, appearing sleepy and bored with the conversation. She waved a lazy hand at her sister, not bothering to open her eyes or remove her cheek from

Ezra’s shoulder.

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Despite the unknown danger still lurking nearby, Ezra felt another brush of Lydia's white energy soothing his blackened one, making it shutter. Somewhere inside his dark heart, he felt a needle of pure light pierce through.

"Let us get you home, darling," Ezra said, allowing a nurturing tone to coat his voice as he turned her back toward the door.

Though, unlike Lydia, he was not sure he was acting.

"You snap at me in public like that again and it will be that punishes you," Lydia snarled as she unwrapped Ezra's hand from her layers of skirts and found a surprisingly large blood stain.

"Now that I would almost want to see," Ezra said mischievously.

He grinned in a similar fashion as he raised his hand above his head to staunch the flow of blood, seemingly unbothered by the amount that still trickled down his forearm and dripped from his elbow.

Lydia felt her cheeks burn as she ripped the bottom of her inner skirts to create a makeshift bandage. Despite the seriousness of the moment, her mind still flooded with various possibilities of how she could carry out such a threat. Annoyed at the diversity of her thoughts, she reached roughly for Ezra's hand, drew away her ruined kerchief, and began binding the wound with the fresh bandage.

"You are impossible," she hissed.

“I am impossible?” Ezra retorted, raising his voice and his brow as he let her work.

“If you had just obeyed me in the first place I would not have had to reprimand you in public.”

Fair, Lydia thought begrudgingly, so she moved on, “Who did this to you?”

Ezra laughed somberly.

“If I knew I would have sent you home and hunted him down back there,” he replied. Then, letting out a grunt he added, “Perhaps that is what I still shall do after I see you back to the house.”

“You will do no such thing,” Lydia snapped back, adding a little extraoomphas she tightened the bandage edges into a knot.

A low growl rumbled from Ezra’s chest at the little bite, but he grinned at her devilishly as he casually asked, “I will not?”

Lydia felt her arousal return as his voice lowered into that sweet darkness and she felt her anger dissipate somewhat.

“You are smarter than that,” she stated, giving him an imploring look.

“This could have been much worse, and I know you are aware of that. We need to make a plan; speak to the host, retrieve a copy of the guest list and staff that were there, then narrow down our suspects.”

Ezra’s teasing smile had slipped a little, but she could not quite read the expression on his face. It was as if he was searching for something beyond her person and inside of her heart. Unable to take his intense stare any longer, she let her gaze return to his

hand.

“I believe I can clean and dress this wound myself,” she said as the carriage stopped. “You will come to my rooms and let me do so.”

At this, Ezra finally seemed to snap out of his trance and snickered.

“Will I?” he asked.

Lydia afforded him a sultry glance before getting out of the carriage, and Ezra followed her up into her rooms to do as she had instructed.

“I have never taken orders from a woman in my life,” Ezra mused as Lydia delicately washed his hand in clean, warm water. “Not even my mother, and yet you have me following you upstairs like a pup. How do you do that?”

Lydia laughed.

“Are we not supposed to be discussing this?” she asked, moving his cleansed hand from the blood-stained basin onto a clean, white towel.

Ezra’s eyes flicked to his wound.

“I will take care of this.” He stated, his tone final as he gave her a warning look. “And I will do so my way.”

“But I can help,” Lydia insisted.

“I know you can,” Ezra replied calmly, his gaze softening, “But I am not allowing you to become involved. Now, answer my earlier question, or give me that punishment you were teasing me with.”

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Despite her irritation, Lydia found herself smiling at him ruefully as she paused her tending.

“Something tells me that the word “punishment” does not invoke the same feelings in you that it does in others,” she replied wryly.

His only response was to give her a challenging grin.

“My mother was...she was the exact opposite of my father in every possible way,” she began, letting the memories of her childhood form. “Where he was big, she was small, where he was rigid and unyielding she was soft.”

“And where she was weak your father was strong,” Ezra added.

Lydia looked at him then, the humor in her eyes gone, and she shook her head.

“No. At least not from what I saw. My father may have outweighed her in brute strength, yes, but she was the one who possessed the power. She could command people, my father included, with the softest tone and the lightest touch. She never became riled, not that I can ever recall.”

Heartache and yearning suddenly slammed into Lydia, and she blinked rapidly to dissolve the tears that threatened to spring forth.

“She was amazing,” she added, clearing her throat. “There was and will be no one like her. She was...irreplaceable.”

Ezra was quiet for a moment as Lydia began to gather the bandages and the bloodied basin.

“And yet you took up where she’d left off,” he mused quietly.

Lydia immediately shook her head.

“No, I simply stepped in and did what I could for my sisters,” she replied, keeping her eyes down as she busied herself with cleaning him up. “My father only put up with Alice and me because he was convinced that Juliet was going to be his darling boy. But once she came out and was identified as yet another girl, my father stormed out of the room.

“He thought my mother was going to recover from the birth just like she had the other two, so he went off to get foxed at a gentleman’s club. He was not there when the physician declared that she was still bleeding, or when she was begging the air to hold her hand.”

Memories, painful and raw, continued to slam into her so hard that she visibly flinched.

“You see, she was seeing things due to the blood loss,” she continued, her voice growing hollow. “So, she did not know that when a hand had grasped hers, it had been mine.”

“Your father is worthless,” Ezra announced as Lydia came back empty-handed from the bathing room.

He had kept his mouth closed as Lydia had peeled back her layers to show him a bit of her past, but he had not been able to stop his thoughts. Fury, malice, and redemption all flooded through him as he pictured his wife at seven years of age

becoming not just a mother to her sisters, but essentially a wife to her own father, but for the biblical sense.

Lydia had explained that not only did she take on the burden of raising her sisters, but also that of being the Lady of the House. She had learned to care for and hire staff, plan and follow budgets for meals and parties, advocate for herself and her younger sisters when it came to education, and how to speak to adults as if she were an adult herself, all before she had turned fourteen. He had been fourteen when he became a duke...but Lydia had only been half of that when she was confronted with her burdens.

Lydia gave him a weary smile and simply shrugged.

“I have given up trying to measure a man’s worth long ago,” she sighed, “But I suppose I would not argue with your opinion.”

Something about her nonchalant manner annoyed Ezra.

“He abandoned you when you needed him the most. Then, when he finally decided to return, he made you do everything, Lydia. Everything!”

The last word came out as a shout, and it startled not just Lydia but also himself. Where had such an intense burst of emotion come from?

“I am well aware,” Lydia replied calmly, putting her palm on his chest.

Her touch first scorched, then soothed him, and he did not move.

“But you see, to me it was worth it,” she went on. “To know that my sisters were receiving a small portion of the love and guidance that our mother had been able to teach me before she passed. If I had let myself cry or feel the fear of being left alone

with our father, I would never have been able to raise Alice and Juliet the way I did.”

“Lydia, you must know that is not a balanced scale,” Ezra remarked, although he could appreciate her optimism. “That what he took from you was not equal.”

“When has life ever been truly balanced?” Lydia asked with a soft laugh, her hand slipping up to his neck.

The wisdom and truth of her words struck him in his heart.

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“I know nothing of balance,” she continued, speaking candidly, “But I do know about sacrifice, and I am not sad or bitter about that. Alice is now married to the love of her life and in just a few months Juliet will be the same. That is worth it to me.”

“And what of you?” He asked.

Ezra was acutely aware that Lydia’s hand still rested calmly against his neck, and he could feel her fingers slowly rubbing at a tense muscle there. It both soothed and bothered him to have her hand placed upon him so intimately, but he fought through the urge to push her hand away. Instead, he drew in a steadying breath and brought his hand up to cup her cheek.

“What about me?” Lydia repeated, her cheeks blushing as his palm caressed over her soft skin.

He watched her chin lower subtly toward his palm as if wanting to nuzzle into it, and he felt another needle of light puncture a hole through his heart.

“Where is your happy ending?” he asked, letting his thumb stroke her bottom lip.

Lydia did not respond as they continued to look into one another’s eyes and gave him a small shrug.

“My happiness lies within my accomplishments,” she whispered, her eyes full of sincerity. “And I have accomplished much, even with so little.”

Admiration and a touch of awe swept through Ezra as he saw the raw truth in her

gaze. He stood there, unable to form a thought or words to say to the beautiful, strong woman before him. Suddenly though, discomfort swept through him like a strong wind, sending away all other emotions, and he pulled his hand swiftly from her face.

As he did so, he realized that he'd used his wounded hand, and though she'd just washed and bandaged it, a smear of his blood had been left across her cheek. He stared at it, the sight somehow stirring the beast of arousal that had become dormant. He watched as Lydia slowly brought her hand up to her cheek, delicately touched her fingertips to the blood, and brought it to her face to examine. He waited for her disgust or jest, but she only stared at it objectively.

"Enough of me," she said, waving her blood-dipped fingertips before him, "Tell me what we are going to do about this."

Needing to get out of the room and away from the strange feelings that were encompassing him, Ezra drew his kerchief from his pocket and tossed it to her carelessly before turning to the door.

"Like I said," he growled, unable to look back as he reached the door, "I will take care of it."

CHAPTER TEN

"Say it again," Ezra demanded, his voice as deadly and hollow as his gaze.

Morgan, Duncan, and Ambrose exchanged tired glances before they collectively looked back at Ezra in defeat.

"We're sorry, mate," Morgan replied, his tone full of remorse as he gave Ezra a pitiful look.

“We misread you and your intentions,” Duncan admitted, looking gravely serious.

“We should have thought better of you,” Ambrose chipped in, shaking his head, “We should have simply spoken with you first.”

It was the day after the masquerade ball and although Ezra and Lydia had only been expecting Duncan, Alice and Beau, every member of their peculiar little family had arrived. Lydia had immediately taken the women and children with her to the gardens to give the men their privacy, but Ezra had caught the worried look on her face right before she left. After last night’s accusations from Alice and Duncan, both were wary of an impending coup.

An apology, though, was something Ezra had never expected. Ezra looked steadily at his friends, taking a moment to enjoy the regret and shame on their faces. They had jumped to their judgments too quickly, and even if it was just for a few moments, he wanted them to wallow in that misery.

“Bloody hell, old boy, you are torturing us,” Duncan said with a tense laugh. “Forgive us, will you?”

“Let us get back to who we were,” Ambrose insisted, leaning forward anxiously in his chair, “Before all of this. We are brothers. This is not how we should be.”

Deciding that he had tortured his friends enough, Ezra picked up one of his pens and tossed it at Ambrose.

“Of course, I forgive you, you twits,” he remarked when Ambrose jumped at the pen hitting his chest. “Who else is going to let me beat them to a bloody pulp when I need a row? Just do not behave like such idiots the next time.”

A collective sigh of relief seemed to pour out of Ezra’s three friends. As they all

stood up to converge on him they let out rueful laughs.

“I remember a time or two when you were bested,” Duncan retorted mockingly, though the relief was clear in his eyes.

He reached out his hand to Ezra, and he allowed the strong, customary handshake.

“And I remember thirty or forty times when you were outdone, my brother,” Ezra remarked.

Duncan let out a deep chuckle as Morgan made some sort of jest about a wick-dipping tour and Ambrose tried to bring up an issue with one of their ventures. Ezra felt his earlier discomfort dissipate as he began to jest with his friends to reinstate the earlier balance in their relationship. Trust was not something they would earn back all at once by any means, but for now, he was willing to let them attempt to do so.

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“Now Morgan, what is this about a wick-dipping tour?” Duncan mused as they all settled back into their seats, a friendly whiskey now in everyone’s hand.

Morgan’s eyes lit up as the subject came back around, and he tipped his glass toward Ezra.

“Indeed! I have chartered a course and decided that I shall be “dipping” into every port along the way,” he explained, pulling out a folded paper from his jacket pocket.

With a quick unfold, the small paper laid out into a large map with several red circles along the coasts of Europe.

“It will be a masterful play,” Morgan said with gusto, “And you are coming with me!”

Ezra was not sure if it was he or his friends who were more surprised at his curt expulsion of laughter, but he rode out his rare display of emotion and gave one of his usual bored shrugs.

“Count me out for this one,” he retorted, returning to his seat behind his desk.

Ambrose and Duncan shared a look while raw disappointment flooded Morgan’s expression.

“Oh, come off it, mate, I know you want to join me! We have not taken a trip like this in ages! And now these two cannot go because they’re “happily married”, so it only leaves you and me. Remember what happened the last time we took a trip like this?”

Ezra smirked, recalling it vividly.

“The courtesan in Venice in the red lace?” He offered, and in that moment, every man in the room developed a dreamy, far-off look in their eyes.

“She was lovely,” Ezra continued, “But might I remind you, I too, am married.”

“Yes, but not happily,” Morgan retorted.

Ezra let a small, side smile touch his lips as he shook his head at Morgan. Though he was not the youngest of them all, Morgan was still the most boyish. It was nothing new for him to pout a little when he was not getting his way, and Ezra used the moment to tease him.

“Now, now, we have all just made up,” he chastised Morgan, “Let us not fall apart again over one of your little tantrums.”

“Watch it, mate,” Morgan said bitterly, crossing his arms.

“Perhaps it is you who should watch it,” Ambrose joked, punching Morgan in the arm playfully, “Happy or not, no married man wants to be caught planning a trip like this behind his wife’s back.”

“I think they might actually be happy,” Duncan mused.

A raucous laughter came from Morgan and Ambrose rose a doubtful brow.

“Well come on then, brother, tell us!” Morgan goaded, “Have you become a man in love? Will you and Lydia be popping out children as well?”

“I assure you, gentlemen, nothing will be ‘popping’ out of me any time soon,” Lydia

stated, announcing her presence.

Morgan, Ambrose, and Duncan's heads all swiveled rapidly toward the door, missing the smug smile that drew across Ezra's face. She threw him a quick wink that ignited a stirring in his groin. He flashed his teeth as he pushed his chair away from the desk to make room for Lydia and her tray of medical supplies.

"Whatever are you scoundrels talking about?" Lydia asked haughtily, her nose high as she walked elegantly toward Ezra.

From his seat Morgan flew at the map still laid out on Ezra's desk, and in his hurry to conceal it he nearly tore the thing in two.

"We were just discussing a trip," Morgan answered, still fighting with the map.

"And that involves something popping out of me, how?" Lydia asked coolly as she took the seat Ezra offered her.

"Yes, do tell her," Ezra mused, unable to hide his grin. "I, too, would like to know the answer to this."

Lydia met his eyes with a cheeky gaze before she put her focus on redressing the wound on his hand. Like before, her touch was delicate but clinical; kind yet thorough. He had shared with his friends what had transpired the previous evening, which had been the catalyst that had led them to their apology. They had already sworn to help him find out who it was, and why they had done it.

"Well, we were curious," Ambrose ventured, throwing a tense look at Morgan and Duncan. "About when you and Ezra might have children."

"Oh?" she said, raising her head to look at them. "And that is your business, how?"

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“Well, not that it is,” Duncan stammered, looking worried, “we were just curious if...”

“And tell me, dear brother-in-law,” Lydia cut him off, “How quickly did you and my sister have children after you were married? I seem to remember it taking you well over a year to produce one, did it not?”

Color flooded into Duncan’s face, as well as Morgan and Ambrose’s, as the three of them grew quietly uncomfortable. Ezra had to muster all of his self-control to keep himself from grinning wildly.

“I thought you were the best-mannered out of all of them,” Morgan said bitterly, throwing Lydia an embarrassed look.

Lydia smiled sweetly as she finished changing the dressing on Ezra’s wounded hand, then turned to Morgan.

“I assure you that I am, Your Grace, but I am also the most ruthless. Do remember that when you make your little jests.”

Pride and approval enveloped Ezra as he watched Lydia rise from her seat and curtsy gracefully toward his friends.

“I believe I should be getting back to your wives now,” she said, continuing her sweet tone, “Perhaps, if I am feeling magnanimous, I shall refrain from telling them what exactly it was the four of you were discussing. A wick-dipping tour, was it not?”

Ambrose's face paled considerably as Duncan suddenly turned an enraged look toward Morgan and threw a punch into his arm.

"Lydia, you must believe me, I had no part in this," Duncan argued vehemently, turning back to her with wide eyes.

"Nor did I," Ambrose added with equal desperation, "You know Barbara is not above murdering me for such an indiscretion, and you are equally aware that she's wily enough to get away with it."

"So, what I should be hearing is..." Lydia let her words trail off as she leaned an ear toward them and motioned for them to speak.

"Apologies, my lady," the three men replied in unison.

"Very good," Lydia praised in a condescending tone.

Once gone, Ezra's three friends turned from the door and back to him, their faces pale.

"Jesus, mate, she is scary," Morgan stated, slowly shaking his head.

"Was she always like that?" Duncan asked, looking at the door as if she might suddenly reappear.

Ezra didn't respond as he watched each of his friends gradually pick up their bruised dignity and turn their conversation toward other topics. Eventually, he also found himself involved in their discussions in his usual quiet, monosyllabic way. But, as the jokes and jests resumed, Ezra could not help but think back to Lydia and the unflappable strength she so obviously possessed.

“Useless,” Lydia heard Ezra mutter as she opened the door to his study, “Utterly, unbelievably useless.”

Lydia cracked open the door a little more to peek inside and caught Ezra flinging a pen and then an inkwell at the wall. She flinched a little as she heard the glass shatter, but she gathered herself and strode in.

“Is this a new style of writing?” she asked, nodding her head toward the mess on the wall as she kept her eyes on him, “If so it looks quite enjoyable, and I should like to try.”

Though Ezra glared at her, she saw the tiniest spark of humor ignite in his eyes.

“Unless you are here to assist me I suggest you leave,” he said gruffly.

He was in no mood to play with her today; despite knowing the pleasure it always brought him. He was too annoyed with his injured hand, and the fact that they had not yet found his assailant.

“Then I suppose it is good that I am here to assist,” Lydia replied matter-of-factly, unfazed by his foul mood.

He watched her quietly as she gathered a new pen and a fresh inkwell from his cabinet before taking a seat on the opposite side of his desk.

“You cannot help,” he stated when she looked at up him expectantly.

“I do not see why not,” Lydia countered.

Ezra glared at her. Lydia had access to his accounts, yes, but only what he allowed Mr. Porter to show her. The issues he presently needed to address were of a different

nature. These were in respect of the longstanding accounts that had belonged to his father, which he had slowly been balancing throughout the years since his death. He knew Lydia was aware of his late father's debts; it was no secret, but he still did not want to show her the evidence.

“If I punish you would you still wish to see then?” he quipped back.

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Lydia looked back at him evenly for a moment, then smiled sweetly as she got up.

“If you want to allow our success to slow down because of your wounded pride, that is your choice to make,” she stated smoothly. “But I, for one, have enjoyed the pace we have set, and would like to continue it.”

The challenge, the insinuation that he wanted to slow down, twisted his temper into something hotter. So, she thought he was weak if he refused her help, did she? Well. She would pay for that, he decided.

“I think I shall punish you and accept your help at the same time,” Ezra mused, standing up as well.

“And how do you propose you do that?” Lydia asked as he walked toward her. He took the writing utensils from her hand and brought them back to his side of the desk.

“You will indeed do my writing for me,” Ezra retorted, coming back to her.

Lydia attempted to step out of his reach as he grasped for her waist, but he caught her easily and grinned when she gasped.

“You will just be doing so from my lap.”

Lydia’s face paled before her cheeks flushed bright red and she fought his grasp. They had not discussed her reward since he had been assaulted; there simply hadn’t been enough time, but it had unlocked something new between them, and he knew they both felt it.

“This is absolutely preposterous,” Lydia muttered as she felt her backside being forced down onto Ezra’s lap. “I can write from across the desk!”

She truly had come in to help, but when he began to snap at her she could not help but tease him. It had obviously been a mistake on her part, and he wanted to prove to her that while she could compete with him, she could never win. No matter how injured, Ezra always seemed to have the metaphorical upper hand.

“Yes, but I would have to watch you write upside down,” Ezra countered lazily, his voice almost sultry in her ear, “that would be most annoying.”

“Yes, that is a true annoyance,” she scoffed, pushing with both hands at his good one locked around her waist.

She tried to wiggle free again but his fingers bit into her hips, stopping her with apparent ease. Ezra might be more compact than his friends, yes, but she was sure that he was by far the strongest.

“I highly suggest you stop doing that,” Ezra mused into her ear, his tone calm as he held her still, “Unless you actually want our work to slow down.”

Lydia immediately stopped squirming and allowed herself to settle on Ezra’s lap. From below, she felt something tap against her backside, and she blushed deeply once she realized what it was.

“Are you ready to help me with my task now?” Ezra asked, his tone teasing as his hands stroked up her waist.

“Yes,” she replied curtly, ignoring her blushing cheeks and racing thoughts. She did not want to tease him anymore, she decided.

“Very good,” Ezra praised in her ear.

She could hear the sarcasm and taunting in his voice, but she ignored the sensations his praise caused and picked up her pen. To her relief, Ezra’s tone shifted from sultry to serious, and as he spoke his desired words into her ear, she wrote them verbatim. Soon, her annoyance faded as she became ensconced in her task.

The rhythm and tone of Ezra’s voice were easy to pay attention to, and she found her body relaxing comfortably in his lap as she wrote one missive after another. Ezra also seemed to relax, for as he watched and guided her words, she felt his hands begin to smooth their way along her back and around her waist. Not in a tugging, demanding, or teasing way. It was as if he was touching her absentmindedly and it was soothing to him.

Curious if that was even possible, Lydia allowed his touch to continue but noticed an immediate effect. It was distracting. Normally she was able to hear every word Ezra spoke; his deep voice and seemingly effortless eloquence made it easy to do so. But, as his hands continued to caress and massage the muscles of her back, it became impossible for her to continue paying attention.

Lashes fluttering, Lydia closed her eyes to the soothing pleasure of his touch and let the pen fall from her fingertips. As soon as it hit the desk, a burst of ink shot forth onto the letter, creating a deep, black splatter among the words, and Ezra’s hands ceased their seduction.

With a jolt, Lydia blushed as she reached for the pen with one hand and the nearby cloth with the other.

“Is this boring to you?” Ezra asked.

His hands had stilled at her waist, and she felt his fingers tighten there as he pressed

her back down into his lap.

“I...no,” Lydia stammered, suddenly feeling feverish.

She mentally reached for her wit but there was no sarcastic remark to be found.

“I...I am so sorry, I do not know what happened,” she apologized.

She moved to turn in his lap, but he stopped her and slowly turned her back until she was facing forward again, and her back was flush to his chest.

“I can be a patient man from time to time,” Ezra replied.

His lips were closer to her now, caressing her outer lobe with each word he spoke. With one hand still anchored on her waist, he rose the other to the ties at the back of her dress and slowly pulled the strings loose.

“Fetch another sheet of paper from that stack of vellum over there, and we shall begin again.”

His tone was patient, but she still picked up on the slight lilt of amusement beneath. This time, though, instead of annoyance she felt a burst of arousal in her lower belly.

Taking a steady breath, Lydia moved the ruined letter aside, pulled a fresh sheet of paper from the vellum as commanded, and picked up the pen again.

“I think I might know what happened last time,” Ezra whispered as she felt her dress being pulled down her shoulders.

She shivered at the brush of air against her bare skin, and instinctively pressed into him. Instead of letting her linger there he gripped her biceps and made her sit forward just a little, revealing her back.

“Please explain,” she managed to say, her eyes fluttering as she felt her corset strings coming loose, “for I cannot seem to get my mind to work correctly.”

Ezra chuckled into her ear; a low, taunting sound as his fingers slipped up the back of her corset and slowly pulled so that the many crisscrossed strings would release as

one. Relief poured through her as she felt the pressure on her breasts and ribcage release, and she could not help the moan that left her lips.

“You poor thing,” he purred, his voice dripping with mock pity as he splayed his full hand against the nakedness of her lower back and began to press upward.

Like a feline, Lydia moved her spine with his touch, and when he ended at the nape of her neck and circled his fingers there, she let out another helpless whimper and shivered. Yes, right now, she was a pitiful thing, and she could not deny it.

“You are not used to such multi-tasking, it is obvious,” Ezra continued, stroking his thumb along the left plane of her neck as he moved her back to his chest again. “Therefore, some education simply needs to be provided.”

His hand slipped around the front of her throat then, his grip firm but gentle as he moved his other hand to lightly trace the line from her throat to her navel. Large, dewy drops of her juices began to slip from Lydia’s petals as his fingers made lazy circles around her navel, and she found herself pressing her thighs together even tighter. As she did so, she felt Ezra’s member throb once more against her backside.

“This type of learning is best absorbed through application,” he continued calmly as her mind continued to unravel.

He then pressed a kiss to the tender spot below her ear, and she let out a soft cry. How could a touch so soft be so intense? So powerful?

“Shhhh,” he soothed, moving his hand over the one that held the pen. “You’ve proven exemplary at everything else you have shown me. I am confident this will be no different.”

His grip on her hand tightened then, and he let his lips trace down the nape of her

neck and up again before he whispered more adamantly, “We will do this over. And over. And over again, until you complete your task perfectly. Do you understand, Lydia?”

“Yes,” she whispered quickly, her grip tightening on the pen.

“Good,” he praised, his voice thick as he moved her hand to dip the pen into the inkwell.

“Now, let us begin again. And this time, no matter what I do, you must not allow yourself to become distracted.”

“I am starting to think you are making mistakes on purpose,” Ezra teased, pinching Lydia’s right nipple.

He was rewarded with another delightful sound from her throat as her hips squirmed in his lap. As it had done for the last hour, the sensation made him grit his teeth and thrust his hips in response.

“Well, you are making it quite difficult to succeed!” she gasped, then moaned as his rigid length thrust against her glistening mons.

Though he still had trousers on, her juices had coated through the fabric, making it wet and uncomfortable around the head of his manhood. The combination of pleasure and discomfort was driving him mad, and he was beginning to lose patience with this lesson.

Lydia had been deliciously responsive to his touch; so much so that at times even the barest scrape of a singular nail made her gasp. In truth, he too had become distracted at first. Fascination and wonder had overtaken him several times as he traced lightly over her bare upper body, and he became entranced with watching every movement

and hearing every sound she made.

He remembered that she was pure and completely untouched. Ezra let the pressure from his hands gradually grow firmer and his touch became increasingly sensual. No man before him had ever touched her or seen her before he had. He truly was her first for everything.

So, he had been gentle at the beginning, allowing her to become accustomed to his touch, his voice. But, as her writing grew steadier, his grip became harsher. His slow kisses transformed into scraping teeth and sharp nips, and his gentle fingertips began to intermittently pinch or lightly slap.

“I suppose I am being a little unfair,” Ezra admitted, releasing her nipple from his firm pinch.

Lydia whimpered as he quickly began to knead and massage the bruised, sensitive bud back to life and felt another splash of her juices spread across the crotch of his trousers. He hissed in a breath at the sensation, and for a moment he paused and leaned his forehead against the sensual contours of Lydia’s back.

He had started this game to punish her for disobeying his commands, but now, as he felt ready to explode, he realized that he was punishing himself vastly more than he could ever chastise her. He needed the game to end if only to remove himself and find relief, but each time he attempted to pull his hands away, he found he could not.

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His fingertips were fused to her flesh as if melted onto it, and his grip became desperate despite his mental protests to let her go.

“Let us end this lesson, Ezra,” Lydia pleaded from his lap as his hands continued their possessive exploration.

“I cannot take it anymore. I cannot write the letter. I was wrong for disobeying your order to leave you alone. I am sorry I did not leave when you told me to.”

The pleading in her whimpering voice as well as the apology itself sent a shot of arousal so intense, so deep, through Ezra’s groin that he felt his seed release of its own volition. Unable to help himself, unable to do anything but allow it to happen, his hands gripped her tightly to him as he sank his teeth into her shoulder, and he groaned out his relief.

Pleasure racked through him as his rigid member pulsed over and over, but he barely had a moment to feel sated before his frenzy began anew. In fact, he did not even soften as he pulled Lydia off of his lap to turn her around and make her straddle him; and he knew she felt the evidence as her knees brushed up against his sides and he locked her to him.

He wrapped his injured hand around her neck and brought her lips down to his, kissing her possessively until they were both breathless.

“Say it again,” he commanded, grinding himself into her.

“I am sorry,” she breathed, her eyes fluttering as her hips rose and fell with his.

“I am sorry, husband,” Ezra corrected bitingly.

“I am sorry, husband,” Lydia moaned obediently.

A growl of approval ripped from Ezra’s chest as he pulled her in for another kiss.

“That’s my good wife,” he rasped, pulling away from the kiss.

He turned her once more, so she was facing the desk and pushed the pen into her hand.

“Now you will write this letter. Repeat what I say so I know you are hearing me.”

Trembling, Lydia dipped the pen into the inkwell as Ezra’s fingers found her mons beneath her skirts.

“To Lord Reginald Hammond, Earl of Rayburn...”

Lydia’s voice came out soft and trembling as she repeated his words, but she was able to legibly write out the greeting. Ezra thrummed his fingertips against her sex; a reward for the accomplishment, and he continued, ignoring her gasp.

“It was both a privilege and an honor to have...” Ezra’s fingers began to stroke small, lazy circles into Lydia’s taut bundle of nerves as he forced her to write and repeat each new sentence. This time, with his hand between her legs, Lydia seemed more determined than ever to carry out her task properly.

“Regards, Lord Ezra Fernside, Duke of Frampton,” he finished, his fingers now moving at a fevered pace.

Lydia moaned and writhed as she shakily drew out the last letter in his name, and as

she let the pen fall to the side, Ezra drew her closer to him and thrust his two fingers inside her wet warmth. Satisfaction poured through him as Lydia's hips rose, her back arched, and the back of her head fell into the crook of his shoulder as her body spasmed with release.

Unable to help himself, Ezra bit down on her shoulder once more as he began to thrust his manhood against her wetness. To his great surprise, Lydia's hips began to move with his, as if wanting to help him release. Too weak to resist, Ezra released his teeth, running his tongue over the sore mark, then kissed and lapped up her neck as Lydia allowed him to meld her body completely to his.

They had not discussed the reward he had given her at the masquerade ball. It had been for her pleasure, yes, but what she had not known was that it had pleased him as well. Now that the tables had been turned and it was his mercy in her hands, he suddenly realized that she wanted him.

As he moaned into Lydia's back, his release shot out from a place deep within him. She moaned with him too, which only made his erection throb harder as he continued to spill. For a moment he let himself become lost in her as he absorbed every sensation. Her black cherry scent, the buttery softness of her skin, and the sensation of the combined rhythm of their hips, even as they slowed, was delicious. Intense. Too intense.

The realization dawned on him gradually. As addictive as it was to drink all of Lydia in, it was too much. Feelings, strange and uncomfortable, rose in Ezra he stilled Lydia's hips and pushed her gently from his lap.

"Ezra," Lydia panted, slowly turning on wobbling feet. She lasted just long enough to find a seat on the desk and collapsed. "We have to talk."

"Why?" he said gruffly, shoving himself out of the chair.

His legs nearly gave out as he stormed to the opposite side of the room, and the show of weakness only made him more uncomfortable. What the hell had she done to him?

“You disobeyed an order, you were punished,” he said simply. “You learned your lesson, therefore the punishment is over.”

The sleepy, sated look that had covered Lydia’s beautiful face vanished, and shame colored her cheeks as she began to dress herself.

“That was more than just a punishment, Ezra,” Lydia replied, “It might have started out as such, but it turned into something else. I thought we were just going to keep this a business relationship?”

“This is a business relationship,” he fumed, but Lydia only scoffed.

Already he missed the whimpering, pleading Lydia that had just been in his arms, but it was clear from the way she glared at him that the fearless older sister persona had fully resurfaced. It suddenly hurt him to receive that look from her, and he immediately hated the feeling.

“Right, and is that how you reward all of your business associates when they do a job well?” Lydia asked, her tone defiant.

Ezra set his cold, dead stare upon her but she did not so much as flinch.

“And when they do poorly? Is that the punishment you give them?”

“Lydia, enough,” he growled, taking a step back as she came toward him.

He had never felt like this before, ever. Like a caged animal with no means of escape. What was this damned woman doing to him?

“We provoke one another,” he said in a forced, dull tone, “You cannot deny it, and neither can I. Perhaps today our taunting and teasing went a little too far, but that is all.”

The fresh memory stirred through him, and he couldn’t help but let his eyes rake down her once again. She had fixed her gown without a helping hand, and it was poorly fitted and sat on her in a way that made him want to rip it off again.

“You made it clear on our wedding night that you did not want me, yes?” He demanded to know.

Lydia’s brows drew into a hurt, slightly guilty expression, but she nodded and replied, “I did, yes.”

“Precisely,” he said, in a clipped tone as he finally felt the customary numbness begin to stretch over him.

“But Ezra,” Lydia pushed, “you are... there has been something different about you.”

“There absolutely has not,” he growled defensively, feeling his shoulders rise with tension.

He took a deep breath through his nostrils and slowly let it out, as he came to a calculated decision.

“I am going to London for a few days,” he said curtly, dragging his eyes away from her.

“You should not go alone, it is too dangerous...”

“That is none of your concern,” Ezra cut off Lydia’s words harshly.

Unable to tolerate their close proximity any longer, he strode toward his office door and flung it open.

“You should invite your sisters over while I am away,” he said coldly as he walked out, “You will finally have something to tell them that will confirm their worst fears.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

“I am so terribly confused,” Lydia admitted, shaking her head wearily.

Barbara and Alice sat across from her at the table in her room. She had also contemplated inviting Juliet and Helena, but Lydia decided that she needed to speak to women who were already married. Women who, like her, had not been in love with the men they had married.

Upon their arrival, Lydia had made them swear, not just to secrecy, but also to loyalty. She knew it would be asking too much of them to keep their minds open, but she implored them to listen to her fully. Though they were skeptical at first, both had agreed, and Lydia finally told them everything.

She told them of their first kiss and how it had shocked and thrilled her; how she felt such excitement when they teased and taunted one another until they were right on the cusp of intimacy, and how she would feel both relieved and disappointed when they would withdraw just before giving in. She told them of her reward at the party and her punishment in Ezra’s study.

She had expected Alice and Barbara to interrupt her, gasp, perhaps even start to gather her belongings, but instead, the more she talked, the more they exchanged knowing glances. When she finally finished and demanded to know why they were doing that, she was shocked by their answer.

“Our darling dukes are a rather peculiar breed,” Barbara had said slowly, choosing her words carefully.

“It seems that none of them handle emotions very well,” Alice included, and with a compassionate look added, “especially Ezra.”

“And when they are confronted with them; especially those of affection, they get a little...” Barbara continued.

“Agitated,” Alice offered.

“Precisely,” Barbara agreed.

“Yes, but I feel the same,” Lydia interjected, “Perhaps I am just now starting to accept it a little better, but we are similar in that way. On each occasion when he got too close, I pushed him away, even if I did not want to, until the night of the masquerade. Now I cannot stop thinking about him in that way, but I am also furious with him, and I am angry that he does not want to talk about whatever it is that is clearly unfolding between us!”

“Oh, dear,” Barbara murmured, sitting back in her chair. “It has happened.”

“Even with Ezra,” Alice mused as if amazed, “Who would have thought it possible?”

“What are the two of you going on about?” Lydia demanded.

“Let me just say this,” Alice sighed, smiling at Lydia as she grasped her hand, “Our orphans seem to be all torn up about love. Believe it or not, Ezra is acting this way because he is starting to care for you and that terrifies him deeply.”

“Ezra is not afraid of anything,” Lydia scoffed, but neither of her friends joined her.

“For a man that feels almost nothing at all, feeling anything can be terrifying,” Barbara replied, her tone gentle.

“Ambrose,” she went on, taking a steadying breath, “was not quite as distant as Ezra with his emotions, but it was clear that having feelings for me unnerved him.”

“And look what Duncan did when he first realized he loved me,” Alice said.

“Do not remind me,” Lydia said quickly, “I wanted to throttle him for the heartache he caused you.”

“He made up for it one hundred times over when he came back,” Alice said gently. “He has not left my side since, nor will he. Duncan cares deeply for me, and I believe Ezra may be starting to care deeply for you.”

“Ezra is neither Duncan nor Ambrose,” Lydia replied, her heart sinking.

“I am grateful that you kept your initial promise by not being judgmental and demanding, but you do not have to give me false hope.”

Barbara let out a loud laugh and asked, “Hope? You truly think we wish to give you hope for this man? No. He does not deserve you now, nor will he ever. Despite that, however, you are changing him. I saw it, we all saw it at the party, and it is for the better. That mask of numbness he always wears is slowly crumbling away.”

Lydia’s lips quirked. Yes, that was true. In fact, she had come to enjoy the various new expressions she’d seen on her husband’s face. All of them seemed to make him annoyingly more handsome, but yes, she had relished not seeing his usual blank look of dull boredom.

“There is something else,” Lydia ventured slowly, her cheeks growing hot. “Not an emotional issue per se, but a...a, well...” She laughed nervously, unable to say it aloud.

“Physical,” she forced out, stretching her hand to her side to wave at her body, “And no, before you ask, it is not that he strikes me or anything like that it is...it is...well, I do not know what it is, exactly but it, it...”

Lydia stopped trying to find the right words for a moment as she took a furtive look at her friends. She saw Alice peering down at the table, her lips pressed together tightly as if trying to hold back a wide smile. Barbara seemed equally excited, her eyes alight with curiosity as she leaned forward on her elbows. Lydia gave them an odd look. It was not quite the reaction she had been expecting.

“Go on, dear, you can tell us anything,” Barbara said quickly.

Taking a deep breath, Lydia took a moment to gather her thoughts.

“When he touches me,” she began slowly, unable to make eye contact with either of them, “it is like my entire body wakes up. He may touch only my hand, but I feel it so deeply everywhere, almost like a pulse. It is so enjoyable, yet it steals my thoughts in the most annoying fashion.”

“Oh, heavens,” Barbara murmured, a slow smile spreading across her lips.

“And then he mocks me for it when he sees he has this effect. When he is not touching me I can mock him right back, tit for tat, you know? But if he is touching me and he mocks me, I...” she paused, unsure whether or not she should actually share such a shameful admission.

Lydia pressed her eyes shut tightly as she recalled her time with Ezra in his chair and she felt her body heat up and tighten all over again.

“It excites me, somehow,” she finally breathed out, “and I do not understand it! I am wicked, surely I must be.”

“You are not,” Alice said defensively, speaking up for the first time.

Her smile had slowly faded as she heard the distress heighten in Lydia’s voice and

was now giving her a calm, comforting look.

“Ezra is not the only man that possesses this “trait,” Barbara added delicately, reaching a hand for Lydia, “And you are not the only woman that draws excitement from it.”

Relief and surprise filled Lydia as she took in the calm, honest faces of her sister and friend.

“Truly?” she asked.

They both nodded, then Barbara stood up and said, “I have an idea. Come back to London with us. Allow Ezra to do what he needs to do there, you do not need to stay at his house. The four of us ladies and our two babes can reign free the rest of the week at the Curtis House. We can share wicked stories of our husbands and perhaps find a way to help you and Ezra smooth things out.”

Lydia smiled, the idea sounding truly delightful. She had enjoyed her work with Ezra greatly, but there was no doubt she missed spending time with her friends and sisters. She was not sure how much more she was willing to share with her friends and could not imagine spending a week discussing such issues. But there were plenty of other things they could discuss and do together.

“I would love to,” Lydia replied, remembering Ezra’s command, “but Ezra stated that I should wait here.”

“That was while discussing his travel plans,” Barbara retorted, “We are now discussing ours. He will not even know you are there.”

“Well...” Lydia mused, liking the idea more by the second. “Yes, I suppose you are right. And it is not as if the staff requires me to be here to function properly. Very well then, I shall ask my maid to pack my luggage. Shall we leave in an hour?”

“George Nicholson,” Ezra said aloud, staring at the glass of whiskey in his hand. “Earl of Ridlington. I vaguely remember him. He used to work for my father right before he passed.”

“You mean with?” Ambrose asked.

“No,” Ezra stated firmly, meeting his friend’s eyes. “The earl worked for my father, not with him, although I do not know what he did or why.”

He held up his injured hand toward Ambrose, one brow raised.

“Are you saying that is who gave this to me?”

Ambrose nodded his head at Ezra from across his desk. It had been a complete happenstance that Ambrose had just been getting ready to send for him when he’d suddenly appeared in the gaming hell. Ambrose had immediately insisted they go to his office. As he shared the news, even Ezra had to admit that he was a little baffled.

Why would he want to hurt him? Especially now. It must have been at least thirteen years since Ezra had last seen the Earl of Ridlington, so why did he wait this long to exact his revenge? And revenge for what? The relationship had dissolved a couple of years before Ezra was named the next Duke of Frampton.

Suddenly, like a slap in the face, it hit him; a certain forgotten memory, and Ezra sighed wearily. How old had he been when he’d walked into a servant’s cupboard to find to a certain man and woman pushing parts together? He had likely been eight or nine years of age. He shivered in disgust and pushed the memory back into the very darkest corners of his mind where he kept all such vile recollections.

“Of course,” he muttered.

“Enlightening,” Ambrose retorted dryly, “Care to share a bit of what you are thinking?”

Despite his annoyance, Ezra let out a wry chuckle.

“I have a theory,” he sighed, rising from his chair. “But I need to conduct some research first. Unfortunately, I think it is time I paid a visit to my darling mother.”

Ambrose balked and made a face.

“Jesus, mate, why do you not just hop on down to hell and visit Satan himself? It would be easier and far more enjoyable.”

Ezra chuckled, relieved that they were once more back to their old ways. It had been strange not having his friends near, and though he would never admit it, he truly did not enjoy it.

“Perhaps,” he mused, “But it would not give me the same results.”

“You really think it is her?” Ambrose asked, standing as Ezra walked toward the door.

“It would not be the first time she has tried,” he replied with a shrug. “Or the second.”

Ambrose’s grin slid a little.

“You still have some eyes and ears out there looking for information on the fire,” he said, “Maybe someone is trying to get you to stop looking.”

“We haven’t touched that subject in months,” Ezra said dismissively, “No, I am certain it is my mother. I will take care of it.”

“Should I pretend to offer to go with you?” Ambrose asked.

“And have Barbara blame me for your death?” Ezra mused as he walked away, “No thank you.”

“Ezra, wait,” Ambrose said, coming around his desk.

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“Something else?” Ezra asked, turning a bored look toward Ambrose as he stopped.

Ambrose huffed a laugh as he took a casual stance by the door.

“Well, yes, actually,” he answered, his tone laced with sarcasm.

Ezra drew a brow up at him and waited.

“I want to say that, even though I did not approve in the beginning, I am happy that you and Lydia have wed. Now that I have seen the two of you together, I can clearly see that there is something genuine between you two, and I just want to apologize again for misjudging you, old friend.”

Ezra felt his gut clench tightly as the thoughts he’d so carefully pushed away came flooding back. Lydia. Her touch, her taste; never had he been driven so wild by a woman. He seemed to lose so much control over himself whenever she was present, and it irritated him greatly.

“Your apology is accepted, just as it was before,” Ezra stated blandly, his face void of emotion. “But perhaps you should worry about your vision, old friend, for I assure you there is nothing between Lydia and I for you to see. We are a partnership. Nothing more.”

Ambrose’s light-hearted expression slipped a little, and he drew in a deep breath through his nose as he nodded.

“As you say, brother,” he answered, his tone resigned.

“I have matters to see to while I am here,” Ezra stated, done with the conversation. “We will speak soon.”

“Take care, brother,” Ambrose called after him thoughtfully as Ezra finally walked down the hall.

He did not respond and continued walking until he’d reached his office door and let himself in. He was both annoyed and caught off guard when he found Maria lying naked across his desk. Her brown eyes glistened as she watched him walk in and her red-painted smile drew into a seductive invitation as she waved her fingers at him.

“Bloody hell,” Ezra muttered. Was he ever going to get some peace?

“Good evening, Your Grace,” Maria purred sweetly, arching her back like a feline.

Ezra did not react to the seduction of her movements as much as he noticed how they scrunched and mussed the papers she had not bothered to remove from beneath her. Papers with deals, debtor’s notes, loan requests; papers that meant money.

“I thought you said you were done giving me your time,” Ezra said, his tone dull as he slipped his hands into his pockets and walked to his desk.

Maria’s smile slipped a little, but she quickly recovered, pulling up on her elbows to thrust her chest higher toward him.

“After some contemplation, I have chosen to forgive you, Your Grace,” she replied, her tone both sweet and sharp. “After all, it was my honor you offended, not my body.”

She brought up a hand, her eyes riveted to his, and slowly stroked her fingertips from her tilted chin all the way down to her parted thighs. She squeezed her palm to herself

when she reached her sex and let out a whimper.

“And my body is what misses you, Your Grace.”

“Your coffers miss me too, no doubt,” he muttered back.

Ezra gripped the edges of a wad of papers and pulled it out from under her with a sharp tug, making her gasp and lift her bottom so that she was forced to hold herself in a backward bow on her feet and elbows.

“Stay there,” he commanded sharply as she began to lower herself.

She stilled immediately, remaining in the uncomfortable position. He took his time gathering the papers, keeping his eyes purposely off her body and on his task. When he finished, he took the papers to a side table and took his time organizing them.

“Your Grace, may I...”

“No, you may not,” he stated harshly, interrupting her before she finished her request.

It was only then he turned back to her, his eyes null of emotion as he met hers, and he weighed his thoughts. She was trembling from the position, growing more uncomfortable by the second, but he said nothing to release her. Perhaps he should give in, if anything to prove to himself that he was still as unfeeling as ever, or at least to confirm what sex was supposed to be like for him. It was supposed to be fierce, harsh, and painful. It was a way to gain control when he had none.

With Lydia, it was the opposite. It was as if she had stolen that power from him and made him a slave to his needs. With Maria, he could regain his control. After all, Lydia had given him leave to do as he wished, even encouraged him. Yet as he tried to think of what he would do to Maria, he felt disgust rise in him and he sneered.

“Our business, as you stated the last time we met, has been concluded,” Ezra said, turning away from her to walk to his drink cart. “Get down, put your dress on, and leave.”

“Your Grace, surely we can come to an agreement,” Maria urged, her tone almost desperate, “I spoke in haste before, truly, and I beg your favor.”

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Ezra poured his drink, drank it down in one swallow, and walked toward the desk as he pulled out his billfold. He said nothing as he saw Maria still holding her position and did not look her in the eyes despite her efforts to attract his attention. He pulled another two fifty-pound notes from his billfold and tucked them into the pocket of her dress before he tossed it at her.

This time Maria finally came down from her elbows and feet and stretched the dress around as she scrambled off the desk.

“Do you want to continue your work here?” Ezra asked curtly as she hurried to dress.

Maria froze, her eyes wide, and she stammered, “Yes, Your Grace.”

He stepped toward her, stopping until he was only a short pace away.

“Then I suggest you never step foot in this office again. Am I understood?”

Maria blushed deeply, but she hurried to finish dressing as she nodded.

“Yes, Your Grace,” she replied obediently.

Not bothering to fix the rest of her dress, Maria gathered her skirts, and after a quick curtsy, she left him. Unsure if he was now more or less frustrated by making her leave, Ezra locked his office door, poured himself another drink and focused on his work.

The next morning, after a night of little sleep, Ezra pounded the large brass knocker

on his mother's front door and waited. He could not remember the last time he saw Sophia. It might have been two or three years ago in passing at the opera. A few years prior to that he recalled seeing her at the horse races. They never acknowledged one another; both of them were particularly careful not to let their paths overlap.

"Hello, Walter," Ezra stated dryly as his mother's butler opened the door.

The old man's eyes widened, first with surprise, then with panic.

"Your Grace! How good it is to see you. I...I..."

"Rest yourself before you cause yourself a coronary, old man," Ezra stated with a sigh, brushing past him. "Just tell me where she is."

Ezra only made it a few steps into the foyer before he heard the soft, whistling sound of an incoming projectile, and he ducked his head just as a teacup smashed into the wall beside him.

"What are you doing here?" Sophia screeched, stomping toward him with clear hatred.

"Hello, Mummy," Ezra retorted sarcastically, rising back up to his full height. He brushed imaginary dust off his shoulder as he added, "I see your hatred and venom have kept your beauty and aim as flawless as ever."

"Not my aim," she hissed back, loathing sparkling in her blue eyes.

"Oh, come now," he cajoled, unbothered, "You would have struck me if I had not ducked. I would say that your aim is as accurate as ever."

"What the hell do you want?" Sophia hissed, her small hands curling into fists.

Age really had not touched his mother at all, he realized as he took her in. A few lines by her eyes, yes, and she had a strand of gray in her hair here and there, but her vitriol for life had truly kept her otherwise well preserved.

“Your old friend Georgie stabbed me the other night,” Ezra stated, getting right down to business.

“I want to know why.”

Sophia grinned cruelly.

“I assure you, I have no idea what you are talking about,” she said sweetly. “But I do love to hear a good story.”

Sophia raked her eyes over Ezra in a way that made him cringe with disgust, then turned away from him, thrusting her nose in the air as she walked away.

“I hear that congratulations are in order. You are a married man now,” she said whimsically over his shoulder.

Though he told himself he would not be goaded by her, Ezra felt a shockwave travel through him, and he immediately began to follow her.

“They certainly are not,” he stated casually, catching up to her easily, “It was a simple business arrangement, nothing more. You know all about that though, don’t you? Is that not how you became Father’s wife?”

“You have always been good with your insults,” she praised, a condescending sneer on her face, “I assume you got that from me.”

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“It is not the only thing I got from you,” he muttered, unable to keep the bitterness from his tone.

After all, it was from her blackened soul that he had been born.

“Do not pretend to know what my relationship with your father was like,” Sophia said, coming back around to his earlier comment. “It was no one’s business what he and I agreed to behind closed doors.”

“Whatever it was you had with him, it was not enough to keep you by his side though, was it?” Ezra asked, ignoring the faint hurt in Sophia’s voice. “The moment you found out he was dead you just left.”

“He was dead,” Sophia shot back, glaring at him. “What else was I to do? Simper over his lifeless body? Plead with bankers and debt collectors to leave me be?”

“That’s what I did,” Ezra stated, his tone blunt. “You left a fourteen-year-old boy in the claws of those debt collectors and bankers. You did not have to stay. I did not particularly want you to. But you could have used some of your family’s inheritance to help dig us out of debt. You could have failed to show up to Father’s funeral foxed out of your mind on opium and Lord knows what else and then attempted to put me in the coffin with him!”

“Your father wanted a son so I gave him a son,” Sophia spit out, giving him a cold, disgusted look. “He said all I had to do was make sure you made it out into the world as a boy. Well, I did all that I was tasked to do, did I not? You were to be his. You were never mine. I figured you would want to go with him.”

“Did you ever even want me?” Ezra asked though he was sure he knew the answer.

The disgusted look on Sophia’s face did not change.

“We are nobles, Ezra. Even when we do get what we want it always comes with a bite of bitterness. Even if I did want a child, you were never that. You came out cold and silent, you know that? You did not cry, did not move as they pulled you from me. Just glared at everyone in the room. Like you somehow knew you were just...a pawn and you hated us all for it.

I knew then that any hope of loving you was gone. How could I love you? It is not normal nor healthy to love a thing you know could never love you back.”

Hatred boiled in Ezra’s stomach as he drew in a shaky breath through his nostrils. He had expected some sort of derivative of that notion, but her eloquent if not vehement vitriol had certainly painted a more detailed portrait of his mother’s views. She placed no blame upon her own shoulders. She had been absolved of the sin of birthing an emotionless demon instead of a child.

Sophia looked down at Ezra’s knuckles which were turning white from the strain of his fists and smiled prettily.

“Little Lydia will soon discover such burdens herself,” she said, her voice soft and sweet as she slowly raised her eyes back to his. “Poor little thing. She has no idea what you are.”

Ezra felt his body lurch forward a step before he could even help it, and he fought with his anger to keep from taking another. She was goading him, he knew it, and he would not allow her to win.

“Do not speak her name,” he warned.

“Your wife, from what I am told, is very sweet,” Sophia went on as if she had not heard him. “It was so shocking to hear that you would accept such a bride. So much like your father, in that respect.”

She turned away from him to open the patio doors. Ezra quickly followed her out, not noticing the slight tension of the wind or the gray clouds slowly forming in the sky.

“Her sweetness is none of your concern,” Ezra quipped, keeping one eye on his mother and the other on the nearby street.

Not even thirty paces away, their fellow nobles walked by casually, but the trees and the gate offered them some privacy.

“Perhaps she should be yours,” Sophia replied, “After all, what happens to an innocent thing when it is cast into the darkness? Is it not the first to die? Or turn? What dark, twisted thing will you turn her into, Ezra?”

Alarm, rage, and an overwhelming urge to protect surged through Ezra as he turned his glare toward Sophia and clenched his fists.

“You will watch what you say, Mother,” he warned, his tone grave, “especially when it comes to my wife.”

Sophia laughed at him, the sound loud and obnoxious enough to draw the attention of the passing people.

“Oh, you stupid darling,” she taunted, shaking her head at him, “It is not I you need to protect your wife from. It is you.”

CHAPTER TWELVE

“Juliet, the table settings you chose are beautiful, absolutely beautiful!” Lydia gushed.

Though she was hesitant to leave Frampton, Lydia quickly set her worries aside once she was surrounded by her friends. They had laughed, talked, gossiped, and best of all, had not spoken of Ezra since her most intimate confession.

“They are stunning, are they not?” Juliet beamed, linking her arm through Lydia’s as they walked. “I cannot believe that this is truly happening. Edmund will not be home for another fourteen months, and that is saddening, but it does afford me additional time to plan a more ravishing party. Oh! I still cannot believe that my new in-laws are willing to help pay for such a lavish wedding! Papa would never, you know, but now I truly get the wedding of my dreams! It shall be perfect!”

“Of course it will,” Lydia replied warmly.

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She was so incredibly happy to hear Juliet continuing to rattle off more of her elegant wedding ideas, but somewhere in the distance, Lydia heard the shout of a familiar voice. She ignored it at first, thinking it was her imagination, but as they continued to stroll down the street, it got louder to the point that Juliet stopped talking, and they both paused to look toward the commotion.

Lydia felt a deep hurt spring in her gut as she put the familiar voice with the familiar face, and she watched with shock as a strikingly beautiful noblewoman struck Ezra's face with a force so great that it rang throughout the street. Though it was a warm late summer day, Lydia felt a cold trickle over her, starting at the top of her head and traveling like melting ice down to her feet.

Ezra had been slapped so hard that his head had swiveled toward them, and though they were a good thirty paces apart, Lydia could see the fury in his eyes. She watched, frozen, as he slowly began to turn back to the woman, but he paused as his eyes settled on her and Juliet.

She had told him she did not care about his paramours or his needs. She had told him that he was welcome to them if he did not touch her. And yet, as she saw him there with her, this woman was so obviously enraged by the way he made her feel, it felt like a knife to her chest.

“Who is that?” the woman asked, raising her voice louder as she noticed Ezra’s stolen attention.

She peered through the gate at Lydia, so close to Ezra that their foreheads nearly touched, and she smiled. It was a wicked smile; poisonous. It made Lydia take a step

back and pull Juliet close.

“Ah,” the woman sang, “Your wife. Hmm. She seems rather...shocked, Ezra. You did not tell her about me?”

Lydia felt another slice of hurt pass through her chest as she dropped her gaze to the ground and took another step backward. From the woman’s patio, she heard Ezra growl, “You will stay away from her. You and your friends. I do not believe you, not for a moment.”

Lydia looked up blankly to see Ezra jump over the waist-high patio railing and march toward her. There was a terrifying look on his face, but she felt nothing as she looked up at it. In fact, a numbness she’d never felt before had swallowed her whole.

Ezra stopped just a few paces away, looking like a trapped bull ready to charge. He then took a deep breath, closed his eyes, and gave a rigid bow toward her and Juliet.

“Wife. Sister-In-Law. What a surprise to see you.”

Lydia stood as still as a statue as he raised up to his full height once more and focused his deadened gaze directly on her.

“My deepest apologies, Miss Juliet, but I am afraid I must cut this impromptu visit short. May we escort you home?”

Juliet looked worriedly toward Lydia, but she could only muster a blank stare. How, how could catching Ezra hurt so much? Is that not what she had known he would do?

“My carriage and maid are just up there,” she heard Juliet reply, “But I am not sure my sister is...”

“Your sister is in safe hands, I promise you,” Ezra replied curtly, then offered her his elbow. “We shall escort you to your carriage.”

Juliet looked toward Lydia once more, and she managed a silent nod. Without another word, her little sister took Ezra’s arm and stepped into place beside him. Ezra turned to Lydia and offered her his other arm, and she took it numbly. He gave her a short nod of approval, but his blue eyes were devoid of emotion.

“Your whore?” The question came spilling out as they walked away from Juliet’s carriage.

She had never used such a word before. It felt raw and guttural in her mouth and she regretted it immediately. Beside her, she felt Ezra stiffen, but he continued to say nothing as he walked them toward his London house. In the hazy afternoon, gray clouds had rolled in, and a light sprinkling of rain began to fall on them. It was fitting, she thought, since everything else seemed to be collapsing around her.

“Do not use such language again,” Ezra warned a while later.

“Why?” she asked quickly, “It is a term I am sure you use.”

“I am a debaucherous lech, and you are a lady,” he sneered.

Tears sprang in her eyes, but instead of sobbing, she let out a laugh.

“And what is a lady that is married to a debaucherous lech?” she asked bitterly.

Ezra halted, stopping them as the rain began to fall harder.

“What are you saying?” he asked, his ice-blue eyes darkening warily.

She hated him then. Hated how the raindrops amplified the carved, handsome features of his face, and how it made her want him even now. Because she did, didn't she? She wanted him, and she had thought he had wanted her. But he clearly had been toying with her. She had just been another victim of one of his heartless games.

"I am saying that if a wife inherits her husband's title, perhaps it is time that I, too, participate in some debauchery."

Anger finally spiked through her numbness as she broke out of his hold and stood defiantly before him in the empty street. Ezra looked back at her with a sneer but shot forward and reached for her wrist. She slid out of his way, throwing him a glare as she took a few more paces backward.

"Are you saying you want to take a lover, wife?" he barked, marching straight toward her.

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“Is that who that woman was to you?” she hissed, attempting to get out of his grasp again.

This time, though, she was not fast enough, and in one swift moment, Ezra had her pinned to his chest with his arms wrapped tightly around her back.

“You had better answer my question first, Lydia,” Ezra growled.

Despite her rage, Lydia felt a barb of unwanted desire shoot through her as Ezra’s heat roiled from his solid body.

“Who is she?” she demanded, her voice cracking as she pushed at his chest.

“Lydia.” The deadly warning in Ezra’s tone was almost enough to make her make her stop. Almost.

With a final thrust of her palms, she bent her knees and ducked. Thanks to the pouring rain it allowed her to twist out of his grasp, and before she had a second thought, she picked up her skirts and ran down the empty street.

“Damn it,” Ezra growled, his jealousy rising as he watched Lydia run away from him.

Without answering your question, a wicked voice whispered into his thoughts. His fury over finding her in London had suddenly vanished when she made her comment about engaging in debauchery, and in its place a dark green cloud of choking possessiveness had arisen. Is that why she was pushing him to take other lovers? Did she desire someone else?

His mind flooded with erotic memories of her; not just how she had looked, but how she had responded to him. She had wanted him. But...did she also want someone else? His fury rising, Ezra began to storm down the street after Lydia, who had followed its curve to the left and led to a park.

With each vision of her sitting on someone else's lap, of her biting another man's lip, he began to run faster. Though Lydia had a good two-minute lead on him he caught sight of her again in less than one, heading down an empty, darkened path away from the main promenade area and into the woods.

"Lydia, stop," he shouted, his blood boiling as he ran faster to catch up to her.

"Leave me alone!" she shouted over her shoulder, dodging off the path and through the trees.

"The hell I will," he spat out, springing for her.

Lydia gasped as he gripped his good hand around her upper arm, and she spun and slid in the mud, flying toward him. His own feet slipping in the mud, Ezra attempted to right them before he too lost his footing, and they were hurled to the ground.

Neither had seen the steep slope just a few feet to their left, but as they slipped down its muddy bank, Ezra wrapped his arms proactively around Lydia and cradled her head to his chest. His back took the slide with no pain at all, so as soon as they came to a stop at its bottom he gripped Lydia's wrists and pushed her back down into the sodden grass of the small, hidden valley.

He glared down at her silently as the rain pelted them, both of their chests heaving as they worked to catch their breath, and she glared right back. He would not ask her again and he would not let her up until she answered. And he knew she knew it.

“I do not want another man,” Lydia said through panting breaths. “I did not want any man at all. Until you.”

Ezra felt the words drop into the empty pit of his stomach like a bomb. He had teased her about wanting him, made her a plaything to taunt to prove to her otherwise- but he had not actually thought she had wanted him. He let out a ragged breath, letting his grip ease on her wrists.

“But I will not be a simpering idiot who wants a man who does not want her back,” she spat out, hurt mottling over the rage in her eyes, “And if being with other women soothes your pain, maybe it will soothe mine.”

Guilt and hurt churned inside Ezra as thunder bellowed above them and the warm rain grew heavier. He had done this to her. Twisted her into this confused state until she felt helpless. Yet, is that not what he did to all people? Is that not how he bent them to his will? Not Lydia, a voice from deep within begged him. Not her. You can stop. You can spare her.

So distracted had Ezra become by his clashing thoughts that he was unprepared to prevent the sudden twist of Lydia’s body, the movement of her wrists as she slipped them out of his hold and shoved him into the mud. For a moment he thought she was going to run, but as he lunged for her she swiveled around in the slick rain and slammed her hands into his chest as her body came down onto his, pinning him.

The force knocked the air out of his lungs, and he felt Lydia’s legs straddled over his lap, her thighs holding tightly onto his to keep him still. He thought he could easily move her, but when he tried to do so, he found his hands were only able to grip her waist and hold her to him.

“Now answer me!” she demanded, her eyes glittering with wrath as she ignored his hold. “Was that woman your whore?”

Ezra glared back at her, uncomfortable with the storm of emotions raging inside of him. Part of him wanted to say yes just to punish her. But that part, a part that had once been so large within him, had become incredibly small and withered.

“There has been no woman but you since we wed,” he yelled above the clashing of the storm, his eyes locked on hers.

The rain and mud had ruined her dress and hair, but like this, all mussed and wild, he found her more beautiful than ever. As his thoughts became blank, Ezra gave in to what he wanted. In one swift motion, he sat up and pinned Lydia to his lap with one hand as he held the back of her neck with the other.

“And I hate how much I want you too,” he spat out, pressing his forehead against hers as he heard her breath hitch, “It is driving me insane.”

His kiss was quick and possessive, giving neither of them a chance to say another word. Lydia whimpered as his lips claimed hers and she sunk into him, her fingers wrapping into the hair at the nape of his neck. Needing her taste, he used his lips and tongue to guide her mouth open, and he groaned with pleasure as he finally tasted her tongue again. It had only been three days, but he had craved her black cherry taste the moment he’d left Frampton, and he needed it like a vampire needed blood.

A booming clash of thunder followed by a piercingly white flash of lightning was the only thing that broke them from their spell, but it only lasted long enough for Ezra to guide Lydia into a nearby thicket. Once in the safety of the brambles, the spell resumed, and as their lips met again in passionate kisses, their hands began to tear at each other’s ruined clothes.

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Though he had undressed hundreds of women, and had nearly undressed Lydia on one occasion, Ezra's hands began to tremble as he yanked at the wet, stubborn ties of her dress and peeled back the soaked fabric from her body. Despite the rain, her skin felt hot to the touch, and the rain seemed to sizzle as it dripped onto her bare shoulder and collarbone.

Following the raindrops, Ezra bit and kissed his way from Lydia's exposed shoulder to her collarbone, then up the column of her neck, and finally to the little spot below her ear that made her whimper. As he did so, he continued to gently remove her gown and corset, pulling it down a little at a time to expose another expanse of flesh that needed to be bitten and kissed.

When he finally pulled the fabric down low enough to expose her pert breasts and small, pointed pink nipples, he let out a heady groan of approval. Though he had immensely enjoyed teasing them the last time they were together, Ezra had not taken the time to truly appreciate them.

In awe, he brought his hands to her chest, sliding his thumbs along her sternum as he palmed the underside of each breast, and let his fingertips feel their silky weight. Just the gentlest of squeezes had Lydia's breath hitching and her fingers tightening in his hair, and he looked up into her eyes to see pure pleasure shining down at him.

"Please," she breathed, her hold on him growing tighter as she began to tremble, "Don't stop."

Every ounce of strength seemed to leave Ezra as he saw the pure desire for him in her eyes, and he sunk slowly to the ground with her in his arms. If he was a gentleman he

would stop long enough to get them home and bathed but he was no gentleman, not really, and in this moment, Lydia did not seem to want to be a lady either.

With her seated in his lap, Ezra continued his exploration, alternating the touch of his hands from soft and gentle to rough and biting until Lydia was squirming in his lap and fumbling with the buttons of his shirt. He had no care for where his jacket or vest had gone, especially once he clamped his mouth down on Lydia's left breast.

Lydia said his name in a strangled tone as her fingers suddenly twisted and pulled at his shirt, forcing several of the obsidian buttons to fly off into the deep brown mud and soaked grass. Ezra's mouth did not leave Lydia's breast as he helped her rip the rest of the garment off. He held her fast to his ribcage as he moved over to her right breast and licked her nipple.

Lydia writhed atop him at the sensation, her hips making her mons dance wickedly against his hardened member. He gripped her tighter and wanted more of her in his mouth, but then to his surprise, she was shoving him back, her small hands flying around his neck so she could tilt his chin and bring his lips up to hers.

Ezra groaned as Lydia took possession of his mouth. He let her nip and lick him as she pleased as his hands finished pulling her dress away. His trousers were trickier, especially since neither refused to pause their kissing, but they were soon lying among the other discarded, ruined garments, along with his briefs.

It was only when he felt her hot, wet, bare petals slide against the rigid, naked length of his manhood that he finally broke from her kiss and forced them to stop. He wanted this, God did he want this.

"Don't," Lydia whispered, her fingers tightening at the back of his neck as she forced his eyes to hers.

Pain bloomed in Ezra's stomach as he froze, thinking the worst. Then her hands pulled him closer.

"Please," she whispered, her lips hovering above his, "Don't stop."

Relief flooded through Lydia as a groan ripped from Ezra's throat, and his lips returned to hers. She did not care about the rain, the mud, or the fact that they were outside; all she cared about in that moment was that she was Ezra's and Ezra was hers. No others. No nobles to court, no friends to appease, no paramours to worry about. Just the two of them together.

Lydia did not fight Ezra as he pulled her down atop him, and she moaned with pleasure as she felt their bare chests slide against one another. Between her legs, she could feel his member thumping against her most sacred place as if begging to be let in.

She sank into Ezra's embrace, letting him take control so he could kiss and bite his way down her throat and over her breasts, but she did not expect him to suddenly grip her thighs and thrust her forward. Her knees wobbled in the mud as Ezra's grip moved from her thighs to her backside, and she let out a cry of pleasure as his tongue burrowed between her legs.

Lydia's back arched as she felt Ezra's hot tongue thrust into her opening, electrifying the thousands of nerves that lay within her. Her thighs began to tremble around his ears as Ezra, unlike the first time, lapped and suckled at her like a man dying of thirst. Unable to help herself, she began to buck her hips into Ezra's mouth, finally finding a steady grip by lacing her fingers through his thick, black hair.

"Oh, God, Lydia." Ezra's moan was guttural, primal, and it rang in her ears in such a way that she could not help the wave of juices that flooded from her.

The moment she felt her ecstatic release, Ezra's grip on her backside tightened and he locked her into place, burrowing his head even further between her legs as growls and grunts of need poured from his throat. Even when she finished spasming and felt her body grow heavy and woozy, Ezra's firm grip on her remained.

His quick, teasing tongue slowed down to deliver soothing laps over her mons, and with every stroke, she moaned and shivered helplessly. It took Ezra several minutes to become satisfied that he'd licked her clean of every drop, and when he finally loosened his grip on her, Lydia slid down to his chest like she was made entirely from liquid.

She gasped and came to life again as she felt her petals slide against his engorged member, and barely had time to cling to him before he lifted her up and placed her back on her discarded gown. Her legs slid around Ezra's muscled lower back of their own accord as he nestled his hips above hers and she pushed her pelvis up into him as she laced her arms around his neck.

A hint of worry flashed through his desire-filled blue eyes as he paused above her, and she felt her affection bloom through her as he carefully moved a tendril of her wet hair out of his face.

"This will hurt you," he warned above the storm. She could hear the worry in his voice.

Lydia impatiently tugged at him with her legs.

"I thought it was you who said pain goes well with pleasure?" she attempted to tease.

Ezra let out a low laugh as his erection pulsed between her legs, making her grow warm and ready again. He brought his hand up to her face and cupped her cheek, then slid his fingers down to her neck, where they formed a tight necklace.

“Is that what you want, my little white dove?” he asked, trailing his nose along hers.

“You want to feel the pleasure through the pain?”

A sinful wave of desire filled her as she heard Ezra’s blunt question. They were playing a game again. A dangerous game that she should be frightened of. Except she was not frightened. Not of Ezra.

“Yes,” she breathed, knowing she meant it fully.

With a moan, Ezra claimed her lips as he thrust his hips forward. The velvety head of his rigid shaft was thick and round as he slowly pushed between her parted petals and into her tight entrance. Lydia gasped against his mouth but focused on his kiss as his size stretched her.

It was uncomfortable at first, having so much inside, but she was surprised at how quickly the discomfort passed, and she let out a soft moan as she felt her inner walls begin to relax and pulse around each small thrust.

“Oh,” Lydia breathed against his lips, feeling her hips begin to move with his.

“Are you in pain?” Ezra asked quickly, breaking the kiss.

“No,” Lydia breathed, feeling pleasure begin to build higher, “I... thought this would hurt more.”

Ezra chuckled deeply as he leaned down to kiss her neck, and this time as he thrust his hips, sending him deeper inside of her, pain bloomed deep in her pelvis. She had not realized she had not been taking his full length before; that he had only been letting her grow comfortable before he claimed her maidenhood.

Lydia’s teeth sank into Ezra’s shoulder as he let out a deep, guttural groan of pleasure, and she let her nails bite into his back as he filled her with all of him. The pain rippling through her belly was searing, but somehow she knew if his hips stopped, it would be worse. She clung to him desperately, letting his moans and

whispers of praise help her relax until the pain ebbed to nothing.

When she felt his first full stroke without pain, Lydia released her teeth and nails, and Ezra moaned her name in praise as he moved to capture her lips again. Their kiss was deep, matching the rhythm of their thrusts as they made love for the first time, and she felt her body fully surrender to him.

She could still feel the small drops of rain finding their way through the thick branches of brambles that sheltered them, and it only amplified her pleasure. This was not how she'd pictured her first time; not how she'd ever dreamed losing her maidenhood would unfold. But in this moment in the park, Lydia felt as if her longtime dream was finally coming true.

She had never had an interest in making love outside before, had never even contemplated it; but as she felt Ezra's thrusts move faster and her pleasure climb higher, she could not picture them anywhere else. For them, this was what they needed.

Ezra's mouth captured her own once more as their pleasure continued to build, his hips now moving in a needy, almost desperate fashion as her insides began to pain from his feral onslaught. He was so large, so thick, that even just the few moments they had shared were beginning to feel brutal.

"Stay with me, little dove," Ezra panted, his eyes glowing as he pulled back from the kiss, "We are almost there."

Lydia's legs tightened around his waist as she felt another pulse of pleasure slam through her and past her blooming soreness as she felt Ezra's member swell impossibly large before she felt her womb being flooded with his seed.

Ezra's groan of release was like an invitation for her to follow, and as his thrusts

became slow and sensual, she felt her own orgasm rush forth.

“Yes,” Ezra breathed, pulling her moans of pleasure into his mouth, as his hips slowed, Yes.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

“Her name is Sophia,” Ezra explained, handing Lydia a glass of wine. “And she is not my lover. She is my mother.”

They were back at his London house, both clean and dry after their passionate tumble in the park. They had lost track of time out in the rain, and by the time they had pulled their soaked and ruined clothes back on and went back home, it had turned dark. The servants had given them both crazed looks as they walked drenched and muddy through the foyer, but none of them dared to say a word.

In the privacy of his quarters, Ezra disrobed Lydia, helped her bathe, made love with her once more, and then wrapped her in one of his blankets before placing her in front of the fire. It had taken everything in him to leave her there; as he worried that she might panic and leave while he quickly bathed. When he returned to his bedroom wearing a pair of fresh briefs he was relieved to find Lydia exactly where he had left her.

He had been rough and desperate with her when he took her in the park, and it was impossible not to worry that it had been too much for her.

Yet she smiled at him warmly as she lounged on the settee, still cocooned in the blanket he'd wrapped her in. She looked happy and sated. It made something flutter in his belly, and he couldn't stop the smile that formed on his lips. He had shirts. Perhaps it would have been proper to offer her one, but when he went to fetch it for her he could not bring himself to do it. He much preferred the idea of simply

unwrapping her.

First, though, they needed to talk.

“Your mother,” Lydia echoed, watching him as he took a seat in the chair across from her.

Her cheeks flooded with color, and she let her gaze fall to the floor.

“Goodness, how mortifying,” she breathed, shaking her head. “I am sorry.”

“You have no need to be,” Ezra replied calmly. “You were right. I tease and taunt you all the time. What I have not done is share anything with you about my past. But yes, that beautiful, monstrous creature that you saw slapping me across the face was indeed my mother.”

Ezra watched a contemplative look form on Lydia’s face as she slowly took a sip of wine.

“Why did she slap you?” she asked calmly, turning her green eyes to him.

With that single look, Ezra was ready to pull her back into his lap and stop talking. He already wanted her again and the thought was taking over the majority of his thoughts. Instead, he gripped his whiskey glass harder and pushed his thighs deeper into his seat.

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“I accused of her something,” he replied, swirling the whiskey in his glass. “She took great offense to it.”

“Your hand,” Lydia said, putting the pieces together.

Ezra nodded.

“You thought it was her?”

“Not her, as in the holder of the blade, but I suspected that she was the one who had coordinated the event.”

Another pause, then Lydia asked, “Will you tell me more about her?”

Ezra weighed her request thoughtfully.

“She is cruel and unworthy of your time,” he said at last. “But let us remain on task. I have answered your question. Now you will answer mine. Why did you disobey my orders and follow me to London?”

“I did not follow you,” Lydia answered quickly, her brows drawing together in earnest. “I was invited by Alice and Barbara, who thought a few days out of Frampton might help me ease some of my...confused thoughts.”

“Confused thoughts?” Ezra asked, leaning forward.

Lydia threw him a look that said you cannot be serious. When he said nothing, her

earnest look drew into a defensive one, and she rose into a seated position.

“Yes, confused thoughts,” she insisted, “You and I...what we had done in your office, it was...it did things to me, changed me. When I attempted to speak to you about it you pushed me away like an annoying thing. I was hurt and alone and I needed my friends, so yes, when they suggested I join them in London I accepted. But I did not go for the purpose of following you.”

Guilt, relief, annoyance, and understanding all flooded through him, rendering his mind a jumbled mess. He tried to sort through them all, identify them and put them in their proper place. Never had he felt so many confusing emotions because of one woman.

As he sorted through his thoughts Lydia did not pester him. She did not huff or accuse, but instead simply waited as though she somehow understood what he was experiencing. Recognizing this only made him long to touch her again, and he gripped his hands tightly together in an attempt to focus.

“I made an error,” he said at last, finally raising his eyes back to hers. “When I decided to seek a wife. An arrogant mistake. I did not consider the dangerous position it placed you in if you were married to me. When I was attacked at the ball I was furious at you for not listening to me, but I was even more furious at myself for not preparing for such an incident.

“I have made many enemies, and this is not the first attempt that has been made on my life, but it is the first time I have worried about someone getting hurt because of me. Duncan and the others, we all assumed a shared risk when we became friends. Putting our lives on the line for each other was just what we did.”

A sick, oily feeling coiled in his stomach, and he winced.

“Your life is one I am not willing to risk, so I came to London, where most of my contacts are, to try and find who the assailant was.”

“And it was your mother?” Lydia asked.

Her eyes were shining with sympathy now, and he hated it. His jaw snapped shut as he ground his teeth.

“Apparently not,” he growled, working through the sudden anger that fueled him.

Pity. She was pitying him, and he hated it. Unable to take it, he shot up from his seat.

“Do not look at me like that,” he snarled, heading toward the door. “I do not want your pity.”

Quicker than he realized she ever could, Lydia sprang from the settee, the blanket dropping, and she pressed her naked body against his. She thrust her fingers into his hair and yanked his head down, forcing his eyes to meet hers.

“Do not mistake pity for empathy,” she warned, her tone low and deadly serious. “You are unworthy of such an emotion from me.”

Ezra felt his body react to her stubborn strength, and he felt some of his anger turn into something else. Beneath his briefs, his member stirred, and his hands rose to grip her waist.

“Swear it,” he demanded, looking her dead in the eye.

Lydia looked back at him coolly without a trace of fear.

“I swear it.”

The rest of Ezra's anger and hurt waned, and his grip on her softened as he stepped back slightly and slowly took inventory of her. His beautiful wife.His.

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“Now, tell me,” Lydia urged, nodding back at the settee, “Why did you think it was her?”

Ezra followed her gesture and led her back to the settee. Though part of him did not want to, he picked up the blanket and wrapped it around her again before settling down into the cushions and pulling her into him.

“It would not be the first time my mother has attempted such a thing,” Ezra explained, his fingertips beginning to idly graze over her arms.

Glazing over the first attempt at his father’s funeral, Ezra chose to tell her about the second.

“When I was seventeen or so,” he began to explain, tapping into the distant memory, “after she had taken the house in London and I had become used to my new responsibilities at Frampton, a message was delivered from her stating that it was most urgent that I come to her straight away.

“We had not spoken since she had moved out almost three years earlier, so I stupidly assumed that she was telling the truth. However, when I arrived, she was drunk, out of her mind, and came at me with a piece of broken glass.”

In his arms, Lydia started and sat up, her eyes wide with alarm.

“She tried to stab you?” she asked.

“Shedidstab me,” he corrected.

Taking her hand, he brought it to his chest and ran her fingers down his sternum until her fingertips pressed against the thin, white, inch-long scar on his abdomen.

“Luckily, the boys and I had been boxing well before that, and my training kicked in. I was able to step back before she pushed it any deeper than the muscle, and then I disarmed her. She started to scream murderer and collapsed in my arms. The servants later told me that she had been drinking for weeks before I got there, apparently raving about me and my father in incoherent bursts of anger. At some point, she started forcing the male servants to join her in bed, and that was when her housekeeper, not my mother, had sent me the urgent message.

“After the physician saw to my wound, I charged him with her recovery and had every form of pain reliever and alcohol removed, I left, and we had not spoken since. I am not even sure she remembers.”

Silence stretched between them as Ezra finished his story. At some point, he had not been able to keep his eyes on her and had found his gaze locked on the flames in the hearth. He could not tolerate her gaze if he saw pity there, even if she called it something else.

“Perhaps it is I that should stab her.”

Lydia said the words so sweetly and simply that Ezra almost failed to register them. When he did, he felt a boyish grin spread across his face, and he looked down at her in wonder. When she only raised her eyebrow back at him, he let out a loud laugh and then kissed her deeply.

“You are supposed to be the good one,” he teased, nibbling at her lips, “remember?”

“Hmmm,” Lydia murmured back, grazing her fingertips against his scar again as those gold and bronze flecks illuminated in her eyes, “Some things are worth stepping

into the darkness for.”

Ezra’s smile faded as a deep and primal need surfaced somewhere from the inky depths of his heart. He cleared his throat, suddenly finding it hard to breathe, and felt his blood begin to hammer in his veins. The time for words was over.

Slowly, he slid his hand down her back, pulling loose the blanket he’d wrapped around her. Lydia’s glittering eyes grew heavy as she helped him pull it away until it finally slid to the floor, and she rose up on her knees to straddle his lap. Their eyes on one another, Ezra slid further down the settee until his back rested comfortably against its raised back and let Lydia’s hands on his shoulders tell him when to stop.

There was more, so much more that they needed to talk about. But, for now, Lydia only wanted one thing: to be with him again. Her mons had grown sensitive and moist well before he’d removed the blanket, and as she slid herself against the ridge of Ezra’s confined hardness; she spasmed with need, pleasure, and dismay as she came in contact with the thin fabric of his briefs.

As if knowing what she needed, Ezra braced his hands against the back of the settee and raised his hips. It was the only invitation she needed, and she slid down just enough so that she could set him free. He did so the moment she unbuttoned him, springing through the part in the fabric. Her mouth watered as she saw his red, engorged head pulse above the veined, thick column of his stem, and she began to lower herself.

“Lydia-” Ezra breathed, but his words drew out in a hiss as she flicked her tongue across his tip, licking away at the thick, clear dewdrop that had formed there.

Hunger thrummed in her as she tasted Ezra’s essence, and she lowered her head for more. She took her time, flicking her tongue first across the small slit at the tip, then slowly down to the engorged ridge around his head before licking over each pulsing

vein in his sword. As she did so, she kept her eyes on her husband and watched with pleasure as he slowly lost control.

Ezra's hands had tightened on the settee, and he had thrown his head back against the armrest. His entire body was trembling and tense as if he was having trouble keeping still for her. And if his little movements were not enough to arouse her, the sounds he was making certainly were. His breaths were sharp and shallow, and the deep grunts of pleasure that escaped his gritted teeth called to her like a siren.

Unable to ignore his moans any longer, Lydia abandoned her exploration, rose back onto her knees, and settled her center at the tip of Ezra's hardened arousal. Ezra began to move as if trying to raise his head to see her, but Lydia leaned forward and pressed her hand to his chin. For a moment Ezra's eyes grew wild as he angled his head and looked at her with distrust, unsure if he could grant her that level of control.

But she waited, stroking her thumb against his chin calmly as she let him read her thoughts through her eyes. Slowly, the distrust in Ezra's eyes began to fade, and with one last, unsure look, he let his head ease back onto the armrest. Reveling in the fact that she had earned this small morsel of trust, Lydia leaned forward and brushed a kiss at his throat, collar bone, sternum, and then finally to the small, white scar on his abdomen.

Ezra shivered at the final kiss, his hands digging deeper into the settee, but he did not move to stop her. Rising back up, Lydia positioned herself atop his rigid shaft once again and slowly lowered herself. Soft moans of pleasure spilled from both their lips as she eased her warm, tight, dewy sheath onto his waiting sword one desperate inch at a time. When her petals finally made it to his base, she let out another small, slightly uncomfortable moan while she let herself adjust to his size.

"If you want me to keep still then you are going to have to move," Ezra breathed through a tightened jaw.

His knuckles were turning white on the settee, and the strain in him was visible by the bulging cords of vein and muscle that traveled down his neck and into his rigid abdomen. Lydia felt another gush of liquid as she took him in. He was so tense, so...restricted.

Had he ever given himself over to a woman like this before? And with that thought, she was moving; an old, primal knowledge taking over her as she began to ride him. Her movements were awkward at first as she attempted to grapple with both her pleasure and his size, but within moments she found her stride.

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A heady moan full of relief poured from Ezra's throat as her hips began to undulate him into her perfectly, and his hands finally let loose of the settee. Her pleasure intensified when he brought them harshly to her backside, and she cried out his name as she felt him take over.

Ezra's hands, firm and demanding, hooked into her hips, and before she knew what he was doing, she felt herself being lifted up and then slammed with force back down onto his shaft. Stars filled Lydia's eyes as a new and intense pleasure filled her, and she let her body sink into his guidance once more. As if knowing what she wanted, Ezra forced her hips up until his engorged head was at the very mouth of her entrance and then slammed her down onto him again.

By his fourth powerful stroke, her orgasm was rippling throughout her body, and what little desire she had to be in charge drained away along with her juices. Wrapping her arms around his neck, Lydia pulled at him to look at her. She could not take it anymore, she realized; not seeing his eyes.

A whimper and another tug of her weakening hands caused Ezra to lift his head, and Lydia felt another gush of arousal flow from her as she saw the pure need and raw emotion in his crystal blue eyes. Once more, as if knowing what she needed, Ezra captured the back of her neck with one hand and kept the other on her hip and brought her lips to his as he began to work her atop of him.

Ezra's kiss was as demanding and hungry as his thrusts; he would take everything she was willing to give. And, in that moment, she was willing to give everything. Just like they had in the park, she felt them transform into something else. Something more than a duke and duchess; something far more basic and driven by primal

instinct to come together.

Sane thought, any thought, seemed to abandon them when they were fused in this way and Lydia loved every moment. She adored being able to let go, to feel and sense nothing but the pleasure vibrating through her body like a tuning fork; loved feeling herself turn into nothing but warmth and wetness and quivering flesh.

Ezra's lips abruptly tore away from her, bruising her lips with his passion as he pulled her by the hair to look into his eyes. His icy blue orbs were glowing with the heat of his passion and desire, and he pressed his forehead tightly to hers as he growled out, "Come with me."

Though his tone was demanding and fierce, Lydia picked up the slight desperation in his voice; and it was what sent her over the edge a final time. Through the chorus of her own moans and panting breaths, she heard Ezra's strangled sounds of release as he slammed her hips down into him one final time and locked her there.

A heavier, dizzying pleasure filled Lydia as she felt Ezra's hips slow as his pumping member still spilled his seed into her; and with a shaky breath, she felt herself collapse. Immediately, both of Ezra's arms were around her bringing her to his chest at a much slower pace, protecting her from harm. A thickness grew in Lydia's throat as she felt how tenderly he cradled her head to his chest, and she blinked back two hot tears that suddenly sprang from her eyes as she felt his lips press into her hair.

As she listened to his pounding heartbeat she realized that there were two sides to Ezra: there was the Duke of Demons; his evil side that always got what it wanted, and then there was the man who stood apart from everyone and everything without complaint; who had pain but never complained about it. The man who could face anything, but panicked when she took just the slightest bit of control.

There were layers to her husband, Lydia realized as she drifted asleep to the touch of

Ezra's fingertips raking gently down her back. Layers that, with time, she could peel back, discover, and soothe. But first, they would have to talk more. Much, much more.

"This does not mean our conversation is finished," Lydia murmured into his chest, prying open one eye.

She caught Ezra looking down at her, his handsome face smooth. Not with numbness, she realized, but pleasure and satisfaction-and a bit of contemplation. His hand paused on her back as he continued to look at her, and in that moment she desperately wanted to know what he was thinking.

"No, it does not," he agreed at last, his hand resuming its gentle stroking.

Satisfied with his acknowledgment, Lydia closed her eyes again and let her body ease into his. With the soothing rhythm of Ezra's heartbeat, the gentle stroke of his fingers on her back, and the warmth of his chest, she felt her body sink deeper into relaxation. Then, just as she felt herself go, she felt a small pulse between her legs and smiled. She was falling asleep with Ezra inside of her.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Ezra awoke to the pressure of someone against his chest as his thoughts became filled with memories of the previous evening. His mother and Lydia; the storm, the fight, the lovemaking in the park. The lovemaking here. That was what that was after all. He did not simply pluck her as he would have done to anyone else. They had made love.

Opening his eyes, Ezra looked down to see Lydia, naked and still deeply asleep on his chest. Her dark brown hair was curly and loose and tumbled across her naked back. Her dark lashes were fanned over her cheeks and her lips parted slightly as she breathed softly in her sleep. Unable to stop himself, Ezra lifted a hand and gently

moved a lock of her hair that had fallen over her eye.

He tucked the piece gently behind her ear, then stroked his palm over the back of her head, over her neck, and down the smooth, curved expanse of her back. Even in her sleep, Lydia whimpered and moved with the gentle stroke of his touch. Desire rose in him again, but so did something else.

That strange emotion he'd felt previously had again raised its ugly head and Ezra pulled back his hand in response to his discomfort. He had told her things last night. Secret, intimate things about his past with his mother that he had not even told his brothers about, and she had listened to him without judgment. Or, at least, without judgment of him. Her reaction to his mother was obviously a different story.

His mother. Talking about her had brought some old memories to light; ones he had long buried or dismissed as unimportant. But what if they were important? He'd never really pursued his mother as a suspect. They had been too focused on the men that could have been their enemies. Not just to the Fernside name, but also to the Banfield, Curtis, and Green names. They had been looking for men who had been angry with all of them, but what if he had been the sole target all along?

Needing to think, Ezra slowly moved himself out from under his sleeping wife, careful not to wake her. As he gently lowered her head onto the cushion, a soft sigh escaped her lips, and Ezra felt a fist tighten around his heart as he watched her curl and snuggle into the space he'd just left.

Go back to her, a voice inside demanded, but he ignored it. There was more than just his assassination attempt to think about, more than just his father's untimely demise. He needed space to think about her and the effect she was having on him. He had been born into a cold, black void and had never felt much more than that until Lydia had come along.

She had brought light and warmth into his darkness, awakening sensations he never knew he possessed, and he had drunk it in greedily. In turn, he had shown her what pleasures the darkness could hold, and they were now quickly becoming addicted to the trade.

Only now, he realized, perhaps he had shown her too much. She was turning into him, twisting into someone equally as dark. Her jest about stabbing his mother had genuinely amused him last night, but now, as he saw how his corruption was slowly taking over her purity, he was filled with self-loathing. He felt his body stir with strange arousal at the thought of such a thing, and he shook his head and scoffed as he began to roughly don fresh clothes.

“Where are you going?”

Lydia’s soft, sleepy voice instantly stilled his aggressive thoughts and Ezra stopped buttoning his trousers to look her way. Her green eyes were still hazy and full of sleep and her cheeks were flushed with the lightest pink as she yawned slowly and stretched like a kitten. Immediately his palms ached to smooth over her curves and he felt desire spread through his loins.

“I have to get to work,” Ezra forced himself to say, resuming his buttoning.

“You said we would talk, Ezra.”

He pulled on his shirt, tucking it roughly into his waistband and reached for his socks and boots. There was no disappointment in her voice, no pouting, and Ezra knew that she was merely pointing out the truth. He stayed silent a moment longer, finished dressing, and then walked to the settee to kneel beside her.

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“And we shall. But for now, I need you to listen to me,” he stated, his tone calm but commanding as he took her face in his hands.

“Go to your sisters and friends and give them my apologies, then return to Frampton where my men can protect you. Do not let them come with you. They need to stay close to Duncan and Ambrose for now.”

“Ezra...”

He cut her off with a kiss. He meant to make it quick, but it turned into something deep and possessive, and he only stopped when he found himself ready to drag her onto the floor with him.

“Do as I say, Lydia,” he demanded softly, stroking her cheek as she looked at him with concern.

“When will you join me?”

Ezra faltered. He had never been forced to report to anyone.

“When I can,” was all he could muster.

The look in Lydia’s eyes begged him to talk to her, to give her more information. Part of him wanted to, but he held back. He kissed her once more, roughly this time, and then pushed himself away. He heard her beautiful voice calling his name as he opened the door, and even though his body begged him to stop, he forced his steps forward and left without another word.

“You look downright wretched, mate,” Morgan stated, his head tilted to one side as he gave Ezra a concerned look. “What happened to you?”

Ezra felt a spark in his veins as he thought of Lydia, but he forced his mask of detachment to remain in place.

“Since when does my pretty face concern you, Morgan?” Ezra asked blandly, then turned to Ambrose.

“When it is no longer pretty,” Morgan muttered back.

“What are they doing here?” Ezra asked Ambrose, ignoring Morgan’s remark. He had no doubt he looked like hell.

He had come to the gaming hell to speak with Ambrose about getting the group together, but to his surprise, he had found them all waiting for him. Until now, Ambrose and Ezra had agreed to keep the gaming hell a secret from Duncan and Morgan. They did not want anything to be traceable to them in the event they were caught.

Ambrose nodded toward an empty seat between Morgan and Duncan, and though he was reluctant, Ezra took a seat.

“Why does this feel like an ambush?” he asked wryly, lacing his fingers together as he crossed his ankle over his knee.

“It is not an ambush, brother,” Ambrose said calmly, leaning back in his chair. “An attempt was made on your life. Any one of us could very well be next. I decided that the gaming hell was the safest place for us all to meet.”

“I hear our wives are busy planning a wedding for young Juliet and have taken over

Ambrose's house," Duncan added in a jesting tone, "So I have chosen to dedicate some time to finding this man who stabbed you in order to question him."

"As have I," Morgan added, then fluttered his hand toward the room, "Although we will be discussing this dirty little treasure trove that you've so carefully hidden away from me at another time. Honestly, I am rather hurt that I was kept out of this. I would have been your best customer."

"That is why you were kept out of it," Ambrose retorted with a dry chuckle, then turned toward Ezra.

Ezra felt that strange burst of warmth again. Only this time it was not like what he felt with Lydia that first filled his chest and groin; it was a sibling affection of some sort, he gathered. Unnerved at yet another foreign sensation, Ezra shifted uncomfortably in his seat.

"Let us get down to it then," he stated, rubbing his temples to try and erase the new feeling, "Mummy dear says she has not heard nor seen old Georgie in years. She also denied having anything to do with the attack."

"You visited yourmother?" Morgan gasped, his eyes widening in shock.

To his right, Duncan shifted uncomfortably in his seat, and in front of him, Ambrose suddenly became intensely interested in the surface of his desk. They did not know much about Sophia Fernside and did not need to. Not after how she had behaved at the late duke's funeral.

"I see you got away with your life," Ambrose stated, finally looking back up at him. "What about your little spies? Did you send them out yesterday?"

Visions of him and Lydia in the park flashed through Ezra's mind, and he shook his

head.

“I dispatched them this morning,” he answered. “No responses yet.”

Ambrose looked at him as if he were about to question why he waited, but Duncan spoke up next.

“While we have not found him yet, my men found these when they went to his London house to search for him,” he said, leaning down toward his satchel.

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From within it he drew out some loose papers and passed them to Ezra.

“Notice anything in common about them?” Duncan asked as Ezra scanned the pages.

They were letters; twelve of them, and Ezra immediately noticed they were all written word for word by the same hand, including the date and signature at the bottom. The only difference in each letter was to the addressees: their fathers.

“Whittler?” Ezra asked, reading the name signed at the bottom. “That sounds familiar, but I do not recall a Lord Whittler.”

“That is because there isn’t one,” Duncan replied, “I already checked. I do not believe it is a true name, however, but a moniker.”

“Like a reference,” Ezra muttered. “Though what villainous measure can be performed by a man who is fond of whittling is beyond me.”

“Why this person calls themselves what they do is not important,” Ambrose interjected. “Each of these letters is an invitation to our fathers, and did you see the locations? These were not meetings in offices or homes, but in back alleyways and on wharves.”

He paused as a familiar address appeared in one of the copies of the letters and doubled back to read it correctly.

“This is an invitation to meet at the wharf on the day of the fire,” Ezra said aloud. “If George had these, that means he was able to get into our fathers’ offices and retrieve

them before the investigators arrived.”

Duncan nodded.

“That is what I also thought, which is why I decided to take a page from his playbook and break into his offices. Trouble is, he is a terribly disorganized man,” Duncan said with annoyance, “has his information and documentation sprinkled throughout his houses. My men are bringing me new information daily, and we are hoping we can find a clue as to where he may be hiding since he has not turned up at any of his properties.”

Ezra nodded and looked back down at the papers, studying them closely. He needed to get back to Frampton and delve into his father’s old papers. George’s signature was on many, and he wanted to see if it compared to Whittler’s. If it did, that would be all the proof they would need to seek justice against him.

“I have an idea,” he stated, rising to his feet. “But I need to get back to Frampton before I can be sure it has any legs. I’ll leave word for my men to come and report here to you three while I’m gone. Let me know if George is found.”

“Take Colter with you,” Ambrose said, running to catch up to him.

Ezra stopped, eyeing up the mountain of a man that always guarded Ambrose’s door.

“You will need him. For a moment I thought it was only me he was after, but I was wrong. We all need to be on guard.”

“They may be coming for all of us,” Ambrose replied, “But you were obviously the first target, and they won’t move onto us until they take care of you. Colter, go with him.”

“If you wish to send your giant anywhere, send him to watch over your sister, wife, and young son. This is a dangerous time for all of us, whether I am the intended first target or not.”

Ambrose looked at him challengingly for a moment; an older brother grappling with admitting his younger brother’s wisdom. Then he turned his head toward Colter and nodded. Ezra watched as the massive man returned the nod and disappeared down the hall.

“Duncan, you may want to...”

“Excuse me,” Duncan said, cutting Ezra off as he hurried between him and Ambrose to catch up to Colter. They all knew where he was going.

“Morgan?” Ezra asked and looked back to see his friend rising from his seat.

“I have no lovely wife or child to protect,” Morgan said with feigned remorse as he strolled toward his friends with his hands in his pockets, “But I suppose I do rather like my life, and therefore I do not wish to forfeit it just yet. I shall speak with my guard and ensure my home and staff are safe.”

“Ezra, where is Lydia?” Ambrose asked as the two were left alone.

“Hopefully in Frampton by now,” he replied, already regretting the decision of sending her ahead. Had he known he would be returning home so soon he would have instructed her to wait for him.

“It is late. If you leave now you’ll be traveling in total darkness. It puts you at risk of an attack, especially if you are insisting on going alone. Stay here and return to Frampton tomorrow in the light, at least,” Ambrose insisted.

“I appreciate your concern, old friend,” Ezra found himself saying, much to his surprise, “but I will be fine.” With a smirk, he shook Ambrose’s hand and added, “In case you forgot, the dark is where I do my best work.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Lydia tossed in her bed restlessly, caught somewhere between the hazy line of exhaustion and insomnia. There had been so much to think about today. Ezra’s mother: the assailant who wanted Ezra dead, and of course, Ezra himself.

Thoughts of their lovemaking in the park had kept her body warm and tingling with excitement during the carriage ride back to Frampton. She should be ashamed, she thought, of losing her maidenhood in a public place. And yet every time she reached for regret or penance, she found herself smiling and reaching for her neck instead.

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She was falling in love with the way Ezra always reached for her neck; she was falling in love with him. She couldn't deny the jealousy she'd felt when she had seen Ezra with Sophia or the utter relief she'd experienced when he'd confessed that not only was she simply his mother, but that he had not been with another woman since they had wed. She knew then, even in the rain, even in public, that she wanted Ezra. She wanted to behis. And she wanted him to be hers. Definitively so.

Arousal filled Lydia as she thought of the way Ezra had chased her through the park; how the rain, though cold, had seemed to sizzle on her hot skin as he had drawn nearer to her. How, when he'd finally caught her, they had snapped and snarled at one another like two wild creatures. Even their lovemaking had been such.

Ezra had been as gentle as he could, but what she had not expected was her own drive, her own need to have him inside of her. Lydia smiled devilishly in the darkness, thinking of the way she had to squirm and lift her hips to take in his size; of how, despite feeling discomfort, she had still wanted more of him.

Lydia's smile faded as she advanced her memories to the point when they had made it back to his home. Ezra had been so gentle with her in the bath, so unlike any persona she'd seen him display so far. His tending to her had been gentle but thorough, from the cleansing of her hair to the washing of her feet.

Then, when he was sure he'd gotten every speck of mud and maidenhood cleaned from her body, he'd rubbed and massaged her dry before carrying her to the settee. As he did this for her they did not speak, but she had watched him, and he had let her. He had let her see the devotion in his eyes; his reverence for her. He had not tried to hide that from her, and she understood how vulnerable he'd felt exposing his

bewildering emotions.

A heavy thump suddenly scrambled Lydia's thoughts and she opened her eyes to focus on the present. She listened for a few seconds, her spine becoming rigid with tension.

"Laura, was that you?" Lydia called, sitting up in the darkness.

From the cot on the floor, a small spark lit a candle, and Lydia saw her handmaid sitting straight up and alert, just as she was.

"No, Your Grace," the handmaid answered quickly, her eyes wide. "It came from below us, I believe."

Another thump sounded again; identical to the one that had pulled her from her thoughts, and her handmaid rose from the cot, her breath coming out in strained huffs. Lydia also felt her discomfort rising, and she thought of the ridiculously large guard that Ezra had left for her to soothe her worries.

It truly had been difficult leaving London without Ezra. A large part of her wanted to disobey his command and stay and wait for him. But then she remembered the look in his eyes; the intensity in his voice, and she chose to obey him.

She had been told to be careful but had been greatly alarmed when she came down the stairs of his London house dressed and ready to go, to see that guards had appeared in the foyer to escort her to her carriage. One quick look at them and Lydia knew that these were no guards of the Crown. No, these were Ezra's men. They did not march, they did not wear uniforms. They didn't have to, for they looked sufficiently intimidating in their all-black garments.

Her alarm for the large men had turned into annoyance, however, when she discovered that Ezra had sent word ahead of her that two guards were to be posted at

her door in whatever room she was in, and that her handmaid was to be with her at all times.

“It is surely nothing, Your Grace,” Laura whispered, anxiously rubbing her hands together, “The guards would be doing something if it was.”

Another thump echoed from below, and this time Lydia pulled herself out of bed and reached for her robe.

“Your Grace, no,” Laura whispered hurriedly, stepping between her and the door.

“You are right about the guards,” Lydia replied, “So if it is not a threat, then as the lady of this house it is my duty to discover what it is. If it is my husband then I want to see him. Now please step aside.”

She had endured her personal space being violated for long enough and was willing to walk right over the girl if necessary. Whether it was for the purpose of self-preservation or obedience, Laura stepped aside and let Lydia out into the hallway. However, the moment she stepped outside, two guards stopped her in her path.

“Let me pass,” she snapped, “I need to know what all the thumping is about.”

“It is nothing to worry about, Your Grace,” one guard answered with a slight bow.

“His Grace has arrived and is looking for something. He does not wish to be disturbed,” the other advised.

Lydia felt her pulse quicken as she heard this and attempted to step around the guards. When they stepped into her path again, Lydia brought her eyes up to them as she straightened her shoulders and let her wrath unfold. She did not like the way she and Ezra had left things, and she was not going to be kept from him a moment longer.

“As the lady of this house and duchess of these lands, I command you to move out of my way.Now.”she barked, mimicking her husband’s cold, deadly energy.

The guards visibly paled in front of her, and after exchanging worried glances they stepped to the left, allowing her to move toward the stairs. No other guards she saw along the way dared to stop her, all of them bowing their heads and standing down the moment she turned her vengeful eyes on them, and she arrived at Ezra’s office without incident.

As she opened the door she heard another thump, but it was much closer this time. Worry filled her as she saw Ezra standing at his desk, a box with its lid open parked on its surface. Ezra’s half-undone white collared shirt appeared stained with sweat and his riding boots were still caked with mud from his journey. His hair was a black, matted and thoroughly soaked curly mess that hung before his wild eyes as he scanned over the multiple papers in his hands.

“It is here,” he murmured, and Lydia realized he was speaking to no one in particular. “It has to be here somewhere.”

“Ezra,” Lydia said, keeping her voice calm.

He did not hear her and kept muttering to himself as he tossed the stack of papers he was holding to the floor and retrieved another handful from the box.

“Come on, you bastard,” he said through clenched teeth, his eyes once again scanning across the pages. “Where are you!?”

“Ezra!” Lydia called louder, her worry for him deepening.

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He let out a growl of anger, tossing the papers onto the floor before shoving the box off of his desk, creating another loudthunkthroughout the house before he stomped off into the adjacent room where he had once let her work.

He cannot hear me, Lydia realized, taking a timid step toward the adjacent office. She had seen many of Ezra's personalities thus far, and while some had their challenges, this was the only one that truly frightened her.

Ezra slammed another old box onto his desk and ripped open the lid. When he had begun his search he had suspected that he would find his proof easily, but as he scanned paper after paper his task became more difficult. The name Whittler had indeed been familiar. Ezra had seen it more times than he'd realized, but verification of the earl's signature was exceedingly hard. Growing more frustrated when he again came up empty-handed, Ezra flung the box off the desk and immediately grabbed another.

"Come on," he said aloud, shuffling through the next folder of papers, "you must have had to sign your real name on something pertaining to Father's businesses on at least one occasion; something that required the authority of your title."

Ezra flung the next paper away but froze when his eyes finally landed on the legible cursive signature of the one and only George Nicholson; Earl of Ridlington. Hurriedly he reached for one of the letters that had been signed by Whittler, but as he grasped for the pages, he felt them being pulled from his fingers. Startled, Ezra looked over to find Lydia standing before him with a look of grave concern in her eyes as she held the papers he needed.

For the briefest of moments, his manic condition was stilled by the relief of seeing her, but the balm was quickly washed away by the need to secure his proof.

“What are you doing?” he snapped, holding out his hand to her for the papers. “Give them back to me immediately.

“Ezra, I have called your name thrice and you did not comprehend that I was here!” Lydia replied, holding the papers behind her back.

Through his fervor to find the truth, he could barely see the worry in Lydia’s eyes, and for a moment he almost stopped to take a breath and calm his frazzled nerves.

“Ezra, you do not look well,” she said next, her tone softer now, “Something is wrong. Your eyes are bloodshot.”

The space around them ebbed and blurred, and he felt his heart begin to hammer faster.

“Give me the papers,” he rasped, taking a step toward her.

Suddenly she was on him, capturing his face in her hands and pulling him toward her. His body rebelled at the demand to bend to another’s will, particularly at that moment, and he shoved her hands away. Lydia gasped and stumbled backward, and Ezra’s vision suddenly became crystal clear as hurt filled her eyes. Not fear or a bruised ego, but a deep, emotional hurt.

Guilt sliced through him as he took a step back to scan the floor for the papers she had taken from him.

“I told the guards I did not wish to be disturbed,” he choked out, but even as he said it he heard how pitiful the excuse sounded.

Perhaps I am turning into something worthy of pity after all. He forced himself to look at her, not yet willing to accept the title of coward.

The hurt in Lydia's eyes had grown deeper, so much so that it made him want to gag.

"So, you did intend that order to include me, Your Grace?" she asked, her tone cold but polite as she straightened her shoulders and raised her chin.

A different type of panic suddenly arose in Ezra. Lydia had not called him by his title since they had discussed it nearly a month ago.

"This is not the time, Lydia," he spit out, fighting to deaden the onslaught of his emotions. "Give me the papers back, please."

"You married me to help you," Lydia insisted, stepping away from him as he grabbed for her. "I have done nothing but succeed in that, so why not let me help you now? Why, after making love to me, are you pushing me away?"

The question hit Ezra like a brick. He had been away from her to see to their safety, but he knew that there had been another reason for his sudden departure. Some things he just had to do alone. However, this was not the time for a discussion, not with him being so close to having proof. He needed Lydia to give him those papers.

Suddenly, as if finally answering his call, he felt his old, familiar numbness cloak him in its protective shell. He welcomed it with a deep breath and turned a cold stare toward Lydia.

"As helpful as you may be at times, you are nothing but a hindrance to me right now. Give me the papers and leave."

The gold and bronze flecks illuminated Lydia's widened eyes, but this time Ezra did

not let himself feel anything. He reached out his hand again, taking another step as a blush spread across her cheeks.

“Is that what you want?” she asked, her voice frosty and low.

Through his numbness, Ezra felt a shiver of alarm, but he shut it out and nodded.

“As you wish, Your Grace,” she answered icily, throwing the papers at his feet.

His shield of numbness cracked and shattered as Lydia slammed his study door shut behind her, and for a moment Ezra nearly stepped over the papers to go after her. However, when his eyes dropped to the floor and he saw Whittler’s elegant signature, he forgot everything else and picked up the document to examine it more closely. As he compared the signature with the one on the letter signed by George, he discovered that the two were a perfect handwriting match.

“Got you, you bastard,” Ezra proclaimed, folding the two papers together. He shoved them into his back pocket as he walked away from his mess and threw open the study door.

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“Your Grace,” a guard greeted him as he stormed into the hall.

“Go fetch me a fresh horse,” Ezra commanded, “I need to get back to London straight away and I do not have time for a carriage.”

“Yes, Your Grace,” the guard answered quickly, “I have a question regarding the duchess. She has requested...”

“As long as she is protected let her do whatever she wants,” he snapped, cutting the man off, and opened the front door.

He waited outside as the guard ran to bring him the horse, giving Ezra time to double back to his office and grab his dagger and pistols. By the time he returned, the guard had a horse waiting for him. Devoid of any thought other than finally solving the murders of their fathers, Ezra urged his horse into a run and left for London.

“Your Grace,” the guard said worriedly to Lydia. “I am not sure this is wise. The duke will certainly not like this plan.”

“That will be a shame,” Lydia agreed, leaning back in her saddle, “But that is a matter I will deal with at another time.”

“If His Grace has no idea of your whereabouts, it will be sure to put him in an awful state.”

He is already in an awful state, Lydia thought, her heart sinking. She really did want to go back to him, not that she had gone far, and not that she had broken his rules. She

had left as he'd instructed, had taken a guard along as he had instructed and had ridden to the fields and meadows that stretched along the Frampton countryside. After the way he had snapped at her, she could not remain in the house and needed to burn off some of her hurt and anger. She would not return until she was sure that Ezra was actually going to talk to her.

Her heart still hurt from the cold look he had given her and how roughly he'd pushed her hands away from him. It had not hurt her physically but seeing Ezra so caged and agitated and nearly feral; that is what had caused her pain.

She had needed space; an opportunity to get out of the heavily guarded house. For a brief moment she had considered going to her father's house to visit Juliet, but she did not want to risk any questions from her father. If she went to Alice, Barbara, or Helena's, they too would not be satisfied with her "just paying a visit" and would demand all sorts of answers.

Finally, she decided to go riding. Laura also seemed relieved by this plan and was happy to come along as her chaperone. They'd packed plenty of food and water, and instead of being wild with their horses, they had enjoyed a long, peaceful ride in the early fall weather. Although the weather and ride had indeed soothed her body, it had done little to soothe the worry in her mind and spirit.

"Your Grace, forgive me," Laura said presently, "But perhaps our escort is correct. The stars are beginning to come out and we still have quite a journey to get back. I am..."

She paused, looking around them in the dimming light.

"I am not even sure we are in Frampton anymore, Your Grace," she added, her tone low as if sharing a secret.

Lydia stopped her horse then and drew her attention to her surroundings. The day had come and gone, as had the light. She was alarmed to find the sky had settled into a deep purple-orange swirl, and there were indeed a few dozen stars starting to twinkle in the cosmos.

“I suppose we should,” she finally agreed, feeling a tremor of nervousness in her stomach as she spoke.

Whether she wanted to admit it or not, she did want to see Ezra, even if only to get mad at him.

“Very well, Brennan, lead us home,” Lydia said, turning her horse around.

“Thank you, Your Grace,” the guard replied, obviously relieved to be taking her back.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

“What do you mean she is not there?” Ezra bellowed.

Lydia had left, and according to the guards, she had been gone since nearly eight that morning. It was now eleven at night, and his messengers had just returned with word that Lydia had not been seen at her father’s nor any of their friends’ houses. The messenger from Owen’s had been the last to arrive, and he had leveraged the remainder of his sanity on the hope that he would have word of her whereabouts.

“Please forgive me, Your Grace,” the messenger replied, bowing deeply, “But Lord Knight was insistent that he had not seen the Duchess of Frampton in weeks.”

He had torn out of Frampton like a demon released from hell and had raced to London to deliver the proof that George and Whittler were one and the same.

However, when Duncan informed him that George had been spotted in Frampton, all care for any proof vanished from Ezra's mind as he stormed back to Ambrose's stables.

His brothers had chased after him, pleading with him to rest before another ride or to at least take a carriage, but he only put up with their words long enough to saddle a horse.

"At least wait for us," Ambrose insisted as Ezra had slung himself up into the saddle. "We can go with you, we can deal with this together."

"Get to Frampton when you can," he said, before racing once more down the road.

Now he was here, with word that George was in his very town, and Lydia was nowhere to be found. Had she left or been kidnapped? Had she gone somewhere on the grounds to find some space? One of the guards had gone with her, a young man named Brennan, and she had also taken her handmaid Laura. At least she was not completely alone. If she had been attacked, someone would have been there to protect her.

"Have your men search the grounds again," Ezra commanded the guard after sending the messenger away.

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“In fact, we will all search for her, not just you and your men. I just need to run to my quarters for a moment.”

“Allow one of us to go with you, Your Grace,” the guard replied, but Ezra waved him off. “I will be but a minute and the house has been guarded all day. I will be fine. Go, give your men my orders, and then head down to the staff quarters to do the same. We will find her tonight one way or another.”

The guard bowed as Ezra quickly made his way to his rooms. Thus far he had kept away from his pistols, as he found his dagger more efficient in even the most extreme circumstances. But tonight, with Lydia missing and a murderer on the loose, he wanted them at his side.

Ezra hesitated in his doorway when he saw his quarters were dark. Usually by this hour, his valet had both the candles, and the fireplace lit in preparation for his arrival. He took a furtive step inside and glanced warily into the darkness. From what he could see in the dim light from the hall, nothing seemed out of place.

I sent the servants into a flutter the moment I realized Lydia was gone. Perhaps he did not have time to light them this evening,

Deciding he was being ridiculous, Ezra pushed the door open wider and marched into his sitting room and toward the first fireplace. There, he struck a match and lit a candle, sending more light into the room. Holding onto its base, Ezra held out the candle and found the room empty.

“You just need some sleep, you paranoid fool,” Ezra muttered to himself as he

opened the door to his bedroom.

How long had it been now? Thirty hours at least since he'd awoken with Lydia in his arms. It has been too long. He felt the need to find Lydia surge through him again.

He walked quickly toward the opposite end of the room where he kept his favorite weapons in an artfully crafted wardrobe. He set the candle down on the window sill so he could act quickly. Ezra opened the wardrobe doors and breathed a sigh of relief when he found his pistols exactly where he'd always kept them. He loaded and holstered his pistols with speed and precision and turned to leave.

The sudden punch in his face caused blood to gush from both nostrils. Ezra's body flew back into the open wardrobe, the force of which knocked several of his weapons loose. Ezra blinded himself to the pain in his face as his hands curled around one of his fallen billy clubs, and he brought it down on his assailant's head. He felt the blunt end of the billy club collide with flesh as another fist was delivered into his stomach, and he let out a strangled cough as he fell back again.

Ezra thrust himself away from the wardrobe and charged forward to drive his body into his doubled-over attacker. They tumbled together onto the floor, Ezra's fists making a direct hit on the man's left temple as they scrambled for power. Before Ezra could take another swing, something silver flashed in the man's hand, and Ezra hissed as a blade sank into his right outer thigh.

A grunt ripped from his throat as he felt the searing pain and severed nerves, and he felt the strength of his leg fade as his attacker got the upper hand. Ezra threw out a wild punch and tried to fling his body forward, but the man caught his fist and flipped him over. He felt the man's heavy weight press down on him as a rope was wrapped around his neck, and with a violent jerk of the man's fist, Ezra began to die.

Crushing pressure began to close around Ezra's throat as he struggled to reach the

pistol trapped beneath him. As he strained for it he felt the air in his lungs rush out and freeze and he was unable to draw a fresh breath. His fingers scratched deep grooves into the floorboards as he fought to free himself, but the pressure from the rope only increased until Ezra could no longer see.

No, he thought, his mind flooding with images of Lydia. He'd never been afraid of death before. It was inevitable for all men, even those likened to demons, but he refused to accept this as his fate.

No. The thought was faint now; the images of Lydia dimming. Something far off in his brain ticked sickly, and Ezra went limp.

The shatter of ceramic was so loud in his ears that Ezra was sure that it had struck him and not his attacker. The shards of the large vase rained down on him as he felt the crushing pressure around his throat finally release. He dragged in a deep, coughing breath as his oxygen-starved lungs took in the fresh air.

"Ezra, Ezra, breathe, please."

He heard Lydia plead above him as her shaking fingers worked to unwind the rope from his neck.

Tears sprang from Ezra's eyes and his throat burned and ached like it was on fire. He raised one hand to touch the bruised flesh as Lydia gently pulled the last of the rope away. He took another deep breath, winced at the pain, and slowly stood up.

"Ezra," Lydia breathed, relief flooding her tone, "I'm so sorry I left, I'm so sorry I..."

"Be quiet right now," he commanded hoarsely, his throat burning, and then pulled her into his lap to kiss her.

Lydia let out a soft sob as she melted into his arms, her hands moving as fast as her lips as she tentatively touched his neck, jaw, hair, and shoulders, as though she needed to reassure herself that he was truly still alive. With effort, he pulled away from their kiss so he could help her up as he heard the guards flooding into the sitting room. As he did so, he felt his right leg falter. Looking down, he saw that the assailant's knife was still stuck in his outer mid-thigh.

He looked up just in time to see Lydia notice it too. He quickly forced her to look back up into his eyes before she began to panic again.

"I am fine," he said, his hand trembling as he smoothed her tears from her cheeks.

"You are not fine, you have been stabbed again and you were nearly strangled to death, Ezra!"

Ezra chuckled although he did not know why.

"Better me than you," he murmured, his hands moving to tuck a mussed curl back behind her ear.

"You are not to leave my sight again until I say so," he warned, rubbing his hands over her hands, arms, and shoulders.

He needed to stop touching her, and he did, with some effort, once she'd agreed to stay with him. As the room filled with people and additional light, with Lydia tucked under his arm he looked down on the unconscious man that had attempted to take his life. Several attempts were made to awaken him, but no matter how hard his face was slapped, the man did not stir.

"How hard did you hit him with that vase?" Ezra murmured to Lydia, feeling a glowing sense of pride for her as two of the guards hoisted the man up between them.

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“I needed to ensure he was going to let go of you,” Lydia replied, her eyes sparking with bloodlust. “So, I imagine quite hard.”

“Where would you like us to take him, Your Grace?” a guard asked.

Ezra smirked at his wife’s response, then turned toward the guard.

“We still have the old dungeons down below. I believe one of those cells will work for now until my friends arrive.”

“Your Grace, I can see to his wounds myself,” Mr. Tompkins, the young physician pleaded as politely as he could.

Lydia did not look up from her work as she replied enthusiastically, “Of course you can! But I am tending to his neck either way, so you can be content with sewing up that gash in his thigh.”

Below her, Ezra attempted to chuckle and winced as it hurt his throat. Shortly after the guards had taken the man away, Lydia had had little trouble convincing Ezra to come to her quarters so she could cleanse and tend to his wounds, and he was now lying on her bed with his head in her lap.

“And you,” she said tenderly, lowering her head to Ezra’s, “Keep your throat relaxed. No more laughing at another’s scolding for a while.”

Ezra’s blue eyes shined up at her with a mixture of affection and tension. He still could not take commands well, even if they were playful. She felt his body tense and

his breath quicken, and she leaned down to place a soft kiss on his lips. On his next breath, she felt him relax again, and she gently pulled away.

“Shhhh,” Lydia soothed tenderly, massaging more salve into his ring of bruises, “Everything will be all right.”

The image of seeing Ezra; his face a bright reddish purple, his body limp and nearly lifeless as the man standing atop his back choked him with a rope, was still burning in her mind. She knew that memory would always be there and would be the source of every nightmare she would ever have. She wanted vengeance, both for Ezra and for herself, and she would get it, one way or another.

“I have finished His Grace’s sutures, Your Grace,” Mr. Tompkins declared, then cleared his throat uncomfortably.

“You may check my work before you leave if you like, Mr. Tompkins,” Lydia replied.

The young physician gave her a relieved look and hurried to the head of the bed to examine Ezra’s throat. He studied his bruises carefully, touched them tenderly with his fingertips, and nodded.

“Heavily bruised, but nothing crushed,” he affirmed, then looked up at Lydia with approval. “If you had come upon him three seconds later I would not have been able to say the same.”

Lydia’s eyes fell to Ezra’s, who was staring silently and intently back at her.

“The salve is perfect, you did well, Your Grace,” Mr. Tompkins said, finishing his assessment.

Lydia accepted the praise, though she just wanted the man to be gone.

“I shall leave him in your care then,” the physician replied, bowing at his waist.

Lydia nodded toward him with respect and waited quietly as the servants entered to gather the soiled dressings and other supplies.

“I have to go downstairs,” Ezra rasped, his voice raw and gravelly from the strangulation. “I have to question him. There is a lot I can learn before Ambrose and the others...”

“Shhhh,” Lydia soothed, putting a calming hand on his chest as he attempted to sit up.

“You need rest first,” she insisted. “The others will be here by the time you awaken, and you can all manage this together.”

“But...”

“This is not your burden to bear alone, Ezra,” Lydia insisted, feeling a swell of emotion as she said the words.

What did she have to do? What did she have to say to make him understand?

Anger slowly began to eat away at the panic in Ezra’s eyes as he willed his body back into the bed.

“This could have been you,” he rasped, his hand reaching up for her throat.

Lydia felt her chest grow tight as his hand wrapped possessively around her neck the way she now loved. Yes, it could have been her. The man had snuck into the house

unbeknownst to anyone and they were yet to determine how and when he had done so. If she had stayed after their fight, would she have been killed?

She felt terror begin to consume at the thought, but she forced it away and replied tightly, "I am fine."

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Ezra's thumb caressed over the hollow of her throat as if marking where the lie had come from. She was not fine. Neither of them were.

"Stay with me," she whispered, feeling her weariness take over. "I understand what is happening downstairs is important, but please, Ezra."

Emotion churned in Ezra's blue eyes as he mulled over her request. Then a small, wicked grin began to spread over his face.

"You see, my lady? I told you that you would be begging to get me into your bed someday."

Ezra's tease broke through the intensity of the day's emotions, and Lydia let out an exhausted laugh as she pulled her lap out from under his head and stretched out beside him.

"Ow," Ezra laughed hoarsely as his head fell softly into the pillow, and Lydia tasted his laughter as she leaned down to kiss him.

Ezra's chuckle smoothed into a groan as their lips met, sending a shiver of desire through her tension. She kissed him again, and his arms came around her, holding her tightly to his chest. A sob nearly escaped her throat as their kiss deepened, and she ran her hands over him again desperately.

She had almost lost him today. If she had not listened to Laura and turned back when she had, she would have been too late. Lydia did not realize she had started to cry until she felt Ezra's lips part from hers, and he began to kiss away her tears. Muttered

words of assurance poured from his badly bruised throat as he gently captured each one, making sure not a single tear escaped him.

When he had finished he crushed her lips in another, more fiery kiss, and this time she tasted his hunger. His soothing touch became more urgent, as did hers as they began to run their hands over one another. Together, they worked her out of her gown and undergarments and flung them aside the moment they could. Lydia moaned with relief when she felt Ezra's body slide across hers.

"Your leg..." she protested, breaking the kiss.

"Will be fine," he panted before kissing her again.

Lydia's thoughts dissolved as Ezra deepened his kiss. His hand tightened around her throat as he parted her legs with his thigh. Lydia bucked and gushed against him when she felt his hard length bob against her waiting entrance. Ezra swallowed her moans, suckling them along with her tongue before he broke the kiss and began to make his way down her body.

Lydia's eyelashes fluttered and her back arched as Ezra's hands and mouth seemed to go everywhere over her all at once. He is devouring me. His teeth nipped at her neck, her nipples, and her navel. She gasped and initially resisted when he tried to turn her onto her stomach, but quickly succumbed to his advances when she felt his hot kisses trace possessively over her shoulders, her spine, down the curve of her waist, and over the small swell of both cheeks.

Ezra's name broke from her lips in a breathless plea as she felt his tongue flick over her already dewy petals, and Lydia felt her body become weightless as she gave into his hunger.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Lydia had certainly been right; the bastard downstairs could wait.

Now, with his face buried between her legs and his hands filled with her backside, Ezra was very happy that he had finally agreed to execute Lydia's plan.

Ezra had been furious at his own stupidity and arrogance at thinking it safe to go into his room. His stupidity had nearly gotten him killed. He wanted the man in his dungeon to pay for that on top of the other crimes he'd already committed. But first...Ezra smiled as he turned back to the matter at hand.

Ezra let out a groan as he forced himself away from Lydia's parted legs and rose to his knees, careful to keep his weight off his injured thigh. He let his hands slide around Lydia's waist and, with ease, lifted her until she was on her hands and knees, her bum flush against his hardened manhood. His throat was sore from the rope and his voice was raw and aching. But that didn't mean that they were not going to have a little conversation.

"You left," he rasped, his hands tenderly massaging the flesh of her right and left cheeks.

Lydia gasped as his hands kneaded the sensitive flesh, moving the muscles back and forth before reaching up to grip her hips. Her gasp turned into a moan as his fingertips tightened around her waist and then slipped down between her legs. He touched the little taut bud of nerves tenderly, earning him another moan and a tremble.

"You angered me," Lydia struggled to get out, squirming. "And you told me to leave."

With her clitoris at the mercy of his fingertips, he struck her left butt cheek with the other, sending a crack through the silent air.

Lydia gasped and bucked against him at the slap, trying to twist around to look at him.

“That is not what I meant, and you know it,” Ezra replied, easily keeping her in place despite his injuries.

He let another slap land across her backside, this time on her right cheek.

“You know how I feel about you disobeying me.”

“Now?” Lydia gasped, beginning to tremble as she looked back at him, “You are going to punish me now after nearly getting killed?”

Ezra grinned wickedly, reveling the mixture of panic and pleasure in Lydia’s eyes.

“Now,” he agreed.

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Lydia let out a strangled moan and spread her legs further as his next slap landed directly between her thighs and across her mons.

“You did save my life,” he admitted, rubbing soothing fingers across her stinging parts. “So, I will give you ten.”

“Ten what?” Lydia panted.

Arousal shot through his veins as he found her already dripping, and he couldn’t resist stroking a finger inside her velvety folds. The moment he did, Lydia’s back arched, and she moved herself into his hand, wanting more. Before he could lose himself and allow her, he pulled his hand away and delivered another slap to her backside.

“Ten spankings,” he replied as Lydia moaned, “For each cheek.”

He lowered himself down on top of her, letting his chest press into her back as his lips found her ear.

“And you will be counting them out for me.”

Lydia moaned once more as Ezra drew himself back, bringing her hips up with him so that her backside presented itself once more, and he let another slap ring across her left cheek. Ezra waited, giving Lydia a moment to try to find her breath and senses, and finally, he heard a breathy “One.”

Ezra reveled in the pleasure of her submission, letting his hands roam and grip

whatever he wanted before he delivered another stinging strike.

“Two!” Lydia gasped, her body trembling now.

By the time they made it to the twentieth slap even Ezra was shaking with need. He barely let his ears register what he said before he gripped her hips and thrust himself inside of her. Lydia’s warm, slick walls gripped him tightly, all but begging for him as he began to move his hips.

Needing to see her eyes, Ezra was only able to hold the position for a moment before pulling out to turn her over. As if she had been waiting for permission to get off her knees, Lydia whirled on him, her arms wrapping around his back as she all but dragged him on top of her. Wanting exactly what she wanted, Ezra let her pull him in, and when he thrust inside of her again, they both moaned in pleasure.

“What will you do to him?”

Lydia felt Ezra’s fingertips pause on her lower back. As gentle as they probably should have been, their lovemaking had been heated and feral; both of them now sporting new scratches and bite marks that would now be blamed on the assailant in question. She had enjoyed the spanking immensely; much more than she probably should have; and had certainly enjoyed what came afterward.

But now that it was over, the assailant had been captured and they were both pleased with the proof that the other was alive and well, the question came to her: What was going to happen next?

“We think we already know who his employer is. We will question him, get his confirmation and a location, and then go find the bastard,” Ezra replied.

Lydia lifted her head from his chest so she could look down at him. Ezra was used to

doing things a certain way and was no stranger to doing the dirty work himself. That was something she admired and accepted about him. But now, as she saw the toll such power took on him, she wished someone else would do it.

“Question him, how?” she asked warily.

Ezra’s blue eyes went dark, but his fingertips began to stroke along her back again.

“You need not worry about that,” he replied. “I will take care of him. Come, try to sleep.”

Deciding after all that she did not want to know what that meant, Lydia rolled onto her back, pulling him with her, and rested her head among the pillows.

“What is this?” Ezra chuckled, nipping at her right breast as he palmed the other.

“You need more sleep than I do,” Lydia replied, stroking her fingers through his dark, silken hair. “And I’m not going to go to sleep until I’m certain you are.”

She had nearly fallen asleep on his chest because of the way he was stroking her back, and she wondered, if the roles were reversed, whether she could do the same to him.

“How am I supposed to fall asleep when your breasts keep tempting me awake?” Ezra muttered mockingly, tugging at her nipple lightly with his teeth.

Lydia smiled, gasped, and writhed beneath his ministrations, but while he did these things, she continued to stroke her fingers over his hair, shoulders, and back.

“I do not need sleep,” Ezra stated, as he nuzzled his face between her breasts, nipping at the left one, “I just need these.”

“No one is stopping you,” Lydia laughed lightly.

His teasing nips and tugs and suckles were already starting to awaken Lydia’s arousal again, but even as she felt those familiar dewy drops gather between her thighs, she willed herself to only keep stroking soothing circles and trails into Ezra’s back and hair. Moments later, his objections to being tired began to fade. Next, Lydia felt his body relax further into her; his words forming into a mumbled mess as he closed his lips around her left nipple one last time.

“I know, my love,” she soothed, feeling her own body start to drift as soon as she heard Ezra’s soft snores, “You are not tired.”

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Lydia awoke to an empty bed, but before fear could consume her, her eyes landed on the note waiting for her on the nearby pillow.

Ambrose and the others have arrived. We will be conducting our business below and you are not to interfere. Alice, Juliet, Helena, and Barbara are all waiting for you in the first-floor sitting room. We will join you when we can.

Please eat something.

E.

It was by no means a love letter, but the use of the word please along with the word seat something somehow made her stomach do a little flip. She nuzzled into the pillows and inhaled deeply, capturing his scent, and felt the flip in her stomach melt into a pool of desire. She missed him; missed the feeling of being in his arms.

Lydia smiled as she recalled the way he'd fallen asleep. Sometime during the night, he had shifted, his warm body wrapping around hers like a cocoon of muscle and protection. She'd awoken only long enough to nuzzle her head into his arm and lace her fingers through his after he'd wrapped his arm around her waist and then had dropped back into a deep sleep.

"There you are!" Alice gasped as Lydia walked into the sitting room a brief time later.

Her sister shot up from her seat and flung her arms around Lydia as the others quickly followed to do the same.

“Here I am!” Lydia gasped, her chest tight from all the embraces. They all finally let go and she dragged in a deep breath.

“Where did I go, though?” she asked, as she took in the concerned looks on their faces.

Barbara was the first to huff and drop her smile.

“You tell us,” she replied, crossing her arms. “Where did you go yesterday that made Ezra think that you were with us?”

Lydia’s cheeks flushed with red as she realized just how much trouble she had caused by taking her little ride yesterday, and she offered an apologetic smile.

“I guess I have a lot of explaining to do,” she replied as a maid came up.

“Pardon me, Your Grace,” the maid said softly with a curtsy, “But His Grace left orders that you were to be served immediately once you joined your friends. We have your breakfast ready for you at the table.”

Lydia flushed once more, remembering the note he’d left her. Had he even gone so far as to talk to the servants about it?

“Is Ezra tracking your feeding habits, sister?” Juliet teased.

“Of course not,” Lydia laughed.

“Then why is he ensuring that you break your fast?” Barbara asked.

Lydia made a face at her friend’s annoyingly amused smile and replied, “I...well, he is just...”

“She is turning red,” Juliet giggled. “Tell us, sister, has your marriage with him been...” She wagged her eyebrows as she dropped her gaze down Lydia’s figure.

“Juliet!” Lydia exclaimed but could not stop her smile.

She turned an accusing eye toward Alice and Helena, who both wore an expression of shock and amusement.

“You two have been giving her those filthy books to read, haven’t you?” she asked.

Alice pressed her lips together tightly as a blush bloomed over her face.

“Well, I...” she stammered, wringing her hands together, “Well, you have read one and you know how, um,detailed,the scenarios can be. And, you see, I, um, thought...”

A nervous laugh broke through Alice’s stammering. Lydia had never seen her sister this flustered before.

“Out with it,” Lydia coaxed, looking from one friend to the next.

“Oh, for heaven’s sake, the books describe what to expect during marital relations better than any speech you could have given her about consummating a marriage,” Barbara said, her words rushing tightly together.

“And you have been so busy,” Juliet said, offering her a timid smile. “I know, you wanted to have the “talk” with me a little more properly, and I thought we’d have that opportunity in London, but...”

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Her words trailed off, and Lydia's cheeks blushed a deeper red for an entirely different reason. The last time she had seen Juliet was the day they had seen Sophia slap Ezra. Little did any of them know that less than half an hour later, she had been consummating her own marriage in the rain and the mud of Mayfair public park. Arousal coursed through her at the memory of how they had gone from being furious with each other to tearing off one another's clothes.

It had been exciting, taboo, thrilling; everything the "talk" she had given to Alice before her wedding and would have given to Juliet was not. Still, she felt a sense of guilt that Juliet had hoped to speak with her first. It was her duty to help prepare her for such things, and she had failed.

"Darling," Lydia said apologetically, taking Juliet's hands, "Forgive me for not making more time to help you prepare for your future life. You know, perhaps it is best that I did not give you that speech. I believe Alice was right about that. There is more, so much that happens between a man and a woman than I could have ever described from my previous perspective."

Lydia heard her unintentional confession slip from her lips before she could stop it, and immediately turned red.

"Um, anyway the food is getting cold, perhaps we should..."

"Previous perspective?" Juliet asked, her voice rising into a squeak of excitement on the final note.

"Oh, good heavens, I am not going to talk about this," Lydia laughed, going to the

table.

“Our husbands are in the dungeons right now questioning an attempted murderer, should we not be more concerned about that?”

“No,” all four of her friends said in unison.

Lydia gave them a pleading look and they ignored it.

“You and Ezra actuallylikeeach other?” Barbara asked, hurrying to take a seat by her side.

When Lydia only smiled and began to butter her toast, Barbara gasped and added, “Oh, my God, you drive him mad, don’t you? You minx! You secret little minx!”

“Oh, like you were any better?” Lydia laughed, “Was it not you as well that swore off men? Yet you have shared some delightfully wicked stories of Ambrose and how you make him go cross-eyed.”

“Pleasedo not share them now,” Helena pled as she and the others came to the table.

“I won’t if Lydia shares her details,” Barbara answered, wagging her brows.

“No one is sharing anything of the sort,” Lydia replied as firmly as she could.

“Now, Iwillshare the details of where I went yesterday and why, and the events leading to such, but that is all.”

“Will you at least tell me in private?” Barbara whispered at her side. “Ihaveto know what he is like.

Lydia rolled her eyes, smiling, and reached for her tea.

“No more, please,” the man begged.

Blood dribbled from his lips, nostrils and several cuts on his face. His powerful body, the one that had knocked Ezra into his weapons, now hung limp, bruised, and sweaty; his arms outstretched and hanging by chains and thick, iron cuffs.

“I imagine if I had begged you for that last night you, would have ignored me,” Ezra replied calmly, washing his bloody hands in the nearby basin.

The man groaned.

“I thought as much,” Ezra replied, rubbing his hands dry with the blood-spotted towel.

He tossed it onto the table where his friends now sat, then turned on his heel to deliver a left hook into the man’s jaw. Blood and a tooth flew from the man’s mouth with a pained cry as his head shot to the side. Ezra caught him by his hair and yanked him up, forcing him to meet his eyes.

“We have not even started the interrogation yet,” he said calmly, his rage pouring off him in palpable waves, “This is simply retribution for my wife.”

Still holding firmly onto the man’s hair, Ezra cuffed him hard with his other hand.

“Your wife?” the man choked out, more blood splattering over his beard. “I did not touch your wife!”

“Was she your next target?” Ezra asked, forcing the man’s head up again.

The silent, swelling panic in the man's brown eyes was all the answer Ezra needed. He raised his left leg swiftly and kicked the toe of his boot forcefully into the man's testicles. A scream erupted from the man's lips as he tried to buckle into his chains and catch his breath, then proceeded to vomit from the intensity of the kick.

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“Terrence,” Ezra called, taking a step back.

Terrence, a young man of the guard he’d hired who showed potential, came hurrying up to him.

“Yes, Your Grace?” he asked willingly.

“Clean him up, will you?” Ezra asked casually, nodding his head at the groaning, mess-covered man. “I do not want to get too filthy before we begin.”

Terrence quickly agreed, all too happy to fall under Ezra’s mentorship, and Ezra walked back to the table where a pint of ale and a fresh basin of water were waiting for him.

“You think he’s going to deny working for George?” Ambrose asked Ezra.

“Of course he is,” Duncan answered dully before Ezra could reply, “He could have started confessing any time after we’d arrived, but he chose to remain silent. Whatever George has on him, he’s more terrified of that than he is of us.”

“Still no word on where he is?” Morgan asked. For once, he was not joking. In fact, in this room, his entire demeanor had changed.

“None since he was spotted here in Frampton a few days ago. He could be hiding anywhere now. This horse’s arse is the only lead we currently have to find him,” Duncan replied.

“I don’t know where he is,” the man called out as Terrence scrubbed at him.

“You were doing well with the truth before,” Ezra replied chipperly, “Let us not start lying now. And I would be quiet if I were you. This is the last bit of relief you shall get until we are satisfied with what you tell us.”

“Well once we get George, then what?” Morgan asked, “Turn him over to the constable? Do we even have enough proof?”

“We will make him confess,” Ezra replied simply, wrapping clean strips of cloth around his knuckles, “and then we will make him pay.”

“He is clean, Your Grace,” Terrence announced.

“Very good, thank you, Terrence,” Ezra replied in a cheery tone.

“You are in a strangely good mood for someone who was nearly murdered,” Ambrose noted, giving Ezra an odd look.

“Oh, I am,” Ezra agreed, walking up to the man again, his eyes bright with retribution.

He tilted his head slightly as he took in the man before him. Terrence had done his best to clean him up but no amount of washing could hide his sorry state. He would talk. One way or another, Ezra would get what he wanted.

“Now then,” he practically purred, grabbing a fistful of the man’s hair, and yanking his head back, “Let us start with something simple. What is your name?”

“Thank you, Terrence,” Ezra said politely, taking the clean shirt he held out to him.

His other clothes, filthy with the blood, spittle, and tears of his detainee, were now burning in one of the nearby pits. Derrin, the man they now knew as their hired hitman, was unconscious and unchained, lying in a heap on the floor of his cell. He would live. After a time, he might even be able to walk again.

Since Ezra had been the one attacked, his friends had agreed that he should be the one to handle the interrogation and he had to admit, the process was very satisfying. After he'd gotten the information he wanted, Ezra had shed his clothes and washed himself right there, not bothering with modesty as his friends sat nearby, discussing their next move. They had learned a great deal, and though no one was getting too excited, it seemed that the balance of power had now shifted firmly to their side.

"So old Georgie is holed up in a brothel basement outside of London," Ezra sighed, taking a seat. "Admittedly, one of the last places I would have thought to look, but I am still a little disappointed in his lack of creativity."

"We need to make a move soon," Ambrose stated, tapping on the table, "It has already been nearly a day since Derrin attacked you. George was probably expecting him to return hours ago with a report. He might already be on the move again."

"Let us fetch him and bring him back here. We do not need a public scene," Ezra stated.

"Not here," Ambrose stated, rising from his chair. "It was hard enough bringing Helena and Barbara here just knowing that pathetic excuse for a man was down here. Furthermore, I do not want to risk any of them catching a glimpse of this bastard."

"Very well," Ezra agreed, "The gaming hell, then."

They all nodded in agreement and stood up.

“What about him?” Duncan asked, throwing a look of disgust at Derrin. “I know you have guards, but I am not leaving Alice and Beau here alone with him.”

“You are right,” Ezra agreed and beckoned Terrence to come forward.

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“Grab a few more guards and gather him up, will you?” he asked, “We’re taking him with us.”

“I will stay down here and help with him while you three go up and say your goodbyes,” Morgan said, hanging back as the others began to leave.

Ezra heard the badly hidden tone of longing in his friend’s voice and doubled back as Ambrose and Duncan continued their way upstairs.

“Do not fear, Morgan, one day you will have a wife to say goodbye to as well,” Ezra said, clapping him on the shoulder.

Morgan smirked and muttered “bastard” as he shook off Ezra’s hand.

“I am serious, old friend,” Ezra said.

The emotions that had irked him so badly before, no longer seemed so terrifying as he gave Morgan a calm, understanding look. He had been satisfied that he could call back that tall, imposing black wall of numbness when it came to interrogating Derrin, but now he was relieved that it was beginning to fade away and make room for something better.

“You will find her, and you will be all the better for it,” he said sincerely.

Morgan looked at him curiously, one brow moving high as the other went low, and took a step back.

“Christ, mate, you have changed,” Morgan said in awe.

He looked back up at Ezra and simply asked, “Lydia?”

Ezra tilted his head in acknowledgment, and Morgan swore under his breath.

“Well, I hope you are right, mate,” Morgan sighed, rolling up his sleeves as the guards filtered in.

“I am,” Ezra stated, then clapped him on the shoulder one more time. “Now don’t take long. We will meet you at the carriage.”

Upstairs, Ezra found the others gathered in the foyer. He spotted Lydia at once, her face lighting up as she saw him approach, and his chest grew tight as he opened his arms to embrace her. She went to him immediately, and Ezra felt the ring of bruises around his throat burn as he gathered her close and kissed her.

Lydia’s hands smoothed over his chest, his shoulders, and his hair, as if once again proving to herself that he was alive, and he held her tighter. No one had ever cared for him the way she did, he realized, placing another tender kiss on her lips before letting her rest her head against his chest.

As he looked up, Ezra took in his other friends. Duncan had Alice wrapped tightly in his arms as little Beau cocooned between them and wrapped his tiny arms around both of their necks. Ambrose had Helena and Barbara squeezing him tight, a fearful look on both of their faces as he held them tightly to him. A few paces away stood their nanny with their four-month-old son, Titus.

I want this, he realized, watching his friends holding and kissing their loved ones. The image of a little girl wrapped in Lydia’s arms suddenly made his heart so full he could hardly breathe, and he felt his bruised throat struggle to swallow. Could he?

Could he actually have a family of his own?

“Everything will be fine,” he heard Ambrose say.

“You don’t know that” Barbara hissed, still holding him tight. “Let the constables handle him!”

“This man was able to hide for nearly twenty years,” Ambrose replied patiently, “He was not able to do that by himself. Until we get a solid confession out of him and understand who’s dirty and who’s not, we are on our own.”

“Ambrose is right,” Lydia said from Ezra’s arms as she turned in them.

Ezra looked down at her in awe as she drew her chin up and looked around the foyer at the worried faces surrounding them.

“We have to let our men do this,” she went on, “Justice was evaded for so many years. It is time they were allowed to receive it.”

Their arms still wrapped around their families, Duncan and Ambrose both gave Lydia a nod of appreciation. A moment later, Alice, Helena, and Barbara were letting the two of them go.

“If you die I will find a way to bring you back just to murder you myself,” Barbara warned Ambrose.

He smiled at her brightly, then gave her one more passionate kiss.

“I expect nothing less,” he replied, his tone full of affection.

“And no more scars for you, you hear me?” Alice said, giving Duncan a warning

look. “You have given enough. Do not let this man take any more from you.”

“I would not dare go against your orders, my love,” Duncan replied sincerely, cupping her face in his hands.

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“And you,” Lydia said, tugging Ezra’s face back to hers once more. “No more stab wounds or strangulations. Understood?”

“Only punches,” he teased, tapping his still bruised nose.

“I mean it,” Lydia whispered, pressing herself to him one last time.

“I know you do,” he replied, his tone growing sincere. “Trust me, Lydia, it is not that is going to be harmed.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

“You nasty little pricks,” George spat out through heaving breaths.

“You all right, Ambrose?” Ezra asked his friend, ignoring their captor’s insult.

“Not really,” Ambrose grunted, gently holding a rag to his broken nose. “Barbara really is going to kill me.”

Ezra chuckled dryly as he remembered Barbara’s threat to Ambrose and turned back to George. They’d found him along the road shortly after nightfall, heading away from the brothel and toward Bath in an unmarked carriage. It had been pure luck that the man had chosen to open the curtains as Ezra and the others had ridden by on their horses. He had gotten in one solid hit before they had ridden back and dragged him out, and unfortunately, it was to Ambrose’s face.

Morgan, in his usual suave if not comical manner, had flashed a fistful of pounds in

the carriage driver's face, and the man was all too happy to forget what he saw and take one of their horses back to the brothel. Morgan then climbed up onto the driver's seat and drove the carriage to the gaming hell while Ezra, Duncan, and Ambrose began with their questioning.

George now kneeled across from them, hands bound behind his back and his face and shirt bloodied as the four dukes all stared down at him.

"All right, Georgie boy," Ezra sighed, giving him a bored look, "Calling us little pricks is not going to make this situation any better for you."

Arrogant cucks," George sneered, blood and spittle dripping from his lips.

Before Ezra could react he saw Duncan's foot fly out and kick the man directly in the chest, making him gasp and cough as he was thrown backward. From the doorway, Colter and Terrence snickered but otherwise continued guarding the door.

"That was not very nice," Duncan mused, his tone taunting.

"The next one is mine," Ambrose said, his gaze deadly as he looked at George.

"Why did you kill our fathers?" Morgan asked, getting straight to the point. "You were their business associate and their friend. What did you need from them so badly that you simply could not ask them?"

George's rueful laugh twisted into a cough as he turned his feral glare toward them.

"Yes, your fathers were such glorious, righteous men, weren't they?" he asked, his voice dripping with sarcasm.

Ezra threw a furtive look toward his brothers, noticing how they all shifted subtly in

their seats.

“No man is perfect,” Ambrose said carefully.

“Obviously,” George seethed, nodding his head toward the room they were in. “I see you’ve followed in their footsteps and immersed yourselves in the dirtier sorts of business to finance your lavish lifestyles.”

Ezra watched Ambrose’s gaze harden.

“So, what? Did our fathers cut you out of a deal?” Ezra asked dully, not allowing them to lose track. “Chose not to include you one time when they’d promised they would?”

“They cut me out of the deal!” George snarled, glaring directly at Ezra. “We worked for years putting together a setup that would make us millions, and when it was time to finally get a payout, they cut me out! I am an earl, a nobleman just like you, and yet it was I that had to get my hands dirty for the good of the deal and then dropped for doing what I had to do!”

Ezra’s stomach twisted. His businesses were not exactly pristine; The gaming hell, his share in the flesh market, the illegal barter and trades. He could certainly not judge others in similar lines of business.

“You need to stop acting like a blathering idiot and give us specifics,” Ezra demanded, leaning forward with his elbows on his knees. “What were the five of you up to?”

He coolly met George’s glare, unfazed by his obvious hatred. Something shifted in George’s gaze as they challenged one another. It wasn’t regret, but something akin to it.

“We were providing passage to the Irish,” George grumbled, finally breaking his stare. “To the Americas.”

“Which passage?” Ezra asked slowly, a memory pinging in his mind. A horrific event in the papers; thousands of innocent people died. The boats they were on had just broken apart like toys.

George looked back at Ezra, his gaze wary.

“They named it the Irish Drowning in the papers,” George answered begrudgingly. “We spent as little money as possible to construct a fleet of ships to bring the passengers across. According to the two survivors, when the first storm hit, they were...”

George went silent for a moment as he shook his head.

“Obliterated.”

“You are lying,” Morgan snarled, rising so fast from his chair that it fell backward.

“They had buried our real identities from the beginning, disguising them in false business names and forged papers, so no one was going to tie the catastrophe to them, but me. I had done the dirty work. Traveled to Ireland to sell the trip as a luxury travel experience; talked these people out of their money. It was my face they saw that promised them a new future. My face that the survivors would remember when investigators came to speak with them.”

“I recall reading that the two survivors died in an infirmary the day after they were rescued,” Ambrose said, speaking into his clenched fist. “I remember reading about it. That was you?”

“I could not have them tracing me back to the ships,” George confessed, shaking his head. “Your fathers knew it needed to be done and did nothing to stop me.”

“So, you were the one who had the most to lose, and you are now the only one that has blood on his hands, and when our fathers cut you out of the payoff, you snapped,” Ezra stated, ignoring the growing disgust in his stomach.

“They had already given me two insultingly small payments, but the final time we had arranged to meet at the wharves was when they were supposed to give me my last big payment. I had already decided that once they had given me my share I was done. I would have had enough money to sail a ship to Barbados and disappear into the exotic finery there.”

George’s face slowly twisted, making him look more beast than man as he stared hard at the ground.

“But they showed up empty-handed. Said it was my fault the ships blew apart and that I had put them all at risk. They threatened me, told me if I ever tried to come after them they would get to me first. I knew then it was true; knew that if I left the wharf without doing anything, I would never get another chance.”

“I don’t believe you,” Duncan stated, removing his mask. “I was there. You may have been there, I could not make out many faces, but there were others there too.”

“I was not an idiot,” George snarled, glaring up at him.

“I had a feeling they were going to betray me, so I prearranged some. If they paid me, my men would leave with me, I’d pay them for their time, and off I would go. If they did not, well...”

George’s voice trailed off as a hateful smile drew across his bloody lips.

“Well, you know better than anyone in this room what I did, don’t you, boy?”

Duncan shoved himself out of his chair so fast that Ezra was only able to get to him after he'd punched George twice.

"Easy, brother," Ezra, urged, wrestling Duncan back a few steps.

"Did you stay?" Duncan snarled.

Panting, George slowly rose back up to his knees.

"What?"

"After you set the fire. Did you stay?"

George squinted his bruised eyes, studying Duncan's scarred face.

"No."

Duncan lunged for him again despite Ezra's hold, and this time Morgan rushed forward to help keep him back.

"I have heard their dying screams for nearly two decades!" Duncan roared, "I have had the stench of their burning flesh...of my flesh in my nostrils; the taste of human ash forever on my tongue!"

"You should not have been there, boy," George roared back, baring his bloodstained teeth.

His gaze slowly drifted from Duncan and settled on Ezra.

"You should have, though."

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Ezra felt his wall of numbness and his newfound emotions slam together violently; waging a war as to how he should react.

“We need him alive,” Ambrose warned, taking a step toward them.

“What did you just say to him?” Duncan asked, his tone deadly as he glared at George.

“You ruined her life. Both of you,” George went on, not breaking his stare from Ezra.

The hatred in his gaze began to shift into sadness and despair.

“She was a beautiful woman once. Pure, inside and out,” George went on, his voice beginning to tremble. “She was mine before your father made that deal with her.”

Ezra’s heart stopped.

“What deal?”

A pathetic laugh left George’s bloodied lips.

“You should know. You made the same one with your own wife.”

Bile burned in Ezra’s throat as his mind began to unravel. No.

“Sophia was...magnificent. Beautiful, kind, and humble; her patience and manners were beyond reproach. She came from wealth and it showed in her dress and

presence, but she never forced it into conversation like so many do. Everyone fell in love with her when they met her,everyone.And yet somehow, she loved me.

“That is until your father discovered her. No one at that time knew how much debt he was accruing or that he had a black heart; he hid them both under his handsome looks and charm. Sophia fell for him at once, heart and soul, and I lost her.”

“Someone better than you came along,” Duncan said bitterly.

He had stopped straining against Ezra and Morgan’s hold, and now the three of them stood frozen and stared down at their fathers’ murderer.

“He used her!” George snarled, “He took everything good about her and drained her of it until she was a vain, useless husk. Years later, when she offered to share her bed with me, I felt as if itwere my chance to rescue her, to take her away and breathe the old Sophia back into her body.”

George paused, his face crumpling as he shook his head.

“She was still so beautiful,” he whispered, then gritted his teeth. “But she had become so cold and cruel. She loved to watch me plead for her to leave him; smiling pitifully at me the whole time like I was a helpless bird stuck in her claws.”

“I do not need to hear of my mother’s conquests,” Ezra stated, not able to take any more. “I do not share much with you, but I will attest to my mother’s cruelty.”

“You don’t know a thing,boy,”George laughed bitterly. “After you were born? When she saw she had given birth to such a cold, lifelessthing,that was what truly broke her.”

“So, you could have killed me back then,” Ezra said coldly, “Why wait until now if

you have hated me since my birth?”

George grunted.

“Because as much as I hated you I could not blame a child. Your mother loved your father, but he never loved her, and somehow part of me knew that would become evident after your birth. You seemed doomed to repeat your father’s life and that seemed like punishment enough,” he replied.

“How kind,” Ezra retorted blandly.

“Then I heard you were getting married to one of Owen Knight’s girls. One was in love with the son of another friend of mine. I saw everything that had happened start all over again and I knew I could not let history repeat itself. It was only after I tried to come at you the first time that I discovered that my original information was incorrect, but at that point, I did not care. You needed to die, just as your father did.”

Coldness poured into Ezra, filling him from foot to head. Being told that he deserved to die did not bother him. It was the possibility that George was right. That had always been his fear, had it not? That he was twisting Lydia into something as dark and wretched as himself?

He could not imagine his mother being kind or pure to any degree, but up until a few days ago, he would never have imagined Lydia sweetly threatening to stab a woman either.

“Look at that,” George chuckled wickedly, “You know it is true. I see it in your eyes, boy,”

Ezra slowly raised his eyes back up to George as he felt his body move forward of its own volition, but he was caught by all three of his friends.

“We now have enough to make a formal arrest,” Ambrose said, his tone full of authority as he held Ezra’s right shoulder tightly. “I think it is time we let him shut up.”

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“Why, it is just getting interesting,” Ezra spat out, but he did not fight or argue when Colter and Terrence came forward to stand George up.

“Wait a minute, you cannot have me arrested,” George said, suddenly fighting against the two men’s grips. “I will deny everything!”

“Your man will not,” Morgan replied bitterly. “We have him, and we are certain we can persuade him into a confession.”

“No,” George said, beginning to fight harder as he was yanked to his feet, “No, I am not done talking. That is not the entire story. It is not just me!”

“Then you can tell that to the constables,” Ambrose retorted.

“I will tell them!” George began to yell as he was dragged away. “I will tell them of this place!”

“Go ahead,” Ezra drawled, regaining his composure, “We will all laugh about it when they come in for cards next week.”

He looked over to Ambrose then and nodded.

“You were right. It is time he stops talking.”

He turned to Terrence, sliding his hands coolly in his pockets.

“Terrence, be a good lad and gag him, would you?”

“No, no, no, no,” George began to pant and tried to pull away from the gag, “You are making a mistake! You are making a huge mist...mmppphhh!!!”

George’s words dissolved into muffles as Terrence shoved a cloth into his mouth and then bound another across his lips. He lunged one last time at them as he was dragged to the door, but when Colter’s fist connected with his gut, he finally stopped fighting and let himself be dragged from the room.

“Ezra, Duncan, sit,” Ambrose demanded, shutting the door as both of them walked toward it.

“I need to get back to Frampton,” Ezra said.

“I need to see, Lydia.”

“We all need to get back there,” Ambrose agreed, “But you two need to hear some things first.”

Ezra and Duncan exchanged a look as if they’d simultaneously recalled the years of chastising they’d received from the oldest orphan and sat down.

“Duncan, no vengeance you put into George will ever equal what you so painfully survived. Your hatred is valid, but you must allow this to be handled properly.”

Duncan glared down at the floor, his scarred face still exposed. Then, after a moment of silence, he reached for his mask, pulled it over his face, and then nodded.

“Ezra,” Ambrose said next, turning his attention to him.

Ezra met his eyes numbly, but inside, he felt the conflict between detachment and emotion waging war once more.

“You are not like your father. None of us were. As good or as bad as we thought they once were, we know now that we could never be like them. You are not him, Lydia is not your mother, and you are not destroying her by being her husband.”

Ezra’s fingers dug into the arms of the chair.

“You all thought like him once,” Ezra stated objectively. “You thought I would ruin Lydia.”

“That was a mistake,” Morgan mumbled, guilt etching his face.

“A horrible one,” Ambrose agreed, “One we will all happily pay for over and over if necessary.”

Despite the war waging inside him, Ezra felt the sincerity in his friends’ words.

“I hope you are right,” Ezra said, standing up. “But there is only truly one way to know. Come, it is time we all get back to our wives.”

CHAPTER NINETEEN

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“Hear their horses,” Lydia said, her heart beginning to race at the sound.

Barbara’s head perked up from her book, tension written across her face as she strained her ears.

“As do I,” she said excitedly, shuffling out of her chair and the lap blanket.

Alice and Helena quickly followed and the four of them headed to the foyer. It was late, but none of them aside from Juliet had been able to sleep; too worried for their husbands to do so. After Juliet had gone off to bed, saying she would stay with her nephews for the night, they had remained vigilant in the front parlor, doing their best to distract themselves to pass the time.

“How many?” Alice breathed, as Lydia flew open the front door. “Four, please say all four.”

Relief flooded through Lydia as she saw four riders coming fast up the drive. Ezra was recognizable even in the darkness and was in the lead.

“Yes, all four,” Lydia replied, taking hold of her sister tightly as their husbands approached.

Ezra flung his leg over his saddle as his horse began to slow down, but he did not wait for it to stop before he jumped off and strode quickly toward Lydia.

“Ezra, your leg!” she cried in warning, but Lydia rushed toward him at the same time; the two of them coming together with great force as their lips pressed together

greedily.

“I’m fine,” he murmured into her lips, though she felt his right leg begin to tremble with fatigue.

“You came back,” she breathed, peppering him with kisses.

“I promised you I would,” Ezra replied, his voice raw as he tucked her body tightly into his arms, holding her head to his chest.

She could hear his heart pounding as his hands moved and pressed on her back, as though he was trying to push her into him. Looking around, she could see that her friends and their husbands were having similar reactions to seeing one another.

“Duncan, thank God,” Alice sobbed, rushing up to him as he got off his horse.

“It’s all right, my love,” Duncan soothed, cradling her to his chest.

Lydia then watched in fascination as he took his mask off, letting it fall to the ground before he leaned down and buried his face into her neck.

“You let him hit you in the face?” Barbara asked incredulously, shoving at Ambrose’s shoulder before pulling him by his lapels as Lydia turned toward the couple.

“It was a dirty punch, darling, I could not avoid it,” Ambrose snickered before his wife hauled him down for a kiss.

“Come here, you handsome fool,” Helena laughed, going to hug Morgan as she let Ambrose and Barbara have their moment.

“Careful, darling, I’m not allowed to fall in love with you,” Morgan teased but accepted her hug warmly.

Lydia smiled warmly, beyond relief that they had all made it back in one piece.

“Did you find him?” she asked, turning her head to look up at Ezra.

She felt his body go still for a moment, then his hands began to caress her again.

“Yes,” he acknowledged. “He is in the proper hands now.”

“So, it is over?” she asked.

She wanted to feel hopeful, but there was something in his eyes that she was incapable of deciphering.

“Yes,” Ezra agreed, gently holding her chin, and stroking his thumb gently along her jaw.

“Then what is wrong?” she asked, studying his face; a face she had learned to read like a favorite book.

There was worry there. Fear, even, but Ezra said, “Let us get the others to their rooms first. We have all had a vexing day.”

Knowing it was the right thing to do, Lydia nodded, and as everyone broke away from one another, more hugs and words of endearment were exchanged. It did not take long after that for everyone to head to their respective rooms, and soon Lydia found herself walking with Ezra into his quarters. It was the first time she had stepped into the room since his attack, and though it was clean, she felt a shiver of discomfort as she stepped inside.

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She had almost lost him in this room. Ezra caught her looking around worriedly and pulled her into his arms.

“There is no one here,” he assured her.

But, when she looked up into his eyes he nodded in understanding, and silently went about the room, looking through all possible hiding spots until she was satisfied.

“This is my fault,” he said tiredly, taking a seat on his bed. “All of it.”

Lydia felt her heart ache as she saw the self-hatred in his eyes and went to him.

“No,” she breathed, wrapping her arms around his shoulders. “Do not blame yourself.”

Ezra pulled her away just enough to look her in the eyes, and a knot formed in her stomach.

“I have ruined you.”

Lydia shook her head, taken aback by the statement.

“What on earth are you talking about?” she asked. “I am not ruined!”

“You were pure. Before me, you were pure and good. Now you’re threatening to stab people and are hitting people over the head with vases.”

Before Lydia could respond, Ezra said, “According to George, my mother used to be just like you. Just like you before my father twisted her into who she is now. And I...I have done the same to you.”

“Ezra, no,” she insisted, tightening her grip on his shoulders.

“I do not love as others do, I do not feel as others do,” Ezra went on, shaking his head. “I will destroy you as my father destroyed my mother, and Lydia, I will not have it. I will not destroy you.”

Panic seized her as Ezra moved her so he could stand, and then gently pulled her hands from him.

“You cannot...”

I am in love with you, Lydia,” Ezra cut her off, his tone vehement, “And I will not be responsible for breaking you.”

He went to move away, but before Lydia could think clearly, she panicked, her hand shot out and she slapped him.

Ezra stood in front of Lydia, stunned. Her hit was the softest he had ever taken in his life and yet it had rattled him to his bones.

“No,” Lydia said adamantly, pushing at his chest. The back of his legs hit the edge of the bed, his weakened right leg faltering, and he sat down hard.

Hurt, fear, and anger were written plainly across her beautiful face, and he felt the weight of his decision compound. Look at her. You are right.

“This is not you,” he protested.

“It is your turn to be quiet now,” Lydia snapped back, using his own words from the previous night against him.

“This marriage has been...a paradox,” she admitted, keeping her eyes trained on him, “We went into this union as a business deal, but Ezra, you and I have both changed since then. Not just me, and you know it.”

“Yes,” he admitted begrudgingly.

He had changed in many ways. Not just by finally finding relief from his detachment and rage, but in the way he touched Lydia and thought of her. He had never been so obsessed with a woman. With sexual acts with women? Always. Puberty had hit him hard when he was young, and his desire had only grown since. But not a specific woman.

“And as for your mother,” Lydia laughed mockingly, “I meant what I said, yes, but I would have done it for Juliet or Alice or any of the others as well because I spent too much of my life enduring and far too little protesting.”

She paused to take a steadying breath, her features softening.

“It was you, Ezra, who showed me that I could take charge of my life and protect my loved ones. When you accepted my deal no one, not even my father, believed I could help you. Yet you did. I do not necessarily want to stab anyone, and I did say it partly in jest, but I will love you and protect you forever for bestowing that upon you.”

“I have always believed in you,” Ezra replied quickly, unable to help himself. “From the moment you made your wager in my office I knew you would win. Even if I changed the rules of the game, you would find a way to succeed. And you have.”

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“So do not push me away,” Lydia insisted.

Her hand reached toward his chin, and she forced him to look up at her, just like she had that very first night, and Ezra felt the rest of his numbness and fear slip away. His entire body had screamed at him to stop as he tried to leave her. And now he was powerless.

Lydia was taking his control away from him again, and he felt the weight being lifted off of him as he leaned forward and pressed his forehead against her bosom.

Ezra felt Lydia let out a breath of relief, and her hand slipped from his chin and up to his hair as her other arm wound around his back.

“You love me,” Lydia whispered, holding him close.

“Yes,” he breathed.

“And I love you,” she quickly continued, “Neither of us expected it to happen, yet here we are. So let us learn how to deal with it. No more pushing me away.”

Ezra could only nod as he felt Lydia’s hands slip around his neck and begin to loosen his cravat. Her touch was gentle as she pulled the piece of silk away, then moved to the buttons of his collar. Her thin fingers slipped the obsidian beads through their holes, further relieving the pressure around his bruised neck, and he hissed in a breath of pleasure as he finally felt the bare flesh of her fingers contact his skin.

She massaged him tenderly, careful not to hurt him before returning to the rest of his

buttons.

“You frightened me just now more than you did during our entire marriage thus far,” Lydia murmured, continuing her work of undressing him.

Ezra flinched at the words.

“I am so sorry,” he whispered as she smoothed his shirt down his shoulders.

“Mmmm,” Lydia hummed, tracing her nails down his spine.

He shivered with pleasure under her touch, still unused to his own reactions to her, and buried his face further into her breasts. Ezra attempted to bring his hands up to her back to work at her corset strings, but Lydia suddenly stopped, grabbed his hands, and pushed them back down.

“No, no,” she chastised, tugging a fistful of his hair, forcing him to raise his eyes to his. “I think it is time you receive a punishment, husband.”

Ezra felt nothing but desire and arousal fill him as he looked up at Lydia’s possessive gaze. For a moment he ignored her little game and grasped her to him tightly so he could drag her into his lap for a kiss. Instead of fighting him, Lydia kissed him back hungrily, her gentle nails turning sharp as they gripped into his muscled back.

“I suppose there is no talking you out of it?” he asked after pulling back harshly from their feral kiss.

Lydia smiled at him sensually as her cheeks turned pink.

“I am afraid the only way out is through,” she replied, tracing her nails from his shoulders to his wrists.

Her fingers tightened around his hands, but he did not fight her as she brought them up and pushed him back onto the bed.

“You are not to leave this bed until I command it,” Lydia instructed, tenderly kissing the column of his bruised throat. “Not until we have you have fully rested, and we have finally talked about everything.”

“But the others,” he began to protest but hitched his breath as Lydia’s fingertips grazed against the hardened length of his member through his breeches.

“The others also need their rest. I think they should all stay here for a while and recover from all of the unfortunate events. I believe we will all be sequestered to our rooms for a while.”

Lydia untied his breeches, freeing him from the straining confines of the garment, and he felt his erection bob as he heard a feminine sound of approval slip from her throat. Ezra forced his head back, trying to provide her with the control she wanted as she slid his breeches and briefs down his hips, stripping him, but he felt a sliver of his panic return.

Could he do this? Truly? Hand himself over so willingly? He felt his thoughts beginning to unravel as the tension returned to his body, but just as he was about to say stop, Lydia slid her mouth over his pulsing rod, and his mind went utterly blank.

Women had tasted him before. Many, in fact. And he had enjoyed gripping their throats and hair and furiously thrusting into them, but he had never allowed something like this.

Lydia’s hands slowly drifted away from his wrists as her lips suckled and soothed him, but Ezra kept his hands firmly in place on the bed, feeling an intense shudder rise from somewhere deep within as he let her take control.

Lydia moaned around Ezra's hardened phallus, aroused by the taste and feel of him in her mouth. Unlike the last time, she took him deep inside her throat, lodging him all the way back until she could take absolutely no more. She drank from him greedily, taking in his deep, desperate grunts and moans as she suckled to her heart's content.

They would talk, they would reach solid ground, but first, she was going to have her fill of him. It had been too many days of frenzied worrying, and now she was going to take all of the time she wanted.

That was until she felt Ezra slowly losing control beneath her.

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Though he had done well at first keeping his hands flat on the bed, they now clung tightly to the sheets, and his hips had begun to piston in time with each thrust into her mouth. Understanding bloomed in her when she felt him swell in her mouth, and she felt herself gush with arousal as she brought him close to his edge.

“Lydia,” Ezra panted.

His deep voice, so etched with ache and need, only amplified Lydia’s own desire, and she plunged her mouth down further onto him, pushing past her comfort, opening her throat, and devouring him. Ezra’s hips shot forward as his hands suddenly flew from the blankets to her hair, holding her to him tightly as he began to spill his seed.

Lydia moaned, her insides turning molten as she felt his rod spasm repeatedly and the inside of her throat became coated in his hot liquid. His muscled body trembled for her, and he moved his grip from her hair to her shoulders and hauled her up his chest.

Lydia gasped, dragging in fresh air as her mouth became free, but it was cut off by Ezra’s kiss as he began to tear at her gown.

“Jesus, what you do to me,” Ezra whispered fervently against her lips, ripping her dress open from the back.

He dragged it down hurriedly over her shoulders, tugging it over her waist and tossing it away from her. When he was finished with that he ripped the thin fabric of her shift into shreds, freeing her from her stockings and shoes last.

“Show me,” Lydia panted as he rolled her onto her back. “Show me everything.”

She hissed in a breath as Ezra's hot mouth clamped down on her throat and her hands flew to his body, finding grip wherever they could. Lydia bucked her hips as Ezra first kissed, then scraped his teeth down her neck and collarbone as his hand disappeared between her legs.

"Ezra!" she gasped as two of his fingers slid between her already wet, hot folds.

Ezra groaned against her throat as he began to work his hand, letting the two fingers inside of her crook and coax out her pleasure.

"My turn," he rasped, then wrapped his arm around her waist.

Lydia gasped as he lifted her with one arm as though she weighed no more than a pillow. Her gasp transformed into a deep moan as he sat her atop his hand.

"I do love you," he whispered darkly, a sinfully handsome smile spreading across his face as his fingers began to work faster, "But if you want full control of me, you are going to have to challenge me for it."

As he said so, Lydia felt one of his fingers slide out of her tight sheath, but before she could whimper in protest, she felt him slide it somewhere else. Lydia's breath caught in her throat, her lashes fluttering as she felt both pleasure and discomfort at the new sensation.

Desperately, she dug her fingernails into his shoulders, trembling as the discomfort began to transform into molten pleasure. She could hear herself; hear how her juices created a slick suckling noise against his hand as occasional wicked grunts of pleasure left Ezra. He was watching her unravel, making her hold herself on full display as he did so, and she loved it.

"Here is the first challenge," Ezra growled- "Ah, look at me, sweetheart, I am talking

to you.”

Lydia felt his fingers spread across the back of her skull and was suddenly thrust forward. So lost in her pleasure, Lydia had not realized that she had tilted her head far back and had closed her eyes. Not only that but had fully begun riding his hand, no longer needing his arm for support. Her eyes flew open, and she saw Ezra’s blue eyes glowing with pleasure and dominance.

“Wh...what?” She panted.

Ezra risked, giving her a pitying look, and suddenly stopped.

Lydia whimpered at the severity of the pause, but as she parted her lips, Ezra pulled her head forward and muffled the sound. His kiss was quick and harsh, and when he finished he pulled roughly away as his hand went from her head to her throat.

“Ready to listen, now?” he asked, bucking his hand again a single, torturing time.

“Yes,” Lydia panted, then whimpered again as she felt the intensity of the thrust.

“Mmmm, there’s my good wife,” Ezra purred, beginning to rhythmically work his hand again, “Your challenge is, you must not come.”

The pleasure of his fingers had already made her mind begin to go blank again, so she was certain she had misheard his words.

“But...”

Ezra’s hand worked her harder then, another one of his fingers sliding into her dripping, tight sheath to replace the one that had gone somewhere else, and she felt another deep pull of pleasure.

“If you come you will have to endure my punishment with me,” Ezra went on, then clamped his mouth over her right breast.

Lydia moaned loudly, her nails now breaking the skin of his shoulders as his tongue and teeth teased her relentlessly.

“So, whatever you do,” Ezra groaned, taking her pleasure higher and farther than it had ever been before, “Do. Not. Come.”

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Lydia's orgasm flooded from her as her body began to tremble uncontrollably; her moans pouring out in the same fashion until Ezra clamped a hand over her mouth.

"Oh, my poor, sweet thing," Ezra purred as he laid her down. "Looks like you are taking my punishment with me.

His manhood, rigid and ready once more, slid deep inside her without preamble, and Lydia moaned his name against his hand as he began to take full and utter possession of her. Her walls, already so slick from his teasing, clenched and suckled around him greedily the moment he was inside, and she trembled and bucked as he made her come apart again.

Ezra pulled his hand away from her mouth only to seal his lips there next, not giving her a chance to take a breath of her own before she was infused with his. His kiss was as demanding as his thrusts; stealing her breath and her senses as her body became completely his to claim.

It was too much, and somehow not at all enough, and she felt a desperation begin to build in her as she ran her nails hungrily over every bare expanse of his body that she could find.

"Harder," she breathed, tearing away from the kiss when she could not take any more, "I am yours. Make me yours."

Lydia saw pure love shimmer through the thick mist of arousal in Ezra's eyes, followed by gratitude. He kissed her roughly once more, then rose to his knees. She gasped when he threw her ankles up on his shoulders, then screamed his name as he

grabbed her hips and slammed back into her. Ezra's grip was tight on her thighs, pinning her to him as he became completely savage in his lovemaking.

She wanted this, Lydia realized as her body shuddered in utter pleasure with each intense, possessive thrust. She wanted this every day, every night, with Ezra and just Ezra, for the rest of her life. She wanted to slip into the darkness with him just like this, and she wanted to coat him in her light at the same time. They were meant to blend, to fuse. To never be apart.

Ezra's moans began to grow more ragged and desperate as he continued to lay his claim on her, his fingers digging deeper into her hips as he began to move at a more frantic pace.

"Lydia."

Ezra's voice was so thick with pleasure that her name came out ragged and raw as he thrust into her a final time and gripped her waist to the point of bruising.

Lydia moaned through the biting pain as she felt him burst inside of her and reveled in the feeling of his loss of control. A wicked thought entered her mind as she still felt him spasm, and so she began to pulse her inner muscles around Ezra's tool. He groaned deeply at the sensation, and locked his hips into her, allowing her to milk him dry.

Soft tendrils of pleasure began to wrap around her again as Ezra leaned his forehead against her ankle, then pressed kisses into her flesh as he slowly eased himself out of her. Lydia moaned in protest at the loss, but it was absorbed by his kiss as he came down to gather her into his arms.

"You lost," Ezra whispered.

Lydia could feel his grin against her ear as he kissed and nuzzled her, and she smiled sultrily back at him as she twisted to face him.

“You cheated.”

Ezra managed an indignant look over his pleasure-filled gaze.

“I did no such thing,” he replied calmly, circling his hand around her throat. She whimpered as he squeezed softly.

“In fact, I encouraged you not to come.”

Lydia laughed softly, then bit his lip lightly before kissing him.

“My opinion remains,” she teased.

“Cheated or not, I still won,” Ezra replied, shifting down to her breasts, one hand still around her throat.

“My punishment is now your punishment.” He nipped playfully at her nipple, then soothed the soft pain with his tongue before he drew her breast into her mouth.

Lydia moaned deeply as she thrust her fingers into his hair, holding him to her breast.

“Oh no,” she breathed, as his fingers began to swirl lazy trails down her throat, her waist her hips, “Whatever shall I do?”

CHAPTER TWENTY

Three Days Later

“Lydia,” Ezra muttered, his blue eyes opening.

Something felt wrong. The bed was too cool, too empty. He’d sensed his solitude before he even awoke, and it startled him. Ezra sat up as he scanned the bed, finding it empty, then got up to check the rooms. He called her name once more as he walked through the bathing, sitting, and dressing rooms, finding them all empty.

Anger spiked with fear shot through him as he stalked naked back into the bedroom and scanned the room once more. This time he spotted a folded piece of paper among the bedcovers.

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Sadly our “punishment” must come to an end, but do not worry, I will return before nightfall.

You should probably check on our guests, they are most likely as disgruntled as you are at this point.

Yours,

L

“Bloody hell,” Ezra growled, storming to his dressing room for some fresh clothes.

Moments later he was dressed and stomping out of his quarters, startling the servants in the hallway as the door slammed into the wall.

“Where in GOD’S name is my WIFE!?” Ezra roared, his voice echoing through the halls.

“That was exactly what I was about to ask you,” Duncan growled, storming toward him from the right.

In his hand, he held a similar piece of paper, and Ezra snarled.

“Son of a bitch,” he growled, snatching the letter from Duncan’s hands as he tossed his own toward his friend.

The contents read almost verbatim to Lydia’s, save for the punishment part.

“You care to explain this?” Ambrose demanded, joining them.

“It appears our wives have staged a coup,” Ezra muttered, snatching another identical letter from Ambrose’s hands.

He rolled his eyes and tossed the letter toward Duncan, who then crumpled them together and threw them on the floor.

“These damned women,” Ambrose seethed, heading toward the stairs. “Barbara took Helena with her too, as usual. I swear I am going to wring both of their necks for this.”

Ambrose’s voice tapered off as he started muttering something along the lines damned succubus, and three-day sex coma, and it piqued Ezra’s curiosity. It seemed to pique Duncan’s too, because he suddenly caught up to Ambrose, demanding details.

“Wait a minute, what have you been doing for the last three days?” Duncan demanded, stopping Ambrose on the second-floor landing.

Ezra narrowed his eyes as he watched Ambrose’s ears and neck turn scarlet red, and something pinged in his brain. Had their wives devised something?

“It has been an incredibly stressful time,” Ambrose growled defensively, picking at his jacket, “Some recuperation was required.”

Recuperation,” Ezra echoed, looking from Ambrose to Duncan.

His initial suspicions were confirmed when he noticed that they both wore the same flushed yet proud looks on their faces.

“They staged this,” Ezra admitted aloud, shaking his head as his thoughts grew dark.

“Wait a minute,” Ambrose stated, his face growing pale again. “Where is Morgan? Where is mysister?”

Ezra went blank as he suddenly pictured Morgan’s funeral, and heprayedhis foolish friend was not that reckless.

“Ambrose,” Ezra said warningly as the man suddenly pivoted and ran back up the stairs, heading toward Morgan’s room.

“Take a breath, mate,” Duncan pleaded.

“HELENA!!” Ambrose roared, kicking in the double doors to Morgan’s room.

Bewilderment and relief consumed Ezra as Morgan sat up from his bed along with not Helena, but two other women he and Ambrose knew.

“Maria?” Ezra stated.

She gave him a bashful look, then turned her eyes to Morgan before laying a hand on his chest and snuggling into his shoulder. Ezra looked from her to the other woman. Angel, hevaguely remembered, was her name. Another working girl at the hell.

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“What the bloody hell is going on?” Ambrose growled though he’d stopped his death march toward Morgan once he’d confirmed Helena’s absence.

Morgan’s smile was large and instantaneous.

“You know what, mate,” he said, getting out of bed and sliding into his trousers, “I have no idea. What I do know though, is that I am now in love with all of your wives.”

“You better explain what you mean,” Ezra warned, his hands balling up into fists.

“All I know is when I woke up after we got back from dealing with George I had these two lovely hens naked beside me; one holding a tray of food, the other averylarge,verytasty carafe of wine. And when I asked them what they were doing here, they simply informed me that the lady of the house had purchased their time and that they were to dedicate themselves to me for three days,” Morgan replied, in his usual unflustered, carefree manner as he continued to dress, “So, now, forget you three. My allegiance now lies with your wives.”

Ezra and Ambrose turned to one another at once. Did they know of the gaming hell? Of the women?

“How?” Ezra spat out, turning his glare toward Ambrose.

Ambrose stilled, his jaw ticking as he drew his brows down defensively.

“Your wives are too smart for you, boys,” Morgan sang, tossing a grape in his mouth

as he gave them a wink. "I would not try to hide anything else from them."

"You be quiet now," Ezra commanded, holding out a finger to Morgan.

He gave Ambrose a look that demanded an answer.

"It is not my fault," he sneered.

Then his eyes slowly moved to the carpet before he added in a much more defeated voice. "Barbara was a man when she found out about the gaming hell."

"Whatin the bloody hell does that mean, mate?" Morgan bellowed, his eyes as wide as Ezra's and Duncan's as they looked at Ambrose as if he was insane.

Morgan, of course, was the only one smiling; looking like a child catching Saint Nicholas placing down his presents.

"We are getting off-topic," Ambrose snapped, running a hand through his hair. "What matters right now is that our wives are gone, and we have no idea where they are!"

Ezra turned his pointed finger to Ambrose, fury running through his veins, "You will explain this later, Ambrose," he commanded, then dropped his hand and turned his glare back to Morgan.

"And you. You had better tell me where they went," Ezra demanded. His mind was reeling with all that had unfolded, but he could not let himself get off task now. He had to find Lydia.

"I told you I do not know," Morgan sighed, "But, perhaps one of your staff might. I never actually saw your wives these past three days, you see. I was a bit occupied with the two naked and single women in my bed plying me with food, drink, and sex. You

should try it. It might relax you.”

I have,Ezra thought, and it had been incredibly relaxing right up until he found Lydia’s letter. But it had all been a ruse; a plot to distract him and render him as mindless and sated as possible so she could step away.

Oh, there was going to be a punishment for this, he decided right then and there. A collar, first and foremost, so he could leash her since she so obviously needed it. And her ass was going to be as red as the blood he’d taste on her lips; her limbs would be useless from being tied to the bed for so long. He’d gag her. With many things.

“Witches,” Ambrose croaked, working his jaw in frustration as he clenched his fists. “When I...” Ambrose’s words cut off into a growl as he began to storm out of Morgan’s room and back down the stairs.

“That is enough,” Duncan growled, following them closely, “I am burning every single one of those smut books.”

“Someone has to know something,” Ambrose said loudly, then stormed toward the nearest servant as they reached the first floor.

“You there! Where have the duchesses and my sister gone?”

“Answer him, Radley, or there will be hell to pay,” Ezra threatened.

“Your Graces, I beg your pardon, but they would not tell me,” Radley answered quickly, bowing deeply toward them as they approached. “They did, however, take your new man, Terrence, with them. I believe they took your man Colter as well, Lord Curtis.”

“They what,” Ezra said flatly.

Punishment. Utter and pure torture when she got home.

“The Duchess of Frampton insisted that they were all perfectly safe with your guards, and that...” Radley faltered, his gaze falling to the floor.

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“Spit it out, damn it,” Ezra demanded.

“The duchesses stated you were each to follow the commands they left you, Your Graces, and that they would be home soon.”

“Let’s get the horses,” Duncan urged, already striding toward the front door, “They are probably in London. We can search every street until we find their doomed souls.”

“The horses are gone, Your Grace,” Radley replied. “The duchess had them all sent off this morning to the opposite side of Frampton.”

“Go get them!” Ezra, Duncan, and Ambrose commanded in unison.

“With respect, Your Graces, the path on foot would take hours both to the pasture and back. The ladies shall be returning long before the horses arrive.”

Something exploded in Ezra’s brain; a pain behind his right eye as his rage and helplessness reached a new level.

“When I get my hands on her,” Ambrose growled by Ezra’s side, his hands curling toward one another.

“Days,” Duncan spat out beside him, the fury apparent in his voice, “I am going to have her strung up for days.”

Ezra did not trust himself to speak aloud about what he was going to do to Lydia

when she returned.

“I need a bout in the ring,” Ezra grunted, striding toward his exercise room.

Ezra did not need to hear the mutterings of agreements from his two friends to know that they were close behind; all of them needing to work out the frustrations. Still, through the layers of rage and humiliation of being duped, Ezra felt a sense of pride. And, perhaps, after his need for retribution was sated, he would reward her for that.

“Thank you for seeing us,” Lydia said politely, curtsying graciously toward Sophia.

The Dowager Duchess of Frampton drew her beautiful porcelain face into a sneer and looked not toward Lydia and her friends, but at the two large men behind them.

Lydia had shared her plan with her friends to confront Sophia while their husbands were away, and though she had insisted that she should go alone, Alice, Barbara, Helena, and even Juliet, all refused.

“As if you gave me a choice,” Sophia replied bitterly, finally flicking her eyes over the group of women before her.

“I would offer you a seat, but that would indicate that you are welcome, and you are not.”

“I shall be quick about this then,” Lydia quipped back, unbothered by the woman’s sharp tone.

“I know my husband came here to question you, and you did not reach out to him, but you will not have contact with him any further.”

Sophia snickered and rolled her eyes.

“That will be easy,” she retorted.

“It will,” Lydia agreed, seeing as you will no longer be living in this part of the country.”

Sophia’s dark brows drew down as she sneered.

“I beg your pardon?” she seethed.

“This is my home! My right! You have no authority-”

“As reigning Duchess of Frampton I have every authority,” Lydia replied calmly.

“You, as a widow of the late Duke of Frampton, were awarded this residence as a courtesy, but that time has since passed. You come from wealth, yes? That is how you occupy this place with staff and parties and such?”

“My money is none of your concern,” Sophia snarled, her voice trembling with rage.

“You are, of course, absolutely correct,” Lydia agreed wholeheartedly, “But this house is. So, whether or not you are able to fund it, you shall be moving. Presently, in fact, though you do have a week to be completely gone.”

Lydia looked up and around the room, smiling as she took in the rather posh sitting parlor.

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“I believe I shall take this room for my own,” she mused. “I am sure we could pay you for your furnishings, I actually quite like them.”

“Like you could afford them,” Sophia retorted, taking the opportunity to strike, “Your husband inherited more than just his father’s blackened, numb heart. He shares his debt.”

A slow, evil grin spread across Sophia’s face as she glowered at Lydia, “Or has he not shared that with you? You must be careful with these Fernside men. They can only pretend to love.”

“Ezra is not his father any more than he is you,” Lydia stated flatly. “You know nothing about him and from this moment onward I will make sure you never will.”

Finished with the conversation, Lydia nodded to the others, and they turned to leave.

“My family’s courtesy will only extend so far!” Sophia yelled, panic entering her voice. “I have not...my older brother oversees the accounts, and he is not fond of me.”

Lydia slowly turned.

“How is that my problem?” she asked.

“It will be,” Sophia warned, her rage turning into something more evil. “If you stay with Ezra, you will be exactly where I am in just a few years. You think you know him, but you do not. I birthed the monster, and I swear to you that the man you think

you are protecting is not who he seems.”

“You will watch your tongue when you speak of our brother,” Alice warned, her voice grave as she stepped next to Lydia.

Sophia took a startled step back as all five women glared at her.

“You are all fools then,” she hissed. “Stupid, simpering, little fools. They will use you, mark my words. Ezra’s father and his friends were not good men. Their sons will surely be the same. I know mine will. You will be cursed like me. All of you!”

“That is enough of that,” Lydia sighed, snapping her fingers.

Terrence strode forward then, his pace so quick that Sophia stumbled back when he abruptly stopped and bowed to her.

“By order of Her Grace, the Duchess of Frampton, I offer you a small team of men and services to coordinate your eviction,” Terrence said, his voice stern but polite, “As commanded, all of your personal items and staff shall be gone by the end of the week.”

“This is outrageous!” Sophia yelled as Lydia and the others turned once more.

Out of the corner of her eye, Lydia caught Sophia lunging at her.

“I would not, my lady,” Terrence warned politely, stepping protectively between Sophia and Lydia.

“Listen to me,” Sophia hissed, demanding Lydia’s attention, “You will pay for this. Do you hear me?”

Ignoring Sophia's tantrum, Lydia continued out the door, her friends and Colter following closely behind.

"What a wretched woman," Barbara seethed as they settled into the carriage.

"I tried to warn you," Lydia replied.

She shared a weary but grateful smile with them all as their carriage began to take them home.

"You think she will actually leave?" Juliet asked.

"Legally she has no choice," Lydia replied, "According to Ezra's solicitor, everything I just told her was true. The house belongs to the Frampton heir, not Ezra's mother."

"Enough of her," Alice insisted, clearly over the subject. "We need to focus on our husbands. We are about to walk into a lion's den, my darlings."

"Not I," Juliet piped up, "You are dropping me off at Father's before you return, yes? I am meeting Edmund's mother tomorrow morning for a shopping trip."

"I shall be going with you," Helena said as their carriage drew up to the Knight house. "I want no part of what the three of you are about to pay for. Tell my brother where I am, though, so he does not pop a blood vessel."

"What do you think they're going to do to us when they find out what we were up to?" Barbara mused as the three of them continued back to Frampton.

"Well, we took Colter and Terrence, so it is not as if we went unprotected," Alice offered, though there was no hope in her voice.

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“Like that argument will help us,” Lydia laughed, feeling a tingle of excitement through her growing apprehension.

They all knew what would be waiting for them when they arrived. They had taken their controlling, over-protecting, overbearing husbands and hoodwinked them. Ezra was going to be furious with her when she told him the truth about where she had been, but with everything from the past finally over, she did not want any loose strings fraying about. The plan was worth it, no matter the consequences.

There they are,” Lydia said, peering out the window as the carriage drew up Frampton Drive.

Alice and Barbara each looked. There, already standing in the drive at the front of their house was their husbands. Even from the distance, Lydia could see the anger and worry marring their handsome faces, but as the three women looked back at one another they burst into laughter. Their men were some of the fiercest nobles in England, and they could throw all the temper tantrums they wanted, but they were also wrapped tightly around their fingers.

To their surprise, their husbands allowed the carriage to come to a complete stop and politely helped each of them out.

“Did you enjoy your little adventure today, my little dove?” Ezra asked warmly, taking Lydia’s hand as she stepped down.

“It was successful,” she replied, giving him a cheeky smile.

Ezra's blue eyes went dark right before he yanked Lydia toward him and tossed her onto his shoulder.

"Good," he growled, laying a firm spank across her backside without delay, "Because it was the last one you will ever have."

Pleasure bloomed through the pain in her left cheek, and she smiled wickedly. We'll see about that, she thought, as Ezra started carrying her toward the front steps.

"I'm going to spank you until you are red, you hear me?" Lydia heard Ambrose say to Barbara as she watched them from her new view.

"You can try," Barbara smiled, then gasped as Ambrose pulled her to his chest; his mouth clamping down on hers.

"Home. Now," Duncan demanded.

He too had his wife flung over his shoulder, stalking away from the rest of them and toward the waiting carriage.

"Good luck, ladies!" Alice called over Duncan's shoulder.

"The three of you will need it," Ambrose agreed, hauling Barbara to their own carriage. "You are so paying for doing this to me. Do you have any idea how worried I was?!"

"That is what I was hoping for," Lydia heard Barbara say tauntingly before Ambrose deposited her into their own carriage.

"Ezra, I am not going to leave again," Lydia sighed as he carried her inside. "You can put me down, and I will follow you."

“Where did you go?” he demanded, ignoring her as he took her up the stairs.

“I had to serve an eviction notice,” she replied.

Ezra stopped so fast he swayed, and he shifted her in his arms so he could look at her.

“I will explain everything,” Lydia promised, cupping his cheek. “But first, keep taking me upstairs. I am suspecting a punishment of some sort is waiting there for me.”

Though it was obvious Ezra was still furious, a devilish grin spread across his face as arousal flickered through his eyes, and he resumed climbing the stairs.

“Damn right there is.”

EPILOGUE

Four Months Later

“It is a gorgeous piece,” Tabitha Perth, the mother of Lydia’s new brother-in-law praised, pointing a finger at Lydia’s choker. “Wherever did you get it?”

Lydia blushed as she fought the urge to touch the sterling silver collar that laced around her throat. Ezra had made true on his threat of a collar and leash, and now she wore the collar every day.

“I had it made for her,” Ezra said, placing a hand on Lydia’s shoulder as she joined them.

Lydia looked up to see the utter love and possession in his eyes and felt herself grow warm.

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“It is beautiful, is it not?” he asked Tabitha, brushing his fingers gently across the neckpiece. “And it suits her so well.”

“It truly does,” Tabitha answered, smiling at him warmly. “I only hope that my Edmund will treat Juliet as well as you treat her older sister.”

Lydia struggled to hide her scoff in a cough as she felt Ezra’s silent laughter travel from his hand to her body, and they both shared a knowing glance. If only Tabitha knew how close her now daughter-in-law had been to being in Lydia’s place.

“I am sure he will,” Ezra said politely, quickly regaining his composure. “My dear sister-in-law has done nothing but sing his praises since their engagement, and from what I have seen today, the feeling is entirely mutual.”

Tabitha let out a happy sigh as they all turned to look at the bride and groom; both of them looking joyous and in love as they greeted their guests to their reception.

“He is absolutely smitten,” Tabitha went on, “I am lucky, you know, to have a son that has found love. It is so rare.”

She turned back to Ezra and Lydia, studying them for a moment before smiling again.

“You two have found it,” she declared, her hazy blue eyes shining with warmth, “That much is obvious.”

Lydia smiled warmly at her as she felt Ezra’s hand slip around her waist, pulling her closer. Yes, it really was obvious now, wasn’t it?

“I see your collar got another compliment,” Ezra mused quietly after Tabitha made her way back to her husband.

“That does not mean it is appropriate,” Lydia murmured back, though she did so as she was smiling.

While Lydia had received every form of punishment she had predicted that Ezra had waiting for her, she had also received a gift: Her collar. It truly was a beautiful piece; several thin strands of sterling silver wound whimsically around one another like vines and nestled in the center was a vividly blue aquamarine gem; identical to the color of Ezra’s eyes.

A delicate sterling silver chain leash was also gifted along with it; one that Ezra kept in his pocket every day and hooked to her collar any moment they were alone. While she had loved the collar, she had balked at the leash at first. Until that was, he showed her how he planned on using it. Now, knowing the leash was in his pocket, ready to be put on at his pleasure, made her weak with anticipation. Still, she loved to tease him about it.

“You do not like it?” he asked, feigning a hurt tone. Then he smirked.

“Well, if someone had not snuck away, we would not need it, would we?” Ezra taunted.

He began to swirl lazy circles with his fingers on her back, making her tingle. He then trailed them up her spine, to the back of her collar, and gave it a small tug. The soft whimper let loose from her lips before she could help it, and she blushed as she caught herself. Looking around the reception hall wildly, she searched for anyone who might have heard her. To her relief, everyone seemed too involved with their own conversations to notice.

“We are at Juliet’s wedding!” she hissed but took another step backward toward his chest.

She felt Ezra tug her collar again as he let out a cocky chuckle and felt her lower belly clench with arousal as her back become flush with Ezra’s chest. His other arm circled her waist, pinning her to him as he whispered into her ear “And?”

“All right, you two, show some decorum, would you,” Barbara murmured just as Ezra placed a warm kiss on Lydia’s temple, and moved a small step away.

Lydia looked to the left and laughed as she saw Barbara’s cheeky grin.

“Indeed,” Ambrose muttered, giving Ezra a bemused look. “You two are as bad as Alice and Duncan with their little cuff thing.”

“Oh, come now, Ambrose, you should be careful where you cast your stones,” Lydia replied sweetly, reaching back to pat Ezra’s cheek, “Barbara told us all about what happened at your wedding reception.”

Laughter and amusement bubbled out of Lydia as she and Ezra both watched Ambrose’s eyes grow wide and his complexion pale.

“You did not,” he stated, casting a suspicious glance at Barbara.

“Oh, come, darling, don’t be such a bore,” Barbara pouted, reaching up to grip his chin and kiss him.

Lydia watched in amusement as Ambrose’s rigid nature suddenly softened, and when Barbara pulled away from the kiss she had to bite back a laugh when he sighed and asked, “How can I be a bore with you as my wife?”

“Oh, God,” Morgan gagged, rolling his eyes as he approached. “What is it with this wedding? It seems to have everyone acting inappropriately.”

“Inappropriately,” Ezra laughed. “Since when do you believe in the concept?”

Morgan grunted, looking quite miserable as he swirled the whiskey in his glass.

“Since now, apparently,” he grunted, then swallowed the rest of his drink.

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Lydia's smile dropped a little as she took in the unconcealed loneliness in Morgan's eyes. He was the golden-hearted fool of the four orphaned dukes. Handsome, charming, carefree, hardly ever unable to make a joke; ladies of all ranks had to be swarming to him. So, if he was miserable, why had he not picked one?

"I believe I shall pay my salutations and well wishes to the bride and groom, and then I am going to go," Morgan stated, setting his glass down on a nearby table.

"Morgan, mate..." Ambrose said, also sensing their friend's sad demeanor.

"I am fine," Morgan replied, cutting him off.

He kissed Barbara and Lydia each on the cheek and then took turns shaking Ambrose's and Ezra's hands.

"Get in the ring with me tomorrow," Ezra said as he shook Morgan's hand.

It was not so much a request as an instruction, and Morgan nodded as though he understood. They did not just box when there was anger. It was useful for many emotions.

"All right, mate," he agreed, then clapped him on the shoulder before heading toward Juliet and Edmund.

"Where is he going?" Duncan asked, joining the group along with Alice.

"Off to drown his sorrows, I suspect," Ambrose sighed, all of them watching Morgan

closely as he warmly greeted the bride and groom.

“We know where he is going. I shall check in on him later and make sure he makes it home tonight,” Ezra stated.

Lydia nodded as she slipped her hand beneath her husband’s jacket and placed it on his warm chest directly above his beating heart. In the three days that she had held Ezra captive in his rooms when they were not sleeping, eating, or making love, he had told her what they had learned about their fathers.

Ezra himself seemed to be taking it all in his stride, but he had mentioned his concern for Ambrose and Morgan; for unlike he and Duncan, they had actually been loved by their fathers. Ambrose had Barbara now, and in the talks they’d had many times since their coup, Lydia knew her friend was helping her husband through his struggles.

Duncan had Alice, and Ezra had her, she thought as she glanced up to look at Ezra’s handsome face. But Morgan had no one.

“What is it?” Ezra asked, his grip on her suddenly becoming tighter as he looked down at her. “Something is wrong.”

Lydia felt a burst of warmth at her husband’s concern. He noticed everything when it came to her, it seemed, even when her thoughts began to change.

“I am just worried for Morgan,” she replied calmly.

Understanding shone in his eyes, and he gave a subtle nod, but said nothing.

“Come,” Alice said, taking Lydia’s hand, “We came over to tell you all that Juliet and Edmund are asking for all of us.”

Lydia tucked away her worrisome thoughts of Morgan as they all went to see Juliet and Edmund and showered the two once more in hugs, kisses, and congratulations.

“It truly is the most beautiful wedding I have ever seen,” Lydia gushed for the twentieth time.

And, for the twentieth time, Juliet beamed as brightly as the sun. She had put so much effort into creating the romantic ceremony and reception, and it had paid her back in full. Still, nothing in the room shone quite as brightly as Edmund, who never took his eyes off Juliet for more than three seconds.

There was true lifelong dedication and love in every look he gave her, and Lydia felt her heart swell as she thought of how differently they all would have ended up if she had not switched places with Juliet almost a year ago.

“Thank you,” Juliet whispered into her ear as she pulled Lydia tight, and she knew her sister was having the same thought.

“Thank you,” Lydia whispered back, holding her close. “For being brave enough to say something.”

“Do you regret it?”

Lydia stirred against his chest, and he felt remorse slice through him as he realized he’d woken her up. With his palm, he scooped up some warm water and poured it over her exposed shoulders in apology as she sighed and settled into him again.

After the wedding they returned home filled with a strange sort of intensity. Their lovemaking, usually filled with wicked words and teases, had been silent and wild; even their usual moans cut down to desperate gasps and grunts. Afterward, they’d been exhausted, and barely had the energy to pour themselves into the tub.

Regret what?" she asked softly.

"Marrying me. Taking your sister's place as my wife. Our wedding certainly did not look like that..." he paused, then added, "And you and I certainly did not look at one another like those two did today. We barely looked at one another at all."

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He knew by the way Lydia looked at him that she could hear the wariness and guilt in his voice. She slid further up, wrapping her arms around his neck. Even now, months after the marks had faded, she still reverently touched his throat where the rope had nearly taken his life; as if to make sure it had not somehow found its way around his neck again.

Ezra felt a heavy emotion as she did this and lowered his eyes further. Lydia would not stand for it, and she tugged a fistful of his damp, black hair, forcing his gaze up. He smirked as she did so and kissed her lips.

“I am nothing but thankful,” Lydia swore, looking into his blue eyes. “Our story may be different from theirs, but that does not make it any less beautiful and real.”

Ezra’s brows tensed slightly as his throat grew tight; the closest he would ever come to shedding an emotional tear, and his arms pinned her against him as he buried his face in her neck.

“We need a honeymoon,” he murmured as he nuzzled.

Lydia smiled, looking relieved that they were finally moving away from the terrifying thoughts of what had almost befallen them.

“Is that not what our three days of punishment were?” she teased.

Ezra pulled back with an offended look, and she giggled.

“I am still not sure I have punished you enough for running off like that,” he

snickered.

Arousal simmered through Ezra's veins as he thought of all the devilishly delectable things he had done to take away her ability to walk, write, and even speak for several days. To her credit though, she had rendered him quite useless in return. His little minx of a wife did not back down from his challenges, no matter how intimidating he made them.

"I think you are right," she agreed, slowly beginning to gyrate her hips atop him, making him hiss in a breath.

"Obviously," Ezra murmured sarcastically, bucking his hips back into hers.

"Maybe a honeymoon is in order," she continued, as he lifted her out of the tub. "You could punish me nonstop for weeks then."

"Punishment? Oh, no, little dove, you certainly deserve a reward," Ezra replied, his wicked smile growing as he carried her, still dripping wet, to the fur rug sprawled before the roaring fire in the hearth.

"I could take you to Spain," he went on, spreading her arms above her head, "And Greece, and France."

His hands trailed down her arms and over her breasts, making her whimper as he softly pinched her nipples before moving down to her waist.

"And what would my reward be?" Lydia breathed as his hands parted her thighs.

"Mmmm..." Ezra murmured, taking soft licks at her center, "I think I will create our real wedding night everywhere we go."

Ezra felt Lydia shift uncomfortably, as if confused, but when she looked into his

eyes, she quickly understood what he was actually referring to and blushed deeply. He was talking about the night they had consummated, not the actual wedding night. The night they had finally stopped taunting one another and bared their true desires for each other in the public park in Mayfair for anyone to hear and see.

It was not the only time that they had made love outside, either. The weather had begun to change, the summer slipping into a cool fall shortly after George had been arrested, but the coolness of the air had not stopped them from frolicking naked among the falling leaves of his country estate two or three dozen times since.

“You wouldn’t,” she whispered, though she was smiling as Ezra rose back up and settled his rigid manhood at the entrance of her dewy, parted lips.

Her body ached for him to simply thrust it in; to twitch his hips just enough so that she could feel him.

“Oh, but I would,” Ezra said smoothly, continuing his teasing with his hips as he watched her come undone.

His desire only heightened as he watched the challenge in Lydia’s eyes slowly transform into willing obedience the more he teased her. Bringing his hands up, Ezra laced his fingers through hers, and eased his hips forward, sinking ever so slowly into her.

“Don’t you just love it when we do this outside?” Ezra asked.

Lydia let out a deep moan as she arched into him, the word “yes” barely audible at the end of it.

He hypnotically moved his hips, carrying each thrust fluidly up to his base, then drawing out to the edge of his tip at a steady, unrushed pace.

“And you love it when you feel me take your control; when you’re left unable to think of nothing but how good I make you feel.”

“God, yes,” Lydia moaned, fully at his mercy.

“And you know that you are perfectly safe,” Ezra rasped, lapping his tongue over her breast, “Because I will always protect you.”

Lydia let out a strangled cry as she thrust her hips needily against his, but he let loose one of her hands to stop her.

“Because you are mine.” He growled, feeling that possessive nature slide over him again.

“Yours,” Lydia whispered, and then the two of them were lost.

The End?