



Duke of the Sun

Author: *Patricia Haverton*

Category: Romance, Adult, Historical

Description: "Two years you are gone, and now you expect me to give in to you?"

"Always and forever, Duchess. You are mine."

Forced to marry, Cordelia hates her husband. So when he abandons her hours after their wedding, she is free. Until, two years later, he returns. And he dares to have demands.

Duke Michael does not care for his wife or the ton. But when he is branded a killer, he must come back to repair his reputation, starting with the wildling of a wife he left behind...

Five events together, that is what Michael demands. And Cordelia has no choice but to comply. Even as she realizes that each one brings her closer to a brand new ruination: falling for her own husband...

*If you like powerful Dukes, loving Duchesses and a marvelous depiction of the majestic Regency and Victorian era, then Duke of the Sun is the novel for you.

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PROLOGUE

“Cordelia!”

Outside of Cordelia Celeston’s bedroom window, she watched a flock of geese land on the lawn in front of Darkenhill Manor. There were a good amount of them resting or grazing the grass for something to munch on. An easel with a squat canvas sat in front of her, and she dragged her brush across it, color filling the blank page. The sound of her sister’s, Irene, sharp voice made her twitch the wrong way and the geese she recreated suddenly had an oddly twisted neck.

“Devils,” Cordelia hissed, lowering her brush and snatching up the strip of cloth that was already stained with paint.

The door to her bedroom snapped open.

“Cordelia,” Irene repeated, now standing on the threshold. “Did you not hear me?”

“Oh, quite the contrary,” she muttered as she dabbed the cloth against her mistake. “I heard you very well.”

Irene sighed and delicately waded into the room, her hands on her hips. “What have you done now?”

She stepped back, extending a hand to the unfinished painting. “Well, the geese have arrived earlier than usual this year. I have been wanting to -”

“For heaven's sake, Cordelia,” Irene interjected. She shook her head as though she reprimanded a child. “I don’t mean the painting.”

Cordelia lowered the cloth. “Other than being here, I haven’t done a thing!”

“Father is in a raging mood over you.”

“Look at me, Irene,” she snapped, gesturing towards the canvas. “I have been trying to paint. Whatever is on Father’s mind has nothing, and I mean nothing, to do with -”

A shout carried through the halls of Darkenhill, just barely reaching Cordelia’s room. Even from the distance, she could almost make out the noise, noticing how it oddly sounded a bit like her own name. Cordelia flinched. Unfortunately, it was a sound she knew all too well.

Irene raised a slender, proud brow. “You were saying?”

“I still haven’t done a thing.”

“Either way, you better come down to the parlour.”

Cordelia shook her head. “Is Duncan there as well?”

“Of course he is.”

She shook her head even further. Dealing with her Father’s wrath alongside her stern elder brother was a recipe for disaster. Even though Irene was the eldest out of the three of them, Duncan acted as the head of them all, destined to take over their Father’s legacy. There was no doubt of Duncan’s love for the family, but he rarely showed it as love. Cordelia eyed her painting. She’d avoid them like the plague if she had to.

“Let Father find me himself if there is a true problem,” Cordelia said, turning her attention back out the window. The geese were fluttering about and the painting wasn’t even halfway finished.

“There are more important things than your art, you know.”

“Not all of us can be as beloved as you, Irene.”

Irene scoffed. “You ought to come before he sends a servant.”

She returned to her painting eagerly, ignoring her sister. Normally, she wouldn’t linger for too long. In fact, Cordelia’s decisions were her own, and her siblings rarely got involved when their father was already in on it. They handled her rebelliousness long enough to know that the Duke of Darken would, eventually, be the final straw. After dipping the brush in a pool of auburn then a quick dunk in the water, Cordelia began to fill in the geese’s wings, carefully stroking along where the feathers laid. All the while, Irene remained in her room.

“I’ve never seen you so stubborn before,” Cordelia mumbled as she leaned in close to the canvas.

Irene sighed. “Stubbornness is not the same as responsibility. If Father called me, I’d be coming to his aid in an instant.”

“There,” Cordelia mused, “Is the difference between you and I, sister.”

What Irene so effortlessly called stubborn was something quite opposite to Cordelia. She had done enough for her father. An upcoming marriage was beneath her belt, one she argued and fought against for longer than she pleased. In the end, the betrothal remained, and Cordelia planned on living the last bits of her freedom in whichever way she pleased. She was owed at least that, wasn’t she?

“Lady Cordelia,” another voice came from the threshold.

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She turned to see one of the Manor's footmen standing there, bowing his head respectfully.

"The Duke requests your presence in the parlor."

Irene's slender brown brow rose. "Did you hear that, Cordelia?"

"No need to rub it in," she mumbled, finally lowering the brush onto the easel.

After straightening out her dress, not bothering to swipe at the bits of dried paint that clung to her fingers and arms, Cordelia held her head up high as she crossed her bedroom. Irene followed silently behind her with gentle steps. All the way through the halls and down the stairs, Cordelia felt her heart beginning to patter harder against her chest. Not that confronting her father frightened her, but rather, there was the ever present gnawing thought in the back of her mind that never dared to leave her.

Cordelia grew more whittled every time she realized she was not as elegant as Irene, or as serious as Duncan. The closer she came to her father, hearing the distant sounds of his disgruntled shouts, the more she remembered how much of an outlier she was in the society she needed to be fluent in.

Irene took a few longer strides to walk beside her. "Perhaps you might regard Father with a higher respect than you have in the past."

"What on earth for?"

Irene shook her head with disappointment. "You never understand, Cordelia."

They came upon the parlor before their conversation could continue any further. Cordelia marched inside proudly. There wasn't a thing she had done wrong, at least, nothing she knew of off the top of her head. Never before was her painting a problem, especially when it kept her from doing something the family would, once again, feel ashamed over. Not that she outrightly did something to procure shame. No, Cordelia just happened to not fit the mold the rest of her siblings so easily squeezed into. Was that such a bad thing? She took in a deep breath as she rounded the room to stand in front of her flaming father.

Behind him, Duncan had a hand on the top of their father's seat. He watched Cordelia with a tight frown, his head already swaying with chagrin.

"Good afternoon, Father," Cordelia said. "You called for me?"

Solomon Celeston, the Duke of Darken, was a fairly frail man. None of them could blame him. The man carried his Dukedom along with the succession of his children on his shoulders. Their mother passed years ago, leaving him solely responsible for their courtships and future legacies. While Irene and Duncan remained blessed children, willing to be the pictures of perfection in society, Cordelia never once strayed from being the odd one out.

He made an effort to rise from his chair but collapsed into it instead, receiving a steady hand from Duncan on his shoulder. Solomon breathed in sharply, looking up at Cordelia with an untamed glare. He carried the wispy sheets of scandal sheets in one hand.

"You will truly be the death of me, child," he snapped.

Cordelia fought the urge to roll her eyes. "What have I done now, Father?"

"Respect, Cordelia," Duncan warned.

Solomon thrust the pages towards her. "All of the Ton know the scandal that has now found its way into our family," he explained. "What say you, child? Explain yourself!"

Cordelia reached for the pages. The daily prints always had some sort of scandal recently committed listed in a short column within the papers, but she rarely paid them any mind. All of it sounded rather improper, and yet, she was the one known as being too free spirited for the Ton. With a wary eye, Cordelia scanned the column.

"The foolish boy has thrust our name into ruin," Solomon continued, smacking his fist against the armrest. "Do you have any idea what this means for your family, Cordelia? What you have done to us now?"

She shook her head, the words not making any sense. "Run away?" she murmured, reading the column aloud. "The Earl of Vaun has...run away?"

"He is safe from most scandal," Duncan suddenly added.

Irene huffed from her spot on the sofa. "Nevermind the consequences we shall now face in the light of his poor actions."

Cordelia could barely hear them. Not that she was sad. In fact, a bit of her glistened with a newfound hope. There was no piece of her that wished to marry Colin Evans, the Earl. He was a fine gentleman, as most happened to be, but it was obvious that he too had no interest in her. But to run off with a lover? All the way to Gretna Green? She lowered the pages, almost dropping them to the floor.

If anything, she was quite jealous. The Earl was officially free of unwarranted responsibility and the repercussions of his actions. Instead, it now rested in Cordelia's lap.

“Are you proud, child?”

Cordelia raised her face to her father once more. “The Earl is more than capable of making decisions on his own,” she said.

“Do you have no care for what this has done to our name?”

“Perhaps it is a blessing we were blind to.”

An uneasy silence took over the parlor. With shaking legs, Solomon slowly rose to his feet, instantly towering over his youngest daughter. Behind him, Duncan stood steadfast, one hand out to steady his father if need be. Cordelia glanced between them and grew sour.

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“Ablessing?” Solomon repeated.

“Now,” she continued in a smaller voice, “I might be free to -”

Solomon raised his hand, silencing her immediately. “What you so ignorantly believe to be a blessing in disguise will be the thing that drives you into an irreversible state of ruin. You are lucky, child, to have a father such as I to have already procured you another option. Thank me, thank your brother, thank the standing your sister has within society.” He leaned forward even more, his shadow casting over Cordelia ominously. “Without them, you would have been thoroughly shunned and forgotten long, long ago.”

Cordelia’s hands tightened into fists and she did not bother trying to hide them.

“Can you, child, at least tell me what you did to drive the man off?”

She gaped. “Drive off?” she repeated. “What do you take me for, a wild woman incapable of polite society? Just because I -”

“Silence!” Solomon interjected as he returned to his seat. “After everything you have put this family through, you lost the right to defend yourself.”

His words stung deeper than she thought they would. Cordelia was no stranger to disappointing her family. She noticed the looks on their faces and knew exactly what they meant. Even more so now that Colin decided to run off, landing her in a spot that framed her to look like a piece of discarded clothing. For a moment she considered the few meetings she had with Colin, the promenades they had taken. Perhaps there

was something she did wrong, something that settled in with him and pushed him towards fleeing to Gretna Green with an even better woman.

Cordelia shook her head. Never would she succumb to that thinking.

“We have one last resort,” Solomon continued, talking more so towards Duncan than her. “Unfortunately there is no time for proper introductions or anything else respectable.”

“Do you mean I won’t even meet the man before being forced to marry?” Cordelia blurted.

Solomon’s head flung back towards her in a wild rage. “The longer we wait, the more this scandal settles in on the Ton! The less they are to forget it, and the easier they are to ridicule us in all forms of society! Do you wish for your cherished siblings to face the wrath of society for your misgivings?”

She bit back the things she really wanted to say. “No, Father.”

“Then you will do as I say,” he snapped, “And make sure you keep this one.”

Cordelia jerked her head away, the angry hot tears threatening to streak across her face. “Might I please be excused, Father?”

Solomon jerked his hand around at her without saying another word.

She spun around on her heel and stormed out of the parlor. Shooting through the hall, Cordelia marched till she came to the pair of double doors that led out to the gardens behind Darkenhill Manor. Shoving them open, a burst of fresh air crashed against her face, and she inhaled it eagerly. In the distance, she heard the squawks and quacks of the geese. They shot by overhead, flying towards their next destination, and leaving

her behind.

Behind her, gentle footsteps drew near until Irene stood at her right.

“Do you know who I am to be betrothed to?” Cordelia asked.

“The Duke of Solshire,” Irene replied. “But you will love him all the same.”

“Love?” Cordelia repeated. “What makes you so sure?”

Irene sighed wistfully. “Because you must.”

“I refuse.”

“Why must you be against us so much, Cordelia? It is not like you do things we haven’t already done before you. It is not like this is out of the ordinary, or not what has been expected of you all along.”

Cordelia looked over the gardens and past them, all the way towards the rolling hills and the distant horizon. “Mother always told me to never be rid of my free-spirit,” she murmured. “‘Never forget the things that make you you.’ That’s what she said.”

Irene eyed her silently for a moment. “Mother is gone, Cordelia.”

“I’m well aware.”

“We are here,” she continued. “Father is here. Don’t you wish to see him proud, to see him happy in his aging years?”

“Tell me when he has sought out my own happiness, and I will say yes.”

Irene sighed heavily again, shaking her head. Pity laced her gentle green eyes. “I fear your stubbornness might drive you far away from this family, Cordelia. You can only be so carefree for so long.”

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“Society has already shunned me,” Cordelia muttered. “Will you do the same, Irene?”

Her sister remained quiet again, as if she listened to the distant birdsong and the gentle breeze that brushed by them. Eventually she reached, giving Cordelia’s cold hand a firm squeeze before she turned back towards the doors leading into Darkenhill Manor.

“If you’re not careful, dear sister, I’m afraid you’ll be all alone sooner rather than later.”

Before Cordelia could reply or question her sister’s cryptic nature, Irene walked back into the Manor, shutting the doors behind her. Cordelia looked over the fields once more, watching the stablehand move in and out of the wooden stables to the east. Even though she had yet to meet her husband to be, to know the life that had been placed upon her lap, Cordelia couldn’t help but feel as though she were sinking. In that instant, she was oddly jealous of a flock of wild birds, imagining what it would be like to fly free of the place that so often held her back.

“If only,” she murmured as the geese disappeared over the horizon.

CHAPTER1

Cordelia lingered outside of the church. Not many people were in attendance at her wedding. It was an affair with incredibly short notice, just under a week from when her Father told her she would be wed. Only her immediate family attended, and she hadn’t seen anyone enter for the groom’s side. It was looking to become an incredibly grim ceremony after all.

Out from the church came Irene, looking as perfect as she always did. The church was within London, and passerby eyed Irene with smiles and polite bows. Irene's gentle smile never once left her face, not until her gaze fell upon Cordelia.

"We are all waiting on you, sister."

Cordelia frowned. "Let them wait. This is the rest of my life."

"You are far too dramatic. Acting as though this is something no other woman your age does."

Cordelia pulled at the thread in her gloves nervously. "This is incredibly fast, Irene."

"Sometimes, that is just how it plays out."

"Can you tell me that my anxieties are nothing more than a fluke, then?"

Irene sighed, finally giving her a small smile. "You are right, Cordelia. The speed of this marriage is something no Lady wants. I feel for you."

Cordelia bit back a bitter laugh. The words felt hollow, even if Irene didn't mean for them to be. In the end, Cordelia was expected to march down that aisle with nothing but a pleased smile on her face. She was the reason behind the scandal, according to her father, and it was her responsibility to see it right before it took too much of a hold on their family name. But she had never been someone to easily succumb to the confines of aristocratic society.

"Tell me about the Duke."

Irene raised a brow. "I know little about him."

“I have known you all my life, Irene. I think I can tell when you fib or skate by the truth by now,” Cordelia muttered with an arched brow. “You know as much as I that rumors circle the Ton about the Duke of Solshire.”

“Why ask if you already know?”

Cordelia glanced over at her. “I ask for my eldest sister’s support in the next stages of my life,” she said. “Just because I know there are rumors doesn’t mean I know them well.” Taking in a deep breath, Cordelia calmed the raging nerves that threatened to make her burst with anger. The last thing she needed was to drive her sister further away with her rageful tongue. “Do this for me, won’t you, Irene?”

Irene held her hands in front of her and looked around. “Will you go in once I tell you?”

Cordelia nodded. “I promise.”

“His name is Michael Rayson,” Irene said in a quiet voice. “The late Duke of Solshire passed away only recently. The Duke himself is said to be,” she paused, leaning closer to Cordelia’s ear, “A beast, for a lack of better terms.”

“Abeast?” Cordelia repeated. “Father has signed me off to abeast?”

“Calm down,” Irene snapped. “You said you’d go in once I told you!”

Cordelia looked away, trying to peer into the opened church doors but only seeing shadows and silhouettes. “This is ridiculous.”

“Ridiculous or not,” Irene said, grabbing a hold of her wrist, “You promised to go in, Cordelia. Do not -”

“Make another scandal for my family to deal with? Is that what you were going to say?”

Irene sighed. “Do this one thing, Cordelia. Irregardless of the Duke and his beastly ways. Do this for your family, won’t you?”

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Cordelia looked away. It felt as though there were two sides of her, one that ached to be accepted and cherished by the family she adored. And the other, the one that craved a future of her own making, something she could build herself from her own desires. She knew long ago that she would never reach the standards Irene had set out before her. She could never be as poised, as gentle, as respectable, as graceful. But perhaps she could do one thing.

“Let’s go, then,” Cordelia said. “I believe I’ve made everyone wait long enough.”

A sweet smile spread across Irene’s face. “Wonderful, sister.” Irene slipped into the church before her.

Cordelia drew in a deep breath to gather her courage and held her head up high. No matter what, she thought to herself, do not forget your confidence. Not even a beastly husband could tie her down, shape her into something she wasn’t. Marriage or not, Cordelia knew herself, and would never once give that up.

As she passed into the church, the room became clear. There were, in fact, not many people attending the ceremony. Irene just slipped back into her seat when Cordelia began to walk down the aisle.

Her curiosity soared higher as her gaze landed on the Duke of Solshire. He was taller than most men she had interacted with, even her father, who normally loomed over her whenever he stood. The Duke’s brown hair rested just below his ears, not too long to be scorned by the Ton’s high standards. He was as broad as he was tall, shoulders reaching out on either side of him.

The closer Cordelia came to the altar, the more she felt the urge to shrink backwards like a frightened animal. Though she wasn't one to succumb to fear easily, the Duke's aura radiated in waves, his intimidation and commanding presence incredibly hard to ignore. It was mainly in his narrowed, dark stare, with a tightly furrowed brow. He watched her approach steadily, not once pulling his gaze away. Cordelia held his stare, despite it sending a shocking chill down her back.

Finally, Cordelia stood directly across from him as the rector took his spot in front, beginning to give his remarks to the small congregation. The Duke frown stretched across his face as he turned towards the rector, a distant look in his eyes.

Cordelia quickly forgot her manners. She glanced over at him with any chance she got. Not once did the frown lift from his lips. And down, when she managed to stare at his folded hands, her curiosity grew even more. Small, pale scars lined his hands, striking across his tanned skin like lightning bolts. The artist in her wanted to reach for him, to investigate his hands without a care for decorum.

The Duke's gaze snapped over to her when she clung to his hands for too long. His frown deepened, if that was at all possible.

Cordelia's heart beat even faster. Whether it was from embarrassment or the feeling of his hot stare clinging to her, she couldn't tell. In the end, she called it embarrassment and nothing else. Even when she looked away, focusing back on the rector when he produced simply made wedding rings, the Duke's observant stare remained on the side of her face.

The ceremony flew by and before Cordelia knew it, all of it was over. Her life was bound to the Duke of Solshire, and suddenly, she had an important title of her own. The scandal that once hung around her neck became a distant memory, the idea of once marrying the Earl of Vaun sounding like someone else's life.

The moment the rector said his last lines, he gave the Duke a firm nod.

“Very well,” the Duke finally said.

Cordelia raised her ace to him in front of the altar. Somehow, that wasn’t what she expected his voice to sound like. It was gruff, deep, coming from the very depths of his chest. It wasn’t quiet or timid, like she assumed. The Duke spoke like he didn’t want to. Cordelia was so windswept by him that she didn’t even notice his lips moving.

“Are you deaf?”

Cordelia blinked. “I’m sorry?”

He glowered. “At least you aren’t mute,” he muttered, taking a few steps down the aisle. “Say your goodbyes. We leave at once.” And just like that, the Duke stormed down the aisle, shouldering by Cordelia’s lingering family.

Irene approached her first. “Congratulations, Cordelia.”

“I believe it is your Grace now,” she teased.

Duncan scoffed, crossing his arms over his chest. “You are the last person I thought would care for titles.”

“I don’t,” Cordelia said with a shrug. “But I thought I’d be more like my family.” The teasing barely touched her brother. He huffed, raising a brow but not daring to laugh.

Solomon walked between her siblings. “If you manage to ruin even this,” he suddenly snapped, “I will no longer consider you to be my daughter.”

Before the words even sunk into Cordelia, he stormed off, staggering down the aisle in the same fashion of the beastly Duke. Duncan reached to give Cordelia a light kiss on the cheek before leaving the church with the rest of them. Irene was the only one to remain, her smile sad and small.

“I will miss your free spirit, Cordelia,” she said.

Cordelia glanced at her. “I’m sure you want to run off as fast as the rest of them.”

Her sister let out a heavy sigh, but did not argue. Irene barely smiled before she followed the rest of the family out of the church. Cordelia remained at the altar a moment longer, staring at the threshold as the Duke’s carriage rolled to a stop at the steps. She breathed in slowly, trying but failing to steady the racing beneath her chest.

Suddenly, the church’s exit was shrouded by an intimidating silhouette. The Duke of Solshire stood there, staring down the aisle at her with a dark and unreadable expression. Even with the distance, and the shadows casting dangerously across his face, Cordelia could not ignore the unusual chill that rolled down her back.

“Wife,” the Duke said, his voice ringing throughout the quiet and empty church. “We leave now.”

Cordelia walked back down the aisle, towards the haunting rest of her life.

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Solshire's estate was brooding and medieval, something she had never seen before. Spire-like towers rose around the main building, an unkempt garden wrapping around the side. The inside was as bone-chilling as the outside. The walls were painted dark colors, the curtains draped across almost all the windows. Some rooms had white cloths pulled over the furniture, as if they hadn't been lived in for some time.

Blood red carpets lined some of the hallways, ominous portraits giving off the impression of following Cordelia every time she passed them by. The staff, all with long faces and narrowed eyes, gave her the respect of a Duchess, but nothing more. For the most part, as night fell across Solshire, Cordelia was all alone.

When they arrived at the estate, the Duke clamoured out of the carriage first, extending a hand towards her. Cordelia paused, her hand hovering above his own. Once again, her gaze clung to the odd scars that surfaced his skin. They were like brushstrokes, striking along the divots and natural lines of his palms. She wanted to trace them, to retrieve her canvas and paint the unnaturally large and intimidating shape of his hands.

The Duke suddenly grasped onto her hand.

He's so cold, was the only thing Cordelia could think as he helped her out the carriage.

He snapped his hand out of her own the moment her feet were on the ground. "The housekeeper will show you to your room," he said gruffly, his hands tightening and

relaxing at his sides repeatedly. The Duke gave her a short bow before storming off in the opposite direction, going nowhere near the estate's front doors.

"Your Grace," an older woman said to her right as the footmen carried her trunks out from the carriage. "I am Mrs. Bellflower, the housekeeper. Please follow me."

"Quite the charming name," Cordelia said as the housekeeper led her through the estate. She was haunted by the ominous feel of the halls that she craved some sort of discourse to distract her. "Bellflower."

"Yes," Mrs. Bellflower said, not once letting up on her speed. "Meadow Bellflowers grew alongside my family home growing up." She looked over her shoulder. "Not that the two are related, your Grace."

"Do you know where the Duke has gone?"

Mrs. Bellflower was silent for a moment, slowing down her pace to be more at Cordelia's side. "I'm afraid I do not, your Grace."

"Shall I expect dinner with him?"

The housekeeper came to a room, opening the door and glancing over at her with a pitiful smile. "I wouldn't know, your Grace."

"Well," Cordelia said, trying to give her a reassuring smile, "You are the housekeeper, after all."

Mrs. Bellflower motioned for Cordelia to enter the room. "I will send you word the moment I know, your Grace," she said. "For now, I hope you will get settled. If there is anything your chambers are lacking, don't hesitate to let the staff know." The housekeeper gave her a polite curtsy before leaving and shutting the door behind

her.

Cordelia glanced around the room. It was large but still managed to frighten her. “What is it about Solshire,” she murmured to herself as she sulked through the chambers, “That is so unbelievably gloomy?”

Even the furniture, carved from a deeply brown oak, had a somber twist to it. Perhaps she was too used to everything at Darkenhill, where pastel artwork hung on the walls and cherry colored curtains pulled back to let the sterling sun stream in. Speaking of curtains!

Cordelia crossed the room to her window. They were all tall, almost reaching the ceiling, but were covered with the dreary curtains. Even though the sun was beginning to set, she imagined the view was not something to ignore. Cordelia grasped onto the curtains and pulled, releasing a plume of dust into the air.

After a few minutes spent coughing and swiping at the air, Cordelia could finally peer out the window. The view was jaw dropping. As an avid artist, Cordelia saw the world in a different way than most people. She saw the brush of color, the strike of a brush, the flow of a line. It was alluring as it was magnetic. She craved to recreate it, to do it herself across blank canvas. Even then, as she looked over the Dukedom of Solshire, something once so frightening, she felt the slightest glimmer of hope.

“Well,” Cordelia murmured as she pushed open the window, letting the cool early evening breeze into the stuffy room, “I am still quite frightened.”

Something in her gut told her that she wouldn’t be seeing her beastly husband that evening, though she wasn’t entirely sure why. Nothing felt ordinary when there was a man like Michael Rayson involved. Cordelia couldn’t recall a time when she came across a Duke like him, who obviously had no intention of staying around people for longer than a moment or two. While, normally, she might find herself feeling the

same way, Cordelia was in no way a beastly character.

“No,” she said, firmly into the wind as she leaned out the window. “Though, I am quite worried.”

The door slammed open and smacked noisily against the wall. Cordelia yelped in surprise, teetering on the edge of the window. Fear burst through her as she grasped at the wall, unaware of how close she came to falling out of the bedroom window. As she staggered and gasped in fright, an icy cold hand snatched onto her wrist, tugging her without warning back into the dark room.

Cordelia stumbled forward, her face coming in contact with a sturdy chest. Before she could come to her senses, the same cold hands grasped onto her arms, yanking her off the chest she collapsed upon.

Immediately she was met with the Duke. He loomed over her like a towering statue, his eyes wide and wild with an unmistakable fury. His grip tightened against her as he shook, teeth clenched so hard that the muscles in his face looked taut with tension.

“Have you gone mad?” he hissed.

Cordelia blinked, too gobsmacked by his sudden presence to respond. “I-I-”

The Duke let out a frustrated groan before releasing his hold on her. He paced the length of the room, his hands trembling at his sides. “You truly are mad, aren’t you?” He shook his head rapidly. “This is the wife I have been granted. A crazed wife. A delusional wife.”

“I beg your pardon!” Cordelia snapped, finally returning to her senses. The cold breeze from the opened window brushed by her hair. “What have I done to earn such an insult from a man I hardly even know?”

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“The man you regard so casually is the Duke of this estate!”

“Does that give you the right to barge into my chambers, unannounced?”

The Duke barely looked at her as he paced, his hands unable to stop moving at his sides. He shook his head, lips moving as he muttered under his breath.

“Am I not owed an answer to your intrusion?” Cordelia asked, her voice raising. Not once did she allow herself to be reprimanded in such a manner, Duke or not. “I have done nothing to earn such an unwarranted response, your Grace!”

The Duke spun, suddenly marching towards her with his shoulder hunched like an animal stalking its clueless prey. “I will regard you in any such manner I please,” he snarled. “And as this is my estate, I have no qualms going wherever, even if it means your chambers. Have I made myself clear?”

Cordelia glared. Deep down, fear rumbled in the pits of her stomach. The way he loomed over her was frightening. The word didn’t seem to cover the exact feeling that began to smolder within her chest. Despite it, she kept her head held high, unwilling to succumb to his authoritative tactics.

“I am my own woman,” she replied. “I have boundaries that demand to be respected, even by a Duke. Have I made myself clear, your Grace?”

The Duke’s lips pressed so hard together they turned a shade of white.

Her eyes glanced down to a flutter of movement at his sides. His large, scarred hands

could not stop trembling, as if he dove his hands into an icy cold lake.

“Why do you shake like that?” she asked. “Like you are afraid?”

The Duke’s eyes widened in surprise. At his sides, he clenched his hands together, forcing the trembling to hide beneath his skin. Even when he held in his fury, it remained obvious in his dark gaze.

“You will sleep,” he hissed. “You will sleep and leave me be.”

“I haven’t done a thing wrong!”

The Duke stormed towards the bedroom door, not bothering to turn when he said, “Goodnight!” His hand tightened around the knob and slammed as he pulled it shut behind him.

Cordelia ran forward, her hand just inches away from opening the door and yelling after him. She remained there for a few moments, staring at the door and hesitating. The frustration never ceased, not even when she released a heavy sigh and fell into her bed. Everything she felt was clouded by confusion and questions. The Duke was, in fact, a beastly man, but to be so hateful without anything to cause it? It felt outrageously ridiculous, and it happened to be the rest of her life.

Burying her face within the pillows, Cordelia squeezed her eyes shut, trying to imagine the geese from Darkenhill Manor and forget of the dark future she found herself falling into.

* * *

When morning came upon Solshire, Cordelia opened her eyes to a dark and twisted reality. Birds cawed outside the window, but all she craved was to remain within the

sheets, refusing to acknowledge the life she found herself in. Even when she tried to tell herself it couldn't have been all that bad, the moments from the previous evening came rushing back to her, and there was no use in trying to convince herself of otherwise.

"Perhaps," she said to herself when she finally rose, looking through her trunks for a dress to wear, "I might start anew."

It didn't have to be a nightmare. The marriage could've been a new beginning, a mutual partnership of freedom. If the Duke regarded her so lowly, perhaps she might spend her time engaged in her art, or whatever else she pleased.

Hope strung within her as she left the bedroom and entered the eerily quiet halls. It was a beautifully gothic manor, something she never experienced before. Not that it was her preferred style, but it felt like she wandered through one of the books she used to read. Even with the addition of the glowering Duke, it felt even more fantastical.

As Cordelia made her way through the halls, peering into rooms, she gathered her spirits up to talk to the Duke.

"I would like to begin anew," she murmured to herself, practicing the words she wished to proclaim. "I recognize our union can be...is...perhaps a burden, but that does not have to..."

Cordelia turned into a dining room. The round table in the center was delicately decorated, with a single place set up for someone to dine. She stepped within the warm room, glancing around curiously.

"Your Grace."

She spun around to see an older gentleman standing on the threshold. He dressed as any butler would, with a tidy coat and shined shoes. The man's face twisted in a sour way, though she didn't assume him to be a grouchy man. There was something inherently gentle about the way his eyes watched her, but Cordelia blamed that on her ignorant naivety.

"My name is Philip Hunters," he continued, bowing his head deeply as he pressed further into the room. "I have been the head butler at this estate for quite some time."

"It is a pleasure, Hunters," Cordelia replied. "You are the Duke's butler, then?"

"When he blesses us with his presence, your Grace."

Cordelia crossed to one of the windows, pulling back the dark curtain to peek outside.

"Might you fetch the Duke, then? I would like to speak with him as soon as possible."

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“My apologies, your Grace,” Hunters replied, “But I’m afraid the Duke will not be joining this morning.”

“Later, then?”

Butlers gave her an uncomfortable smile. “I do not believe so, your Grace.”

“What on earth do you mean?”

“The Duke has informed me that he will be staying at one of the smaller estates in the dukedom, your Grace.”

Cordelia froze, her hand releasing the curtain. “He is living elsewhere?”

“Yes, your Grace.”

The words Cordelia once thought to give to her husband felt hollow, suddenly. Her chest grew tight from embarrassment, from the butler’s eyes remaining on her. She could not recall Irene or any other Lady for that matter mentioning that sort of action from a husband. Perhaps it was normal. Cordelia glanced over her shoulder at the butler. There was pity in the aged man’s face, in the way his wrinkles lined his eyes and the corner of his frown.

It could not have been normal.

Cordelia rubbed her clammy hands along her skirts, swallowing down the rush of despair that threatened to rock through her. Suddenly, she was left alone in the most

somber looking estate in all of England, with not even a husband to keep her company. Her marriage, though only a day long, felt to be more in shambles than the betrothal she had before, with the Earl.

“Very well,” Cordelia finally said as she turned to face the butler. “I suppose we ought to make the most out of it, shall we?”

The butler barely raised a brow.

Cordelia gave him a half smile. “This is the rest of my life, after all.”

CHAPTER2

Cordelia struck her paintbrush along the canvas, following the line of the bountiful blossoms in front of her. The gardens grew exponentially that season, primarily due to the amount of work she put into them the past two years. Flowers and bushes bordered the back of the estate, squat fences and gates wrapping around them to contain the ever growing gardens. A few geese landed nearby, taking a gander over the gardens before making their way down the squat hill towards the lake.

“See those geese, Silas?” she mused.

Beside her, sunbathing in the sun’s rays, was Cordelia’s Yorkshire Terrier. He was a small creature, colored chestnut and black, his belly stretched across the pavement beneath them. Cordelia lounged in a chair, a canvas balanced across her legs. Silas stretched his stout paws out and yawned before leaping onto the chair, curling up between her feet. He raised his little head towards the geese as they honked loudly.

Cordelia reached, rubbing her fingers behind his ears when a commotion came from behind her.

“Your Grace!” Mrs. Bellflower called out as she burst out from the backdoors. “There is a very adamant woman demanding your presence!”

“An adamant woman?” Cordelia repeated, turning to look over her shoulder at the exasperated housekeeper. “Who on earth -”

Before she could finish her sentence, Irene came fluttering out of the doors behind the housekeeper, not bothering to wait for an introduction. She carried her voluminous skirts as she ran down the steps, her normally gentle face contorted in worry.

“Cordelia!” Irene snapped, resting a hand over her chest. “Have you any idea how much of a fright you have given Duncan and I?”

Cordelia lowered her canvas to the floor. “Don’t tell me sour-faced Duncan is here.”

Irene gaped.

“What on earth is the matter?” Cordelia asked as she looked into her sister’s worried face. “You haven’t bothered to visit for two years, nevermind the short letter or two. Now you plow through my housekeeper?” Cordelia raised a brow at her. “Not quite proper of you, dear sister.”

Irene’s jaw dropped further before Silas suddenly realized a stranger’s presence, hopping down from the chair. He barked and yipped, his short tail wagging so fast he might’ve taken off in the air.

“Y-You have a dog?” Irene asked as the terrier jumped up at her feet.

Cordelia rose to her feet. “I would’ve told you sooner if you gave me the time of day.”

“Sister,” she said, her voice no longer strained with worry, “You know our father as well as I. He was adamant about leaving you be.”

“You cannot use him as an excuse any longer,” Cordelia said. “He passed away a year ago, Irene. Anything stopping you from visiting has to do with you and only you.” She closed the distance between them, reaching to take a hold of her sister’s gloved hands. “Though I won’t deny my pleasure in finally seeing you.”

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Irene's face softened further. She held her stare quietly for a moment, raising one hand to cup the side of Cordelia's face. "You have grown," she whispered, tucking a brown curl behind her ear. "You are quite beautiful, Cordelia."

She smiled, leaning into her sister's hand. The warmth that coursed through her was not like the heat from the sun's stare, but rather something more powerful. The last time Cordelia truly faced her sister was at her wedding, a day that felt so distant she thought she made it up.

Irene's face grew concerned.

"What is it, sister?" Cordelia cooed.

"You have been at the center of the Ton's gossiping for quite some time now, Cordelia."

She sighed, pulling away from her sister. "An unsurprising notion," she muttered. "Tell me, Irene, what is it they harp over now?"

"Too much for you to act blase about it."

Cordelia took her seat again, leaning back against her elbows. "I suppose it was a naive thought to assume their attention would linger elsewhere."

"You haven't made an appearance in polite society for two years," Irene said, growing exasperated once more. "Not only that, but your husband is a known outcast, a man with a warranted beastly reputation. Can you blame them for wondering about

your health, your whereabouts?”

“Oh,” Cordelia drawled, “So that’s all, then? The Ton was worried about my well-being?”

Irene sighed. “You know it isn’t that simple.”

“Go on, then,” she said. “Tell me what they gossip about now.”

“They assumed your marriage had been doomed from the start,” Irene began, taking a seat across from Cordelia. The terrier hopped up next to her, eagerly awaiting a pet from the stranger. “Perhaps the scandal of your previous betrothal got to the Duke, and it tormented him as much as it tormented our family.”

Cordelia rested a hand over her eyes. “You may report back that they were wrong on that one.”

“Some even went so far as to assume you were pregnant.”

“From who,” she snapped, “My previous suitor or my beastly husband?”

Irene glowered at her. “This is no time for teasing, Cordelia. Can you stop for a moment and consider what rumors like these could do for the rest of your family?”

“No, Irene, I assumed we were no longer bound together in such a way.”

“Don’t be so petulant,” Irene snapped. “Those were barely even the most scandalous of rumors that have tainted your good name.”

Cordelia glanced over to her. “Don’t tell me there were more.”

“I happened to hear that you were making changes to the estate.”

She sat up. “How could you have possibly known that?”

Irene laughed dryly. “The Ton knows these things, Cordelia. They see the men coming in and out of your doors. The money being spent on renovations and changes. People talk, and they talk even more when it comes to questions such as these.”

“Whether or not I wish to change the interior of my home is my business, and my business alone.”

Irene raised a brow. “Would it not also be the business of your husband, the Duke?”

Cordelia pulled her stare away quickly. She hadn’t laid eyes on the Duke for two years, since the butler informed her of his decision to reside elsewhere. While she once assumed he needed the space to come to terms with a newfound marriage, Cordelia no longer bothered to ruminate over it. Not when there were countless possibilities left for her, a mountain of avenues and responsibilities upon her shoulders.

Never once did she believe the duties of a Duchess invigorating, until she was truly thrown into it. The ability to rework the estate, to change its dreary interior into something worth living in, brought her joy and satisfaction, something she could not find in her marriage.

“The Duke has not been here for years, Irene,” Cordelia finally said. “Whatever has been done to the estate is from my word alone.”

Irene watched her closely. “Is that why you recklessly spent his fortune? To provoke him?”

“I never said such a thing,” Cordelia muttered, though she couldn’t help the mischievous smirk from pointing up at the corner of her lip. “Though it sounds rather well deserving, does it not?”

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“Cordelia,” Irene scolded, “These rumors have gone on for too long. Perhaps you have no mind for them whispering about a river of men coming and leaving the estate, but it is no longer as simple as that.”

“What do you mean?”

“You have failed to show your face in the Season’s events,” Irene explained, “And it has left the Ton to imagine one catastrophic conclusion: the Duke has murdered you!”

Cordelia froze. “You aren’t serious.”

“Do I look to be having a joke, Cordelia?”

“Well,” she mused, “That has to be the most ridiculous thing I’ve ever heard. Even from the Ton!Murdered?”

Irene shook her head. “Can you outrightly blame them?”

“I suppose not,” she replied. “But they do love to exaggerate. It boggles me how anyone takes them seriously!”

“I insist you make an appearance this Season.”

Cordelia laughed. “I do not see that in my future, Irene.”

She rose from her seat abruptly, forcing the terrier to leap off of her lap. “You must

consider the future ramifications of your actions. What happens when you do, in fact, bear children? When you crave society but are found to be unaccepted?"

"I cannot have children without a husband."

"You have a husband, Cordelia!"

She sighed, leaning back against her seat once more. "I appreciate your caring, Irene, but you know I have never regarded the Tons highly enough to respect their rumors. Besides, my husband is not a deaf man. If you are aware of these rumors, I can only assume he is just as knowledgeable of them."

"What are you getting at?"

Cordelia looked up at her. "The Duke obviously does not care for the rumors. Why should I?"

"Like I said," Irene murmured, "Duncan and I still feel the effect of your actions, Cordelia. We bare your family name. When we attend the Season in London, the amount of Lords and Ladies imploring us about your actions is absurd."

"They are my actions," she said.

Irene sighed. "You have never understood."

"Do not patronize me, Irene," Cordelia snapped. "You have no idea what my life has been like. To live in an estate like this one without a soul by my side has left me no choice but to fill my time!"

"Then why can't you spend it in society?"

Cordelia looked away. “That is what you have never understood about me, dear sister. The society you know has accepted every bit of you. I never received the same kindness as you.”

“It does not have to be that way.”

“I agree,” Cordelia said. “They must change.”

“Cordelia -”

The sound of the back door opening once more cut Irene’s words short. She raised her face towards the estate as the sound of quick steps against the ground drew closer. Cordelia sat up to see Hunters, the butler, standing beside their lounging chairs.

“Good afternoon, Hunters,” Cordelia greeted. “Have you met my sister?”

Hunters bowed his head towards Irene. “Excuse my interruption, your Grace.”

“What is it? Have more workers arrived for the next project?”

“I’m afraid not quite,” he said. “But rather the Duke, your husband, has returned.”

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Cordelia's heart threatened to stop. "The Duke," she repeated. "Are you certain?"

"Very much so."

She rose from her seat, hands beginning to tremble at her sides in the same way she remembered him the last night she saw him. Her eyes shot over to Irene.

Irene's eyebrows were raised. "Perhaps the Duke has heard the same rumors as I."

"The very reason those rumors exist are because of him, Irene!"

"Nevertheless," she said, grabbing onto her things, "He has returned. Good tidings for the entire estate, isn't it?"

Cordelia gave her sister a thin smile, though nothing within her was even the tiniest bit pleased. How can he show up on a whim like these?

"Hunters," Cordelia said, "Might you escort my sister back to her carriage?"

The butler bowed his head deeply. "As you wish, your Grace."

"Sister," Irene said, "I might stay longer, if you wish."

"I only want to greet my husband," Cordelia said, her voice wavering ever so slightly. "Alone."

Irene watched her for a moment, hesitating as the butler gestured towards the doors.

“Won’t you write to me, Cordelia?”

“Of course,” she murmured, though a part of her was too engrossed in the idea of her husband being back to focus too much on her sister.

Irene, seemingly satisfied, allowed the butler to show her the way back towards the front of the estate.

Cordelia remained beside the garden, pacing along the steps. Silas, the terrier, kept a close eye on her as she walked, his head swaying back and forth as though music played. Her mind raced rapidly as she waited for her husband to make an appearance. She decided quickly that she wouldn’t dare to seek him out. Even though anxiety and nerves bubbled up within the depths of her stomach, she refused to allow her confidence to falter.

“Silas,” she said, holding her chin up, “If there is one thing I have done over these years, it is to build a life for myself, and myself alone.”

The dog barked in response.

“Precisely,” she replied. “The Duke made his choice long ago. How can I be scorned for making my own, all the same?”

Before the terrier could make another timely response, noise came from the estate’s backdoor once more. This time, it was Mrs. Bellflower, her voice carrying down towards the gardens as she opened the doors. Behind her, Cordelia could make out a looming silhouette that lurked behind the housekeeper.

Cordelia felt her heart stammer and shudder within her chest. Her relentless anger towards him and ever growing nerves mixed together unpleasantly.

The housekeeper stepped aside, and the Duke of Solshire marched out into the spring air.

Devils, Cordelia thought to herself.

If the Duke had a commanding presence before, it was nothing as compared to now. He dressed in a simple black coat, the tail end falling down behind him dramatically. Though his hair had been longer than most aristocratic men at the time of their wedding, the Duke let it grow out further, now resting down the back of his neck. The way he strutted down the steps, the way he tightened his jaw, the way his hands flexed and tightened at his sides, all threatened to bring Cordelia to her knees.

She raised her chin as he approached. Nevermind it, she thought.

“Welcome back, your Grace,” Cordelia called out to him, lowering herself to a deep bow. When she rose, the Duke was directly in front of her. His presence brought a chill to the air, despite there not being a cloud in the sky. The corner of his lip curled, a sinister smirk spreading across his face. He did not need to speak to let her know he wasn’t the slightest bit pleased with her.

“Hello,” he drawled, “Wife.”

CHAPTER3

“To what do I owe the pleasure of your presence?” Cordelia asked as the tension settled in between them. The terrier whined as he ran around the Duke, seeking shelter and comfort behind Cordelia’s feet. “I hope your private estate hasn’t bored you too much over these past few years.”

The Duke’s brow rose, a quiet scoff leaving his lips. “Well, I needed to see for myself.”

“See what, your Grace?”

“Whether or not you were still living.”

Cordelia pressed her lips together. He had returned for the same reasons Irene insisted on visiting. Wherever he had been the past two years, he still heard the rumors and whispers of the Ton. She gave him a smile, though there wasn't the slightest bit of genuine happiness behind it.

“I pray you haven't been too disappointed,” she cooed.

The Duke stared down at her. “We will discuss my disappointments at a later time.”

“Oh,” she drawled, “I insist you inform me of them now. I wouldn't dare want you to be displeased with your dutiful wife.”

“Does it please you to aggravate me?”

Cordelia swallowed. Though she teased, he never once cracked a smile. Not that she outwardly expected him to, but she thought her sarcasm could've cleared the air in the slightest. There was a tangible heaviness surrounding them, one that threatened to suffocate Cordelia if she wasn't careful. To her, he only looked rageful. His brow furrowed deeply, the sharp lines of his displeasure striking around his eyes angrily. A sneer remained permanent across his lips, the corner of his mouth twitching deeper into a frown.

The longer he stared, the more Cordelia felt the need to shrink backwards. If he wished to intimidate her without saying a word, he was nearing success.

“Of course it does not please me,” Cordelia finally replied. “Did it please you to leave your new wife alone in a new home for two years?” She held her hands behind her back and gave him a shrug. “For all I knew, you had perished yourself. I had no way of knowing.”

The Duke looked over her head. “I see the idea didn’t bother you too much.”

“Whatever do you mean?”

He curved around her, nearing the wooden fence that lined the flourishing garden. “I do not recall leaving my gardens in such a state,” he said.

“Does it displease you?”

“I do not care for it.”

Cordelia frowned, her eyes narrowing on the back of his head. When he wasn’t facing her, she felt as though she had all the power in the world. She managed to accomplish plenty of things while he was off sulking elsewhere, not that he took care to notice it.

“Tell me, your Grace,” she continued, “Do you want to see it barren? When I first arrived, the gardens were decaying and empty, barely a blossoming bud in sight. It was an unpleasant display.”

The Duke turned back to her, walking by and circling around. His eyes squinted on the ground, where her canvas laid beside her feet. “You are an artist,” he said. “Is that right?”

Cordelia swallowed, a different sort of feeling creeping into her chest. He stood behind her, then, reaching down to retrieve the canvas. He held it up to the light, investigating the half drawn flowers and geese in the distance. His expression

remained sour all the same, his nostrils flaring as though he smelt something off about it. She frowned, twisting her hands nervously behind her back.

“It is a hobby,” she said.

“For when you aren’t drowning my fortune,” he mused, “You paint.”

The insult stung harder than she expected it to. Not that he outrightly called her work unpleasant, but he did not compliment it all the same. She reached, taking the canvas out of his hand with a light tug. Her eyes lingered over his hands, the same white scars she noticed on their wedding still brightly standing out against his skin. She stared for a moment too long and he jerked away, twisting his hands in a way that shielded them from her sight.

“I do not remember being told of any restraints I was supposed to have,” Cordelia said, ignoring the way her heartbeat pattered strongly against her chest. “No, I cannot recall even there being a goodbye.”

The Duke looked over his shoulder at her. “Whatever reasons I had for leaving were my reasons alone. They do not require your input.”

“Of course not,” she snapped. “I am only your wife.”

His eyes clung to her. “Do you suppose a wife is meant to wipe clean the original interior of my home, rearranging it to something more of her standards?” Though his words were heavy with disdain, he never once raised his voice, never once gave off the impression that he was outrightly displeased with the work she had done.

“Tell me, your Grace, do the changes not fit your own standards?”

“I barely recognize it.”

The shortness of his tone said it all. There was no pride in everything she had done, despite it being a momentous amount of changes. A part of her, one that she wished to bury and hide, shrunk at the idea of it all being pointless, despite finding her own pleasure in all the changes.

Cordelia's hands tightened into fists. Perhaps he had a right to be perturbed by all the changes. If he was a more present figure in the estate, she would have agreed with him. If he lived alongside her, there would never have been a need to go behind his back and do the things she wished to do. But, alas, the Duke never once lived with her. She doubted he even spent a night there. It was very possible that he left the moment he left her chambers that night those years ago.

Cordelia crossed her arms, her stubbornness being her strongest tool in that very moment. "You have my sincerest apologies, your Grace," she said, though there wasn't a drop of concern in her voice. "I had no idea that you considered this to be your home."

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The Duke became rigid and tense. “You do wish to rile me, don’t you?” he hissed. “That is what this all has been. Let me tell you now, your Grace, that I am more than riled.”

His words threatened to force her to shrink backwards. She tried to look away, but the Duke pressed on, taking thunderous steps closer to her. Above them, where there was once not a thing in the sky, a darkness brewed. Clouds inched closer to the sun, heavy with rain and thunderstorms. As the sunlight became more and more muted, the Duke loomed dangerously over her.

“You have made it your mission to not only bleed me dry of funds,” the Duke continued, his voice low and growly now that he was only a foot away from her, “But to tarnish my very name as well.”

“Your name?” she repeated. “I haven’t done such a thing! I haven’t even left the estate to -”

“That is my point exactly,” he interjected. “Have you or have you not heard the rumors that surround our marriage?”

Cordelia pressed her lips together as Irene’s words echoed in the back of her mind. “It has only recently come to my attention,” she replied. “Though I cannot see the importance behind it. They are only rumors, after all, and from the Ton, no less. Little can be taken seriously from them.”

“Are you that careless?”

Her lips parted in surprise, and though she wished to retort with something confident, all she could produce with a short exhale. Her pride felt stunted.

The Duke continued on. “While you might think you have used your time in solitude for good, you have only made sure that the reputation my family has prospered on is nothing more than a folly.”

“What happens to your reputation outside of these walls does not concern me!”

“My reputation is your reputation,” he said.

She looked away. “I daresay I cannot agree.”

“Believe me,” the Duke muttered, “You need not say it.”

Cordelia shot her gaze back to him. The moment she held his stare, she was whisked away to a moment two years ago, when they stood beside each other in the small, quiet church. Even in his intimidation, Cordelia found herself undeniably drawn into his aura, eager to know what it was that made him so reclusive. He left her without a word, without the mere kindness of an explanation. But now that he was back before her, Cordelia was desperate to know his truth and know it well.

For a moment she caught herself softening to him. Perhaps she did overstep. Perhaps the rumors the Ton so easily tossed about were from her own carelessness.

“Listen to me,” he suddenly said, “And listen well.”

Almost instantly, when his snaked tongue lashed back out at her, Cordelia forgot what she was softening herself towards.

“You have left me no choice,” he said. “I will be taking my rightful place in the estate

for the rest of this Season.”

Cordelia’s eyes went wide. “You -”

“I am not finished.”

Her mouth clamped shut, too surprised to let her stubbornness roam freely.

“Once I have cleaned up the mess you have made, I will return to my private estate.”

The anger burst back through Cordelia. Her hands grew into fists once more as she held his stare, unable to stop the heat from rising to her face as her rage became stronger. “Everything you claim to be caused by my actions are not to blame for this,” she seethed. “A simple redecoration o-or flourishing garden has nothing to do with the Ton’s watchful eye! It isyou,your Grace, who has -”

“You will attend the Season,” he raised his voice to talk over her own, “By my side, as the married couple the Ton expects to see.”

“And if I refuse?” she blurted, not even pausing for a moment to think.

The Duke inched even closer, leaning down till his breath managed to fan over her face. His musky cologne filled the air between them. He remained there, his eyes scanning every bit of her, as if he wished to see her back down.

Cordelia held her ground, though the intimidation crept into her skin and forced her to gulp loudly.

The Duke smirked without the slightest bit of humor. “I doubt you will,” he murmured.

Before Cordelia could even gather up a response, the Duke spun on his heel and marched back towards the backdoors of the estate. As he took the steps two at a time, he paused at the entryway, the shadow of Hunters lingering within the threshold. The Duke took a look over his shoulder at her.

“I suggest you prepare yourself,” he called out, “Wife.”

The Duke slipped into the estate, the door shutting behind him.

Cordelia staggered backwards, her legs hitting the lounging chair and forcing her to fall into it. The moment she landed on the seat, there was a loud cracking sound. She winced, reaching beneath her to pull out the fractured and bent canvas she had been working on before he arrived. Silas, her loyal terrier, lept onto her lap, curling into a small ball against her stomach. Cordelia ran her hand over his face, hoping the motion could sooth her racing heart.

A few droplets of rain splattered against the broken canvas. She raised her head, letting the cold drops hit her cheeks and streak down to her chin. A cool and chilling breeze was carried off from the nearby lake, swiping by Cordelia's loose hair. She glanced towards the estate, imagining all the things the Duke would complain about that she had changed over the past few years.

But, nevertheless, the Duke could complain as much as he pleased. Cordelia was quite proud of her work, and had no intentions of succumbing to his disrespect.

“Come along, Silas,” she murmured, patting the small dog on the rear end to get him off her lap. The terrier jumped off, immediately skidding towards the door as the afternoon shower began to fall a bit heavier.

She smirked as she took her time back towards the estate. All the things the Duke would complain about suddenly felt more amusing than she expected it to be.

“He can tell me to prepare all he wants,” Cordelia mused. “As long as he is ready to prepare for me.”

CHAPTER4

“How can this be the same home I grew up in?”

Michael only stood within the foyer, surrounded by servants and staff he could not recognize, and quickly grew overwhelmed with the strange place he found himself in. If not for the building itself remaining quite the same, Michael would have assumed he wandered into the wrong home, stepped into a different family. The portraits, which spanned across generations of Rayson's, remained the same, much to his surprise. Their surroundings, however, were nothing like he had ever seen before.

The curtains he once remembered his mother picking out no longer graced the windows. The rugs he ran barefoot on as a careless child were rolled up, perhaps stored away somewhere. Faces of newly hired and appointed staff passed him by with a curious eye, stealing an inappropriate glance or two at the Duke they never once saw. He glowered at them, determined to grasp a hold of the pride he once had when walking those dark halls.

“Your Grace,” Hunters said from his right, “Might we take a walk through the estate?”

“Why,” Michael muttered, “Am I frightening your new staff?”

Hunters sighed, crossing his arms behind his back. “Dare I say, your Grace, that we needed more staff hired?”

“Nevermind that,” he mumbled, knowing fully well that, when he left the estate, there were many things needing to be done that couldn't due to a lack of able bodied hands. For the longest time, the staff within the estate grew older alongside Michael, and by the time he was finally wed, most of the servants were far too old for the required tasks. “I want to see my chambers, Hunters.”

The butler gave him an odd look. “Very well, your Grace.”

“What?”

Hunters raised a brow.

“Is there something wrong with my chambers, Hunters?”

Throughout all the years Michael had known the butler, which was most of his life, he never once considered him to be a humorous man. He was stern and to the point, a stickler for rules and unafraid to share his opinions. It was what Michael cherished about the butler, why he considered the man to be more familial rather than a hired hand. Even then, when Michael never once graced him with his presence, Hunters never once failed to remain loyal and forthcoming.

Hunters had the slightest bit of a smile perking up. “No, your Grace,” he replied. “In fact, the chambers are more than ready to be lived in.”

Michael, feeling a hint of sarcasm in the butler’s words, held his tongue as they marched towards his chambers. “Might you tell me all that the Duchess has done to the estate, Hunters?”

“Everything, your Grace?”

“You make it sound like a mountain of things.”

Hunters raised his shoulders. “Many things required Her Grace’s attention.”

“Truly required her attention, Hunters, or was she just doing whatever she pleased?”

As they walked up the stairs, Michael suddenly became very aware of the fact that the

butler was no longer following close behind him. He paused near the top, looking down to see Hunters in the middle of the staircase, looking up at Michael with a hesitant smile.

“Might I be free of restraints when saying these next things, your Grace?”

Michael took a few steps down to get closer to him. “You may.”

“Unfortunately,” Hunters began, “For quite some time now, there have been things left to disarray at the estate. The staff, for instance.”

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“Yes, yes,” Michael muttered. “We’ve been over that.”

“Before you are quick to scold the rest of the changes made, I implore you to imagine what it was like for Her Grace.”

Michael froze, eyeing Hunters with a raised brow. “Do not tell me you are defending the woman.”

“The first few months were quite bleak, your Grace,” Hunters continued. “I only ask you to keep that in mind as we discuss the changes done to the estate. To be alone, and away from one’s family, is a hardship for most.”

Michael watched the butler with narrowed eyes. It was not often that Hunters gave pity or kindness towards an outsider. Michael, who had Hunters by his side since he was a child, never saw the butler give someone such leeway. While a side of him was intrigued, eager to know what it was that made Hunters turn a blind eye towards the Duchess’s actions, Michael could not be rid of the gnawing irritation that festered in the back of his mind.

“I can make no promises, Hunters,” Michael finally said. “Though, I...appreciate your need for honesty.”

Hunters smirked. “Very well, your Grace.”

As Michael continued his long strides towards his chambers, trying his best not to gawk and exclaim at all the changes he saw, Hunters remained close to his side, pointing out everything the Duchess had already done.

“The tapestries,” Hunters started as they entered a hallway, “Throughout the entire estate have been reupholstered.”

Michael huffed. “What was wrong with the older ones?”

“In a cosmetic sense, they were growing painful to look at.”

“How so?”

“Peeling and fraying,” the butler replied. “And according to Her Grace, the colors were far too dull for the amount of natural light the estate gets.”

Michael pinched the bridge of his nose, holding his tongue back. “Very well,” he snarled. “Continue on.”

“Each room has been refurbished, your Grace.”

“All of them?”

Hunters paused on their trek, pushing open a door to one of the studies. “Every last one, your Grace.”

Michael peered inside. Rooms that were once covered in white cloth to avoid gathering dust were now unrecognizable. Wooden desks and accents took up the room. Bookcases he had never seen lined the walls, full of leather bound books. A portrait of his father, one that he distinctly remembered being tucked away in one of the bedrooms, now hung over a mantelpiece, overlooking the entire study with a quizzical brow. Michael hung on to the painting’s stare for a moment before stepping back out of the room.

Michael glowered at the butler. “Anything else?”

As they kept marching down the hall, they passed by a few new staff members, each pausing to give Michael a bow before continuing on their way.

“You know of the newly hired staff,” Hunters said, “With Mrs. Bellflower and I being, just about, the only exceptions. And I suppose you have already seen the Duchess’s most recent additions.”

Hunters paused to gesture towards a window along their route. Michael leaned over. A quiet afternoon shower rolled by the estate, the rain just beginning to clear up as he looked outside. Directly below the window, Michael caught a glimpse of the restored gardens. Wooden fences kept the garden in one spot, rows of bright colors blooming along the edges. Hedges trimmed to perfection lined the fences. There was even an arched gate, vines twisted around to make it look like a fantastical garden.

“I’m sure you remember, your Grace, when the gardens were in their original glory.”

Michael stiffened slightly, pulling back from the window. “Yes,” he murmured. “I am well aware.”

“The late Duchess’s pride and joy has returned to the estate, in a way.”

“Anything else?” Michael snapped.

If Hunters was offended by him, he didn’t show it in the slightest. “Yes, your Grace.”

Michel glowered deeply.

“The most recent addition, which is still ongoing, is the orangery being erected beside the hedge maze.”

“Anorangery?”

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“Yes, your Grace,” Hunters said. “It will be the largest renovation made to the estate so far. Her Grace has spent many days planning it herself. Any architect would be impressed.”

Michael paused, glancing over at the butler. “You certainly are not one for handing out compliments, Hunters, and yet, I fear you are about to deliver another one.”

“As a matter of fact, your Grace, I find it hard not to give Her Grace a compliment.”

Michael stared at him, eyes wide and surprised. “You can’t be serious.”

“Perhaps there has been an useless extravagance spent here and there,” Hunters continued. “But you cannot deny her ability to handle her role well. Her Grace has been a fine Duchess, despite not knowing the responsibilities well beforehand.”

“But you and Mrs. Bellflower -”

“Have been a helping hand, your Grace, but the rest was done through the Duchess, and the Duchess alone.”

Michael glanced out the window once more, his eyes caught on the gardens. If he stared long enough, he swore he fell back into a time he thought long gone, where his mother used to walk with him through the gardens. She’d always have a book in hand, reading some sort of article aloud to him as they walked. If he concentrated hard enough, her voice came back to him as a distant echo, as though she haunted him still.

He yanked himself out of the reverie. “However impressive Her Grace’s work has been,” he finally said, “You cannot deny their pointless extravagance.”

The butler sighed. “They were not pointless, your Grace.”

“Hunters.”

“Sooner or later, the work needed to be done,” Hunters said. “Not that I ever had the authority to deny Her Grace’s wishes, but if I did, I do not believe I would’ve done so.”

Michael stared at the side of the butler’s face with a slack jaw. To see the man so willingly respect her changes felt like a strike across Michael’s cheek, a turn of events he never once dared to imagine. His brow furrowed.

“I would like to see my chambers, Hunters,” Michael muttered irritably.

Hunters, the only man around who could possibly be amused around Michael’s annoyance, let out another smirk and continued the way through the halls. Sticking close behind the butler, Michael glared and smoldered relentlessly. He yearned for some solitude. After spending the years at the private estate, focused on his work upon the dukedom, Michael grew incredibly fond of his moments alone.

Now, at the estate, Michael remembered the reasons why he liked it so much.

Butlers pushed open the familiar door. For a moment, Michael felt at peace, stepping back into the place he cherished, the place he so easily called home. The second he stepped over the threshold, the feeling seemed to evaporate into thin air.

There was not a single thing he recognized. The bed, sitting on the eastern side rather than the western, was dressed with silk sheets, the comforter fluffed and high above

the rest of it. The tapestries, which Hunters mentioned earlier, were no longer the deeply emerald green he remembered. Instead, the colors were pale and opaque, light and soaking in the sun. He squinted as the rays shot through the opened windows, curtains pulled and tied to the side. Whatever shower that had graced the hills before had slunk off into the distance, leaving an empty sky for the sun to shine in.

Michael turned. Behind the butler, a few staff lingered by, passing in front of the room. He sidestepped Hunters, and reentered the hallway. "You two!"

The servants froze, spinning around on their heels and balancing the trays they held. They bowed simultaneously. "Your Grace."

"Fetch the original things that once belonged in my chambers," he commanded. "I wish for it all to be returned to what it once was. Am I understood?"

They glanced at each other before bowing once more. "Yes, your Grace."

Within an instant, the pair took off in the opposite direction.

"Do you despise it that much?" Hunters asked as Michael came back into the bedroom.

Michael sneered. "Must I enjoy it?"

"No," the butler replied. "But you might consider it."

Once again, the irritation of Hunters ability to so easily accept the Duchess's changes came rushing back through Michael. He faced the butler, eyes narrowed in a deadly glare. "Haven't you heard the rumors surrounding my wife? The woman you hold in such high esteem?"

Hunters eyed him. “I do not believe the esteem I hold Her Grace in has anything to do with it, your Grace. But rather, despite her hardships, the Duchess focused heavily on her duties. In fact, I say she might have exceeded all of our expectations.”

“The rumors -”

“Forgive me for interrupting,” Hunters said, “But those rumors are nothing but typical society, your Grace. I’m sure you know that as well as I.”

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The butler's presence in Michael's life left him feeling more like a father figure than an outright servant. It was why, in moments like those, Michael found himself capable of holding back his tongue. He gave Hunters a nod, pressing further into the room.

"If you say it so," he muttered. "But it does not change the fact that the Duchess's transgressions have impacted my reputation within society."

"So, what will you do?"

"You will act as my valet, Hunters," Michael said. "I will need to go into the city far more than usual."

Hunters nodded. "Of course, your Grace."

"For now, you may leave me."

The butler bowed and left the room, not saying another word.

Michael strode towards the windows, grasping onto the curtains and untying them. Before he let them cover the window, something caught his eye. Down below, near the hedge maze, the Duchess walked alongside them. Beside her was Mrs. Bellflower and her little dog, talking as they walked aimlessly. His eyes narrowed.

She was quite beautiful after two years. Not that she wasn't attractive before, but it felt more dangerous then. Now, as solitude and work caused her to mature, the Duchess looked much like the flowers blooming beside her.

Michael bristled, and let the curtain flutter shut.

CHAPTER 5

Though it was only spring, a deep heat came quickly and suddenly the next day. There was a gentle breeze, every now and then, that soared up from the direction of the lake. It felt coaxing and gentle, though it hardly helped against the smoldering sun's stare.

Cordelia rose early in the morning to tend to the orangery. Many estates in London found themselves building them, though most tended to have them connected to the original building. Cordelia, on the other hand, uncovered a rather stunning design of an orangery disconnected from the estate itself, instead acting as a hub within the garden. It all gave off a fantastical aura to the estate, as if mystical beings and ghosts lurked in the garden's shadows.

By that point, when the sun just began to reach over the distant treetops and hills, Cordelia already had beads of sweat trailing down her face. The workers arrived for the orangery right on time. And despite most things going strictly to plan, Cordelia found herself searching and wandering the estates back fields for the butler, Hunters.

"Mrs. Bellflower!" Cordelia called out from the back of the garden. Across the way, just coming out of the estate's backdoors, was the housekeeper. Cordelia waved her arm in the air. "Over here, Mrs. Bellflower!"

The housekeeper carried her skirts as she rushed over. Rosy cheeked and out of breath, Mrs. Bellflower held a hand to her forehead tiredly. "Dear me," she cooed, "How can you survive this heat, your Grace?"

"I suppose it is quite sweltering, isn't it?" Cordelia asked with a light laugh. "I can't quite help but enjoy it. The outdoors, the fresh air. Heat or not, I soak it in like I am

nothing more than the flowers we grow.”

Mrs. Bellflower laughed. “What can I help you with, your Grace? You looked to be rather in a tizzy before.”

“Before the Duke’s arrival,” Cordelia began, a sour taste entering her mouth at the mention of her husband, “Hunters agreed to help me watch over the work being done at the orangery. I’m afraid there’s only so much I can do with my own two hands.”

“Well, you quite enjoy doing the work yourself, don’t you?”

Cordelia smiled. “In some ways. To be hands on every now and then is rather invigorating.”

“Oh, silly me,” Mrs. Bellflower blurted. “Are you looking for the butler, then, your Grace?”

“I am.”

Mrs. Bellflower looked back to the estate. “I suppose I last saw him tending to chores inside, your Grace. Would you like me to look for him?”

“Perhaps some time away from the sun could do me some good,” Cordelia replied. “Won’t you keep an eye on the workers while I am away, Mrs. Bellflower?”

The housekeeper gave her a nod. “Of course, your Grace.” Picking up her skirts once more, Mrs. Bellflower began to make her way down across the hedge maze.

Cordelia looked over the view. In the distance, she could make out the workers moving to and fro, carrying their supplies and pulling carts. The work did not have much longer to go. Soon, the one thing she looked forward to the most would be

finished. She glanced back forward towards the estate. And then, there would be nothing to fill her time, in a place where she had no one alongside her. The Duke's words from the day before came back in a haunting sort of way.

Once I have cleaned up the mess you have made, I will return to my private estate.

The brooding husband she barely knew would be gone before she knew it, if only she was patient enough to survive it. Despite her feelings towards it, and how frustrated he made her, Cordelia's mind always drifted back to their wedding day. There was no love about it, but rather, something new and alluring, a mysterious gentleman with frightening scars standing before her. Cordelia shivered despite the heat and walked up the stairs towards the estate's back door.

As soon as she stepped over the threshold, Cordelia was met with a cool breeze. The opened windows merely let in the wind, the sun not exactly peering through yet. She took in the shadows and dimly lit rooms eagerly, feeling the heat slowly fade from her skin.

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Cordelia passed through the kitchen and working members of staff. They all greeted her kindly with smiles and bows. She continued her way through the halls and up the staircase, peering into rooms and growing more annoyed by the second. The longer she was away from the work, the less things she got to see get done. If there was one thing Cordelia realized throughout her time alone, it was that, deep down, she was a perfectionist.

And besides, the butler agreed to the work weeks ago. In fact, he had already done the work, before the Duke had ever arrived. Cordelia bristled at the idea of things changing just because her beastly husband decided to stick around for longer than a day.

Her walking quickly became a march, the sweat returning to her forehead once more. Twisting around a corner, Cordelia slowed as a few familiar voices grew louder. Down the hall, a few servants moved in and out of a room, carrying furniture out while bringing older furniture in. Cordelia gaped. Those are my new furnishings! Another servant pulled in a distinctly familiar colored desk. And that is from the old set!

Cordelia's hands tightened into fists as she stormed down the hall.

"The desk used to be on the northern side," Michael was saying from within the study. "The one with the oak."

"Yes, your Grace."

Cordelia stood on the threshold, hands placed firmly on her hips. Within the room, a

few servants lingered near the pair of desks, lifting it a foot in the air to move it around. Beside them, Hunters pointed to where they needed to go. In the center of the room, directly across from where Cordelia stood, was the Duke.

For a moment, she was shocked into stillness. The Duke wore a white button down that had been tucked into his trousers, a vest tightly fitted above it. The sleeves puffed along his arms, and were bunched up to his elbows. The Duke pulled his longer hair into a small tail at the back of his head, a few stray strands framing the sides of his face. He turned, eyes falling upon her heavily.

Almost instantly, the Duke glowered at her. “Your Grace,” he said, bowing his head.

“Good morning, your Grace,” Cordelia began, keeping herself civil. “I hate to be a bother, but -”

The Duke looked away, shaking his head ever so slightly.

Cordelia glared. “But, Hunters agreed to help me in overseeing the work being done on the orangery.”

“He is busy,” the Duke replied. “More to the left.”

The servants scooted the desk.

“Your Grace,” Cordelia blurted, “I must insist. As the work on the orangery comes to a close, these final repairs are pivotal to the longevity of the crops kept inside.”

The Duke turned to face her once more. “The work you claim to be so important cannot be contested to the work that needs to be done here,” he said. “If I am to be here, I need to be able to work.”

Cordelia held her hand up towards the servants removing the new furniture. “What was stopping you from working with how it was?” she asked. “Everything you needed was already there.”

“You wouldn’t know what I needed.”

“Does the furnishing displease you that much? That it renders you unable to do your tasks?”

The Duke took a threatening step closer to her. “Do I need to remind you who I am? To whom everything here belongs to?”

“You don’t need to,” she hissed. “You’re already bringing back the old furniture!” Cordelia raised her hands, trying to calm herself down. “Your Grace,” she began through gritted teeth, “I would very much like to make sure the orangery turns out the way I would want it to be. Unfortunately, I doubt I can do it on my own. Weeks ago, Hunters began helping me on this endeavor, and committed himself to it. You surely wouldn’t miss him for an hour or two, would you?”

The Duke paused, his face going incredibly still for a moment. His expression was unreadable, eyes only narrowed slightly and his mouth drawn in a fine line. Slowly he pressed forward, till he loomed over her.

“I will remind you one more time, your Grace,” he said in a quiet, growly voice. “I am here now. Hunters is, and will always be, my butler. Your orangery continues production for one reason and one reason alone. Do you know what that might be, your Grace?”

Cordelia stared up at him, determined to show him how confident she could be. She ignored the feeling of sweat trickling down her face and the length of her spine. For a moment, she imagined how wild she must have looked: her hair unkempt and

windblown, sweat trailing down dirt-stained cheeks, tall work boots reaching up to her knees.

Cordelia lifted her chin, her face inching closer to his own. “No, your Grace.”

The Duke’s glare deepened. “Me.”

She flinched, her demeanor faltering for a second.

“You do not give me orders,” he whispered. “Do you understand?”

Cordelia nodded, chewing on her bottom lip. The Duke’s gaze snapped down to her lips for a moment before they went back up. He turned away almost instantly, returning to watching the servants move around his furniture. Beside them, Hunters remained, not once daring to give Cordelia the slightest look of support.

She knew that, once, she was nothing more than a stranger in those halls. The rest of them were entirely strangers to her, too. But after the years, as she melded into her role as Duchess more easily, Cordelia felt as though she earned the respect of the entire staff. Suddenly, with the Duke’s arrival, everything she had already done seemed to go out the window, no longer mattering in the grand scheme of things.

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Cordelia, embarrassed and enraged beyond belief, did not dare give the Duke the respect of a bow. She merely turned, and marched out from the study.

“I will do every bit of it myself.”

CHAPTER 6

Michael glanced up at the grandfather clock for the third time. He shuffled around in his seat, eyeing the table full of sandwiches and fruits set up in front of him. His stomach grumbled. Across the room, a few servants waited beside the wall politely, not making eye contact with him. He could only imagine how he might've looked to them, his face scrunched up and full of anger.

Lunch was served an hour ago. The Duchess had been fetched before then, and once at the start. Michael sent another servant for her after half an hour had passed, but no one had come back. Not even the servant herself. Michael's foot tapped impatiently against the floor. How disrespectful could one woman be?

Michael smacked his palm against the table. The plates and tiers of food shuddered, a few utensils falling to the floor. The servants remained still beside the wall. He rose from the table and paced along the length of the room. His hands remained at his sides, curling and unfurling with every passing second. The irritation within him was something he couldn't ignore. How could he overlook such a discretion, something that people of polite society were taught from an incredibly early age?

The Duchess deliberately crossed him, a fact that he had no doubt about. No matter the differences between them, they were wed, and he happened to be the head of the

household. To refuse to dine with him was as rude as an unwarranted slap to the face. He could not remember another time when he was so angry, when he was so furious he thought he could tear through an entire room. He breathed in deeply, pausing in front of the table.

“Fetch me Mrs. Bellflower,” he suddenly said, to no one in particular.

Immediately, the two servants poised by the wall bowed their heads and sped out of the room, pelting off in two different directions. Michael stared at the curtain, which he closed the moment he entered the parlour. Almost all the windows on the side of the estate faced the lake, something he had no interest in seeing. A light draft swept in through the cracks, pushing the curtains open every now and then.

Michael’s hand clenched into a fist, his scarred skin wrinkling unpleasantly.

“Your Grace.”

He turned to see the housekeeper standing in the doorway. She bowed her head and pressed further into the room.

“You called for me, your Grace?”

“Where is the Duchess?”

Mrs. Bellflower pressed her lips together. “Your Grace,” she said, “The Duchess has been in the gardens, overlooking her workers for the orangery herself.”

Michael stepped closer to the housekeeper. “Herself?”

“Yes, your Grace,” she replied. “Her Grace has done it plenty of times before, and -”

“What?” he shouted, interjecting in the middle of her sentence. His temper rose and rose, till he could no longer dare to hold any of it in. “Does no one in this household understand the meaning of propriety?”

Mrs. Bellflower lowered her head.

“Who allows this?”

“I am under no authority to halt it,” she responded in a quiet, timid voice. “I might express my displeasure, but I am of no station to argue, your Grace.”

Michael glowered. “Can’t Hunters make a point about it? This is my reputation we are speaking of!”

“I thought it was the Duchess’s,” she said.

“It is both of ours, Mrs. Bellflower!” Michael shouted again, his voice clashing against the walls. “No wonder the Ton believes her to be having affairs, left and right! The woman deals with men without a damned chaperone!Men!”

Mrs. Bellflower flinched backwards a step. “I apologize, your Grace.”

“I -” Michael hesitated. Watching the housekeeper take a step backwards, flinching from the strength in his voice, sent an ill-boding feeling down the back of his spine. He lowered his hands, and took a step away from her. Not once, despite the regret or the remorse, did Michael feel his anger simmer down. His rage was practically tangible.

“I suggest you and Hunters change the way you handle things around the estate,” he snapped.

Mrs. Bellflower bowed her head. “Yes, your Grace.”

Michael stormed by her and entered the hallway.

There was never a time in which his mother took unchaperoned men into the estate. Much less hired hands, workers from below their station. It was despicable and demeaning, an act that could put the Duchess in more trouble rather than not. He had not a clue about those workers, about what they did or where they came from. All he knew was that his wife was there, alone with them.

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Michael marched faster, determined to stop the transgressions from continuing beneath his nose. When he neared the back doors, his eyes caught onto Hunters lingering nearby.

“Hunters!”

The butler spun around, a few other servants behind him. “Yes, your Grace? Finished lunch? We might return to the -”

“Come here.”

Hunters paused, one brow raising as he walked over. “Yes, your Grace.”

“The Duchess is out there overseeing those men on her lonesome,” Michael hissed. “How long have you allowed this to pass on?”

The butler’s eyes narrowed only slightly. “Her Grace insisted on being a part of the work being done on the orangery, your Grace.”

“And you deemed that wise?”

“Whatever I deem it to be matters not,” the butler replied. “I am here to serve, your Grace.”

Michael leaned dangerously close, unable to stop himself from seething. “This might be the very reason why the Ton believes my wife to be constantly in the midst of an affair!”

“You know that is not the case, your Grace.”

“What I know and what is seen are two different things!”

Hunters nodded. “I understand, your Grace. Might I attend to the workers alongside the Duchess?”

“You will come with me to escort every damned soul unwarranted out of the estate!”

Before the butler could reply, Michael stormed off, ripping open the back door that led into the estate’s land. The orangery, which was being built near the hedge maze, was too far for him to see. The workers lingered around the gardens, packing up their tools and supplies for the day. A few were pulling carts up the squat hill, met halfway by Hunters, who led them the rest of the way. Michael continued on, sidestepping by the mingling workers.

Beside the garden, the Duchess stood on a stepping stone to look over a group of the workers. They stood around her, looking up at the pedestal she stood on. The Duchess was in the middle of reviewing things, giving orders to the remaining workers as Michael steadily approached.

“And we need to make sure the glass ceiling is as secure as it can be,” the Duchess was in the middle of saying. “The biggest thing I worry about is -”

“Everyone!” Michael shouted, his voice booming across the field.

Almost instantaneously, the workers shut up to their feet and to attention, turning to face Michael. He bristled with anger, hands clenched into tight fists at his sides. In the corner of his eye, he made out Hunters approaching, already motioning for the workers to take their leave. Michael barely glanced up at the Duchess, who remained unphased from where she stood.

“Leave!”

The workers scattered, gathering up the last bits of their supplies before clobbering up the squat hill. Hunters followed behind them, taking any lingering staff members along with him. In the matter of minutes, when Michael stood directly in front of the Duchess, they were entirely alone in the garden.

He motioned for her to get down from the pedestal.

“I am fine here,” she blurted.

Michael glared up at her. “Don’t you have any respect?”

“Of course I do, your Grace,” she said. “I very well know how to respect my hired help.”

“I cannot, for the life of me, even begin to understand you!”

The Duchess raised a slender brow. “I wouldn’t even think you’d try to.”

“You are despicable.”

Her head shot down to him, her hands resting on her hips. From the pedestal, she stood at least a head taller than him. “What on earth is your problem? I don’t believe I have ever met a man as rude as you!”

“I am nowhere near as rude as you, your Grace,” he sneered. “Refusing to dine with your husband? Just so you might talk and work and sweat beside some strangers?”

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The Duchess faced him, her eyes wicked with anger. “Your Grace,” she muttered, “You were so kind as to leave me to dine alone for two years. And what was even better, was that you had no reason!”

Michael yanked his gaze away, staring off into the garden. He bit down on his tongue, not daring to say the reckless things he wished to say. Michael kept his stare away from her, not willing to even look her in the eyes. No woman had ever managed to rile him so. Perhaps it was from her infuriating attitude or lack of simple decorum. Perhaps he felt the slightest bit of guilt in the back of his mind for deciding to live at the private estate for so long.

Michael clenched his fists as he faced her again. The remorse trickled out of him as if it was never there in the first place.

“No wonder rumors follow you wherever you go,” he muttered. “Your behavior is as reckless as a child’s. It is as inappropriate as a harlot’s.”

The Duchess gaped. At her side, her arm twitched, just barely raising into the air. Her palm shuttered, as if her skin imagined striking the side of his face. He merely remained steadfast, holding her stare and not daring to back down. Her hesitation settled for too long, and the Duchess retracted, holding her arms firmly at her sides.

“I have no plans on taking advice on manners from a man like you,” she whispered.

“Perhaps you should consider it.”

The Duchess leaned, inching the slightest bit closer to his face. “Just because you

decided to remember that you had a wife does not mean I will suddenly regard you as a husband.”

Michael, filled with an emotion he could not understand, surged forward, closing the gap between them. Despite her height being raised by the pedestal, he stepped onto the ground directly beside it, raising himself to be directly beneath her. The breath hitched in her throat, her eyes widening as they took in his entire face.

Being that close, Michael could see the sweat lining her temples, brown curls sticking to the side of her face. Green eyes, green like the emerald he remembered to be on his walls, stared back at him. Michael glanced down at her rosy red lips, entranced for a moment as her breath wafted against his face.

He looked back into her eyes. “I do not expect or ask you to act like my wife,” he muttered. “But I refuse to accept even the slightest bit of respect from you. I am your husband, and you will take your meals with me, as you should.”

The Duchess didn’t speak a word, didn’t even breathe.

Michael took in her face once more, and stepped backwards. Without even a bow, he stormed off, climbing the hill back towards the estate. All the while, his hands twitched and trembled at his side, a series of chills crawling up his spine. The feelings coursing within him refused to make the slightest bit of sense, but haunted him all the way back.

CHAPTER 7

The next morning, as Cordelia made her way down to the orangery, she saw something incredibly peculiar. Down by the hedge maze, where the orangery was beginning to take on its final shape, Hunters stood in front of the gathering group of hired men. He held a hand over his eyes to block out the sun’s gaze, pointing in

certain directions and shouting orders. She approached faster, gathering up her skirts.

As she came closer, the workers eyed her pleasantly. She gave them nods and waves as she made her way over to the butler.

“Good morning, Hunters,” Cordelia called out to him.

Hunters turned around and gave her a polite bow. “It is a pleasant day to spend outside, your Grace,” he said. “Though, I am afraid you won’t get to enjoy it as much as I.”

She narrowed her eyes. “Whatever for?”

“The Duke is expecting you in the dining room.”

Cordelia frowned. “Not this again.”

The butler turned away from the hired men as they began to get to work. “Perhaps you might consider going, your Grace. Even if it is just this once.”

She crossed her arms stubbornly over her chest. “I see no reason to. The Duke disrespected me in more ways than one yesterday.”

“Your Grace,” Hunters began, “You do know the proper ways of dining with your husband, don’t you?”

Cordelia glanced at him from the corner of her eye before letting out a tired sigh. “Of course I know those things, Hunters,” she muttered. “But...I told him how much I needed your help. His response was to berate me for following through with it. Perhaps I might have been able to dine with him if he allowed you to help me. Did you ever consider that?”

Hunters nodded. "I suppose that very much well could've been the case, your Grace," he said. "But, unfortunately, it wasn't."

"I have no plans to fall to his every whim."

The butler gave her a small smile. "I am here now, aren't I?"

"Just because the beastly Duke decided to hand you over once does not change a handful of discretions."

"Of course not," he replied.

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Cordelia met his gaze. The butler watched her like an observant father, a man with a hidden meaning lurking behind his eyes. She sighed again, looking away with a pout on her face. "I am kinder than he," she snapped. "So I will give him this one thing, Hunters. The fact that you are back is a welcomed reprieve. Attending a single meal is the least I can do."

Hunters widened his smile. "What a pleasant idea, your Grace. I will keep a watchful eye on the hired hands. The orangery will be finished in no time."

Cordelia gave him a nod before turning back towards the estate. A million thoughts ran through her mind as she slipped through the backdoors. Her composure was so easily lost when she was near him. Passionate anger felt easy to find, something she never truly reveled in. Not only that, but Cordelia could not deny her unmistakable interest in the Duke. His shrouded nature and outwardly beastly attitude never once failed to make her question what his life had been like before, where he might've come from, what it was like to live in that estate.

The eagerness she had to uncover his true thoughts was more irritable than she realized it would be. Cordelia refused to give in to the man, though everything about him was dangerously intriguing. Cordelia pressed on, going further and further into the estate.

All she had to do was retain her composure and keep a leveled head. The more distance kept between them, the easier it would be for Cordelia to remain collected. As she neared the dining room, hearing the sounds of servants moving around within, Cordelia repeated the words in the back of her mind like a mantra.

Composure and distance.

Cordelia slipped into the dining room. The servants turned to face her, deeply bowing before backing away. Across the table, the Duke rose to his feet.

“Your Grace,” he said, lowering his head in a polite bow. The Duke waved a hand towards the seat across from him. “Good morning.”

“Good morning,” she replied, cautiously moving towards the table.

The Duke’s attention was pulled down to the papers in his hands as he retook his seat. Cordelia’s eyes flicked up to him every minute or so, a desperate attempt to gauge his emotions without staring for too long. Even so, with every moment her eyes landed on him, Cordelia found it harder to pull away. He was so naturally handsome without trying, merely letting his hair rest down his neck and dress in a simple black suit.

Cordelia tried to focus on her food, though not a bit of hunger touched her. She was only growing curiouser and curiouser, unable to stop herself from stealing quick glances in his direction.

“There is a ball coming up in the next few days,” the Duke suddenly said.

Cordelia jerked, pulling her gaze away from him. “In London?”

“Yes,” he replied. “I have already sent word of our attendance.”

She raised her head, meeting his gaze. “Very well.”

The Duke nodded, his stare holding onto her a moment longer than she expected it to. His expression remained unchanged, dark eyes clinging to her face heavily. His head tilted ever so slightly, the corner of his lip twitching into a frown. The longer he

stared, the more her heart began to race. She yanked her gaze away, desperate for the hammering beneath her chest to quiet down to a normal pattern.

Composure, she repeated to herself, though it wasn't the kind of composure she thought she would have needed.

"You understand what would be required of us at a ball, correct?"

She frowned. "Required of us?"

"As in," he said, leaning onto his hand, "Acting like a dutiful husband and wife. A pair that always expected to be together."

Cordelia held back her scoff. His words clung to her longer than she expected them to. She swallowed, looking down towards her untouched plate of food. "Yes," she said. "I remember now."

"Do you have an appropriate dress to wear?"

She met his gaze again, her brow raised as the insult sunk into her skin. "Why wouldn't I?" she snapped. "I have too many I'll never get to wear."

The Duke watched her. "Very well," he muttered. "Hunters will be handling your workers from now on."

Her eyebrows shot up. The surprise was hard to mask. She reached for her cup, taking a sip of the steaming tea and eyeing him over the rim. The Duke already returned to looking over his papers, retrieving an envelope from a nearby stack and using the sharp edge of a blade to pry the wax seal off with a pop.

Cordelia watched him with an unwavering stare. He couldn't be the same man she

witnessed the day before, the same man who approached her with such a raging anger, the same man who abandoned her for two years. Not that a simple request granted was something to fawn over, but it was something. She found herself unable to ignore it, unable to push past the growing feeling of racing butterflies within the depths of her stomach.

Finally, Cordelia lowered her cup, struggling to place it on the saucer without a loud clattering noise. She struggled to speak, the words of gratitude sticking to the tip of her tongue.

“Thank you, your Grace,” she finally managed, the words so low she thought he hadn’t even heard.

The Duke raised his head. He did not open his mouth to speak. He merely watched her, holding onto her stare and leaning forward ever so slightly. The Duke tilted his head, his eyes narrowed in an investigatory way. Every bit of him, without warning, took her in, unable to pull himself away.

Cordelia, greedily, soaked up every moment of his attention, feeling the burning red blush rise to her cheeks slowly but surely. Her pulse began to quicken once more and, even if she wanted to, she found that she couldn’t peel her eyes away.

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Suddenly, the Duke rose from the table, bowing his head politely. “If you’ll excuse me, your Grace.”

Without another word, her husband left the room, carrying his papers beneath his arm.

Cordelia fell back against her seat, one hand resting over her chest. Beneath her fingertips, her heartbeat slammed rapidly against her, not once slowing down. She drew in a deep breath, her eyes fluttering close.

Behind her eyelids, Cordelia could only see her husband.

CHAPTER8

Darkenhill Manor was exactly how Cordelia remembered it to be. Despite the old Duke, her temperamental but well-meaning father, passing a few years prior, Duncan Celeston never saw any reason to redecorate. Perhaps it was because he did not have a woman’s vision, or the reassurance of a wife, to help him do so. Either way, Cordelia frowned upon the Manor as she left her carriage, drawing nearer to the ornate front doors.

Before she knocked, the door peeled open, not even letting out a creak.

“Dear me,” the old woman croaked, her wrinkled eyes colored a pale blue growing wide. “If it isn’t the Duchess of Solshire! The prodigal daughter returns!”

Cordelia laughed, a sweet nostalgia filling her chest. “Mrs. Atty,” she cooed, reaching

forward to take the woman's shriveled hands, "My dear housekeeper, you look younger, if that is at all possible."

Mrs. Atty's marbled cheeks took on a pinkish hue. "Always the sweet talker, your Grace," she teased before jumping almost a foot in the air. She raised a shaking hand to her lips. "My deepest apologies, your Grace. I haven't even invited you in yet!"

"Don't bother! It'll give me a reason to turn back around."

The housekeeper laughed, the sweet bell-chime sound pulling Cordelia back into an entirely different point in her life. Suddenly, she was no more than a bright-eyed and bushy tailed teen, spending hours upon hours outside painting and ignoring her worrywart of a father. She reached, forgetting herself, and cupped a hand around the older woman's cheek. Mrs. Atty, as if she dismissed any idea of decorum herself, leaned into Cordelia's hand, crystal colored tears welling up in her eyes.

"You have grown into quite the woman," Mrs. Atty whispered.

Cordelia smiled sheepishly. "It has only been a year or two since you've seen me, Mrs. Atty. How much could I have grown in that time?"

"So very much, your Grace. More than you can imagine."

And Cordelia supposed she didn't need much convincing after all. The time spent in solitude, learning an estate she never knew, gaining the trust of a house staff that had no intention of seeing her stay be a comfortable one, shaped Cordelia into a strong and well-rounded woman of polite society. Even if she didn't quite agree with it herself, she knew it to be true.

Mrs. Atty sighed, and pulled her head off Cordelia's hand, shaking off the misty eyed reverie they both walked into.

“Please, come inside, your Grace,” the housekeeper said, extending a welcoming arm.

Cordelia breathed in, desperate to calm the beating of her nervous heart.

Everything was just as she remembered it to be. Curtains she used to tug and yank as a child remained around the tall windows. Pale white furniture ordained each room, keeping with the pastel theme throughout the Manor. Portraits of family she never knew and ones she knew all too well stared back at her as she trickled further in. A dog, a great big beast with shaggy fur and a long face, sat at the middle of the grand staircase, watching Cordelia with a lazy expression.

“That beast is new,” she mused to no one in particular.

Mrs. Atty sighed as she wobbled beside her. “The wolfhound came with the Dowager Countess.”

Cordelia bristled. The title now associated with her eldest sister, Irene, was one that still took some getting used to. Not the Countess part, of course, but rather the Dowager. She faced the housekeeper. “How is my sister, Mrs. Atty?”

“The Countess remains her pious and gentle self, your Grace,” the housekeeper replied.

“That’s all?”

Mrs. Atty’s greying brow rose. “If you mean to ask if your sister is sad, your Grace, then perhaps that is something you should ask her yourself.”

“You know as much as I that Irene is nowhere near a person who shares their true feelings.”

“It must run in the family, then.”

Cordelia grinned as she looked over her shoulder at the old woman. “I do adore you, Mrs. Atty,” she cooed. “Never once do you shy away from the truth.”

“Well,” Mrs. Atty added under her breath, “Don’t ask me how the Duke feels. I’ll shy away from that truth for as long as I live.”

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“I wonder how long that would be,” a deep voice rang through the foyer behind them. Slipping out through the kitchen, Duncan pressed in on them, his head angled down to shroud his naturally handsome gaze with shadows. The corner of his lip twitched between a smile and a disapproving frown. “My sister,” he continued, “What an unexpected surprise.”

“On the contrary,” Cordelia said, watching her brother approach with a raised brow. “Irene very much knew of my visit.” She placed a slender finger on her chin. “How funny. Did she not inform the head of the household? How despicable. Tell me you’ll punish her, brother.”

Duncan did not dare to crack a smile. “I see you are still nothing more than a tease.”

“And I see you are still as tight lipped as the rest of the Celeston men.” She smiled and took a step closer to him. “Can’t you tell me how Irene is faring?”

“If you are here to see her, why don’t you ask for yourself?”

“You know our dear eldest sister,” Cordelia pressed. “She won’t offer me the slightest bit of the truth.”

Duncan raised a brow. “And you assume I would?”

“Does it hurt to ask?”

“Perhaps.”

Cordelia's shoulders sagged. "Duncan!"

"Honestly, Cordelia, ask her yourself," he muttered, crossing his arms determinedly over his chest. "I have bigger things to ruminate over than our sister's inability to share her feelings. I thought you'd at least understand that now, as a married woman with a title."

"What does that have to do with anything?"

Duncan shook his head. "Dear sister," he muttered, "There isn't a lady in London's aristocratic society who'd dare to reveal her true feelings. Not when there is marriage, and more specifically, a fortune at stake."

Cordelia blinked, entirely lost. "Once again," she snapped, "What does that have to do with our sister's well-being?"

"Forget it," Duncan mumbled, his brow crooked and annoyed. "She rests in the drawing room. Follow the damned hound," he gestured to the great beast who rose from the stairs. "He knows the way."

Duncan stormed off in the opposite direction, whipping around a corner without another word.

Cordelia flipped around to the housekeeper. "Is it just me, or is my brother a bigger hard-head than usual?"

"I wouldn't know such a thing, your Grace."

She raised a brow and crossed her arms stubbornly.

"The Duke has had quite a bit on his shoulders over these few years, especially with

the return of the Countess,” Mrs. Atty finally said in a lowered voice. “I thought her grief and mourning would affect him, but it seems to be something else weighing on the Duke’s mind. Not that he is ever as inclined to share it.”

Cordelia scoffed. “Must run in the family. Does Irene truly grieve?”

“My dear,” Mrs. Atty cooed, extending an arm towards the wolfhound, who truly seemed to be waiting on Cordelia by that point, “I believe it would be best for you to see and ask her for yourself. You are sisters, after all.”

After letting out a burdened sigh, Cordelia left the housekeeper in the foyer, and followed the wolfhound up the stairs. The beast barely gave her any attention, merely walked at a lazy pace around the corners and through the halls.

For a reason Cordelia could not explain, her nerves amounted to an unexpected height as she drew closer and closer to her sister. Grief was not something their family had yet to experience, but the untimely death of a newly wedded husband? Cordelia shook her head as she walked, slowing her pace so as to not pass the wolfhound. Even for a woman as strong and gracious as Irene, it felt like a burden no person could manage well on their own.

Cordelia received a letter from Irene the day before, after learning about how her husband decided they would attend a ball as a united pair. The look on her husband’s face still haunted her, clinging to the back of her mind like a forgotten dream. Even then, as she walked towards her sister, a tension grew in the center of her chest, a sort of tightness she would have once considered to be a sign of sickness. Now, Cordelia suspected, it had to be some sort of nerve. It had to be.

The wolfhound used his long snout to push a door open fully and slipped inside without barely letting out a sound. Cordelia eagerly followed, and stepped into the brightly lit parlour after the gentle beast.

The parlour was a round room, with tall windows framing one side and bookcases lined with leather-bound volumes on the other side. Plush seats and a long sofa were in the center of the room, a table in between them. A tray carrying a baby blue tea set glimmered at the table, one cup set aside and steaming. Upon the sofa, with needlepoint resting on her lap, was Irene. The wolfhound clobbered up to her, resting his long head beside her, looking up with wide doe-eyes, the slightest bit of a whimper filling the air.

“Dear sister,” Cordelia said from the doorway. “Once, you told me of a certain beast with a rather worried tone. Look at you now! Carrying ‘round a beast of your own.”

Irene looked over her shoulder, a wide smile beaming across her beautifully porcelain skin. “How dare I,” she teased. “If it worries you any, know that Tiberius is the gentlest giant I have had the pleasure of knowing.”

“Tiberius,” Cordelia repeated, catching the dog’s attention for a second. “I don’t recall you being an animal lover, Irene.”

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“I suppose I never was,” she replied. “But circumstances are bound to change, aren’t they?”

Cordelia crossed the room, taking a seat across from her sister. Immediately, her eyes dragged down Irene’s clothes, barely recognizing her sweet sister when she wore nothing but black in mourning.

“Do not worry, Cordelia,” Irene suddenly said. The smile never once left her lips.

“Who said anything about worrying?”

“No one, but your face is full of it.”

Cordelia leaned back in her seat. There wasn’t a thing she could get past her sister, no matter what. The details of her recent move back into Darkenhill Manor were foggy to Cordelia, but the look in her sister’s eyes told her that she shouldn’t dare to ask. “I was glad to see your letter,” she said instead.

Irene raised a slender brow as she dragged her hand over the wolfhound’s snout. “Really?” she asked.

Cordelia scoffed. “Do you believe I am not happy to see a promised correspondence from my oldest and only sister?”

“Don’t tease, Cordelia,” she mumbled. “You and I both know that my letters were bound to go unnoticed by you. What has changed?”

She looked away, glancing out the window as a familiar flock of geese drifted by overhead. Immediately, Cordelia shook her head, disappointed that she didn't even consider bringing a canvas with her. The weather was perfect for a scenic painting, even if it was a time consuming venture.

"I suppose I needed to speak with someone," Cordelia replied.

Irene chuckled. "Have you grown bored of your solitude finally?"

"You cannot tease about my solitude any longer," she snapped. "The day you visited, and we were told of my husband's arrival. Do you recall it?"

"Of course."

"He decided to remain at Solshire."

Irene sat up, the sudden movement startling Tiberius. The wolfhound let out a grumble deep within his throat before lowering to the floor, his long face draping across Irene's feet. "You don't say!" she mused. "Truly? The Duke lives at the estate with you?"

"He has for the past few days," Cordelia replied. "And insists upon remaining till the rumors the Ton so carelessly spread about no longer taint his name."

"Can you blame him?"

"I can, actually."

Irene frowned. "Cordelia," she said in a warning voice, "His family has been a prominent one for generations. I am more surprised he waited this long to rectify it."

“A few rumors spread by aristocratic Lords and Ladies who have too much time on their hands is no reason to flip an entire life upside down.”

“Are you telling me that you truly preferred your solitude? Truly?”

Cordelia leaned her chin against her gloved palm, spread out along the back of her chair. Her gaze was fixated on a portrait beside the window. It was of their mother, a woman Cordelia seldom remembered. She was far too young when she passed to hold onto her memory enough, but missed her all the same. If her mother was here, could the questions and qualms she had with the Duke come along easier, solved in a much quicker fashion? The question hung in the air above Cordelia’s head like a daunting storm cloud.

“It was not such a terrible thing,” Cordelia mumbled. “Though his presence...”

“What about his presence?”

Cordelia glanced at her sister’s suddenly interested face. She pouted at her. “Is quite grueling, Irene,” she said instead, earning a very weighted sigh. “You wouldn’t believe the trouble I went through to have some assistance with my orangery. I was forced to handle my workers alone, and -”

“Workers?” Irene repeated. “You handled men alone? Unchaperoned?”

“I am a married woman, Irene.”

“A Duchess,” she snapped. “Who acts alongside her husband, not without him.” Irene shook her head like a disappointed mother, burdened with undisciplined children. “Won’t you refrain from being so confrontational with him?”

“Who on earth said I was being confrontational?”

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“As I have said plenty of times before: I know you, Cordelia.”

She rolled her eyes like a petulant adolescent. “He decides to start things with me, Irene, not the other way around.”

“Really?”

“Is that truly so hard to believe?”

“As a matter of fact -”

“Irene!”

Her sister let out a laugh. “When did you become so defensive, Cordelia?” Irene’s brow rose, a knowing smirk beginning to spread across her thin lips. “If I knew any better, I’d say something else sits heavily on your mind.”

Cordelia glanced at her. “What is that supposed to mean?”

Irene shrugged. “Nothing.”

“Sister,” she warned, leaning forward and catching the attention of Tiberius, “There is nothing else weighing on my mind, other than my husband who has finally decided to be my husband sent word that we might attend a ball later this week.”

Irene’s eyes widened. “A ball?”

“I know,” Cordelia muttered. “Isn’t it ridiculous? I haven’t attended one in -”

“That is spectacular, Cordelia!” Irene blurted, clapping her hands as if she could no longer contain her excitement. “It has already been a marvelous Season. I am very pleased you’ll have a chance to experience it as a married Lady.”

Cordelia rolled her eyes again. “I am in no way looking forward to the event, Irene.”

“Don’t tell me you argued with the Duke about it.”

“Well,” she mused, falling back against the sofa once more, “I suppose he did not give me much of a chance.” Her mind wandered, lingering in the reverie of the Duke’s heavy stare holding onto her across from the breakfast table. That same feeling returned: the tightness in her chest, the increased hammering of her heart. Cordelia waved a hand in front of her, as if the memory was a pesky bug. “Perhaps I will voice my concern the moment I return to Solshire.”

“For Heaven’s sake, Cordelia,” Irene snapped, “Don’t do such a thing.”

“Why not?”

Irene sighed. “I told you before. The Duke is a beastly thing.”

“You seemed very excited for me a moment ago!”

“When left uncontested, I believe it to be a great opportunity,” she argued. “Despite the Ton’s whispers only being rumors, haven’t you considered what would happen if they weren’t?”

Cordelia shrugged. “No.”

“Rumors or not, the Duke of Solshire was known as a beast before you were ever wed. Doesn’t that worry you?”

“Why should it?”

Irene rose from her seat, quickly rounding the table to lounge on the sofa beside her. Without a moment to lose, Tiberius followed, resting his head across Irene’s lap with a loud sigh. His wide, brown eyes stared up at Cordelia.

“Perhaps,” Irene began, her voice soft, “You might consider allowing yourself to be afraid of the Duke.”

Cordelia leaned away from her sister. “Why would I ever do such a thing?”

“How are we supposed to know what he might do if pushed too far?”

“You can’t believe everything the Ton whispers, Irene.”

“Of course not,” she replied. “But they are not blind. To ignore it would be ignorant.” She reached, grasping a hold of Cordelia’s hand tightly. “I only want you safe and content, Cordelia. Is that so wrong of me?”

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Cordelia watched her sister with narrowed eyes. The words nestled deep in her mind, bringing an unexpected irritation to the forefront of her thoughts. What was there to be offended about? Cordelia knew as much as any other that the Duke was a well known beast, a man with tendencies not entirely approved of by the Ton. At the same time, Cordelia knew she was just the same. The Ton never once looked upon her in the way they looked at Irene or Duncan. Cordelia was as much of an outsider as the Duke.

Looking away, Cordelia sought to shove the thoughts out of her mind. Defending the Duke? The exact man who drove her up the wall, who embarrassed her in front of her workers and never once appreciated the amount of work she did on his dated home?

Not an ounce of her feelings made sense, and she had no intention of ruminating over them any further.

“The Duke is nothing more than a challenge,” Cordelia said instead. “Have you ever known me to back down from a challenge?”

Irene sighed, pulling her hand back. “I suppose not, dear sister.”

“There is one thing that rests heavily on my mind.”

“What would that be?”

Cordelia looked over at her sister. “Why do you suppose the Duke agreed to marry me in the first place?”

“Well,” Irene mused, “I don’t quite know.”

“What would give a beastly Duke reason to marry a recently ruined Lady?”

Irene lifted her shoulders. “Father never explained it.”

“Truly?”

“Can you see him telling me such a thing?”

Cordelia pressed her lips together. “Perhaps Duncan would know.”

“Why should it matter?” Irene asked. “You are married now. The reasons can’t change that fact.”

“Of course it doesn’t.”

“Do not ruminate over things that are out of your bounds.”

Cordelia sighed. It wasn’t like she expected Irene to answer the question, but voicing it brought a new interest in the Duke’s past to Cordelia’s mind. Ever since the wedding, she had been more than intrigued with her husband’s past, and why the Ton knew him to be a beastly and wild sort of creature. But the reasons behind their marriage were unbeknownst to her. Did the Duke face his own sort of scrutiny that required a wife?

“Enough of this,” Irene suddenly said. “Let us talk about the ball.”

“Whatever for?”

“What dress shall you wear?”

Before Cordelia could come up with some sort of lie to please her sister's eager expression, the door to the parlour opened, and Duncan slipped inside, a few books held beneath his arm.

"I don't believe I heard correctly," he said. "Is Cordelia attending a ball?"

Cordelia rolled her eyes. "You find the oddest times to gain a sense of humor, dear brother."

Duncan raised a bushy brow. "There is no humor in my question, only doubt. The sister I know would never willingly attend a ball, not without being forced."

"Well, I do have a husband now."

Duncan crossed the room, sliding the books he held back in their spots upon the aging bookcases. Despite the teasing tint to his voice, Duncan never once dropped the serious frown that seemed to permanently rest across his lips. "Who knew that was all it would take?"

"I believe you knew that very well."

"Not when I heard he hadn't lived with you for two years," Duncan quickly said, eyeing Cordelia skeptically. "Don't get me wrong, sister. I was not surprised the Duke decided to reside elsewhere. You have that charming effect."

Cordelia shook her head. "I cannot believe you are still unwed. With that charm, every available Lady in the Ton should be following you around like Irene's delightful wolfhound."

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“Do you even own a dress for a ball?”

“How long must you insult your youngest sister?”

Irene cleared her throat. “The both of you,” she muttered with a tired shake of her head. “Rather ridiculous how you two tease each other. An outsider might believe we despise one another.”

“Heavens, no,” Cordelia mused, watching her brother with a growing smirk.

Duncan pressed his lips together. “Don’t worry, Irene. Soon her newfound - excuse me, old- husband might talk some respectable sense into our sister sooner rather than later.”

Cordelia couldn’t stop the laugh from blurting out into the room, loudly and boldly. Tiberius jolted, just as surprised as the rest of them to the sound. She grinned as her brother uncomfortably left the room. His seriousness always outweighed his teasing, even though he did it just as easily as she did.

“You two,” Irene said again, her head shaking like a tired mother.

“Are your most beloved treasures.”

Irene looked over at her, the smile she wore growing more and more heavy with a deep sadness Cordelia was unable to understand. “Truly,” she whispered. “You are.”

Scooting across the sofa to get closer to her sister, Cordelia leaned her head against

Irene's shoulder, the scratchy fabric of her mourning clothes sitting uncomfortably on her cheek. She gladly took the discomfort, soaking in her sister's presence as much as she could. There, sitting beside her, Cordelia felt as though she were a child again, lounging in the sun and daydreaming about the next painting she wished to craft.

Soon, before she knew it, Cordelia would return to Solshire and reenter the life she found herself living in. In a voice neither of them could hardly hear, Cordelia let out a whisper to Darkenhill Manor, and every creature within.

"I miss you."

CHAPTER9

When the carriage arrived back at Solshire, Cordelia jolted awake from a dreamless sleep. She blinked as the footman opened the door, a stream of late afternoon sun slicing through the dim compartment. The ride was quiet and swaying, pulling her into a sleep before she even realized she was the slightest bit tired.

The footman extended a hand to help her out, and she graciously took it. As the light grazed over her dress, Cordelia smiled, long wispy hairs from Tiberius lingering across her skirts. Without brushing them off, she began to make her way back towards the entrance to the estate.

When she was halfway up the stairs, the grand doors pushed open, and Mrs. Bellflower stepped out to greet her. Cordelia couldn't help but remember her first few months at the estate, when the housekeeper barely batted an eye in her direction. It took plenty of time and many difficult moments, but after earning the woman's respect, Cordelia found a friend in Mrs. Bellflower, in the same way she once cherished Mrs. Atty back at Darkenhill.

"Welcome home, your Grace," Mrs. Bellflower chimed when she met her on the

stairs. "I hope you had a pleasant trip at Darkenhill Manor."

Cordelia smiled. "I will always be pleased to visit my siblings. Thank you for asking, Mrs. Bellflower." As they walked up alongside each other, Cordelia heard noise being pulled along the wind from behind the estate. "Is the work on the orangery still going well?"

"It progresses just as planned, your Grace."

"And Hunters, has he -"

"Hunters hasn't left his spot overlooking the workers," Mrs. Bellflower assured, a knowing smile on her lips. "There was a point in which he wandered back into the estate to retrieve something, but you will be most surprised to hear, your Grace, that it was the Duke himself who ordered him back to work."

Cordelia paused at the threshold. "You aren't trying to tease me, are you, Mrs. Bellflower?"

"Heavens not, your Grace!"

"Well," Cordelia mused, swallowing down the pleased smile that threatened to show, "How peculiar. I can only assume it means my husband would want something."

"Whatever for, your Grace? There isn't a thing the Duke could be wanting, besides your happiness, of course."

Cordelia laughed. "What an odd thing to hear."

"Odd, your Grace?"

“My husband is seeking out my happiness,” Cordelia repeated. “Does that not sound unusual to your ears, Mrs. Bellflower?”

The housekeeper sighed. “While I very much see your point, your Grace, perhaps you might be open to considering the Duke’s efforts to forge a better relationship between the two of you.”

Cordelia glanced over at Mrs. Bellflower, surprised at the sincerity of the housekeeper’s voice. She couldn’t truly believe that the husband who had been missing from his own halls for over a year would want to ensure Cordelia’s comfortability, could she? Cordelia shook her head just as the tightness returned to her chest, spreading to her stomach where restless butterflies danced around haphazardly.

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“Never mind it,” Cordelia said instead.

“I took to going through your ball gowns, your Grace, since you have an event steadily approaching.”

Cordelia frowned. Somehow, during the trip back, she had completely forgotten about the ball and everything a Season in London required. “Very well,” she muttered. “I assume there was something acceptable for the occasion.”

“More than acceptable, your Grace,” she replied. “You own so many delightful pieces, I am surprised you hadn’t taken to them much sooner.”

“Balls are not my preferred way to spend my time.”

Mrs. Bellflower laughed. “Why not, your Grace? If you don’t mind me asking.”

“Not at all,” Cordelia replied. “Some days, I believe the life of an aristocrat was meant for someone entirely different than me. I do not care to waltz around a room listening to the gossip and rumors the Ton decides to spread on any given evening.”

“Perhaps it would be a more exciting turn of events to spread gossip around yourself, your Grace.”

Cordelia glanced over at her with wide eyes. “Mrs. Bellflower,” she mused, “What a shocking thing to suggest.”

“The rumors spread about you and the Duke have reached even our ears, your

Grace.”

Cordelia sighed. “They are foolish, aren’t they?”

“But still widely believed,” the housekeeper continued. “The Duke would not have returned if he didn’t have a sort of question about them. If they are that easy to be created, your Grace, what’s to say you can’t use this ball to reshape how the Ton thinks of you? However you might please?”

“My, my,” Cordelia teased with a growing smile, “Who knew you were such a gossip, Mrs. Bellflower?”

The housekeeper laughed, a delicate pink hue taking over her wrinkled cheeks. “I wouldn’t call myself a gossip, your Grace, but rather someone who understands how the Ton flows and ebbs. It is only food for thought, your Grace. You may take it as you wish.”

Cordelia’s smile widened even further. The housekeeper suggested to do gossiping of her own, some that could rid Solshire of the dreadfully foolish rumors that threatened to tarnish the Duke’s well rounded name for generations to come. While she had no interest in rectifying the things the Ton wished to believe, she found a sort of playfulness in Mrs. Bellflower’s suggestion. Why shouldn’t Cordelia have a bit of fun herself, in a time when she couldn’t imagine finding the slightest bit of pleasure in a ball?

As they pressed further into the foyer, Cordelia noticed an aching in her calves, one that shot down to her sore feet. Nothing a bout of warm water and a relaxing hour couldn’t fix. “It has been quite a long day of travel, Mrs. Bellflower,” Cordelia said. “Might you send a maid to prepare a bath for me?”

The housekeeper bowed her head. “Would you like to use your newly renovated

bathroom, your Grace?”

Cordelia nodded. “It has been a successful addition to the estate, hasn’t it?” The words of her husband came rushing back to her, his consistent apprehension towards her renovations not hesitating to cling to her confidence. “Despite the work and cost.”

“I would say so, your Grace,” Mrs. Bellflower said. “The maids are very grateful to not have to lug the bathtub to and from any rooms.”

“I am glad.”

“The most important one to please is yourself, your Grace. As long as you approve of the addition, I do not see any qualms about it.”

“I cannot approve it enough,” Cordelia joked, letting out a light laugh. “The window the bathtub is placed in front of is the most relaxing spot in the entire estate. I could have a glass of wine in there, if I was so pleased.”

Mrs. Bellflower smiled. “And your art, your Grace? Have you brought it there with you?”

“I never thought of it,” Cordelia replied as they walked leisurely towards her chambers. “Though, it would be quite a shame to get water on a canvas, wouldn’t it?”

The housekeeper laughed. “You are the painter, your Grace.”

At her chambers, Mrs. Bellflower gave Cordelia a slight bow. “I will fetch the maids now, your Grace, to prepare you for a bath.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Bellflower.”

The housekeeper scurried down the hall, gathering her skirts in one hand as she slipped around the corner. Cordelia passed into her room, walking past the series of canvases she had poised on her easels already. Her work, lately, consisted primarily of landscapes around the estate. She worked on a painting of the orangery, though she paused till the construction on it was entirely finished. Another consisted of the front of the estate, the lake and family mausoleum peeking out on either side. The last remained blank, a project she wanted to begin but had yet to decide on a subject.

Cordelia took a seat at the edge of her bed, peeling off her gloves and kicking her shoes haphazardly across the floor. All the while she stared at the white canvas, her mind suddenly fixated on something to fill it with. Her head tilted. An image came to mind, one that brought a heated blush to her cheeks at the exact same time.

Cordelia was not one to paint portraits. They were time consuming and required the subject to sit in the ideal position for long, grueling hours. Cordelia had her own portrait done as a child, and the time she spent stuck in an uncomfortable chair while a pinched looking man sketched her onto his canvas was not a fond memory. And yet, as she rose from the bed, drawing nearer to the canvas, Cordelia raised her finger, tracing the lines and shapes in her head across the page.

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“Michael Rayson,” she whispered, glancing around as if someone might’ve been listening. The name hung in the air like a prayer, something she was not meant to whisper aloud, something meant for no ears. Cordelia breathed in. “Michael Rayson,” she said again, firmer that time.

“My husband,” she added, raising her shoulders.

Cordelia shook her head, letting her hand fall to her side. “What a ridiculous thought.”

Even so, she snatched up the wood-cased pencil sitting beside the easel, unable to stop herself from dragging lines and sharp edges across the canvas. Soon, from nothing but memory alone, Cordelia had the image of a familiar face sketched.

She took a step back, taking in the likeness. Somehow, she managed to achieve the Duke’s harsh edges, his jutting chin, the way his brow cast a darkened shadow over his eyes. With a few lines and strikes of her pencil, Cordelia felt as though she stood face-to-face with her husband, enamoured by his presence and unable to turn away. To know him by memory in such a way was impressive, but the feeling attached to it almost frightened her.

“He is a beast,” she murmured to herself. “And yet...”

Cordelia snapped the pencil back onto the easel, backing away from her canvas. She hardly recognized herself.

“It is Irene’s fault,” she snapped as she gathered her things to go to the bathroom.

“She has disrupted my thinking.”

Pushing open the door, Cordelia held her chin up, determined to wipe the image of the Duke clean from her face as soon as possible. A delightful bath, one that overlooked the setting sun, sounded like the perfect way to clear her troubled mind. She went down a hallway and a winding corner before coming across the newly renovated bathroom. Perhaps the maid collected her a glass of wine, as well, since she mentioned it to Mrs. Bellflower before. Growing more and more excited to spend some much needed time alone, Cordelia gently pushed open the bathroom door.

Steam from a previous bath filled the room. The tiles on the floor and walls were dripping with condensation, the tables beside the bathtub littered with formal papers and opened letters. Wax seals were on the floor around the tub, a fallen quill spilling leftover ink onto the tiles. A figure, recognizable the moment Cordelia opened the door, stood in front of the tub, facing the wide and tall windows that overlooked the back of the estate.

The Duke was in the midst of pulling a robe on. His back faced the entrance, water still dripping from his hair, trickling onto the floor beside his bare feet. Though Cordelia already knew his hair to be longer than most men in the Ton, it stretched further down his neck than she realized, now that it was weighed down with water.

But it was not the Duke's hair or the mess he left around the tub that caught Cordelia's eye. She had never seen a man so bare before, besides her brother, when they were nothing more than children. This occurrence was different than anything she might've once known. Not only was the Duke's skin oddly alluring, fostering that familiar flurry of butterflies in her stomach, but there was something else, something more personal than she ever realized.

White lines, long and sharp scars, lined the Duke's back. They stretched from shoulder blade to shoulder blade, down his spine and across his waist. Some curved

to encroach upon his neck, others stretched further than what Cordelia could see. Despite the sun illuminating him, casting the rest of his figure into a silhouette like shadow, the white scars stood out like strokes of fresh paint. The breath was stolen from Cordelia's lips. Too shocked and scandalized to move, she remained as still as a statue for a whole moment, till she realized the Duke was beginning to turn around, obviously aware that someone had entered the private space.

Cordelia flung around, almost slipping on the moist tiles below. "What on earth do you think you're doing?" she blurted, facing the threshold.

"I could ask you the same thing," he replied.

Without seeing his expression, Cordelia had no way of reading the tone of his voice. He sounded incredibly monotone, as if there wasn't an odd thing to say about the situation they found themselves in. She fidgeted. "I shall ask you again," she snapped. "What do you think you're doing here? I thought you considered my renovations to be nothing more than an unneeded expense!"

"While I do not plan on retracting my statement anytime soon," the Duke said, his low voice growing closer as his feet padded against the tile, "I cannot deny the impressive work done on this room. I can hardly remember what it was before."

"I-I-" Cordelia stammered, unable to control her thoughts into an ordered statement. The hint of a compliment in his words took her for a spin, one that she had no intention of indulging in.

"As for why I find myself here," the Duke continued, "I was under the impression I could go anywhere I pleased. This is my home, after all."

Cordelia found herself frozen in place.

“You don’t have to be turned around, you know.”

“But you -”

“I am fully dressed,” he interjected, the hint of a tease shadowing his voice, “Have been for a moment.”

Cordelia swallowed. There wasn’t a word she could focus on, a thing she could say when the image of the white scars along his back haunted her every thought. Anytime she considered she might gain the confidence to speak, the scars came rushing back to her, and Cordelia was forced to clamp her mouth shut. What if she was foolish enough to ask about them? And what if he was willing enough to explain them?

She fidgeted again, her hands intertwined tightly in front of her.

“I must say, I was quite skeptical when Hunters advised me on using the tub here,” the Duke suddenly said. “But I never fancied myself to be a liar. I enjoyed the bath much more than I thought I would.”

Cordelia was caught in another blush. Heat swarmed up her neck and her cheeks. She fought the urge to fan herself, to stagger and beg for some air. Every word he dared to speak sent the butterflies rushing through her stomach once more. He couldn’t be complimenting her so much, could he? There must’ve been something she missed, something she was too foolish or blind to see. The Duke that arrived those few days ago, determined to fix everything he swore she did wrong, could not be the same man who valued the work she had done.

It couldn’t be.

Could it?

Cordelia's distraction shrouded her from knowing how close the Duke came to her.

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“Your Grace,” he cooed, the words practically resting on Cordelia’s shoulder, “Is there any particular reason as to why you’re still here?” If it were at all possible, Cordelia felt as though she could hear the smirk in his voice, the corner of his lip turning up in a way she had never seen before.

Devils!

Her shoulders raised, an unexpected chilling rolling down her shoulder blades. In front of her, the Duke’s shadow stretched across the tile, as if he stood directly behind her. If she concentrated, she quickly realized his even breathing sliding over the top of her head. The magnitude of his height and closeness rattled Cordelia down to her very bones. Growing up, she knew the scandal it would be to reside so close to a man, especially if he wore such little clothing. Even then, bound to one another through marriage, Cordelia felt as though she had one foot securely stepping into a world of scandal and inappropriate gossip, as if the entirety of the Ton could see her now.

Without another thought to spare, Cordelia shot through the door, almost sprinting down the hall. When she rounded the corner, she slowed to a walk, unsure of where exactly she was trying to end up. There was not a single coherent thought in her mind, even when there was countless amounts of space between her and the renovated bathroom. Perhaps the Duke barely spared her a second thought, only laughing to himself about her stupidity and childish behavior.

Cordelia crossed another corner, and slid down the wall, sitting with her knees pulled up into her chest. There wasn’t a soul around, no prying eyes to see her in that dramatic state. Even if it was nothing more than a silly encounter, Cordelia pressed a hand to her chest, unable to ignore the insistent hammering of her clueless heart.

And as she sat there, desperate to calm herself down, Cordelia became aware of one thing, and one thing only. She had yet to see her husband smile, and a part of her was truly disappointed in that.

“Your Grace?”

Cordelia’s head shot up. To her right, coming down the hall, was Mrs. Bellflower. The housekeeper had a dreadfully worried look on her face, immediately dipping down beside her on the floor.

“Whatever is the matter, your Grace?” She reached, pressing the back of her palm to Cordelia’s cheeks and forehead. “You look awfully flushed, your Grace. Are you feeling unwell? Shall I fetch the doctor?”

Cordelia shook her head, barely capable of finding her words.

“I went to find you in your chambers, your Grace, but you weren’t there,” Mrs. Bellflower continued. “It passed my mind that the Duke was using the bathroom himself. I’m sure he’ll be finished in the next minute or two, and we can get you relaxed and better in no time.” The housekeeper touched her cheek another time. “Perhaps I will fetch the doctor, your Grace, just in case something ails you.”

“Whatever ails me,” Cordelia finally said, “Cannot be healed by a doctor.”

Mrs. Bellflower frowned. “The Duke enlists the brightest and most talented doctor in Solshire, your Grace. I don’t doubt the sir’s capabilities one bit.”

“Neither do I,” she replied in a murmur. “And yet, I do not believe he would be well versed in my ailment.”

The housekeeper sighed, kneeling down in front of Cordelia. She had the look of a

concerned mother, her brow deeply knit and eyes widened. “Let me guess,” Mrs. Bellflower said, “Do you have a beating heart, your Grace?”

“Of course I do.”

“But is it painful? Perhaps it beats like a drum, or a burst of thunder. Like that, your Grace?”

Cordelia met the housekeeper’s persistent gaze. “I suppose so,” she whispered.

“Then I might say you are more than well, even without a doctor.” Mrs. Bellflower rose to her feet, reaching her hands out to help Cordelia up after her. Once they were both standing, Mrs. Bellflower ran her hands down Cordelia’s skirts, brushing them off and straightening them out. When she stood back up, the housekeeper reached, tucking strands of hair behind Cordelia’s ears.

“How do you know?” Cordelia finally asked. “If I am well, I mean.”

Mrs. Bellflower smiled. “We are all affected by that ailment in our lives, your Grace. And, in the end, we all survive it.”

“What is it?”

“That, your Grace, is something you might need to discover on your own.”

And as the housekeeper led the way back towards Cordelia’s chambers, she found her heart would not stop in hammering the way it insisted upon, never once letting up. She kept a hand pressed to her chest, repeating Mrs. Bellflower’s words in her head, as though they would be the cure she greedily searched for.

In the end, we all survive it.

CHAPTER10

“What do you think, your Grace?”

Words left Cordelia the moment she looked at herself in the mirror. The deeply emerald fabric stood out brightly against her softer skin. Freckles she never realized she had scattered along her nose’s bridge, a few popping up around her jaw and neck. Mrs. Bellflower pinned Cordelia’s light brown hair in a crowning fashion, a few curled ringlets framing her temples and ears. Jewelry, colored green to match her eyes and the dress, rested along her collarbones. The white gloves pulled up to her elbows snugly. And the earrings she wore matched the jade flowers pinned around her hair.

None of it, not a single bit, reminded Cordelia of herself. There was never a time before that moment in which she looked at herself in a looking glass and blushed, surprised and embarrassed by her own beauty. But there she was, unable to tear her eyes away from herself, unaware that even a woman like her could fall victim to the slightest bit of vanity. Perhaps it was her art-centric mind, her ability to capture beauty in even the most unexpected of places. This, she knew, was a particularly unexpected place.

“Your Grace?” Mrs. Bellflower asked again, moving to stand directly beside her. “Does it not please you?”

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“Devils, Mrs. Bellflower, it pleases me all too much.”

The housekeeper covered her mouth from Cordelia's brass use of language.

“I apologize,” she quickly added.

Mrs. Bellflower laughed lightly. “You were shocked, your Grace.”

“I am more than shocked.”

“Did you not know you were such a beautiful creature?”

Cordelia glanced over at her. “I doubt it even still.”

“It saddens me greatly that you do not recall your mother, your Grace,” Mrs. Bellflower suddenly said, the intention behind her words surprising. “I can only imagine what a beauty she must have been, if this is how you look now, your Grace.”

“You flatter me too much.”

“You do not flatter yourself enough,” the housekeeper quickly added. “There won't be a hint of any rumors at that ball, your Grace, I am quite sure of it.”

Cordelia laughed. “And what makes you so confident?”

“The rest of the Ton will be far too distracted on you to even think of it, your Grace,” Mrs. Bellflower cooed as she crossed the room. “I am sure you were raised on piety

and humility, your Grace, as we all are.”

“Of course,” Cordelia replied, immediately turning to put her back to the mirror.

“Well, I believe there are moments the Lord intended for us to look upon our own beauty, and to thank him for the blessings we have so graciously received, your Grace,” Mrs. Bellflower explained. “Recognizing the beauty you put aside all your life won’t make you any less blessed in his eyes. Do you understand what I mean, your Grace?”

Cordelia nodded. “You are a very wise housekeeper, Mrs. Bellflower.”

“Now you flatter me all too much!” The housekeeper gathered up Cordelia’s coat before crossing to the door. “Are you ready, your Grace?”

Cordelia glanced over her shoulder at her reflection once more. In all honesty, she barely recognized herself. There was no hint of the painter, the girl who seldom attended balls unless forced, the girl who was once left behind by her first betrothed, the girl who was left alone once more by her beast of a husband. Everything that made Cordelia herself felt nonexistent. She glanced around the room. Noticed the easels, the blank canvases, the half finished paintings, the sleeping terrier curled up in the corner. All those things reminded her that she was still herself, even if she couldn’t tell.

What if the Duke could not tell? What if he looked upon her painted and gowned with a raised brow? What if he never intended to see her in such a way?

And what if, the worst possibility of them all, the Duke decided he preferred neither version of her?

Cordelia drew in a deep breath. Nevertheless, the ball was still going to happen, and

she was still expected to attend. There were rumors to squash, gossip to handle. Her name and her future in London hung in the balance. The sooner it could be rectified, the sooner Cordelia could return to the small things that granted her happiness. She managed to look out the window, the glass roof of the orangery catching the falling rays of light as the sun slipped beyond the horizon.

“I am, Mrs. Bellflower,” she finally said, hoping the smile on her face did not look as truthful as she felt.

The housekeeper beamed. “Come along, your Grace.”

They made their way out of the chambers, and Cordelia followed close to Mrs. Bellflower’s heel. The halls of Solshire’s estate were quiet that evening, most of the staff tucked away elsewhere. There would be no dinner to prepare for the servants to prepare, no drinks to pour or anything else of the sort. Cordelia, for a moment, wished to be one of them, not bound by the words of the Ton and free to do as they pleased.

Mrs. Bellflower stepped aside at the staircase, extending an arm for Cordelia to walk in front of her rather than behind.

As Cordelia stepped forward, the front doors opened wide and letting the smoldering light inwards, her eyes caught on a figure standing at the foot of the stairs. The Duke raised his head to her. His dark hair was pulled back, a few strands escaping to fall across his shrouded eyes. The normal hard line she expected his lips to be in was nowhere to be seen. Instead, he gaped, ever so slightly, just enough for her to notice the difference.

The Duke’s unmistakable gaze clung to her as she took each step, his dark brow furrowing deeper and deeper. Cordelia found herself unable to look away from him in the same fashion, though she blamed it on her confusion to his prolonged attention

rather than anything else. She remained on the second to last step for a moment, standing a foot taller than him.

“Your Grace,” the Duke said, his voice gravelly, as though he hadn’t spoken in a long time, “That color suits you.”

Cordelia swallowed. “Thank you, your Grace.” She curtsied, though her eyes peeked up at him, eager to take in his attire now that they were only a few feet away from each other.

The Duke wore a black tailcoat, which she very much expected. Beneath it, however, was a green so dark she almost missed it. Within an instant, Cordelia knew their outfits were coordinated to match, a common thing seen with married couples in the Ton. She looked away, catching a glimpse of the housekeeper coming down the stairs, a knowingly proud smirk spreading across her face.

Cordelia met her husband’s stare. “You look very well.”

“Thank you,” he stiffly replied.

They remained like that for a moment, till footsteps came from the opened doors.

“Your Grace,” a footman said after deeply bowing. “The carriage is ready.”

The Duke nodded, and raised a hand to Cordelia.

She looked down at his outstretched palm, unmoving. Immediately, Cordelia found herself staring at the barely visible scars that lined his hands. She swallowed, her throat becoming increasingly dry as she remembered the moment from the bathroom, and how all his scars still looked so prominent in her mind’s eye. It was something she believed she would seldom forget.

Cordelia reached, placing her gloved hand within his own. Despite the glove, she jerked backwards, the touch of his hand sparking something unfamiliar beneath her skin. Cordelia’s heart raced, the feeling almost forcing her to turn around and sprint back up the stairs.

“What is it?” the Duke asked, his gaze flicking between her hand and her widened eyes.

Cordelia shook her head. “Nothing,” she murmured as she retook his hand. “Nothing at all, your Grace.”

The Duke, now watching her with a wary eye, wrapped her hand around his arm, holding her tight against his side as she left the staircase behind. He walked a step

faster than her, his long legs naturally giving him wider strides. Cordelia sped to keep up, feeling like a fool and a child at the same time.

Outside of the estate, the ornate carriage awaited them. A driver already sat at the top, and a footman held the door open. The Duke helped Cordelia up into the compartment, his fingers grazing the small of her back before jerking away in the same fashion she had done to him. She took a seat on one side, her legs twitching from the upcoming event. The Duke climbed in afterwards, giving a knock on the door to signal the driver. Within an instant, they were off to London.

The ride was quiet, at first. Cordelia kept her head facing the window, holding the curtain back to get a look at the quickly falling sun. The sunset sent brilliantly bright colors across the region, looking as if the entire forests surrounding Solshire were lit on fire as they left it all behind. Cordelia rarely moved. She could feel the Duke's presence before laying her eyes on him. There was something about his stare that weighed heavily with heat, as if she stood beneath the sun in an empty field. The thoughts ran amok in her head.

Why does he watch me?

Does he even watch me, or do I make it up on my own accord?

He is watching me.

Cordelia glanced over at him. If he was watching, he made sure to look away long before she ever thought to catch him in the act. The Duke stared out the opposite window, his jaw tense and rigid beneath his skin. She found herself unable to look away, suddenly, falling victim to the very thing she was mentally accusing him of. But she found herself unable to avoid it. The Duke was an odd enigma, one she was never pleased with. Despite her displeasure, Cordelia ached to know what lies beneath him, what made the Duke be known to the Ton as a beastly man. All she saw

was a man who hid behind walls. Walls that intended to keep the entire world out.

The Duke shifted, his head turning towards her.

Cordelia jerked away, flaming embarrassment and shame crawling up her face.

“Do you know what is expected of you?” he suddenly asked.

She frowned. “At the ball?”

The Duke nodded.

“I’m not sure. It has been ages since I have ever even thought of attending a ball, and _”

“Not what the Ton expects of you,” the Duke interjected. “But what I am expecting.”

“Oh,” she drawled, raising one brow. “Won’t you enlighten me, your Grace?”

He stared at her silently for a moment, his gaze growing more and more narrowed by the second. “To be rid of the Ton’s rumors completely, we must act like a loving couple, one who had every intention of being wed in the first place.”

Cordelia frowned at the implication of his words, wondering once more what made him decide to wed her those few weeks ago. Instead of asking, she merely nodded. “I am aware,” she replied. “And how do you plan on doing such a thing?”

He raised a brow. “Me?”

“Of course you,” she said with a shrug. “I cannot recall ever seeing you smile, and yet, you intend on proving the Ton wrong about how you feel about me. Let us not

forget, your Grace, that you were the one who decided to live elsewhere rather than alongside your wife.”

The Duke ground his teeth together irritably. “I am perfectly capable of putting on a facade.”

“Perhaps,” she mused, reveling in her ability to be the one to make him uncomfortable in a surprising turn of events. “But might I suggest something?”

“I believe you are enjoying my discomfort far too much.”

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Cordelia laughed. “Am I that readable?”

“No,” he replied. “But you are failing to hide it well now.”

“You might call me by my name,” she said. “And I might call you by yours.”

His brow shot up. “How does that affect the Ton?”

“It shows familiarity, your Grace. Do you truly believe that happily married couples do not know each other by name?”

“Knowing and using are two different things.”

“Exactly.”

The Duke narrowed his eyes again.

“Go on,” she said.

“Now?”

“We might as well practice.”

The Duke opened his mouth before shutting it quickly. For a moment he only stared, his head tilting ever so slightly. “Cordelia.”

She exhaled sharply. In all honesty, Cordelia never expected him to do it. She merely

teased, pushing his buttons before she needed to act like a doting wife. When he managed to do it, she was frozen, becoming more and more aware of how much closer they were approaching the ball. Now, as he watched her, she could see the pride swirling in his eyes. As much as she didn't expect him to do it, he did not believe she could either.

Cordelia gathered herself, raising her chin. "Michael."

The compartment grew heavy with tension. They merely stared at one another, and Cordelia soon felt her ailment return to her. Beneath her chest, her heartbeat rammed against her, as if it was desperate to be free of her. She swallowed, as if it could stop the feeling from capsizing her.

Neither one of them spoke a word for the rest of the ride. Once the carriage rolled to a stop in front of the house in London, Cordelia drew in a deep breath.

"Are you well?"

She looked up at him. "Why?"

"You are pale."

"Fresh air will do me good," she muttered.

The Duke tilted his head again. "Your beauty is unbelievable," he muttered.

Cordelia's head shot up, but the carriage door had already popped open, and the Duke was not waiting another moment to enter the evening air. Noise from the already started ball and guests pooling in from other carriages filled the compartment. Cordelia was stunned into stillness, the words he spoke hanging in the air all around her. How could she be expected to act as if she hadn't heard it, as if the Duke had

always offered her a kind word or a delightful compliment?

The Duke's hand slipped into the carriage.

She reached, hesitating for a split second before placing her gloved hand in his own.

Instead of pulling away, the feeling that surged through Cordelia was nothing short of confident adrenaline. It was as if she was alive again, rejuvenated and ready to stand before the people who thought to judge her, undermine her. Cordelia glimmered as she stepped out of the carriage. The courses of couples heading towards the Manor's opened doors stepped aside when they noticed Cordelia walking by, paying special attention to the man beside her. They walked in unison, neither one of them daring to lower their gazes or chins.

The Manor was a beautiful one, and Cordelia felt the slightest bit of shame for not knowing whose home they entered. The Duke handled the invitation himself, making sure to reply for the both of them. She felt careless enough for never thinking to ask. The halls were already filled with guests. They resided in the foyer before slipping into wide drawing rooms and great parlours. After twisting around a few corners was a grand ballroom, where couples gathered and waited for the orchestra to begin playing.

Cordelia glanced around. The guests eyed her husband silently, not one of them daring to utter a word. They stepped out of the way, casted their stares in the opposite direction when he happened to turn in their direction. It's like the rumors never existed.

“Why are you smiling?”

She looked over to see the Duke watching her closely. He frowned like she had taken ill in his arms. “I don't suppose anyone here would dare to mention a word about

those pesky rumors.”

The Duke huffed. “I would hope not.”

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Before Cordelia could make the mention about their intentions being accomplished rather easily, she noticed a small posse heading their way. There was an older gentleman, dressed similarly to the Duke but without any added color. His wispy grey hair was pulled into a short tail above his neck. On his arm was a lovely presenting lady, her pale colored dress holding onto her figure in a gentle way. Her blonde curls rested on the top of her hair with an assortment of pins. There were a pair of girls behind them, looking like it was their first ball of the Season.

“Your Grace,” the gentleman said as he bowed. “This is an awfully pleasant surprise!”

The Duke nodded, reaching forward to shake the man’s hand. “How are you, Lord Crake?” He turned towards Cordelia. “Lord Crake worked alongside my father for quite some time. They had intertwining businesses.” The Duke reached, his hand pressing against the small of her back and guiding her forward. “This is my wife, Cordelia.”

She stepped towards the gentleman, letting out a sigh as the wordwifesunk into her. The feeling of The Duke’s hand behind her made her head foggy and uncollected, as if she was burdened with a fever. She smiled the best she could, giving her full attention to the Lord and pretending like she wasn’t at all oddly distracted by his touch.

“I have heard much about you, your Grace, from the Duke of Darkenhill,” Lord Crake said, giving her a cheeky wink.

Cordelia smiled curiously. “You know my brother?”

“In business terms only,” he replied. “But he is a great Duke, a brilliant successor of your late father.”

“Those are kind words, my Lord.”

Lord Crake led his own wife and family forward. “Your Grace, might I introduce Lady Crake, and my beautiful daughters, Loretta and Arietta?”

The daughters curtsied at the same time, their sweet smiles and delicately brown hair almost identical.

“Your Grace,” Lord Crake continued, “I am very pleased to see you, very much indeed. There was something from our correspondence I wanted to discuss in person.”

The Duke pressed his lips together. “What is it?”

A hand tugged at Cordelia’s dress. She turned to see the pair of daughters watching her, their heads tilted in opposite directions. “Hello,” she said with a raised brow. “How old are you two?”

“She’s sixteen,” Loretta replied.

Arietta followed: “And she’s seventeen.”

“Not twins?”

They both shook their heads.

Cordelia held back her laugh. “Are you two enjoying yourselves?”

“I didn’t believe them,” Loretta blurted. “Not one of them.”

Arietta nodded. “Neither did I. We never did.”

“Believed what?”

“The rumors, silly,” Loretta teased. “It’s been the talk of London for ages. Arietta didn’t think you would come out this Season, but I never doubted you for a second.”

Arietta pinched her sister. “I didn’t doubt her, Loretta!” She turned, giving Cordelia a darling smile. “I only thought you both needed your time away from the city. Isn’t that right, your Grace?”

Cordelia glanced between them with wide eyes. Their identical doe eyes and eager expressions brought panic to her in the matter of seconds. She never prepared for anyone to outrightly speak about the rumors, or even the details of her marriage. Was that even polite? Cordelia sighed. The Ton had no issues discussing the workers going in and out of the estate - there wasn’t any room for surprise anymore.

“You two are curious, aren’t you?” Cordelia asked.

Loretta nodded. “Along with the rest of London, your Grace!”

“Whatever for?” She shrugged. “If you don’t believe the rumors, then -”

“Of course we don’t believe the rumors,” Arietta interjected, giving her sister a very obvious sideways glance. “But wouldn’t it be relieving to put the past gossip aside through revealing the true origin of your love story?”

Cordelia gaped. “Love story?”

“Any couple who stays away from the London Season for as long as you have are either in the unlimited throws of love, or deep in unmistakable scandal,” Arietta replied, her smile bright and cherry. “We know which one, of course, but we believe you ought to silence them with how you came to be wed. Not a soul knows!”

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Loretta nodded. “No one in London, your Grace. What a shame that is!”

“O-Of course,” Cordelia said, “A terrible shame.”

The pair of sisters watched expectantly. Behind them, the approaching crowd seemed to linger closer still, as if they wished to listen in at the same time. Cordelia brushed the thought away. That had to have been her paranoia talking. She glanced between the girls once more. They needed a good story, one that satisfied their curiosity and put a stop to the rumors. They could claim to not have believed them all they wanted - Cordelia could see the truth pass behind their eyes. They were as curious as the rest of them.

“I’m sure you both know of my previous engagement,” Cordelia began.

They nodded.

She didn’t even want to dwell on the fact that they knew of that. “It was not at all what you might call a love match,” she said. “Perhaps it was doomed from the start, or never meant to be in the first place.”

“He had a lover,” Loretta said.

Arietta continued: “He admitted to never caring for you or the betrothal, your Grace. Very sad.”

Cordelia eyed her. I need to be better about this. “Regardless, no matter the Earl’s reasons, I was no longer betrothed. Well,” she paused, looking over to where the

Duke still spoke with the Lord. His profile faced her, and she suddenly admired the sharp, jutting edge of his slightly crooked nose. “Michael knew me before my first engagement.”

The girl’s had widening smiles.

“He proposed as soon as the news of my broken engagement reached him,” Cordelia continued, trying to ignore how the Duke shifted towards her when she said his name. He is listening! Cordelia’s smile broadened. “Michael was quite nervous, you see.”

“Really?” Loretta asked. “The Duke of Solshire can be nervous?”

“Oh, yes,” Cordelia teased. “He seemed to believe that he didn’t stand a chance with me!”

The pair of sisters laughed, stepping closer to her as they absorbed the story. At the same time, Cordelia glanced up. The Duke was no longer facing Lord Crake. He stared directly at her, a frown tugging his lips downwards.

Cordelia held her chin up proudly. “To turn a long story short,” she mused, raising her voice loud enough for nearby passersby to overhear, “Michael’s proposal was quite a dramatic affair. The wedding was rushed in order to stop a scandal from spreading and, of course, for our nuptials to begin as soon as they possibly could!”

As the sisters fawned over the story, smiles spreading across their faces, and a few nearby Ladies whispering with their attention grabbed, Cordelia felt quite proud of herself. Perhaps she convinced enough of the Ton to disregard whatever gossip they held onto before.

Cordelia glanced in the Duke’s direction.

He was striding towards her, hands tightened into fists at his sides. The crowds still parted as he walked, no one daring to take their eyes away from the devilishly handsome Duke Cordelia convinced them to love. Even so, the look in his gaze was nowhere near that of a doting husband. Cordelia readied herself for a scolding, for him to grab her forcefully and pull her away from the gathering crowd.

The Duke reached, his warm hand gently catching onto my gloved palm. He raised my hand to his lips, just barely placing a kiss upon the silk before bowing gracefully. When he rose, the intensity in his eyes only grew stronger.

“Might you honor me with a dance,” he asked, his hoarse voice carrying around the room, “My love?”

Her eyes went wide. Devils, what is he doing? Cordelia stared up at him, her heart racing unbelievably beneath her skin. How had he managed to do the exact opposite of what she thought him to do? How could the Duke never once be the man she thought him to be?

Cordelia managed to look around the room. The orchestra was gearing up to play another song, and the dancers were gathering on the floor. Eyes clung to her expectantly from every corner. And yet, the only figure Cordelia found herself able to focus on was Michael. She softened, the fear she once might’ve had within a room full of judgemental Ton members seeping out of her, as though it never existed in the first place.

She curtsied, tightening her fingers around her own.

“I would be honored.”

CHAPTER 11

The music swelled as soon as it began. Couples across the ballroom floor swayed and leapt, carried by their partners and full of wide smiles. Michael could not remember the last time he danced at a ball. Further than that, he couldn't recall the most recent ball he willingly attended. He doubted he even had an answer for that.

Perhaps it was his lack of experience that drove him wild with nerves. It couldn't have been Cordelia, who was merely a foot away from his chest. It couldn't have been the way her hand felt within his own, how he somehow managed to feel the warmth of her skin through her thin, silk gloves. It couldn't have been the curious smile that crept along her tinted lips, an eagerness to remove the walls Michael so comfortably held up all his life.

Michael twirled her, and the shimmering green in her gown sent a wave of color across the floor. He was mesmerized.

"You have a way with words," he blurted, eager to have something more than merely air between them.

Cordelia raised a slender brow. "What sort of way?"

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“Quite like a storyteller,” he replied. “Did you fancy writing in your youth?”

“Heavens no.”

Michael huffed. “I did not realize writing was such an ill-suited pastime for a Lady like yourself.”

“First off,” Cordelia snapped, the corner of her lip perking up in a mischievous manner, “I do not recall ever calling myself a Lady.”

“Is that not what you are?”

“In the barest sense of the word,” she replied, her chin raised. “But in the manner of a Lady in London’s Ton, I am afraid not!”

Michael shook his head. “I cannot say I’m surprised,” he muttered. “What else, then, must you argue with me about?”

She laughed, the sound finding a place alongside the music. “Secondly,” she continued, “I have always had a creative mind, but it was never with words. You have seen my paintings, haven’t you?”

“Here and there,” Michael replied, though he could possibly explain one of her older paintings from memory alone. A few were left around the Manor, neither hung on the walls or in a case. It was as if she painted wherever she went, leaving a canvas behind to let the world know she visited there, once. It was a peculiar habit, but it was one he found himself rather enjoying rather than dreading.

Cordelia smiled. "And what do you think of them?"

"They are fine."

The smile faded quickly. "Fine?" she repeated. "Onlyfine?"

Michael laughed. "I did not take you to be someone so proud."

She stared up at him in silence for a moment. Her eyes drifted down, clinging onto his lips before the laugh was soundly replaced with a straight line. Cordelia cleared her throat, turning her head to the opposite side as they continued on dancing.

"I can only assume you are teasing me," she murmured.

Michael sighed. "I am."

"I did not takeyou to be someone who teases," Cordelia mocked, raising a proud brow. "Not even someone who dared to laugh."

Michael glanced at her. A part of him wanted to be offended, to ridicule her for assuming or acting as if she knew him well enough to say it. But, Michael was not raised to be a fool, and knew exactly the legitimacy behind her mocking words. Even if she only teased as much as he did, Michael quickly knew that he no longer acted like the man the Ton expected. At least, not with Cordelia.

The realization was oddly frightening.

"What were those two Lady's names?" Michael asked instead, quickly changing the subject.

Cordelia looked over to where the family stood and watched. "Loretta and Arietta,"

she replied. "Sweet mouses, if not too curious for their own good."

"They seemed rather convinced."

She shrugged, though a reddish tint began to stain her cheeks. "It was easier to assume what they wanted to hear," she explained. "I thought it to be a daunting task, but it went swimmingly enough."

"Yes," Michael replied, unable to stop the smirk from curling around his lip, "The rumors will change into how long we decided to stay tangled up in our love, outside of the city's constraints."

Cordelia blushed harder. "The girls made that suggestion themselves!"

"I do not recall hearing you deny it."

"Well, I -"

"While I believe you pushed it gravely to the limits of exaggeration," Michael interjected, "It was impressively done in the moment. I doubt you planned the story beforehand."

"Devils, no," she whispered.

"Language, my love."

Cordelia's eyes snapped up.

Still wearing a teasing smile, Michael allowed himself to laugh again. "Not once did I suspect the Ton to be so gullible," he said. "Perhaps it is good to know, for my own future endeavors."

Cordelia, much to his surprise, still remained silent. She merely stared, her eyes widening the longer they stayed stuck on him. Slowly, her lips parted before closing again. The words she wanted to say seemed to hang in the air between them, and Michael never realized how desperate he was to know what they were until that very moment.

"Not a sound out of you," he murmured. "How peculiar."

Cordelia blinked a few times, coming out of her reverie. "I-I apologize."

"Why do you watch me in such a way?"

"In what way?"

"I am not sure I can describe it," Michael said. "As if you see something for the first time. It is peculiar."

Cordelia lightly laughed. "I suppose that is exactly right."

"How so?"

A feverish burn swallowed up her face once more. She watched him through her lashes, pressing her lips tightly together before gathering enough strength and confidence to speak her truth. “You have a charming smile,” she said in a quiet voice. “I cannot recall having the opportunity to see it before.”

Michael gulped loudly. There was a sudden dryness in his throat. He looked away, the space between them feeling like a tangible pressure, a distance he ached to be rid of. Michael shook his head. You are utterly ridiculous. To be so emotional, so windblown by her with only a few words, was the most childish thing he had done in a long time. If his father was still around - well, Michael knew exactly what would be done if the old Duke still walked that earth.

“Have I offended you?” Cordelia asked in a small voice.

Michael frowned. “No,” he blurted, unable to stop himself from snapping out. “Quite the opposite.”

Silence took over them as the music continued on. Dancers positioned all around them never once paid them any mind, too caught up in the orchestra to glance their way. Michael barely heard the music, he realized, barely realized the musicians were still carrying on. Everything else within the ball room quickly faded away, perhaps right when the dancing began. All Michael could focus on was the woman in front of him, and how her simple words managed to pull him into a pensive reverie he had no intention of escaping.

Cordelia breathed in and out slowly, methodically. Her eyes fluttered shut before she nodded to herself.

She acts as if she tries to gather strength, Michael thought to himself. He watched her with a furrowed brow, desperate to know what it was that lied within her.

“I saw you,” she whispered.

Michael frowned. “You see me now, don’t you?”

“No, no,” she murmured. “I meant the day in the bathroom. Isawyou. Your -” Cordelia’s voice lowered, so quiet he barely caught it, “Your scars.”

A chill rippled down Michael’s spine. Instinctively, he wanted to release his hold on her, to reach for his back and run a hand along the grooves and lacerations that permanently scored his skin. It was a feverish need, one that grew outlandishly stronger over the past few years. Doctors claimed it to be a sense of trauma. Once the scars were mentioned, Michael was overcome with the overwhelming need to scratch them, to let himself know that they were, in fact, still there.

Michael bit down harshly on his tongue to keep himself poised in front of his wife. “What of it?” he snapped, the words coming out harsher than he meant them to.

Cordelia flinched almost immediately, her face growing crestfallen. “My apologies, your Grace,” she said. “I overstepped.”

He watched her.

“Please, I -” she froze again and squeezed her eyes shut. “Have I ruined it all?”

“Ruined what?”

She sighed. “The moment, the dance. Your smile. Have I lost it already?”

Michael felt far more pained by her words than he ever wished to be. The girl who opposed him so effortlessly, who led to countless rumors being whispered about his name, who recklessly spent his money and reworked the entire estate to look nothing

like what he remembered, was so easily saddened by something entirely out of her hands. Michael sighed, the guilt resting on his chest heavily. What once caused him pain in the past no longer lingered on his shoulders, and should not burden her all the same.

“What do you know of the late Duke of Solshire?” Michael asked.

Cordelia blinked. “The same as the rest of the Ton,” she murmured. “A rich man, a businessman. My father regarded him highly, from what I remember. But nothing more than that.”

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“My father was nothing like the man the Ton held in high regards,” he continued. “I would never deny or disrespect the legacy my father left for me, the accomplishments he made in society, the things he did to secure his fortune. He was someone most young gentlemen strived to become.”

She watched him with wide eyes, holding on to every word.

“But he had his own ways of creating a strong man.”

“What ways?”

Michael hesitated. The scars along his back seemed to ache and burn, suddenly, as if his father lurked directly behind him. He held back the tremor that threatened to ripple through his body.

“Michael,” Cordelia suddenly said, his name sounding different on her lips than on anyone else’s.

He met her stare. It was hard to believe that the woman he once barely knew, who he married on the same day they first met, held such great power over him. Michael remembered being agonized over the rumors, over everything he heard going on at the estate. Every single thing he once felt burdened with no longer existed. The woman before him was someone else entirely, a creature he had never experienced before within the Ton.

“You do not have to explain it,” she whispered. “But if you chose to, I can carry your burden as if it were my own.”

Michael's brow shot up. "Why on earth would you do such a thing?"

"We are married, aren't we?"

He watched her with widening eyes. A sweet smile passed across her face, one that was gentle and genuine. Suddenly, all at once, Michael felt incredibly at ease. It was an odd feeling that did not sit well with him, at first.

"My father believed that the key to making a perfect Duke was through violent punishment," he explained. "Perhaps it had been done to him when he was a child. Nevertheless, he knew his intentions well. With every crack, he said: 'Perfection can only be achieved through the abandonment of flaws.'"

Cordelia gulped. "Crack?"

"The whip."

"W-Whip," Cordelia repeated, her face growing flushed and pale. "A whip?"

"Cordelia -"

Her hands grew tight on his own. "I-I can hardly understand," she breathed. "H-How can that have happened to you? How are you well? We should -"

"Cordelia," Michael said again, his voice firmer that time.

She pressed her lips together.

"While I admire your sudden urgency towards the matter," he began, keeping his voice even, "it happened long ago. Whatever pain inflicted me then no longer burdens me. Do you understand?"

Cordelia shook her head. At least she is honest.

“Many years have passed since those days,” he said. “I am not in pain. I do not crave answers for my father’s behavior, I do not simmer at the sound of his name, I do not harbor a profound hatred.” Michael, much to his surprise, found himself smiling once more, the feeling quite odd and misplaced on him. “I am well, though your adamant displeasure is a welcomed thing I have not known for quite some time.”

Her cheeks grew red. “I am surprised.”

“What about?”

“Only a patient and gracious man could overlook those things, to find a certain light throughout it all,” she murmured.

Michael swallowed, unable to pull his gaze away from her own. “I would not go so far as to assume those things about me.”

“Why not?” she asked, her voice small. “It is what I see.”

“It is not what I know.”

“Perhaps all you needed was an outsider to convince you of otherwise.”

Michael smirked. “Who said I had already been so easily convinced?”

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She tilted her head, the smile beaming across her face. “You did not have to.”

“There goes that confidence again,” Michael mused with a raised brow.

As the music carried on, coming to a great swell before reaching the end, Michael found himself holding onto Cordelia tighter than he ever planned to. She was directly in front of him, her face tilted upwards to watch him. The feeling of her stare was one he supposed he might never grow used to.

“You know,” Cordelia suddenly said, “I do not believe you have ever told me of your mother.”

Michael went tense before she ever finished saying the word. His teeth clenched immediately, the muscles within his face flexing and becoming rigid. He kept his head raised, looking over Cordelia and upon the crowd.

“No,” he said through clenched teeth. “I have not.”

Cordelia watched him. If she noticed the change in his appearance, she steered clear of pointing it out. “Do not feel obliged to -”

“I do not.”

She narrowed her eyes, but did not grow upset. “I understand,” she whispered. “I am not a teacup susceptible to shattering from a slightly tightened grasp, Michael. I hope you can understand what I mean by such a thing.”

Michael glanced at her, but she no longer watched him as closely as she did before.

The orchestra soon came to a stop, the other pairs of dancing couples pulling away to bow respectfully and clap towards the musicians. Michael felt as though he was no longer in his body, having no control as he pulled away from Cordelia, a sudden chill passing over him as they stepped apart.

The ball was a greater success than either of them planned it to be. Not only did the Ton see Michael and his Duchess in a new light, but they were eager for more, desperate to have some sort of correspondence with the popular couple of Solshire. While Michael never intended to oblige in the Ton, he was surprised that the exact thing he returned to do had been so easily completed.

Now, as he and Cordelia left the Manor behind, climbing into their carriage, there was a peculiar thought resting poignantly on Michael's mind.

If everything he sought to do had been completed, what was there left to do?

Within the dark carriage compartment, the night time gave off a deep chill. The ride back to Solshire was not painfully long, but long enough to realize it. Across from where Michael sat, Cordelia had her coat wrapped over her shoulders and still shivered. An unavoidable draft slipped through the carriage.

Michael scooted over. "Move over here," he said.

"What?"

"It is warmer."

"I never said I was cold."

Michael raised a brow. “Don’t be proud. You’ll be warmer over here.”

She mumbled something to herself before moving across the compartment, taking a seat beside Michael. The carriage was not an inherently large one, and their sides were touching the moment she took her seat. Nevertheless, the closeness allowed them to soak up each other's warmth, and soon enough, Cordelia no longer shivered or rattled her teeth.

Michael, insistent on ignoring how her natural perfume wafted over him in an unavoidably pleasant way, glanced towards the window, though the darkness shrouded him from seeing a thing outside. After a few more minutes, and the pleasant rocking of the carriage, Cordelia’s breaths came out long and deep. Michael glanced over his shoulder to see her drifting into a woozy sleep.

He sighed.

Movement came from his side and a heavy pressure rested on his shoulder. Michael glanced over, his eyes widening in shock. Cordelia moved around as sleep overtook her, finding a comfortable spot on his shoulder to doze off on. She nestled her head over his coat, her hands folded over her lap. She was fast asleep within a minute, not giving him a mere second to think before claiming the spot as her own.

Michael almost shifted, eager to move her off of him as soon as he could.

But something stopped him.

He paused instead, watching her out of the corner of his eye. She was incredibly peaceful, her chest rising and falling rhythmically. Not even the bouncing carriage could shake her awake. Michael reached, pushing a curly strand of hair out of her face and behind her ear. Cordelia stirred briefly before letting out a sigh.

This time, he would let her sleep.

Looking away, Michael let his eyes close.

What am I doing?

CHAPTER12

Michael could not remember the last time he had boxed. While most men and women across London favored the sport, Michael's father refused to partake in it. He was quick to ridicule Michael's involvement, claiming that the son of a Duke had no place in a ring where commoners and lords alike wagered on the likelihood of him winning. Michael, on the other hand, could care less about the public aspects of the sport. He rarely boxed in front of an audience, much less for petty betting.

No, there was a simple reason for why Michael enjoyed boxing.

Across the ring from him, Rhys Glowton ducked and weaved, holding the overly large gloves over his face. The reclusive Duke of Nightrow just returned from a long trip overseas, where he spent time in the Americas for things related to business. Neither Michael or Rhys cared for the financial aspects of their relationship and rarely spoke to the other about it. All Michael knew was that he received a letter from Rhys that demanded a match in the ring, prepared or not.

And with how Michael's life had turned lately, he gladly took on the fight.

Michael threw a punch between them, the side of his glove barely grazing the scruff lining Rhys's jaw.

"You'll have to be quicker than that, old boy," Rhys called out as he hopped between feet, weaving around Michael like a hare.

Michael rolled his eyes. "Wasn't it you who recently got off a boat?"

“A mere few hours ago, as a matter of fact.”

“Shouldn’t you have more sea legs than that?”

Rhys laughed, the echoing sound filling the private training room. “Sounds to me like you regret taking me on,” he teased. “How funny. Wasn’t it you who demanded a match the moment I was back on English land?”

“Only you would take that as literally as you possibly could,” Michael muttered irritably.

Rhys dove forward, landing a practically unavoidable assault. He jabbed and parried, not once receiving a blow but almost managing to land one somewhere along Michael’s body. “I don’t remember you being this slow, Michael,” Rhys said with a raised brow. “What happened to you?”

“Perhaps you’re merely telling yourself the things you wish to hear,” Michael growled.

“Well, I doubt that,” Rhys said as he landed another hit to Michael’s side, receiving an annoyed grunt out of him. “I hope you aren’t letting me win, old boy!”

“I am only out of practice.”

“Out of practice?” Rhys repeated with an obnoxious scoff. “You could’ve abstained from boxing for weeks and I still never could have beaten you. Something’s on your mind, Michael.”

“Are you telling me you didn’t practice in the Americas?”

Rhys shook his head with a wry smile. “I wouldn’t have dared. Those Americans out

west have got some other ideas about boxing than we do.”

“What do you mean?”

He waved a gloved hand through the air. “It’s nonsense.”

“You just don’t want to tell me you got soft overseas,” Michael teased. “That’s it, isn’t it?”

Rhys glowered. “Now you’re trying to make me mad.”

Before Michael could respond, Rhys dove forward, ducking and weaving around Michael’s persistent hits. Soon, without too much effort from his opponent, Michael was soundly out of breath, backing up till he hit the ropes surrounding the ring. Rhys steadily approached, a determined and confident look on his smug face.

“I received a letter about you,” Rhys suddenly said.

Michael raised a brow. “What letter?”

“You know,” he replied. “The sort from the Ton.”

Michael rolled his eyes again. “You can’t tell me you believe a word out of their mouths.”

“Well, not normally.” Rhys crossed his arms, barely breaking a sweat. “But when all it’s about is that darling wife of yours, I found myself rather unable to ignore it.”

The wordsdarling wifechoed in the back of Michael’s mind like an alarm bell. He shoved himself off the ropes, pulling a fist back before soundly landing it across Rhys’s jaw. The Duke stumbled backwards in surprise, fumbling till he toppled over,

one gloved hand covering the growing bruise at the corner of his face. Rhys let out a low laugh as he spit, a small ring of blood staining the boxing floor.

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“There,” Rhys said through a few pants, “Is the Duke of Solshire I know.”

Michael shook his head, hiding the fact that he was seemingly proud and satisfied with himself. He slipped out from beneath the ropes and left the ring, pulling the outlandishly large boxing gloves off and throwing them across the floor.

The only person Michael found himself willing to tolerate was Rhys Glowton. Not only did he manage to tolerate the Duke of Nightrow, but he rather enjoyed his company. It took years to build the trust between them, but he realized quite early on how similar they both were. While Rhys was well known to be a recluse by the Ton, not usually seen in Seasonal affairs like balls or grand dinners, Michael had his own reasons for staying out of London’s high society. They managed to cross paths still in their early years, and hadn’t yet found a reason to part.

A year or two had passed since Rhys left for the Americas. He did not attend Michael’s wedding, never stepped foot in the same room as Cordelia. And yet, much to his surprise, Rhys managed to know more than he thought. Michael shook his head again. He supposed he actually wasn’t too surprised, knowing the Ton’s unavoidable reach.

“So,” Rhys called out as he left the ring, “Are you going to talk about it, or shall I?”

Michael sighed as he grabbed onto a towel, throwing another over his shoulder for Rhys to use. A part of him was relieved to have Rhys back in the city. There wasn’t a soul outside of Hunters who knew his entire backstory, to know where he came from and how he ended up where he was. Obviously, someone else was beginning to pry past his walls, peer closer to the hidden secrets he kept buried inside. The last thing

Michael had told Rhys about his wife was the night of their wedding, how he left the estate to live elsewhere.

Michael took a seat as Rhys steadily approached. “Cordelia and I attended a ball last night.”

An unexpected laugh blurted out of Rhys. “A ball?”

“Why is that so hard to believe?”

Rhys shook his head. “Don’t make me answer that, Michael. I don’t want to give you another reason to land another punch on me.”

“The Ton had been spreading some unsavory rumors ever since I stopped living at the estate,” Michael explained. “They went so far as to claim I killed my wife, or that she was housing a slew of affairs right on my doorstep.”

“Never took her to be a wild woman,” Rhys mocked.

“I am being quite serious.”

“Well, she wasn’t actually doing it, was she?”

“No,” Michael grumbled. “Only handled workers on her own, without a chaperone.”

“And whose fault would that be?”

“Rhys.”

He held his hands up defensively. “It is just a thought, Michael.”

“Are you going to let me explain, or will you keep on rudely interrupting whenever you have the chance?”

Rhys smirked and chuckled. “You might be surprised to know I missed your friendship on my travels.”

Michael frowned. “Don’t tease.”

“Wouldn’t dare to,” he quickly replied. “Go on, then. You were talking about the ball.”

Michael eyed him before letting out a sigh and continuing on. “We attended the ball in an effort to be rid of the pesky rumors,” he explained. “To clear my name and get on with our lives. Cordelia managed to solve it rather swimmingly. I barely had to do a thing. But then we danced, and I could not ignore her persistence any longer.”

“Her persistence?”

Michael shook his head. “That was rather wrong of me to say,” he murmured. “I could not ignore my own desire to tell her of my truth when she asked. There is something...something about her gaze that drives it right out of me. As if I never had any walls in the first place.” Michael rested his chin against his palm. “It is rather infuriating, to say the least.”

“Seems quite nice,” Rhys muttered.

“Nice?”

“To have someone you want to speak to,” he said. “Not many quick marriages wind up being so lucky.”

“In no way do I consider myself lucky.”

Rhys narrowed his eyes. “So what did you say that managed to get you all wound up?”

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“I -” Michael hesitated, the evens from the ball falling back over him quickly. Instantly, in the back of his mind, a foggy image of Cordelia’s face appeared, her gaze looking up at him through her thick, long lashes. “I spoke of my father.”

Rhys’s eyes widened drastically. “What about the old Duke?”

“Everything,” he muttered. “She had seen my back.”

“You told her? Or are you just trying to have a go at me?”

Michael glared. “Of course I told her.”

“Good heavens, Michael,” Rhys breathed, reaching over to clap a hand loudly across his shoulder, “You did a mighty good thing.”

Michael smacked his hand away. “What on earth are you talking about? What good thing could I have possibly done?”

“You managed to talk about your past to someone other than me,” Rhys explained.

“So what?”

Rhys shook his head. “You just never understood it, did you?”

“Now,” Michael muttered, standing from his seat and pacing around the room, “You are beginning to make no sense.”

“Holding in everything that once burdened you is no way to live,” Rhys said. “Finally you have been presented with the ability to change that, to move forward and open yourself up to another person. Why is that inherently a bad thing?”

Michael thrust a finger towards him. “You know just as well as I that there is no future in which I can provide Cordelia the marriage she seeks.”

“No, Michael, I do not know such a thing! Just because it is what you decided long ago, does not mean it needs to be the inevitable truth.”

“You know little of which you speak,” Michael snapped, waving a hand dismissively in the air around him. “I made a mistake in telling her all that I did. Now, I can only imagine how bound she might feel, how she might be obliged to remain closer to me.”

Rhys sighed. “Once again, can you explain how this is a bad thing?”

“Do not mock me, Rhys.”

“In no way, shape or form do I intend to mock you,” Rhys said with an exasperated laugh. “Why did you come back in the first place?”

“I already told you,” Michael muttered. “To correct the rumors.”

“Couldn’t you have done that on your own?”

“The Ton needed to see us as an united front.”

“You are truly telling me that you couldn’t have scared the Ton into submission?” Rhys asked with a look of disbelief. “That you could have gone to every writer of the scandal column and given them exactly what they needed to report? Truly?”

Michael pressed his lips together. “I doubt that sort of strategy would have worked.”

“But wouldn’t you have done it?”

“Tell me your point, Rhys, before I grow tired of hearing you speak.”

Rhys sighed. “I believe you always wanted to go back to the estate, Michael.”

“I did not.”

“Have you told her why you left in the first place?”

Michael went tense, slowly turning to face his old friend. “No,” he snarled. “And I do not have any intention to.”

“Why not?”

“Because I said so.”

Rhys rolled his eyes. “Look,” he began, rising from his seat to steadily approach Michael, “Did you ever stop to consider that you misunderstood the situation? What on earth would make a young, beautiful woman recently wed to a wealthy Duke jump out of a window on her wedding night?”

Michael could feel every tendon within him straighten with tension. Hearing the words aloud were practically cruel, something he never thought would have touched his ears. All those few years ago, the night of their rushed wedding, when Michael had returned to the estate, he looked up towards the windows to see a wispy figure peering over the edge. Her feet practically dangled over the threshold, the rushing evening breeze whipping her hair to and fro. A single misstep, a slight change in the wind, a moment of fright could have sent her crashing out the window, and straight towards her demise.

Suddenly, Michael felt as though he was brought back to that very moment. A plaguing sensation of unavoidable sickness rested in his stomach, the need to hurl or merely heave almost forcing itself through his throat. Memories strung together through circumstance pulled him into an unavoidable reverie, one that he almost fell into and feared he might never return from. Gathering his senses, Michael clenched his fists, bringing himself back to where he stood in the private boxing ring. Across from him, Rhys stood incredibly still, watching him with a patient stare.

“I cannot tell you what could have made her wish to jump,” Michael said in a quiet voice. “But I can tell you this: I know what it was that I saw, and I do not regret putting space between us. Perhaps it was that mere distance that saved her from total

destruction.”

“You can’t be that naive.”

Michael glared. “In no way am I naive, Rhys. I did what I believed to be right. And now, to this very day, at this very second, I still do just that.”

“So, what, you’ll leave her alone once more? Let the rumors slowly sink back in while you take refuge in your private estate?”

“All I know,” Michael seethed, “Is that the moment I can, I will put the distance between us once more. There is no piece of me that can give Cordelia a happy marriage. The more time I spent at Solshire, the easier it is for her to believe that is her exact future.”

“Perhaps it can be her future,” Rhys said. “Perhaps it can even be yours, if you will it to be so.”

“I -” Michael paused, feeling as though a pair of crossroads stood before him.

On one side was Cordelia. She could be at his side for as long as he wished, attending balls and giving the Ton exactly what it was they wished to see. On the other hand, Michael saw himself leaving within the month. He would return to his private estate, leaving Cordelia to do whatever else she pleased on the estate he once considered to be his home. He never saw himself returning after that. They would be solitary creatures, all because of his own accord. Michael’s hands clenched into fists.

“I cannot give Cordelia the life she wants,” Michael finally finished, speaking through clenched teeth. “So I will give her the life she needs instead.”

“How can you be so sure of what it is she needs?”

Michael began to gather his belongings. "She is my wife, after all."

Rhys laughed, much to his surprise. "Michael."

"What?"

"Put the bag down and look at me."

Michael sighed, placing his bag back down and facing his old friend. Rhys approached him with a pointed stare, reaching out to clasp a hand down on Michael's shoulder. He seemed to try and hold him there, as if Rhys knew that the words he spoke next might drive Michael quickly away if he wasn't careful.

"What?" Michael snapped, growing suspicious and even more ready to leave.

Rhys sighed. "Cordelia is not your mother."

Michael barely needed a second to react, reaching up to snap Rhys's firm grasp off his shoulder. "Do not dare to mention her," he growled.

"Michael," Rhys said again, "Your wife is not the same as -"

He launched around, snatching onto his friend's collar and holding him close to his face. Though they were about the same height, Michael managed to hold more strength than him, keeping Rhys locked in place directly in front of him. Not an ounce of fear passed by the Duke's face, not that Michael expected it to.

"Donotspeak of her," Michael hissed.

Rhys pressed his lips together and did not speak.

Releasing his hold on him, Michael slipped by, snatching onto the rest of his belongings and beginning to stalk towards the exit. Behind him, he heard the sound of Rhys moving about, gathering his own things and following close behind.

“Same time next week?” Rhys asked. He didn’t hesitate for one second.

Michael hid his pleased smile. “Whatever you say, Rhys.”

They parted ways out the door, both of them heading towards their respective carriages. Michael felt as though his pack weighed more than he could handle as he climbed into the small compartment, knocking his knuckles against the side to signal the driver. The carriage began to trudge down the cobble road, and Michael leaned his head against the back.

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The foggy image of both his mother and Cordelia's face lingered in the back of his mind the entire right back to Solshire.

CHAPTER13

“Is it truly finished?”

Directly across from Cordelia sat the completely upright orangery. There were seven, tall oval windows erected from the stone floor. They curved near the ceiling, allowing all the world to see into the filled hothouse. Pillars were in a half circle around the entrance, a balcony positioned above it. The ground directly around the orangery was a burnt colored stone, the grass bright green all around it.

On the outside, the walls of the orangery were a sterling white, not yet tarnished by weather. Oh, but Cordelia couldn't wait to see the vines begin to crawl up the pillars, a haunted and lived-in look taking over the estate's newest edition. At either end of the front outside wall were a pair of statues, each taking on a different pose. Cordelia commissioned one of the most well known sculptors who happened to be traveling through London. It was a once in a lifetime experience, and the artist brought the entire building to light.

Cordelia knew it was even more grand on the inside. She designed the very walls, the carpets lining the floors, the hand carved tables and newly upholstered chairs. Bookcases stood here and there, full of specific volumes Cordelia removed from her own personal collection. There was a piece of her in every single thing within the orangery.

Hunters stood beside her, looking over the orangery with a surprisingly proud expression. "Entirely complete, your Grace," he replied.

"And the workers, they -"

"Have been paid their dues," Hunters interjected. "And then some."

Cordelia glanced over at him with a laugh. "You have been incredibly on top of things, Hunters. Is it possible to be more than impressed?"

"I won't stop you from saying it," he replied, the corner of his lip turning up slightly. "There is a final touch or two we might require a painter for, or perhaps the matter of filling the greenhouse, but those decisions have been left up to you, your Grace."

Cordelia smiled. "I have never quite been truly proud of anything, Hunters."

He looked over at her. "Nothing at all, your Grace?"

She remained quiet, feeling oddly out of place.

"I do recall you being a painter, your Grace," Hunters continued after a beat of silence. "Won't you consider that something to be proud of?"

"Isn't this much better than a silly painting?"

"Your Grace," Hunters said, taking a few steps closer, "I would like to ask you to reconsider your latest decision on the orangery's decoration. To put your paintings up inside would -"

"Novice art does not belong in such a place," Cordelia snapped.

Hunters smiled sadly. “It is not at all novice, your Grace.”

She looked away, staring out towards the estate. Cordelia was expecting there to be a few extra additions needing to be made on the orangery before it could be considered entirely completed. Though it was something she could have finished rather quickly, Cordelia considered it to be the perfect chance to get Michael involved. Not that he showed any interest in the orangery’s creation before, but it was his estate, after all. The orangery would be a permanent structure, and it seemed only fair.

“Is the Duke inside, Hunters?”

The butler nodded. “In his study, your Grace. Would you like for me to fetch him?”

“No, thank you,” she replied, already walking towards the back doors. “Hunters?”

“Yes, your Grace?”

“Has the Duke seemed,” she paused, searching for the right word, “Particularly quiet this past week?”

Hunters watched her with a steady expression for a moment. “I am afraid so, your Grace.”

“Whatever for? Has something happened?”

“I do not believe I can say.”

She frowned. “Why not?”

“Because I hardly know,” Hunters said with a small raise of his shoulders. “It has been quite some time since the Duke confided in me in the way he once did. I rarely

know where he goes, the things he does. Though,” the butler grew quite wistful suddenly, “I can still only tell what he is thinking by a look alone.”

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“You have known him for a long time, haven’t you?”

Hunters blinked as if he just realized she was standing there. “Well, yes, your Grace. Since he was a very young boy.”

Cordelia stepped closer to him, her voice quiet. “Was it me, Hunters?”

“Was what you, your Grace?”

“Did I drive him into this seclusion?”

Hunters let his eyes soften. “Your Grace,” he began, “I do not believe there is a thing you have done to do this. The Duke struggles with his own internal afflictions, more than any man I have ever known.”

Cordelia pressed her lips together. “Everything was quite alright during the ball,” she whispered. “The next day, h-he began to shrink away from me. As if I had pressed too hard. Though it was only to prove a point to the Ton, I enjoyed the friendship we had. It has been a long time since I had one.”

“Perhaps you should speak with the Duke,” Hunters said with a knowing smile.

She nodded. “I will take him to the orangery.”

Cordelia turned around and hiked up her skirts to run up to the estate’s back door. Slipping inside, she walked through the halls, gulping down breaths of air to cure her beating heart. The moment she realized Michael was beginning to shrink away from

her, Cordelia did not know what to do. Everything leading up to the ball simmered into a gentle truce between the two of them. Cordelia finally felt at ease alongside him, comfortable with the mysterious man she married two years ago.

And suddenly, it was as if it never existed.

Cordelia curved around the hall, her hand running along the wall as she came up to the study. The door was opened with only a crack, a sliver of light peeking into the hallway. Cordelia drew in a deep breath. What was the worst that could happen?

Many, many things.

Cordelia knocked on the door and crept inside.

Michael sat behind a desk, his attention focused in on a few letters displayed in front of him. He wrote a few letters of his own, his head not even coming up for hair as she stepped inside.

“Are you well?” Cordelia asked, her voice cracking as the embarrassment slowly took over her.

“Yes, yes,” he replied. He didn’t bother to look at her.

Cordelia gulped. Any bravery or confidence she once had seemed to slip out the door. Michael wasn’t acting at all like she expected him to. He wouldn’t even look at her. Perhaps she shouldn’t have even bothered with it. Why would Michael suddenly care about something he had no interest in learning more about? She shook her head. She would ask him what she wanted, no matter how disrespectful he insisted on being.

“Work on the orangery has been completed,” Cordelia continued, keeping her voice loud. “A few additions need to be approved, of course, but it is quite a stunning

feature on the estate.”

Michael nodded his head slightly, but remained tight-lipped.

“Hunters took care of the workers. They were all paid with delightful bonuses. It’ll be quite a good name on Solshire.”

He pressed his lips together as he signed the end of one of the letters.

Cordelia’s hands tightened into fists. “Since this happensto beyour home,your Grace,” she snapped, her voice clashing against the walls, “You should have the final say in what happens with the orangery. Don’t you agree?”

Slowly, Michael raised his head. Setting down the quill, he leaned back in his seat, eyes holding onto her all the same. Not once did he look away, even blink. All he did was watch, his head beginning to tilt ever so slightly. Beneath his stare, Cordelia squirmed and fidgeted, unable to hold it back. Despite the shadow shrouding his gaze, the look he gave her wasn’t any less intense. She was desperate to know what he was thinking, why he watched her without daring to say a word.

Michael sighed, finally, and lifted himself up from behind the desk. Straightening his coat, he kept his lips in a straight line, his brow lifting as he watched her.

“Lead the way.”

* * *

The sunlight from the late afternoon cascaded into the orangery, sending a glowing hue across the entire building. The maroon colored floors and brightly green plants clashed against one another, creating a beautiful image that Cordelia wished she could remember forever. Suddenly she yearned for a canvas and a brush, desperate to

paint and put her hands to work in some way possible. If she could have been out there, nailing the wood and building the structure herself, Cordelia would've showered in the glory of its creation. Even so, just as the architect, Cordelia still had pride bursting through her.

She pressed further into the orangery, almost forgetting that she was meant to be touring Michael. All of it was too gorgeous for her to pay attention to anything else. To read a book inside the orangery in the early morning was on her mind. To take tea and paint and lounge without a care in the world made her drowsy with desire. Everything felt possible and bright with the orangery, her work put into a very obvious reality.

“We designed an open space parlor in the middle of the orangery,” Cordelia finally said, practically panting from happiness. “When the flowers bloom, the smell will be divine. Better than you might ever imagine.”

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Michael lurked behind her, dressed in a regal black suit. He held his arms behind his back, one brow raised as he looked it over. The corner of his lip twitched.

Cordelia watched him helplessly. Somehow she never realized how badly she wanted him to take pride in her work. “It will be fully functioning if you were worried about productivity,” Cordelia said.

He faced her. “Productivity?”

“Throughout winter, the summer harvest will stay strong. The plants will be protected from frost,” she explained with an embarrassed smile.

“I do not recall ever knowing a woman to be so adamant about building an orangery,” he said.

Cordelia breathed a sigh. “All my life, I wished to have an orangery.”

“Whatever for?”

“For exactly this,” she raised a hand towards the greenery. “Why do you think I restored your family gardens last summer? I have always enjoyed gardening and the peace that came with it.”

Michael watched her. “Did you never garden as a young girl?”

“Not as often as I would have wished,” she replied, hiding her surprise at his interest in it. “Irene very much preferred to take on the garden. And as a girl who

accomplished mastering singing, reading, embroidery and needlepoint, my father was in no hurry to deny Irene of any of her wants.”

Michael smirked. “Is she your eldest sibling?”

“Yes,” Cordelia replied, walking through the orangery aimlessly. She froze suddenly, a thought coming back to her. “I completely forgot. I received a letter from my Aunt, who plans on hosting a dinner party a few days from now. She invited the both of us.”

“You look nervous.”

“Well,” she muttered, “She is my father’s sister.”

Michael raised a quizzical brow.

“Nevertheless,” Cordelia continued, pushing past the embarrassment, “My siblings will both be there. It might be something to attend.” She faced him. “If you wished it to be.”

He narrowed his eyes. “Are you asking for permission?”

“I suppose I am.”

Michael held his arms behind his back, an odd look on his face. “I won’t say I’m not surprised. Why would you ask for us to attend?”

She bit back her tongue for a moment, feeling rather like a fool in front of her calm and collected husband. Cordelia drew in a deep breath. There was no time left for sidestepping true thoughts or ignoring hidden feelings. The time spent alongside Michael made her feel more at home at Solshire than ever before. And she had no

intentions of going back to how it was before.

“I have to admit,” Cordelia said in a small voice, “That I preferred our truce. I would like for us to keep it, if it pleases you all the same.”

Michael’s lips parted to speak, but she stepped closer, blurting out more before he ever could.

“While you might have enjoyed your years of solitude, Michael,” she began, his name sounding foreign on her lips, “I must admit that it was never as pleasurable for me. Even if I made it seem like something else before. I am a proud person, you see.”

Michael’s lip turned up in a smile. “I am well aware, Cordelia.”

A shiver rolled down her spine. Calm and collected.

“I’m sure you could assume that I was never the child my family expected to have,” she whispered. “Perhaps it has left me to feel smaller than I am, useless when I am not. Irene married the man put in front of her, never once dared to mutter a complaint to any one of us. My father, who I always believed to be quite an overbearing man, expected me to do the same.”

“But,” Michael said, taking small steps to get closer to her, “You had the Earl, didn’t you?”

Cordelia sighed. “No,” she muttered, “I do not believe I ever did.”

He frowned.

“Yes, he was my betrothed and we met on multiple occasions. I thought he was a proper gentleman, but that wasn’t nearly enough. The moment he left, the moment

those scandal papers arrived at our door,” Cordelia paused, drawing in a deep breath,
“The first thing my father said was ‘What did you do to drive him away?’”

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Michael wasn't too far away then, his head tilted as he listened. There was something frustrated in his face, as if he grew irritated and tried to hide it but failed. His muscles were tense, his jaw tightened and rigid beneath his skin. She could not understand his expression.

"I could not be the daughter he expected me to be," Cordelia said. "And so, the moment he could, my father married me off to you without a second thought. Not once was I asked for my own opinion, to be offered to meet my newly engaged suitor before daring to step foot in a chapel. None of it."

Michael pressed his lips together.

"I do not try to burden you with my own sorrow," Cordelia quickly added, now looking up at him. "I only want you to understand."

"Understand what?" he muttered.

She breathed in. "How much this all means to me. To do something," she paused, remembering Hunters words, "That I can be proud of. Something of my own accord. Something from my own mind. You might have left, but you let me do this all the same. For that, I am grateful."

Michael watched her with a furrowed brow. Perhaps he did not understand her sentiment, perhaps he believed she wished to bring him out to the orangery to further irritate and bother him. Cordelia fidgeted beneath his persistent stare. Finally, gathering her strength, Cordelia faced him head on, keeping her face angled upwards towards him.

“There is something I cannot understand,” she whispered.

Michael searched her face. “What is it?”

“Why did you agree to marry me?”

His lips parted. Suddenly his eyes were clinging onto Cordelia’s lips as if he was caught in a trance. He swayed, dipping down to get even closer to her. She jerked backwards for a moment, surprised at his closeness. A rustic scent washed over her as he inched closer. Cordelia breathed him in, growing increasingly intoxicated by his mere aura, the shimmering light of the falling sun fading in all around them. The glow the orangery walls gave off with the impending sunlight set the entire room on fire, matching the energy that bounced between Cordelia and the beastly Duke.

“Michael -” she managed to whisper before he crashed into her.

His lips were desperate against her lips at first before softening to a gentle motion, merely fading into her. Cordelia felt her shoulders sag, the ability to keep herself afloat quickly seeping out of her. She reached for him but could barely hold on, her legs beginning to wobble and shake beneath her. Michael ducked an arm around her waist, as if he already knew, and hoisted her up, not once letting her come up for air. Chills rolled up and down her arms as his other hand snaked up her side, finding its way to cup the side of her face.

Michael’s hands were full of grooves from his scars and calluses. His skin was rough against her cheek, but Cordelia didn’t seem to mind it one bit. She leaned into him, as if she couldn’t feel him enough.

The kiss lasted till Michael abruptly pulled himself away.

Cordelia was still outstretched, still lost in the feeling of his lips against hers, when

she realized he had already put a few feet of space between them. Full of shame and embarrassment, Cordelia retracted, her arms wrapping tightly around her chest as if she needed to hold herself together. She glanced in his direction and immediately noticed how he could not look at her. He kept his gaze focused above her head, or at the plants.

What have you done?She asked herself as her breathing grew sharp and ragged.

“If you must know,” Michael suddenly said, his arms once again twisted behind his back, “My father added a clause to his will months before he passed.”

“A clause?”

“Before I could access the fortune that was rightfully mine, I needed to be wed.”

Cordelia blinked as she watched him. “I-I don’t understand.” Everything still felt incredibly foggy, the phantom feeling of his lips against her making her drowsy. She inched backwards, almost falling into a chair. The feeling slowly returned to her legs, her strength steadily rising to her arms, when she finally soaked in everything he was trying to say. “Do you mean to say that you agreed to marry me for money?”

“Not at all,” Michael replied. “I agreed to marry you for everythingowed to me.”

“Is there a difference?”

He stared with an expressionless face. “Of course there is.”

Cordelia felt drunk with emotion. The desire she once felt trickled out of her like water. Soon, all that remained was a growing anger. She wondered how much she was worth, how much more money Michael was able to grasp onto once they signed the marriage license. How much did it take for her to be acceptable, for her hand in

marriage to be worth all the trouble?

She shook her head. There wasn't a simple thought in her mind. Everything felt like it was spinning, from the ceiling to the very floor beneath her. Cordelia pressed her palm to the side of her face, feeling the unavoidable heat beneath her skin, as if she had been suddenly plagued with an incurable fever.

The comfort and steadiness Cordelia found alongside Michael began to fade away. She had never experienced a betrayal before, and yet, it hit her almost instantaneously. And as the anger grew, stemming from a place she couldn't recognize, Cordelia began to fight with herself from the inside out. It had been a marriage of convenience all along. She herself married him through convenience sake, to save her family name and be rid of the scandal that desperately clung onto her.

How was this any different?

Cordelia touched her lips, and they felt almost numb, tingling with the kiss Michael had so easily left upon her.

"Your efforts seem to have been a success," Michael suddenly said.

“My efforts?”

He gestured around. “The orangery, I mean. You have my utmost respect and congratulations for completing such an impressive feat. I’m sure that it would draw the eye of even the most skilled and sought after architect.” Michael bowed deeply. “If you’ll excuse me.”

Cordelia watched as he turned abruptly, and stormed out of the orangery. Within a moment, after the front door clapped shut, Cordelia was once again alone in the orangery. She looked around at everything she managed to create. All that she had been so proud of felt miniscule, suddenly, as if it had never happened in the first place.

And when the tears began to fall, Cordelia had no explanation for them at all.

CHAPTER14

The last time Cordelia saw her Aunt from her father’s side, her self-confidence and courage was whittled down to almost nothing. The memories rang through her as she stared out the carriage window, just as a steady rain fell over London. It pattered against the carriage’s rooftop noisily, though Cordelia found it to be rather comforting. She closed her eyes and tried to imagine how Solshire looked in the center of a downpour.

Haunting, she thought, as if the ghosts of the estate were carried in the droplets and set free the moment they hit the ground. A blurry image came to the forefront of her mind: the estate shrouded in a fog, streaks of rain slicing through the world, the

colors of the grass and the garden bright and heavy as they soaked in the moisture. Her next painting, perhaps.

“What are you doing?”

Cordelia’s eyes popped open. Directly across from her, Michael watched with a quizzical brow. He dressed in his fine coats, a top hat beside him. The shadows from the falling sun and approaching storm made him look ethereal, like a mysterious figure in a book, the unwarranted hero or the frightening and tempting villain. Cordelia couldn’t put her hand on it, but perhaps he was a mix of them both.

She shook her head. She felt far too romantic during the rain.

Cordelia met his startled gaze. “Hm?”

“You were,” Michael paused, searching for the word but coming up empty handed. He swayed slightly before raising his hand, and dragging it through the air, one finger pointed out like a paintbrush.

“Oh,” Cordelia mused, the embarrassment already clutching onto her. “Solshire in the rain would be a brilliant painting, don’t you think?”

Michael stared at her, his furrowed brow deepening.

“Sometimes,” she continued, “I feel as though I can see the entire world as a painting in my head. I just thought, with the rain, how beautiful Solshire must look. You know it better than I. Is it as alluring in the rain as I believe it to be?”

Michael hesitated as he pulled his gaze away, glancing out the window as the rain grew heavier the further they crept through London.

Ever since their tour through the orangery, things hadn't returned to how they once were. Cordelia felt plagued by their shared kiss, the remnants of it lingering across her lips no matter how much she scrubbed them. Their time in the carriage was the closest they had been in a few days. Perhaps Michael wished to put more space between them, but his lack of conversation has left Cordelia guessing more than actually knowing. Even then, as she awaited a simple response, her self-confidence began to shrink and disappear.

"It is magnificent in the rain."

Cordelia watched his face, her lips parting as a surprised exhale left her.

"While one might expect the colors to grow brighter in the rain," Michael continued, the strength and steadiness in his voice shocking her even further. He kept his eye focused out the window, one hand holding the curtain back. "They are deeper, instead. As if the leaves and the grass and the petals soaked the water up."

Michael's brow furrowed tightly together as he continued, his gaze becoming faraway and someplace else than the carriage. "When the rain is strong enough, a stream flows down either side of the estate, pooling around it like a medieval moat. My -"

He stopped, suddenly, his lips snapping shut.

"Your what?" Cordelia asked.

Michael turned to face her with an unreadable expression; blank like an untouched canvas. "Have you painted recently?"

"Have I..." The words trailed off.

He raised a brow. “Have you,” he said again, slower as if she couldn’t understand English, “Painted recently?”

Cordelia looked back out the window. Her annoyance flared as quickly as the rain grew stronger. Michael was an expert at changing the subject and acting like nothing happened in the first place.

Besides, she wasn’t sure if it was a question she’d like to answer truthfully. The last painting she worked on and finished, was the portrait she did of him. It was a secret sort of project, one that she hid away when she needed to do something else. The thought of letting another soul see it or hear about it was too personal, a piece of her she wasn’t ready to be seen. Cordelia pressed her lips together. How would Michael even respond if she told him the truth, that she painted a portrait of him without needing him to pose? From mere memory alone?

She shook her head. Far too personal, indeed.

“I am stuck on a few,” she responded instead.

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Michael nodded. “Multiple paintings at once sounds like an unneeded complexity for an already intricate pastime.”

Cordelia shrugged, trying to mask her surprise at his consistent conversation. They hadn’t spoken more than a word to each other since the orangery. The last thing she could do was get her hopes high enough to believe some sort of a relationship could exist between them. Not that she was in a rush to speak to him after finding out that their wedding was a means to be further endowed with money.

“Perhaps,” was all she could manage to say.

Michael’s gaze hung onto her as she looked away. “I wouldn’t know,” he said.

A tense silence settled within the carriage once more. Perhaps if the tour through the orangery never happened, Cordelia would feel more at ease as they neared her Aunt’s home. Pembroke was a lovely estate, one that was half the size of Solshire but surrounded by all the greenery one could imagine. Some of Cordelia’s first paintings were of the landscape around Pembroke, a few still remaining within the estate itself. The fondest memories she had of visiting her Aunt, Patience, were of the paintings she conceived.

“I believe we are near Pembroke,” Michael suddenly said as he peered through the window. He turned to look at her with a raised brow. “Perhaps you might tell me who will be present at this dinner so we might be prepared.”

“Prepared?”

“To be the loving couple that -”

Cordelia waved a hand in the air. She was rather tired of the game they played against the Ton. “Might we have an evening where it is real?”

“What is real?”

She pressed her lips together. “Our companionship. We are companions,” she paused, stress striking her for a moment, “Aren’t we?”

Michael watched with widening eyes. “I suppose.” He nodded, once and shortly. “In the broadest sense of the term.”

Cordelia ignored her displeasure. What was she expecting, anyways? At least she did not need to enter her Aunt’s home unaccompanied. That would’ve been a fate far worse than what she had now.

“Irene, my eldest sibling, will attend,” Cordelia finally said. “Alongside our brother, Duncan. The Earl of Pembroke, William Fitz, and my Aunt, the Countess, Patience Fitz. I believe a distant cousin of mine, James Worsley, arrived in London on some business and is expected to attend. He is staying at Pembroke for the time being.”

Michael nodded slowly.

Listing the names drove a sharp anxiety through Cordelia’s chest. She could barely remember James from her childhood, as he was almost a decade older than her, and was out of the city often. But it was not her distant cousin that drove a wedge through her excitement of seeing family. No, Cordelia remembered the moments in Pembroke far too often, of her Aunt’s sharp tongue and the stinging feeling that always followed.

Cordelia nervously pulled at a loose string on her dress, unknowingly causing some of the ruffles to deflate and fall unattractively down her legs.

“Are you well?”

She glanced at Michael. “Why wouldn’t I be?”

“You are not normally so fidgety.”

Cordelia did not believe her husband noticed her enough to recognize when she was being unlike herself. “I am quite normal, actually.”

“Really?”

“Of course,” she quickly said. “Why wouldn’t I be?”

Michael hesitated. “Well, family is -”

“I wouldn’t worry.” Cordelia straightened, pulling her hands away from her clothes to stop picking at them. “It is expected to be a fine evening.”

He pressed his lips together. “I’m sure it will be.”

Cordelia never realized how much she wanted a companion by her side until they drew closer and closer to Pembroke. The environment outside grew more familiar the further the carriage went, and the fear in her heart surged to a new height. If only they hadn’t shared the passionate moment in the orangery. Cordelia figured everything would have carried on as they were, unsettled but comfortable.

Now, Cordelia glanced at her husband and could not even imagine what he was thinking. Did he dread attending a dinner party with her family? Was he stuck in a

reverie on what his life could have been if he chose another to fulfill his father's conditions? Or, worst of all, did Michael believe his money was worth far more than what he married?

Cordelia shuddered as the carriage rolled to a slow stop. The drafty cold from the dreary weather sunk into her before they ever left the warm compartment. She only prayed that it wasn't a sign of what was to come. Perhaps her Aunt had changed, no longer the nitpicking woman who was intent on undermining Cordelia for who she was.

The driver opened the carriage door, a wide umbrella already in hand. The rain noisily fell against the ground and the umbrella, splashing into the carriage and wetting her feet. Michael climbed out first, and reached back within, his face shrouded so much that Cordelia could hardly read his expression. She took his hand, stepping out of the carriage and wrapping her thin shawl further around her shoulders.

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Michael held the umbrella as they walked towards the front doors. Pembroke glowed in the distance within the downpour, light managing to show the way from the windows. When they arrived at the front steps, Irene already stood outside, her delicately pale blue dress covered by a deeply dark cloak.

“Irene!” Cordelia exclaimed when she realized it was her sister. “What on earth are you doing? Get inside before you catch a cold!”

She merely waved a hand in the air dismissively before grabbing a hold of Cordelia and giving her a tight squeeze. “I only wished to greet you, sister,” Irene murmured in her ear. “And a little rain never hurt anyone.” Her gaze focused on Michael and she gave him a polite bow. “It is a pleasure, your Grace. I hope you are well.”

Michael merely nodded. “You as well.”

The front doors swung open.

“I thought I heard you.” Duncan stood on the threshold, his lip already pulled down in a displeased frown. “Come inside, won’t you?” He reached to shake Michael’s hand as he entered. “Your Grace,” he said, the pair of them sharing a similarly gruff greeting.

Pembroke was delicately warm on the inside, smelling of sweet madeira wine and a dinner roast being carved. The foyer was quiet, though a few voices were carried through from the nearest parlour. Cordelia breathed it in, desperate to calm her racing heart before the evening truly began.

“Aunt Patience is over here,” Irene said, gesturing towards the parlour. “I know she is looking forward to seeing you.”

Cordelia bit back a bitter laugh. “Truly?”

“Well, you’ve been the talk of the town,” Duncan replied instead, his sarcasm hardly evident from the lack of a smile on his handsome face. “The pair of you.”

Michael raised a brow. “I believe any rumors spread by the Ton have been put to rest recently.”

“Our Aunt is a different story,” Duncan said.

“Different how?”

Duncan glanced at his sisters silently.

“She is merely a gossip herself,” Irene finished for him, her arm tucked around Cordelia’s. “Perhaps not an outrightly harmful thing, but an unpleasant habit altogether.”

“I assume this means she has heard the rumors surrounding my husband and I,” Cordelia said in a quiet voice. “Is that right?”

Irene pressed her lips together and nodded.

“Very well.” Cordelia straightened herself and ran her hands over her dress, the finest piece she owned.

While she expected it to be enough to satisfy her Aunt’s prestigious tastes, she was quickly becoming aware of the conversation that was bound to take place. Instantly,

Cordelia was brought back to her youth, when her Aunt would circle her like a caged animal, picking out every flaw and mistake she ever made.

“Shall we?” Cordelia asked.

Irene pulled her arm away, giving the space for Michael to stand alongside her. He strode forward, his hand hovering before taking Cordelia’s, like any married couple might do. Cordelia, ignoring the flare of unease that swirled in her stomach at her husband’s closeness, held her chin up as they walked into the parlour.

“Finally!”

Aunt Patience rose from a long sofa, her delicately brown hair pulled into a neat bun at the back of her head. A green dress fell down her shoulders, brilliantly shimmering jewelry around her neck and hanging from her ears. As she watched the married couple stride towards her, the Earl of Pembroke stood alongside her, his expression kind and unaware of the tension lying around him. On the loveseat beside them, Cordelia’s cousin James stood, streaks of grey now beginning to appear within his dark hair.

Aunt Patience had the same starkness Cordelia’s father’s face once had. There were sharp, angular points in the woman’s face, casting shadows across her chest and neck. A crooked brow, always raised and always judgemental, was Aunt Patience’s trademark, even if she didn’t believe it to be. Cordelia remembered it from her childhood, and felt flashed backwards a decade at seeing it then. She glanced up at Michael, but his expression remained unchanged: stoic and calm.

Cordelia repeated a familiar mantra in her head: calm and collected.

“I thought we lost you to the rain, dear,” Aunt Patience cooed as she went to greet Cordelia. Her hands immediately went for Cordelia’s face, one long finger hooking

around her chin as if she was a fish to be caught. Aunt Patience turned and twisted her face every which way, getting a look from every angle possible. “My, my,” she drawled, that brow raising even higher, “What a woman young Cordelia has grown into!”

Holding back her pleasure, Cordelia tried to remind herself that the compliments were always followed by the polite insults. “Good evening, Aunt,” Cordelia said. “Uncle, I pray your business has been well.” She turned her attention to her cousin. “And James! What a pleasure to see you again. I am ashamed to admit I cannot recall our last acquaintance.”

James chuckled, one hand over his round belly. “Seeing you were no taller than my hip the last we saw each other, I would be surprised if you did!”

“Our cousin has had spectacular business in Portsmouth, sister,” Irene blurted as she rounded the couch. “Perhaps he might disclose the talk with your husband.”

Cordelia was about to turn her attention towards James and Michael, but Aunt Patience had other plans. Cordelia was more than aware of her sister’s quick thinking, in the efforts to distract the Countess from focusing too much on the Ton’s gossiping. If it was that simple, Cordelia wouldn’t have dreaded the party at all. But just as she opened her mouth to ask James about his business, Aunt Patience snatched onto her wrist once more.

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“Now, now,” she drawled, “Don’t think you’d get away that easily, Cordelia! I’ve had plenty of time to question the other Celeston siblings, but when was the last time we saw each other?” Aunt Patience looked over her shoulder to her husband. “It couldn’t have been for my dear brother’s funeral. I very much remember Cordelia’s absence!”

Cordelia gulped. Her father passed on while she was living in solitude at Solshire. Even if she wanted to attend, she couldn’t imagine leaving the estate and attending any sort of event without her husband in tow. The explanation she would be expected to give was hardly something she had ever done in the past. What could she have possibly said?

Right as she opened her mouth to speak, Michael stepped forward with a slight bow.

“You’ll have to forgive me, my Lady,” he said in a deep voice. “Unfortunately, my wife’s and I’s nuptials carried on far longer than what is socially appropriate.”

Aunt Patience didn’t bother to hide the surprise from her face. “How lucky our dear Cordelia must be,” she said.

“Lucky, Aunt?” Cordelia asked in a quiet voice, not that she was entirely certain she wished to hear it.

“Why,” she began with a shrug, “You were pulled from a great scandal that could have affected the entire family, only to have been saved by a Duke. Doesn’t that sound lucky to you?”

Cordelia lowered her head. Michael's stare hung onto the side of her face. She could feel it from the heat alone, a rush of embarrassment beginning to claw its way through her body.

Aunt Patience turned, still discussing Cordelia's life without outrightly addressing her. "And don't get me started on all the dreadful rumors the Ton has been gawking on about," she snapped. "Every place I dare to go in London was always met with a 'have you heard from the Duchess? Have you heard of what happened next?'" Aunt Patience met Cordelia's gaze, both of her brows raised at a crooked angle. "'Have you heard how was seen entering her abode next?'"

Cordelia pressed her lips together. While the rumors had been as settled as they could've been from their attendance at the Season's latest ball, Cordelia never once stopped to consider how many reparations needed within her own family. Her eyes desperately glanced around the room. Irene and Duncan looked helpless, though she never expected them to truly speak against their Aunt. While the Celeston siblings went on to be rather bound to each other, the rest of the family kept their expected distance.

She should not have planned on receiving anything else from her Aunt's family.

"Aunt Patience," Cordelia began, desperate to change the conversation, "You would be greatly impressed to see my orangery. Work has just finished, and I -"

"Tell me, Cordelia," Aunt Patience interjected as she retook her seat, "Do you still paint?"

She gulped. "Yes, Aunt."

"What else?"

Cordelia hesitated. "Else, Aunt?"

"Embroidery, the pianoforte," Aunt Patience explained with a wave of her hand. "Singing, writing. Tell me something else of importance you have managed to take on since we last spoke." Shaking her head, she turned to eye her husband. "Long before dear Irene reached Cordelia's age, she had already mastered all that is expected from a respectably raised woman." Aunt Patience faced her once more, her brow raised. "Well, Cordelia? What else?"

Cordelia stuttered over her words as she struggled to find the right thing to say. What else was there? She liked to call herself an expert at landscape paintings, and recently trudged through mastering portraits, but that wasn't at all what her Aunt wanted to hear. When was the last time Cordelia dared to try embroidery, to read one of the books stowed away in Solshire? Each question came up empty, no response adequate enough to satisfy her Aunt.

Everything Cordelia worried about in regards to the dinner party quickly closed in on her.

"As I mentioned before," Cordelia began in a small voice, "I believe you might be greatly impressed with what I have done to the estate in Solshire. The orangery is beyond what -"

Aunt Patience suddenly rose from her seat when the sound of a servants' quiet footsteps entered the parlour. "Has dinner been served?" she blurted, entirely cutting Cordelia off from what she was saying.

The servant bowed her head. "Yes, my Lady."

"Splendid!" Aunt Patience waved with an exaggerated grandiose. "Let us move to the dining hall, shall we?"

Unaware of the tension radiating from Cordelia, Aunt Patience trickled out of the room absentmindedly, already talking about something new. The Earl followed close behind her, with James trailing them next. Irene passed by Cordelia with a small smile, her hand squeezing her shoulder reassuringly. Duncan did the same on her opposite arm, though his frown never dared to turn.

A hand appeared in front of her.

“Shall we?”

Cordelia glanced up to see Michael standing in front of her, his hand waiting. She breathed deeply before taking his hand, and allowed him to steer the pair of them towards the dining hall. While she already felt herself being whittled to something very small and timid, Cordelia remembered as they passed over the threshold that it had hardly even begun yet. She pushed a smile across her face, the mantra repeating feverishly in the back of her mind.

Calm and collected.

Calm and collected.

Calm, and whatever else I can possibly be.

CHAPTER15

“When she barely reached my hip,” the Countess, Patience, was in the middle of retelling, “Irene already sang greater than Angelica Catalani. Half as beautiful, too!”

A ripple of polite, but rather uncomfortable, laughter spread over the dining table. The first course had been served, and Michael could barely find the stomach to indulge as the tension grew to become practically palpable. Only the residents of Pembroke, the Countess and her husband, the Earl, divulged in their meals like it was any other day. The cousin visiting on business hardly paid attention to the conversation, too busy scarfing down his soup than paying his family any mind.

Catalani was a name he recognized. A famous Italian opera singer who blessed London with a few performances during her height of fame. Michael glanced in Irene’s direction. The eldest Celeston housed a bright pink hue to her cheeks as her Aunt continued boasting about her past achievements. Michael could see the resemblance between the opera singer and Irene, though he hardly doubted it had anything to do with her success in London. The Countess, on the other hand, had an obviously different belief.

“Irene would sing to my guests during our parties,” the Countess recounted with a glass of wine in hand. “All the guests had a tear at the ready whenever she played. Oh, they cried and cried to me afterwards about her beauty, and I could only say -”

“Auntie,” Irene politely interjected, her voice barely raised. She gave the Countess a sweet smile, a slight tilt in her head. “Let us not talk about me so much! There are so many more tales to fill the dinner table, aren’t there?”

“My niece,” the Countess cooed, reaching over to run her fingers across Irene’s curved cheek, “So pure, so humble. I always said that vanity causes imperfections, haven’t I? Haven’t I, William?”

The Earl lifted his head out of his soup bowl and ran a cloth across his lips. “Yes, my dear,” he said. “Yes.”

The Countess turned, looking rather proud of herself. “As I was saying,” she continued, ignoring Irene’s cautious pleading. “After they cried, the guests demanded to know how a girl could be so beautiful, insideandout. I could only say: ‘Gentlemen, she is simply cut from the Celeston cloth. Breeding, my friends. Perfect breeding.’” She laughed sharply. “Isn’t that right, William?”

Once again, the Earl turned as if he heard her for the first time, not at all involved in the conversation. “Yes, my love,” he said for a second time. “Of course.”

“Have you been singing lately, Cordelia?”

Across the table, Michael’s wife visibly gulped. She smiled, tilting her head in the same fashion Irene did a moment before. Cordelia shook her head, careful not to let the content expression on her face slip away.

“No, Aunt,” Cordelia replied. “I don’t believe I was ever any good at it.”

The Countess sighed. “Though, we paid for the finest tutors, didn’t we?”

“As a matter of fact,” the Earl piped up, leaning back against his seat at the head of the table, “I ran into the old woman a fortnight ago!”

Michael glanced over to watch his wife wince slightly. It was hard to believe, at first, that the stubborn woman he had grown to know over the past few weeks sank at the

feet of a simple Countess. But, the longer he heard her Aunt's shrill voice and the unflinching need to insult someone, Michael understood it well enough.

The more surprising bit, however, was Cordelia's restraint. He did not know her to be someone who stepped down from a fight, who was afraid to say whatever it was she truly meant. Each time he combatted her, tried to show he was the authority in their relationship, Cordelia responded in the exact opposite way. There wasn't fear, not recognition, not submission. She merely made herself look taller, raised her chin up higher. Michael did not believe there was a fearful bone in her small body.

But then, suddenly, Michael felt as though he didn't know Cordelia at all.

"Mrs. Brimley?" Cordelia asked. "You saw Mrs. Brimley?"

"Well, she still teaches in London!" The Earl smirked in the same way his wife did. "The poor woman recounted her short time tutoring Cordelia. I almost felt inclined to offer her some more pay!"

Laughter ensued across the table. Even the cousin, James, who I thought to be a mindless fool too focused on eating to dare utter a word, joined in on the phone. Irene eyed her sister solemnly, her lips pressed tightly together. Beside her, Duncan stared at the Countess and the Earl, a displeased frown tugging at the corner of his mouth. Despite the clear discomfort, not one of them said a word. Michael glanced around the table, his gaze lastly landing on Cordelia. She was acting in the oddest way.

"Irene," the Countess began, "I remember when Mrs. Brimley decided you didn't even need a lesson. Don't you remember that? How much she swooned over your naturally sweet voice?"

Irene watched her sister. "I remember when Mrs. Brimley came into the drawing room

one day to find atoadin her tea.”

Cordelia’s face lit up. “How could I have forgotten?”

Even Duncan, the hard lined Duke who never dared crack a smile, let recognition pass over his face. He leaned against his hand, his gaze flicking between his siblings.

Michael forced himself not to bristle as he watched their interaction. One thing he never had the pleasure of knowing was a familial bond. The passing of his mother was more than just a nurturing woman’s absence from his life. The late Duke stepped back in his position as a father, becoming a hardened warden-like figure instead. Suddenly, everything else in London was more important than having Michael as a son. To watch the Celeston siblings lean on one another through the simplest of actions was a shocking realization to what Michael never had. The faintest idea of having it with Cordelia touched him, and he quickly lurched away from the idea.

No,he thought to himself.Do not be absurd.

Cordelia turned, suddenly facing him. “Our music tutor happened to be rather strict, Michael,” she began, her voice higher with excitement. “You know how children are! Well, Irene had the brightest idea of - “

“Me?” Irene shook her head. “Don’t pin it on me! Duncan -”

Duncan raised his hands defensively. “I was a good child, if you could believe it, Michael.”

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Michael's brow shot up. Beside him, Cordelia gazed up at him, a smile twitching across her lips. For a moment, he was clouded with an emotion he couldn't understand. The same feeling that once plagued him within the orangery came rushing back, almost knocking him off his seat. It was the feeling of being enamoured, stuck on the beauty of something and unable to look away. Cordelia looked like the blossoming flowers she planted in the orangery: bright with life and sharp.

He bit back the smile that threatened to peak across his face.

"Knowing my wife, I can believe it quite well," Michael finally said.

Irene chuckled as she raised her glass to her lips.

"Well, now," Cordelia drawled, her eyes flashing combatively, though it was obviously humorous. "You hardly know Duncan well enough to make such broad -"

"Cordelia."

Silence snapped across the table as all the guests turned their attention towards the Countess's venomous tone. She shook her head ever so slightly, her gaze never once daring to leave Cordelia. The longer she stared, the more Cordelia shrank, her humor quickly dissipating. At the head of the table, the Earl had the same air about him, a disapproving stare holding onto his youngest niece.

"A lady does not allow herself to be so inappropriately excited at a crowded dinner table," the Countess reprimanded. "Do you not remember your mother's finest

example, may she rest in peace?”

Cordelia held herself up surprisingly well. “No, Aunt. Mother passed away when I was far too young to remember.”

The Countess waved a dismissive hand in the air. “Don’t be ridiculous! If you did not remember the things your mother naturally taught you, that is a crime upon you, not the woman’s fault!”

“Of course it isn’t her fault,” Cordelia said. “That isn’t what I meant at all.”

“Well, if you were a respectable student like either one of your siblings, we wouldn’t be having this discussion, wouldn’t we?” The Countess snapped. She quickly turned her attention towards Michael, a sweet smile hiding the vile whip beneath. “Your Grace, I must apologize for my niece. We pray those childish things she once did are all in the past, don’t we, William?”

The Earl nodded. “Way in the past, your Grace.”

Michael stiffened, unsure of how to proceed. Beside him, Cordelia kept her lips pressed firmly together, though a storm was beginning to brew behind her eyes. “Well,” he finally said, intent on closing the conversation, “I wouldn’t say that -”

“I know how humble you must be, your Grace, like our beloved Irene,” the Countess interjected. “Cordelia was once such a spoiled child, something I’m sure you’ve come across over the past few years. Though I can only imagine that a fine gentleman like yourself with such proper upbringing managed to tame her rather quickly.”

“Aunt Patience!” Cordelia blurted, her eyes wide as a redness swarmed to her cheeks. She glanced sideways at Michael every once and a while, shrinking away any time he met her gaze. “You are embarrassing me!”

The Countess waved her hand in the air between them once more. "I blame the spoiling on her mother, may she rest in peace, your Grace," she effortlessly continued. "Cordelia was the youngest, after all, and the poor thing was in her later days. Can you imagine having a child demanding things from you at every possible second?" The Countess shook her head with a sigh. "Such a shameful thing."

"I-I am not spoiled," Cordelia said in a quiet voice.

Michael remained silent. He doubted it would be too long before Cordelia finally snapped back. It was hard to believe she lasted that long without doing it already, but he couldn't imagine her staying quiet. She couldn't. Could she?

"Spoiling a child leads to one thing, and one thing only, your Grace," the Countess said. She leaned towards him, as if no one else was at the table. "Perpetual disobedience." She shrugged matter of factually. "Eventually, they believe it is allowed, and are the most disobedient of creatures. Whether it be putting toads in tutors' tea," the Countess paused to eye the Celeston siblings, "Or refusing to be the proper lady they were raised to be. Cordelia is a perfect example."

"You speak as if I am still a child," Cordelia said, her voice raising ever so slightly. "The disobedience you speak of, Aunt, is -"

"Interrupting your superiors is beyond rude, Cordelia," the Countess snapped, her brow raised in an angry way. "And you dare to say you are an obedient lady?" She laughed, though it was sharp and without humor. The Countess focused her attention back to Michael. "Honestly, your Grace, I greatly pity the burden placed upon your shoulders in wedding my niece. You are beyond humble to take such a thing on your chest without complaint, your Grace."

Michael opened his mouth to speak, but was quickly interrupted.

“It is the grueling job of the husband to right his wife’s wrongs,” the Countess said. “All along, for years upon years, I told that brother of mine that a swift engagement would end the trials he faced with Cordelia. A husband, one of strength and strong birth, would correct that attitude in a matter of days, I told him. Now, he tried his best with that -”

Cordelia rattled the table as she pushed her seat back, snatching the attention of all the dinner guests. “Aunt Patience,” she snapped, her voice rigid and trembling. “I do not appreciate the manner in which you speak of me in front of my husband.”

“Calm yourself, dear!” The Countess laughed, glancing around the table with her hands out, as if she hadn’t uttered a complaint in the first place. “What point would there be in complaining about the past? It is long gone now, no need to be rude about it!”

Cordelia slumped against her seat in a dejected way. There wasn’t a tear in her eye, but a sort of sadness glazed over her as the conversation carried on around the table. Irene and Duncan hardly said a word, perhaps out of fear of upsetting their wealthy and well liked Countess of an Aunt and Earl of an Uncle. Perhaps they remained silent out of the mere obedience the Countess spoke of. Michael could not deny the morals in which she carried on with. There was a time and place for the petulance Cordelia wielded, though he found it charming, in a way. What was she without it, other than another Lady in a crowd of the Ton?

Michael watched her closely. Any minute now, he figured, she would stand from the table and demand to be excused. She would pull him along with her, marching towards the front door without even gathering her coats. Through rain and storms. Michael watched, but never saw it come into fruition. Cordelia merely listened to the words her Aunt spoke, and took them all like a lashing.

Michael’s brow furrowed as the realization of her silence settled into him. If she

refused to stand up for herself at Pembroke, what gave her the courage to stand up to him each and every day? If he dared to utter such things to her, Cordelia would have argued the moment he opened his mouth. Suddenly, she was as frightened as a child, and it gave him a far greater irritation than he thought it would.

“You are right, Aunt,” Cordelia finally said.

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Michael hid his shock, though he couldn't stop himself from eyeing her oddly.

“As I was saying, your Grace,” the Countess continued, “My dear brother, rest his soul, finally listened to my advice when he arranged a courtship between Cordelia and the Earl of Vaun.”

A different sort of quiet took over the table. Irene and Duncan snapped their attention towards their youngest sibling. Cordelia's crestfallen expression lowered as she stared at her lap. Michael was astonished. This had to have been the time she would stand up for herself. If not now, then when could possibly be a better time?

“And what a pleasurable gentleman that Earl was,” the Countess said.

The Earl nodded alongside her. “Positively fine young Lord, your Grace. If he had remained in London, I'm sure you would have crossed business paths with him.”

Michael pressed his lips together.

“Aunt,” Irene said. “Perhaps we might find better entertainment in a different conversation.”

The Countess ignored her niece. “I cannot begin to voice the disappointment I felt when we saw the story in the papers,” she said, lowering her tone as if it would help the situation. “I know what all those women in the Ton say about the supposed love he found in the country, but I can't help but believe it was something poor Cordelia had done!”

“Aunt!” Cordelia gasped, her eyes wide. “You can’t possibly -”

“We all knew it, your Grace,” the Countess spoke over Cordelia. “Every last one of us. For the Earl to lose interest in a Celeston Lady, it must have been something she did. And we know her well enough to know such a thing to be true!”

Michael’s brow shot up. He was moments away from turning to Cordelia when the Countess reached for him again, touching his wrist once more.

“Do not mistake me, your Grace,” she said. “We have been blessed by the miraculous appearance you made! Without you, my brother’s children would have been ruined, all because of a silly girl.”

Michael finally looked over at Cordelia. She bit down on her lip fiercely, her brow so wound up that a series of short lines began to wrinkle across her skin. Her mouth trembled as the glossiness in her eyes began to turn into tears, the embarrassment welling up in her gaze. Everything she wished to say came out in an exhale instead of words. Cordelia held herself back, biting down on her bottom lip everytime she made the slightest movement to speak.

The anger boiling beneath Michael’s skin was one he hadn’t felt in a long time. But, suddenly, all he could see was Cordelia being berated, and the effort in which she held her tongue. He wished to grab a hold of her, to tell her to speak and be the stubborn woman he had come to know over the past few weeks.

Instead, Michael faced the Countess, who so foolishly prepared to speak again.

“Everything turned out for the better because of -”

Michael slammed his palms against the table as he shot to his feet, the sudden momentum causing his chair to shuffle backwards and clatter to the floor. “If the Earl

was foolish enough not to realize the diamond presented to him those years ago,” Michael snapped, his voice deep and gravely, “That is a consequence he must live with for the rest of his dreadful life.”

“And as for you, Countess,” Michael continued, straightening himself up as he spoke to the shocked woman, “Perhaps you have allowed your oncoming age affect your refined judgement, but any right-minded and clear headed educated person in all of London can take one look at my wife, and see her unstained quality. Only a stubborn fool can insist otherwise.”

The table around him remained stuck in a surprised silence. He stood there quietly for a moment before moving his hands behind his back, and bowing towards the Earl.

“I do believe it is best for my wife and I to retire for the evening,” Michael said. “Cordelia?” He reached a hand out for her.

Hesitantly, Cordelia took his hand and stood from the table, her lips pressed together so hard they lost their naturally red hue. She gave her Aunt and Uncle a short bow before leaving the dining room, joined quickly by Irene. Duncan slowly rose from the table, but did not exit the room. Michael felt his still gaze on the back of his head.

After taking a quick glance over his shoulder, Michael rounded the table, drawing closer to the shocked Countess and Earl.

“Perhaps you might consider us to be bound in a familial way,” Michael began, “But that will hardly change my cadence towards you. Heed my warning now, as this will be the one and only time I am patient enough to so easily hand it over.”

The Countess’s eyes widened in surprise. “Y-Your Grace, we -”

“Insult my wife again,” Michael interjected, “And I will make sure London sees your

respectable reputation stripped from you both.” He bowed shortly. “Good evening. Thank you for the invitation.”

Michael spun around on his heel and strode towards the doors. He glanced to his right to see Duncan standing beside the table, his eyes holding onto him closely. Michael paused, bowing to the middle Celeston child. Duncan did the same, and Michael could’ve sworn he saw the slightest bit of a smile on the man’s face.

Feeling oddly pleased with himself, Michael left Pembroke behind, following the path left behind by his wife. She waited for him beside their carriage, whispering quickly to her sister before he had the chance to arrive and overhear.

“Your Grace,” Irene said with a short bow, twisting around Michael the moment he came up to them.

Cordelia gazed up at him.

“What?” Michael snapped, the intensity of her stare bringing a tightness to the center of his stomach. “Why do you watch me like that?”

“Like what?”

Michael hesitated. The words left him instantly. Instead of replying, he sighed and opened the door to the carriage, holding out his hand to help her inside. Cordelia watched him for a moment more before slipping inside, immediately shrouded by the darkness. Michael breathed in a final gulp of air before following, entirely lost by his own thoughts.

And soon, Pembroke was only a distant memory.

CHAPTER16

The carriage compartment was a rather small thing, but it grew even tighter the moment the door snapped shut, and the driver began to press forward towards Solshire. Cordelia could feel every movement in her chest, how it rose and fell greatly, how she felt as though she might’ve started gasping for air at any second. She was never one to feel as though the walls were caving in on her, but the childish fear came upon her in a quick second, like she had lived with it all her life.

Her eyes snapped over to Michael. He looked like the statues within the orangery, incredibly still and on alert. Michael focused his gaze on the space directly across from him, not once looking any other way. Cordelia opened her mouth multiple times, eager to speak but only finding silence instead. No matter how much she wished to thank him, to implore as to what he was feeling or why he decided to defend her in the first place, Cordelia could hardly bring herself to speak.

A trait that happened to be very unlike her.

Cordelia shifted in her seat to look out the window before scooting again, her hands finding the strand she had been pulling on before the dinner party. She yanked on it once and then again, pulling the work to bind the dress together apart without even realizing it.

“You are fidgeting,” Michael suddenly said.

Cordelia stared at the side of his face. “Does it bother you?”

“Would you stop if I told you it did?”

“Well,” Cordelia paused, thinking about what she should say, despite the true answer resting on the tip of her tongue. For a moment, she thought Aunt Patience lingered around her still, ready to clap down on her the moment she acted like a petulant or disobedient child. Cordelia smirked. Her Aunt wasn’t around at all. “I probably wouldn’t.”

Michael finally met her stare. “Back to your normal self, aren’t you?”

“I suppose,” she murmured.

He looked away again.

“Michael,” Cordelia began, her courage gathering, “I wanted to -”

“We shall arrive back in Solshire soon,” he blurted, cutting her off instead. “I have plenty of work to be done in the morning, and will need it to be an early night.”

Cordelia pressed her lips together. The reasoning behind his outburst at the dinner hung in the air between them. She didn’t realize how desperate she was to know why he had said such things until he refused to speak, till he cut her down before she ever

had the chance. Cordelia leaned against the carriage door, holding back the curtain to get a glimpse at London passing by. The rain had simmered to a light trickle, barely making a sound as it hit the carriage's rooftop.

An uneasy silence settled between them for the rest of the ride back to Solshire. Cordelia ruminated over the words her Aunt said, how easily it was for her to fall back into the mindset of Cordelia being the obviously lesser child. Insecurities and fears she left behind were suddenly rushing back to her, and now there was the added fright of her husband feeling the same way. Perhaps he defended her out of pity, not wanting to have to deal with a crying and sad wife all the way home.

Unanswered questions hovered in the air around them as the carriage came to a stop in front of Solshire. Hunters met the carriage as it paused at the front steps. He opened the doors, and Michael shot out from the compartment. Cordelia quickly climbed out next, surprised not to see him waiting with his hand outstretched like he normally did.

Michael, in the distance, stormed up the stairs that led into the estate's front doors, his hands clenching and unclenching at his sides with every step he took. Within a moment, he was gone behind the doors.

"Your Grace," Hunters greeted her with a long bow. "How was your dinner party? You have returned earlier than expected."

Cordelia sighed. "Rather dreadful, Hunters. Thank you for asking." She began to walk up the steps, quickly hearing the sound of the butler following close beside her.

"I suppose that is why the Duke ran off so fast?" Hunters asked.

Cordelia shook her head. "I hardly know."

“But -”

Pausing at the top of the steps, Cordelia pulled her cloak off, following next with her gloves. She barely cared for decorum, to wait to place them somewhere, to wait till she was inside. Cordelia lacked the patience, and the heart to do so. Her gaze fell on the butler, surprised to see the slightest bit of concern pass his normally expressionless eyes.

“Perhaps the Duke faced some harsh realities about his wife,” Cordelia snapped, “And has decided to leave at once than to stay alongside me for another second.”

“I cannot believe that to be true, your Grace.”

“Why not?” She shrugged. “He has left before, hasn’t he?”

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Hunters hesitated. “That was a different time, your Grace. Do you not think you owe him the patience of talking rather than assuming the worst?”

“Is it possible to not have any patience left?”

Hunters frowned. “For someone as young as you, hardly not!”

“The Duke has made his intentions clear,” Cordelia said, though the words drove a driving pain through her chest. “He did the honorable thing and defended his wife when the time came. Though you and I both know, Hunters, that he could hardly deny the words spoken by my Aunt.” Cordelia turned away, shaking her head. “He could not even deny them to my face.”

“What exactly happened, your Grace?”

Cordelia pinched the bridge of her nose to silence the rush of emotion that threatened to cascade as tears down her cheeks. “My Aunt discussed my childhood,” she explained. “Called me disobedient and spoiled. Though they were mounting flaws, they could be squashed by the right husband, she claimed. After accusing me of doing something to turn my previous betrothal away, my Aunt went on to congratulate and thank the Duke on saving the Celeston family from complete ruin. It was then that Michael ceased to allow the conversation to continue, and announced our departure.”

If Hunters was surprised by the events that unfolded at Pembroke, he worked well not to show it. Rather, the butler simply crossed his arms behind his back, listening to the recountment with a single, burly eyebrow raised.

“Perhaps, your Grace, you might be inclined to offer the Duke the benefit of the doubt.”

Cordelia gawked. “Whatever for? He left, Hunters. If he so willfully disagreed with the things my Aunt said, why leave in the first place?”

“Have you ever asked him, your Grace?”

She frowned. “Asked him what?”

“Why he left on your wedding night?”

“Well, no,” she mumbled. “Not entirely.”

Hunters took a few steps closer to her. “If you might allow me to be bold, your Grace,” he said, “You might regret it if you chose not to go to him this very evening.”

“Hunters, I -”

“If not at least to offer your graciousness in his change of heart,” Hunters continued. “To repay him for defending you, your Grace.” He pressed on further still, taking a few steps to lower his voice as servants moved about in the foyer. “How might you ever expect to know the truth of the Duke’s feelings if you are not brave enough to ask, your Grace?”

Cordelia watched the butler as he raised his shoulders. Before she could argue, offer up another reason as to why she couldn’t go to him, the butler turned around, and returned to the rest of the staff. Quickly, she was alone with her thoughts, and every single one of them told her which way to go. Breathing in a deep breath, Cordelia began to slowly make her way through the estate, approaching the wing she had never gone to: Michael’s chambers.

Even though she wanted to prove the butler to be wrong in all senses of the term, Cordelia could hardly find anything to strengthen her argument. After everything, Michael deserved her thanks. She lost her voice during that dinner, when her Aunt pushed to a height she did not expect. The moment Colin, the Earl, had been mentioned, Cordelia lost every bit of the fight she once had. The words reminded her of the ones her father said, how he held her in such disdain after the failed engagement, and quickly thrust her into another one. It was too familiar, and it drove her back effortlessly.

Cordelia was soon in the hall outside of Michael's chambers. She hesitated at the door, at first believing it to be empty, till she heard movement on the other side. Rapping her knuckles against the wood, she wrapped a hand around the knob, and slowly pushed it open.

Michael had his back facing the door when she first entered. He seemed to have thought her to be a servant at first, absentmindedly waving a hand over his shoulder as he read over some papers across his writing desk. Cordelia's mouth opened and closed like a fish, her eyes eagerly taking in his room without managing to utter a single word.

"What is it?" Michael seethed as he whipped around. "Oh."

Cordelia's eyes went wide.

Without his coats, Michael's simple shirt breathed with every movement. The first few buttons were popped open, revealing a few patches of wispy hair and brilliantly pale white scars. The black shirt was puffy and voluminous without the coat to keep it down, the sleeves rolled up to his elbows. Cordelia couldn't tear her eyes away. There were scars across every inch of his deeply tanned skin and dark strands of hair. To see more of him felt like a blessing, something granted to her while it had turned many people away before.

Cordelia swallowed. Why did I come here in the first place?

“Is something the matter?”

She shook her head. “Quite the opposite, really.”

“Alright,” he murmured. Michael shifted between his feet, eyes snapping around.

Nerves, Cordelia quickly realized. To see her husband in such a state was hard to swallow. She didn’t know he was capable of showing fear or nerves whatsoever. Cordelia lowered her head, realized she was staring far too much.

“You ran away so fast,” she finally said, “That I never had the chance to thank you.”

“Thank me?”

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Cordelia stepped further into the room. “For standing up for me against my Aunt. I’m sure it was hardly the way you planned on spending the evening.”

Michael nodded curtly. “You bare my name, and I haven’t before let a stranger put my name down.”

“Oh,” she murmured. Perhaps he had only intervened out of duty. Aunt Patience pressed too far for what was politely allowed, and Michael felt inclined to step forward. Holding back her disappointment, Cordelia was near ready to walk out of the room without another word, but she stopped herself.

The moment they had shared in the orangery came flooding back to her. A prickling sensation rippled across her lips as she remembered their passionate kiss and the desperation behind it. She never realized how much she craved his hands around her till they were taken away, till she believed she would never feel them again. The true things she wished to say bounced around on her tongue, tempting dangerously to be set free in the quiet room.

I do not regret a single thing from our time in the orangery, was the thought it all came back to. And, of course: I pray you do not regret it, too.

The most sensible thing to do would have been to walk away. Cordelia did what was necessary by expressing her gratitude. A simpler woman would have left it at that, and left him alone for the rest of the evening. A more respectable woman would silence her thoughts right then and there, not daring to step over an unseen line and press where she shouldn’t press. But, as Cordelia remained in his bedroom, she was stuck to the floor, overcome with the overwhelming sensation to be as close to him as

she possibly could.

“Do we have another event already planned?” Cordelia suddenly asked.

Michael avoided holding her gaze. “I have sent word of our attendance to a garden party happening later this week in London,” he explained. “I believe your sister will be attending.”

“How wonderful,” Cordelia whispered breathlessly.

He nodded firmly, clamping his mouth shut and not saying another word.

Cordelia’s gaze ran around his room. There were countless books upon even more shelves. An untidy desk that carried more books than one man could possibly read in a single lifetime. His bed, put together rather nicely, had dark sheets over it. Dark curtains that she had once replaced were pulled tightly over the windows, though she was sure that the bedroom had a beautiful view of the nearby lake.

Michael’s entire life, all of his thoughts, secrets, and memories, were kept in that bedroom. Cordelia ached to peel him back and see what truly laid within, to know why he was the man he was, to understand the being she found herself to be completely enamoured with. Cordelia breathed deeply, desperate to contain her racing thoughts. The only way forward was to be true to herself. If Hunters’s insistence on the matter showed her anything, it was the impertinent need for Cordelia to express the things she wished to know.

No more questions with empty answers.

“Michael,” she said, stepping closer to where he stood in the middle of the room, “I do not wish to plague you more than I already have, but...I need to know why you left on our wedding night.”

His eyes widened slightly.

Before he could respond, Cordelia carried on. “All this time, I went on believing it was something I had done,” she explained. “Like my previous engagement, I must have done something to have pushed you away, despite only knowing each other for hours.”

Michael’s head tilted, his lips parting to speak, but not a word managing to come out.

“You claim to have defended me in order to protect your own name, but I cannot seem to believe that,” Cordelia continued. “If not for my unladylike behavior, my stubbornness, by strong will, then why did you leave? If you truly do believe my Aunt to have been wrong in the things she said, then why did you leave?”

In front of her, Michael’s hands twitched and trembled. He inched forward before jolting backwards, barely staying in one place for longer than a few seconds. Michael looked away, his jaw tense and obviously clenched.

Cordelia stood in the silence, watching his body jerk around but hearing not a single word. The hope she felt for a companionship slowly trickled out the door. What on earth was she thinking? Since when had Michael given her the time of day before? If he could have told her why he left in the first place, he would’ve done it weeks ago. Perhaps he would offer up a blatant lie, or tell her the truth that she dreaded to hear.

Pressing her lips together, Cordelia took a few steps away from him. It was growing clear that he had no intentions of truly speaking to her. Cordelia breathed sharply, ignoring the pain that began to fester in the center of her chest, over the space where her heart was frantically beating.

Without bothering for politeness or decorum, Cordelia turned around, and began to head for the door. The last thing she needed to do was to embarrass herself further.

Besides, at least she could track down Hunters and gloat about how quickly she proved him wrong, though the idea of doing such a thing seemed rather pathetic itself. Cordelia was reaching for the door when Michael jerked forward and snatched onto her wrist.

Frozen in place, Cordelia could hardly gather the strength to look over her shoulder at him. His shadow crossed over her as she stood there, his fragrant cologne wafting over her the closer he came. Michael's shallow breathing mixed in with her own, the ball of tension growing wider and wider and swallowing them both up in the process.

Michael pulled at her hand ever so slightly. "I was afraid."

"Afraid?" Cordelia repeated. "What on earth was there to be afraid of?"

"Could you -" he paused and all she heard was his slow, trembling breathing for a moment. "Could you turn around?"

Gulping down her nerves, Cordelia turned to face him. The grooves of the scars along his palm rubbed against her bare hand, but it was, surprisingly, not uncomfortable. She raised her head to see him looking down at her, his lips pressed together in a hard line.

"I came to the conclusion you were on the verge of forcibly ending your own life," Michael said, speaking so quietly that she could hardly hear him. "When you were standing in the window. I saw as I rode towards Solshire, and -" Michael stopped himself, turning his head away sharply. "And I was frightened by it."

"I-I don't understand." Cordelia shook her head, her eyes falling to stare down at their intertwined hands. "Why would I do such a thing? Take my life in such a dreadful way?"

Michael sighed. “Do you think I was unaware of the fact that you had been pulled into a marriage you did not want?”

Cordelia's eyes widened. "I -"

"I told you before, Cordelia, why I rushed into a marriage with a Lady I had never courted," Michael explained. "Does that rid me of my conscience? Of the awareness of the life I took from you? The future you might have been dreaming of? Am I wrong to have believed that to be reason enough to take such drastic measures with someone's own life?"

The shock of his reason still rattled her. Cordelia would have never guessed it to have been a reason. Out of all the things she believed, that harshly real explanation was too grandiose to have been false. No one of their right mind would make up such a thing, and Cordelia scorned herself for believing him to have been a liar, to have had a terrible truth that would've thrust her head first into an unbelievable despair.

Cordelia fought the urge to touch his face.

"The fault of my absence these past few years lies with me and me alone," Michael added. "Do not carry that burden on your shoulders for any longer. I hope you might forgive me for making you hold it in the first place."

Cordelia's heart softened even further, if that was at all possible. The elation she felt from their kiss in the orangery came surging back to her chest. Suddenly, she wanted to stand on the tips of her toes to get closer to him, to angle her face up and invite him down for another kiss. Somehow, the hardened beast of a Duke managed to wrap his way around her heart, and only further intertwined himself with her rather than drive them deeper apart.

“Do you still believe that to be true?” Cordelia whispered.

“What?”

“That I might turn to those drastic measures. Do you still fear it?”

Michael searched her eyes, as if he searched for the answer right then and there. Finally, after a long pause, the tension crept out from his jaw, the corner of his lip twitching upwards. “No,” he murmured. “I do not believe I do.”

Cordelia let a small smile cross her face. “Then I am happy.”

Taking in a deep breath, Cordelia let herself pull her hand out of his own. Giving him a short bow, she turned around, and slipped out of his chambers, gently closing the door behind her. She raised her hand, dragging her fingers across her lips. Perhaps the Duke was an entirely different man after all, not at all what the Ton had originally made him out to be. Or, on the other hand, he was the beast they knew him as, and it was only Cordelia’s arrival that helped him to ease the tension that clouded his heart.

Either way, Cordelia was quickly aware of two things. The first was that there was something brewing within her in regards to Michael. The man she once viewed as a hindrance, a figure standing in the way of all the work she had done on the estate, was nowhere near that any longer. Instead, he was Michael, her husband. Michael, the man who lived down the hall. Michael, the once beastly Duke who now so readily held her heart.

Secondly: she wished he could have kissed her again.

CHAPTER17

“We have looked at all the dresses you own, your Grace.” Mrs. Bellflower

exasperatedly opened one of the windows, letting in the cool spring breeze till it filled the hot room.

Across Cordelia's bed was each one of her gowns, all laid out and cast aside. For the last hour or two, the housekeeper pulled the dress forward, showing it to Cordelia till she soundly turned them away. The dresses were too tight, too bright, too flowery or too dark. Not one of them resounded with Cordelia in the way she wanted them too. Even though plenty of them would do perfectly for the garden party they would attend later in the day, Cordelia did not want something that would simply "do."

"Perhaps we should look through them again," Cordelia said as she looked over the series of dresses. "Now that they are all out, it won't be half as tedious, won't it?"

Mrs. Bellflower sighed as she pulled away from the window. "If you don't mind me saying, your Grace, you seem to be quite unusually frantic this morning. Are you nervous for the party?"

"Oh, heavens no," Cordelia replied as she waved her hand in the air, using the other to push through the dresses. "There's hardly anything to worry about when it comes to the party. Most of the work in tending to the Ton's rumors has been settled. I barely remember it in the first place."

"That is very good, your Grace," Mrs. Bellflower said. "Though I suppose it doesn't quite halt my questioning."

Cordelia pressed her lips together, keeping her face facing the nosy housekeeper. The night before revealed countless truths that Cordelia found herself incapable of admitting. While she was more than pleased that Michael admitted to her doing nothing wrong that sent him away from the estate on their wedding night, Cordelia was now plagued with the relentless butterflies that filled her stomach at the very mention of his name. Michael looked different in her eyes, suddenly, and the idea of

attending a romantic garden party alongside him gave her a thrill she wasn't expecting.

Suddenly there was the added stress of picking a dress Michael would admire. There was the matter of her hair, and how many pins she should fill it with. She wondered if he would kiss her again, if he would hold her hand, if their eyes would hold each other in a different way than they did before.

Cordelia shook her head. Have I managed to go mad overnight?

To impress a Duke was something Cordelia never prepared herself for. In fact, it had never been a matter of importance in the past. But now, as Mrs. Bellflower tiredly returned to looking through the piles of dresses, Cordelia fought the idea of Michael liking none of them, and her efforts to see him pleased alongside her would fade into nothing. Perhaps he would laugh at her, claim that she managed to take his words too far, that he still planned on leaving once the chance arrived.

Cordelia shook her head another time, desperate to be rid of the thoughts that plagued her so easily. The embarrassment threatened to grab a hold of her tongue, but Cordelia was desperate to share her racing mind with someone, and the only one available to do so with was the housekeeper herself.

"Mrs. Bellflower," Cordelia began in a quiet voice, "When one realizes theydowish to be bound to their husband in more ways than a simple marriage license, which dress would they wear?"

The housekeeper blinked a few times as she thought the words over, her aged eyes glancing down at the dresses before snapping back up to Cordelia. "Truly, your Grace?" she breathed. "Do you mean to say that the Duke will be staying in Solshire?"

“I cannot promise a single thing,” Cordelia blurted. “I only speak of the trials and tribulations within my own heart.”

Mrs. Bellflower rounded the bed to stand beside Cordelia, taking her hands in the same way a loving mother might hold their child’s hands. “Your Grace,” the housekeeper began excitedly, “If that is the true extent of your feelings, I pray you may gather the courage to voice them to the Duke in the way you voice them to me now.”

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“Well,” Cordelia mumbled sheepishly, “I couldn’t possibly -”

“Might I tell you of my late husband, your Grace?”

Cordelia glanced at the housekeeper curiously. “I-I suppose you may, Mrs. Bellflower.”

“Many years ago, when you were still bound to your mother’s bosom, Mr. Bellflower and I had a delightful cottage on the outskirts of London.” A wistful and pleased look took over the older woman’s face as she told her tale. “It wasn’t much at all, but it was ours. I gardened all year long while he made a living as a carpenter. And, despite everything that managed to come our way, we were happy.”

Cordelia leaned against one of the bedposts, unable to take her eyes away from Mrs. Bellflower, even when her face began to grow somber.

“My husband’s final days felt nothing at all like a person’s final days,” she continued. “Everything was as it should’ve been, and not a thing happened to have been out of place. And yet, when the moment came, and his life was returned to God, I could hardly remember the last time I told him I loved him.”

“Oh, Mrs. Bellflower,” Cordelia cooed as the housekeeper began to cry. “What a dreadful and sorrowful thing.”

“It is not his death that haunts me, your Grace, but rather the inability to know if he knew I loved him when the time came for us to part ways,” Mrs. Bellflower murmured. “That is what I fear for you. While it is not in the extreme of my late

husband, it is still a dreadful problem all the same.”

“I cannot imagine saying such a thing without knowing the Duke feels the same.”

“How would you ever know if you don’t try?”

Cordelia hesitated. “H-How do I know it is the right way forward? I am terribly embarrassed, Mrs. Bellflower, for my childish need to impress him by what dress I wear. And when I realize it was all for not - what happens then? When he still leaves at the end of the day?”

Mrs. Bellflower sighed, returning to running her hands across the series of dresses. “I cannot tell you the answer, your Grace, for it lies within you, and only you. Love is about taking a leap of faith into the unknown. You will never know until you try.”

Cordelia turned to look over the dresses. Perhaps she had been mistaken about her own feelings, and what she felt now, was merely a kindness she believed Michael deserved. Cordelia strode forward, stepping into the closet where she kept all of her heart supplies. Canvases she worked on previously but didn’t have the determination to finish were stored alongside the paints and brushes. The projects she was working on remained out within the room, standing upright on easels and waiting to be finished.

Cordelia dug through the closet till she procured a recently finished painting. Stepping back into the light, Cordelia placed it open an easel, and stepped backwards to take it all in.

“Your Grace,” Mrs. Bellflower breathed from behind her, “That’s -”

“Michael.”

The painting was a stunning replication of the Duke, entirely done from memory. Cordelia avoided sleep for far too long the previous night in order to finish it. Now that the paint had all dried, the painting had a new sort of look to it, one that was entirely more permanent. The portrait captured Michael's intensive stare, his jutting brow, his shrouded eyes. A delicate shadow rested across his jawline, the classic black coat it wore pulled up around his neck. Cordelia reached, the tips of her fingers tracing along the grooves of his face.

Even then, with only a painting of him in front of her, Cordelia felt short of breath at the sight of him. She began to imagine a life where Michael remained by her side, and they continued their days out in Solshire together. Perhaps he might help her in the gardens or lounge while she painted in the orangery. They would attend London's social season side by side, or chose to ignore it all together. The future she imagined teased her forward, as if the portrait had been Michael himself.

Cordelia pulled her gaze away. Perhaps the feelings she had were not a fluke after all. After everything, Cordelia finally realized the truth she wished to bury deep within the confines of her heart. She had undeniable and unavoidable feelings for Michael, and the thought of him turning away from her once more drove a fear into her chest unlike never before. As long as she did not give him the impression of doing something reckless, he wouldn't feel inclined to leave. If she showed him how much she wished for his presence, perhaps Michael could admit his own feelings.

"Mrs. Bellflower," Cordelia began, slowly looking towards the housekeeper, "I -" She paused when she realized the woman had tears streaming relentlessly down her cheeks. Cordelia twisted to face her, reaching out to swipe her finger across the housekeeper's face. "Whatever is the matter, Mrs. Bellflower?"

"Haven't you ever seen a work of art so beautiful that it manages to bring you to tears?"

“Why, yes,” Cordelia replied. “Though I can hardly believe that you cry over one of my paintings.”

Mrs. Bellflower’s shoulders raised. “How could I possibly not? The likeness is practically fiction. I hadn’t even realized the Duke had been posing for you, your Grace.”

A blush burnt across Cordelia’s cheeks. “He hasn’t the foggiest idea I have done this painting, Mrs. Bellflower.”

“That’s impossible!” The housekeeper shook her head. “You couldn’t have completed this from memory alone, could you?”

Cordelia shrugged, fiddling with her hair sheepishly. “I hardly believed it myself,” she murmured. “I usually have some sort of focus when I paint, but this portrait came rather naturally.” She paused, her brow furrowing. “Is that odd, Mrs. Bellflower?”

“I would have to say so, your Grace,” she said. “Though I mean it in the most complimentary way possible. This is an extraordinary gift, your Grace! I do believe you managed to capture the Duke in a way we haven’t seen in quite a long time.”

“Really?” Cordelia’s curiosity caused her to lean towards the housekeeper. “And in what way would that be?”

Mrs. Bellflower smiled widely. “Content, your Grace.”

Cordelia faced the portrait once more. She couldn’t see a smile on Michael’s face, no matter which way she leaned or stood. Though, the housekeeper would know him better than she, so Cordelia decided against arguing.

“Have you considered giving the portrait to the Duke?”

Cordelia’s brow shot up. “I haven’t, actually. Do you take it to be a good present, Mrs. Bellflower?”

“I do not see why not,” she replied. “It is too well done to be ridiculed or tossed away, your Grace. I believe the Duke would appreciate it more than you may realize.”

Cordelia decided she would consider it, though she couldn’t imagine truly handing the portrait over. Perhaps she liked it too much, or was too embarrassed to think about sharing it with Michael after all. Turning back towards the dresses, Cordelia swallowed down her nerves. The only way forward, to the future she so desperately wanted to grab a hold of, was through courage. Cordelia needed to fill herself with self-confidence, to believe that whatever she wore or however she presented herself would end with Michael pleased to be by her side.

“What of this yellow one?” Cordelia pulled a light dress from the pile, holding it up in front of her for the housekeeper to see. “Spring enough for the garden, but flattering at the same time, no?”

Mrs. Bellflower’s smile grew till she was beaming from ear to ear. “It is perfect, your Grace. You must get ready at once!”

Rushing with a new sense of urgency, Cordelia changed into the yellow gown and sat to have her hair done. Mrs. Bellflower worked quickly behind her, twisting and pinning Cordelia’s curls till there wasn’t a single strand covering her face. As she

looked at herself in the mirror, Cordelia felt her security wither. There were plenty more beautiful things to see in a garden than herself. And Michael arranged their attendance in order to finally squash the rumors against them once and for all.

Would he even pay her any mind, or would he be too engrossed with convincing the Ton of their companionship rather than actually having a companionship?

Cordelia shoved the thoughts away. They were hardly relevant now that she was dressed and ready to go. She rose from her seat to stand in front of the housekeeper, her arms outstretched to either side of her.

“Well?” she asked. “How do I look?”

“Beyond the descriptions of words,” Mrs. Bellflower cooed. “Absolutely beautiful, your Grace.”

Cordelia felt herself smile broadly. “Well, now, then, I -”

Knock! Knock!

The rush of quick, short knocks was followed by the door opening up a crack.

“Your Grace?” Hunters whispered into the room.

Cordelia crossed the room to pull the door open fully. “What on earth is the matter, Hunters?”

“Have you seen the time, your Grace?” he asked before raising his pocket watch, the hands slowly ticking. “I am afraid you are running the risk of arriving late, your Grace!”

“Oh, devils!”

Cordelia whipped around for her gloves before frantically glancing around for her fan but coming up empty handed.

“What surprising language, your Grace,” Hunters teased, another rare smile slipping across his face.

“Your Grace!” Mrs. Bellflower, like an angel, swooped in front of Cordelia with the fan in hand, holding it out for her. “Hurry, now!”

Excitement mixed with an unpleasant surge of nervousness swirled in Cordelia’s stomach. She could hardly remember the last time she felt that way. Anticipation for one thing, but dreadfully afraid about another. The idea of seeing Michael so soon after their tumultuous day beforehand was entirely thrilling. Cordelia’s slew of newly realized feelings rushed her out the door, carrying her down the hall as she ran towards Michael.

At the same time, questions blared across Cordelia’s mind. How will her life look in the coming weeks? What would life be like beside Michael if he remained in Solshire? Could Cordelia be faced with a happiness she never thought she had the chance of receiving?

Cordelia grew so overwhelmed with emotion that she could hardly see where she was going. She merely flew ahead, eagerly and restlessly awaiting the man she had grown to dislike as much as she was intrigued.

Whipping around a corner, Cordelia grew intensely lightheaded, the world around her growing unbearable foggy for a split second. When she regained herself, about to walk the rest of the way, Cordelia slammed against a hard and warm surface, a resounding grunt vibrating across her face.

Oh, devils.

“Whorunsindoors?” Michael snapped, his voice deep and tense.

Cordelia staggered as she took in her surroundings, suddenly aware of the fact that she gripped onto Michael’s coat rather tightly. His hands hovered over her waist, his palm accidentally brushing against her side every once and a while. Each time he managed to touch her, Cordelia’s heart beated faster and faster.

She pulled her gaze up towards him. An unmistakable red hue began to crawl across Michael’s face. It snuck up around his collar before following the grooves and tendons in his neck, and swallowing his entire face whole. The deeply unforgiving color began to spread to his forehead when Cordelia realized what was happening.

Cordelia took a step backwards, releasing her hold on him though she wasn’t entirely sure if she wanted to. “It’s rather fun.”

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“What is?” Michael blinked rapidly as he gained control of his blushing.

“Running indoors!”

Michael finally met her gaze again, his mouth twitching between a smirk and a frown. “You’re dreadfully late,” he suddenly said.

“Hunters told me,” she replied.

“I happened to tell him quite long ago, you know. It’s why I began to come up myself. I thought you managed to wrap him up in whatever was already making you late.”

Cordelia raised a brow. “What could I possibly be doing that manages to involve Hunters?”

“Perhaps you wished to make him the focus in one of your upcoming paintings.”

She gawked, her mouth opening and closing a few times before she realized he was only fooling around. “My, my,” she drawled, “I never realized the beastly Duke happened to be a tease.”

Michael smirked. “What if I was serious? How would poor Hunters feel knowing you wouldn’t paint him?”

“I’d gladly paint Hunters, thank you very much,” Cordelia snapped, raising her nose obnoxiously towards him.

Michael let out a loud laugh, one that filled the entire hallway.

The last time he had laughed was at the ball and they danced together. Cordelia thought of that moment often, she realized, once he laughed a second time and she already knew the sound by heart. For a second, Cordelia assumed she heard it in her own head, as if she wanted to imagine him laughing at their bantering. She gazed up at him with a growing smile as the emotion remained on his face, the laughter still evident around his eyes.

It was a beautiful sight, one that Cordelia was nowhere near intending to be rid of.

Michael cleared his throat. "I believe we will be quite late at this point."

"Perhaps that would be better."

"And how might you suppose that?"

Cordelia shrugged as she began to continue down the hallway, Michael respectfully beside her. She willed herself to ignore the feeling of her arms brushing against each other. "It will give the Ton something else to talk about," she replied. "The couple that was so lost in love they forgot to check the time. It is practically Shakespearean."

Michael chuckled. "Then," he paused, his breath stammering, "Perhaps we should take our time to convince them further."

As Cordelia walked alongside him the rest of the way through the estate, neither one of them spoke. There was a lulling calm between them, all the way a bouncing energy grew larger and grander with every step they took. Cordelia tried to focus on her footsteps, but could only think of Michael's hand continuously brushing against her own, the jutting scars pulling shudders out of her back. And there was the neverending need to have him plant another kiss on her lips, the phantom feeling of

the first one still lingering in the back of her mind.

Cordelia, overcome with emotion, followed Michael out the front doors and to the awaiting carriage. He helped her inside before getting in himself, and Cordelia caught a glimpse of the cloudless sky behind his head. When the carriage door snapped shut, she pinned the curtains to the sides, her eyes falling upon Mrs. Bellflower waving at the bottom of the steps. The words the housekeeper spoke came flooding back to her, filling her with an even deeper emotion that she could still hardly understand.

Love is about taking a leap of faith into the unknown.

You will never know until you try.

CHAPTER 18

For the first time, Cordelia wore a smile all the way from Solshire into London. By the time they arrived in the city, her face ached from the wideness of her lips. She reached for her face, touching her cheeks to make sure the smile was really there. It hardly felt real. But there was Michael, sitting across from her, looking pleasantly content himself. There was an unusual ease in his shoulders, a relaxed aura from the way he rested his hands in his lap, how he watched the world go by from the window.

Cordelia watched and couldn't help but feel as though it had to do with her presence.

As they drew closer to the recently opened gardens within London, Cordelia felt momentarily stunted. She didn't know a thing about where they were headed or who would be at the event, other than her sister. They were very public things, and garnered the attention of most every member of polite society. If any rumors still circulated the Ton regarded Cordelia's marriage to Michael, they would be effectively silenced in that single afternoon. Her brow furrowed at the idea of her Aunt and Uncle attending, after the tumultuous dinner party at Pembroke.

“Do you know who will be at the gardens?” Cordelia suddenly asked.

Michael pulled his gaze from the window as if he were stuck in a trance. When his eyes landed on her, the ease did not fade or slip away. “I told you about Irene, didn’t I?”

“You did.” She tilted her head curiously. “Anyone else?”

Michael smirked. “You look like a conniving creature in search of information.”

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“Is it improper of me to be curious about the event we are attending? Or, better yet,” she leaned forward slightly, “An event I hardly know a thing about, thanks to myhusbands’sole planning?” The title of husband lingered in the back of Cordelia’s mind after she set it, the sound of it more right than it ever had been before.

“I suppose I can tell you,” he mocked as his smirk grew wider. “In all seriousness, I do not believe it is a crowd either one of us are familiar with. Your sister, Irene, will surely be in attendance. Along with a good friend of mine, Rhys Glowton, the Duke of Nightrow.”

Cordelia’s eyes widened. “The Duke of Nightrow?”

“Oh, have you heard of him?”

“Haven’t you?” She shook her head. “He is dreadfully reclusive. Even more so than you ever were.” Cordelia paused, one brow raising. “That is the connection, isn’t it? Friends through hermitage?”

“Very amusing,” Michael muttered as he looked away, though there was a smile perking up at his lip.

Cordelia watched him closely. “I hadn’t realized you...well, that you...you had...”

“If you mean to say you never thought I was capable of having friendships,” Michael finished for her, his face expressionless, “I understand.”

“I-I’m sorry, Michael.”

“Do not bother with such things,” he replied with a shrug. “Some days, I hardly believe it myself.”

“That you and the Duke are friends?”

He nodded slowly. “I am not a fool. I know the life I have lived is one of reclusivity. I can see everything that the Ton sees, Cordelia.”

She sat in silence for a moment, merely remembering the sound of her name against his lips. “Well, you couldn’t have been all that recluse, could you?”

“How so?”

“You managed to find the Duke,” she replied. “And he managed to find you all the same.” Cordelia smiled. “What do you two like to do together?”

Michael only stared. He opened his mouth to speak but simply let his jaw hang open, watching her with an intense closeness. The sudden quiet carried on until he leaned backwards, as if he needed to put more space between them. Michael cleared his throat. “Boxing,” he finally said. “We spar together at a club in London. It is private, of course, not like the gymnasiums you expect to see athletes at.”

“How good are you?”

Michael laughed. “That would be a foolish question to ask, wouldn’t it?”

“I don’t think so,” she replied with a shrug. “It is simple enough.”

“Well, I would not be inclined to call myself bad at the sport, now would I?”

Cordelia wasn’t entirely sure where the blush came from, but could hardly put a stop

to it. Quickly, her face was engulfed in heat. Despite the red hue taking over her, she didn't dare pull her gaze away from Michael. "I suppose you might be right after all," she replied in a quiet voice. "Is the Duke good, then?"

"Rhys is a capable partner to box alongside," Michael said.

Cordelia laughed. "That was hardly an answer at all!"

"My point made again."

The silence that came next was painfully comfortable. Cordelia wanted to bask in it, to fall asleep in it, to wake up with it. The feeling was one she wasn't used to. Of course Cordelia grew up incredibly close to her older siblings, but they were never as bound as that. Suddenly she found herself sitting across from Michael once more, hoping that he would decide to remain at Solshire for as long as he wanted. She felt like a child as she wished for it, but couldn't possibly stop herself.

The carriage ride went on smoothly till it rolled to a stop within London's bustling city. There were countless other carriages that couples and families emerged from, all eager to spend some time in a newly furnished and groomed garden. The weather was beyond perfect for such an excursion, where one's fan was hardly ever deemed necessary. Michael left the carriage first before extending a helping hand, and pulling Cordelia out next. She stepped out into the spring afternoon, and took in a deep breath.

A tall arched walkway was in front of her, lined with cobblestone. The path led into the twisting and winding gardens, countless different blossoming flowers curving around the corners. Members of the Ton already walked through, all eagerly casting looks in their direction. Cordelia had one arm twisted around Michael's, and instinctively tightened, not entirely aware she had even done it at first.

“Are you alright?” Michael asked as he steered them towards the gardens.

She nodded. “I am very well, Michael.”

As the arch passed overhead, Michael kept his gaze focused on her. A smile tugged at the corner of his mouth.

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The gardens were full of colors and butterflies. The pollinators swept through the blossoms effortlessly, even with the countless number of people surrounding them. Immediately, Cordelia wished she had brought a canvas, desperate to have the image before her permanently etched onto a blank page.

A familiar face came around a corner of bushes, a pale blue shawl wrapped around her shoulders. Irene's rosy cheeks had a few strands of her hair resting across them, the rest of her hair pulled into a neat braid behind her head. She was as effortlessly beautiful as she always was. Irene stretched out her hands towards Cordelia, immediately grasping onto her.

"What a beautiful dress, sister!" Irene looked her up and down, reaching to run her hand down the wispy yellow skirts. "I was so pleased to hear you both would be attending today. Isn't it a perfect day for a walk in the garden?" She was already pulling Cordelia away from her husband. "Won't you take a stroll with me, Cordelia?"

"Well, I -"

Michael interjected and slipped his arm away. "Go along, my love," he said, making sure to raise his voice as he said the last two words. "Enjoy your time with your sister."

Cordelia's gaze was glued to him for far too long. Of course he said it with the intention of steering the Ton towards his intended direction, but she was torn in half by what to truly believe. Perhaps it was her clueless side, the one who was still so childish, that wanted to think he meant every word. Cordelia shook her head as she

pulled away, allowing her sister to lead her in the opposite direction of where Michael stood.

“Good Lord, Irene,” Cordelia groaned as Irene practically dragged her forward. “Who rushes through a garden party? For heavens’ sake!” Cordelia yanked her arm backwards, forcing her elder sister to come to a sudden stop.

Irene twisted around, her face scrunched up slightly, in the way she would as a child when she grew annoyed. “Can’t you see how difficult it is to have a private discussion in the gardens?”

A few Lords and Ladys passed them by, paying them special attention as they kept along the path.

“If you wanted to speak privately,” Cordelia grumbled, “Why didn’t you just say so?”

Irene pressed her lips together. Her cheeks bellowed, like she held back everything she wished to say. She glanced around hurriedly, searching for a place where they could speak without the chance of anyone overhearing.

Cordelia could hardly stand the waiting. She was desperate to tell her sister of everything that changed at Solshire. Everything she might have once told her mother suddenly needed to be told to Irene instead. Cordelia reached for her, grasping at her sister’s hand.

“You wouldn’t believe what’s happened with Michael and I,” Cordelia blurted.

Irene eyed her. “What’s happened now?” She grew dreadfully serious. “Don’t tell me the beastly Duke has done something out of hand.”

“Of course not, Irene!” Cordelia bit back a laugh. “So quick to fight, aren’t you!”

“Well, it’s just the things the Ton whisper about him,” Irene admitted. “It is outlandishly difficult to hear it all and not worry about my sister. You understand that, don’t you, Cordelia?”

She sighed. “That is what I’m trying to tell you. Everything is changing,” Cordelia explained. “I believe the Duke might remain at Solshire.”

Irene’s brow shot up. “Truly?”

“We have had moments of,” Cordelia paused, searching for the right words but only coming up with an annoying burst of blushing, “Honesty, which has led me to think he wants to be my husband.”

“Thinking and believing are starkly different than truly knowing, Cordelia.” Irene tilted her head at her. “I fear you are trying to create something that does not exist.”

“Why? Because a future like that does not belong to someone like me?”

Irene huffed. “In no way did I utter such words!”

“Maybe not,” Cordelia snapped, “But it does not mean they were not your true intent.”

“Do not be childish, Cordelia,” Irene said, reaching forward to take her hands. “I am your sister. All my life, I have sought out ways to protect you, and that does not change with age. Married or not, I look after you. What I say now, is out of love, out of fear for your well being.” She touched the side of Cordelia’s face, her thumb coursing over the curve of her cheek. “But you are a woman of your own, now,” she murmured, her gaze wistful. “And your decisions are your own.”

Cordelia gazed into her sister’s face and wondered if she looked like their mother.

Even though her sister's insistence on being cautious drove a wedge of annoyance through Cordelia, she couldn't help but let her heart grow softened. To remember that there was always a Celeston to fall back on was more comforting than Cordelia thought it would be. She wished to revel in it for a moment longer, but there was a familiar figure in the distance that caught her eye.

Focusing on the group over Irene's shoulders, Cordelia felt the breath catch in the back of her throat.

The Earl of Vaun, Colin Evans, stood beside a blooming patch of dahlias. The afternoon sun lit up his sandy colored hair, eyes as blue as the sky peering back at her. Cordelia imagined he was merely a ghost, at first, before she remembered that he was still very much living. There was a small group of people around him, all of them engrossed with the beautiful foliage. Colin turned to whisper something in a short woman's ear before walking towards where Cordelia stood.

"Colin Evans cannot be here," Cordelia whispered, "Right?"

Irene exhaled sharply. "Dear sister," she breathed, squeezing her hands, "I desperately tried to tell you before when you -"

"When I spoke of Michael."

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“The man can mean no harm, Cordelia, but I may send him away if you -”

Cordelia pulled herself out of her sister’s grasp. There wasn’t any time for anything, as Colin was suddenly upon them. He held his hands behind his back as he bowed, keeping a respectable distance.

“It is a pleasure to see you both this afternoon,” Colin said as he rose.

With the distance gone between them, Cordelia saw the age in his face. A few years had passed since she last saw him, since they were betrothed, and he was almost a new man. Hair grew along his jawline, scruffy but kempt. He gazed upon her fondly, though there was a nervous sway in his step every few seconds.

“Might I speak to the Duchess in private?” Colin asked.

Irene straightened. “O-Of course.” She passed by, her hand gently passing over Cordelia’s before she disappeared around the corner.

“I hope you won’t start calling me your Grace,” Cordelia teased, an awkward smile tugging at her mouth.

Colin chuckled. “I was ready to.”

“I insist against it.”

He bowed his head. “As you wish, Cordelia.”

She gulped, glancing around at the flowers. Behind him, her eyes caught on the group of people waiting for him. A few of them looked familiar, but she couldn't quite tell at the distance. Her curiosity grew and grew.

"You are well, I hope," she blurted, uneasy with the silence.

"More than well." Colin turned to gesture towards the nearby people. "My wife and parents -"

Cordelia sighed louder than she meant to. "Excuse me," she murmured sheepishly. "I-I knew I recognized them."

"They told me of your marriage," Colin said with a smile. "I was very pleased to hear it."

"Pleased?"

Colin winced. "T-That was terribly rude of me. I am sorry, Cordelia. It wasn't what I meant at all."

She looked away, feeling uncommonly small in his presence, suddenly.

Cordelia pressed her lips together. Though she never found herself missing the idea of having Colin as her betrothed, the idea of being so easily tossed aside was hard to step over. It lingered with her still, even more so with Colin standing directly in front of her. Perhaps if she had Michael at her side, the ease would return to her. She almost twisted around in search of him, when Colin cleared his throat noisily.

"I was hoping to hear that you would attend the event today, Cordelia," Colin said.

She raised a brow. "Really?"

“There is something I have wished to do for quite some time now, and feel rather like a fool for not striving to have it done sooner,” he explained. “How dreadful life in London must have been for you after I left.” He lowered his head, his eyes lost in a distant reverie. “I never realized what a selfish man I was till I reflected on it years later. To have left you in the midst of a scandal, all because I found a different future. It was -”

“Colin,” she interjected in a soft voice, “While I appreciate the sentiment, I do not blame your actions too much. Not even for such a pleading apology.”

“H-How could you be so at ease about it?”

“Much like you, I have had time to think it over,” Cordelia said. “Neither one of us sought the other out with the real intent to marry. You know as well as I that it was an agreement arranged by our parents, made at the expense of our families. There wasn’t a bit of either of our souls in that pairing.”

Colin frowned. “Perhaps not. But the scandal -”

“I was wed the week after you left London, Colin.” Cordelia ached to see Michael somewhere within the garden.

“To the beastly Duke,” he said. “I heard very well.”

“Don’t tell me you disapprove?”

He chuckled. “I doubt everyone was entirely happy,” he replied. “And the rumors that followed were quite precarious, weren’t they?”

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“How can you even know of that?” Cordelia held back her bitter laugh. “Can news possibly travel that far outside of London?”

“I still come to the city for business, Cordelia,” he said. “That’s plenty of time to hear about a rumor or two.” He looked at her disapprovingly. “It sounds as though you’ve gotten up to mischief at Solshire.”

“Perhaps I have!”

Colin laughed. “As long as you are well, Cordelia. Are you well?”

“I’m -” Cordelia paused, unsure of what it was she would truly say. She supposed things were good enough. If things went on as they had been, perhaps the relationship between Cordelia and Michael would surely change. Talking would grow easier as the walls he held around him crumbled to the ground. Perhaps, one day, he might trust her enough to reveal the true Michael that lied within.

It was that mere thought, that distant hope, that gave Cordelia the ability to answer him the way she did. Even when Irene’s warning rang in the back of her mind, she pushed past it, desperate to be honest, to truly mean it. It was all that she wanted, after all.

“I am more than well, Colin.”

CHAPTER19

Michael couldn’t help but enjoy the fact that he and Rhys stood out from the rest of

the Ton like a sore thumb. The pair of them dressed in black, their hair pulled back and glowering. Michael glanced at his close friend and could hardly recognize him within the sea of flowers, the Lady's dressed in pale colored sundresses standing out shockingly against his silhouette. Michael glanced over his shoulder at his wife and her sister.

Cordelia looked like a sunflower within a dull field of green. She was the brightest in the entire batch, and he couldn't dare to even think about pulling his stare away. He happened to be her husband, after all, and that responsibility suddenly felt like the greatest he ever had. Michael felt the greatest tug towards her when they were the furthest apart, as if he could feel the tension in their separation. The bond was staggering and unexpected, something he was never supposed to have.

The life she wanted - married and living alongside a partner - was nothing Michael was prepared to give. Perhaps when she called him a recluse she failed to understand the simple meaning of the word. Even there, within the garden and alongside Rhys, Michael wished for an immediate escape, overcome with discomfort by all the Ton members surrounding them. Michael glanced at his friend, and judging by the stricken look on his face, he knew that he felt the same way.

"You seem different," Rhys suddenly said.

Michael leaned against a pillar within the garden, his hands grazing the lilacs. A few bees buzzed by his head. "How so?"

Rhys shrugged. "We'll have to see about it in the ring, won't we?"

Though he was only teasing, Michael was suddenly interested in hearing more. "Different how, Rhys?"

He shrugged, not too bothered by Michael's persistence. "More at ease, if that's at all

possible for you to comprehend.”

Michael scoffed. “I hardly feel at ease.”

“We are talking about two different things, I believe.”

“What?”

Rhys leaned closer to him. “Perhaps you aren’t at ease in this very moment, but in the grand scheme of things,” he raised his shoulders, “You seem different. Is that so bad?”

“Depends,” Michael grumbled.

Immediately his mind was focused on Cordelia once more. There was only one thing different in his life, something that was burrowing itself in the back of his mind like a cold. He already dove in too deep, unable to break the tie that was so easy to sever when they were first wed. He neared the point in which he was in no rush to leave Solshire, to say goodbye to her or the life she built so beautifully in the estate. Since returning, he saw Hunters smile more times than he had all his life. And, once again, only a single thing had changed.

“When will I get to meet her?”

Michael’s head shot up. “You can’t possibly mean -”

“Your wife,” Rhys said. “How much longer can you keep her from your best friend?”

“We have discussed this before. Introducing her to you implies something permanent, something that I will not be able to keep.”

Rhys shook his head and sighed. “Where in the devil did that come from?”

“What?”

“Your incessant need to prove that you cannot be a good husband to Cordelia,” Rhys snapped. “What has driven you into such a reckless insecurity, Michael?”

His eyebrows shot up. “In no way am I an insecure man, Rhys.”

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“And yet, you cannot admit that you might be a well enough man to be at Cordelia’s side?”

Michael leaned in close to him, his voice barely above a whisper. “You tread into water you do not understand, Rhys,” he hissed. “I know what cloth I am cut from, and to tread warily into marriage is a nicety I believe a woman like Cordelia deserves.”

Rhys pressed his lips together. “I understand.”

“Are you through with the questions, now?”

“Don’t push it.”

Michael leaned against the podium once more, too annoyed with his boxing partner to focus his attention on him any longer. The garden seemed to fill with more people, if it was at all possible, and pressed in upon them steadily. Michael let his gaze search through the sea of Ton members, desperately looking for Cordelia.

His heart threatened to stop.

Cordelia was where she had been, but Irene was nowhere in sight. Instead, there was a tall gentleman standing beside her, and they were deep in the throes of a conversation. The man smiled down at her and, even from a distance, Michael saw her laugh.

Without thinking, Michael’s hands tightened into fists.

“Rhys,” Michael growled, “Who is that man talking to my wife?”

Stepping forward, Rhys’s eyes narrowed as he stared across the garden. “Looks like the Earl of Vaun to me,” he murmured, his gaze flicking over to Michael nervously. “Colin Evans, the man who was once betrothed to Cordelia Celeston.”

Michael’s eyes widened. He couldn’t pull his gaze away from the two of them, and could hardly hide his aghast expression. They looked like old friends, reminiscing and remembering the previous days they spent together. A fiery heat exploded through Michael’s chest the longer he stared. His vision warped, and he soon imagined them holding hands, walking through the garden as a married couple, carrying a few children along with them. The jealousy surged through him relentlessly, swimming through his veins alongside his very essence.

“You alright, Michael?” Rhys asked, clapping his hand down on his shoulder.

Michael shrugged his hand off. “We will see each other at the ring, won’t we?”

“Well, sure, but -”

“Good afternoon, Rhys.”

Michael twisted and nudged around the throngs of crowds within the gardens. The pristine weather pulled all of London’s society out into the day, and they gathered all around the dahlias and the daffodils. Michael, however, was intently determined, and it would take a lot more than a series of nicely dressed men and women to stand in his way of reaching Cordelia. As he drew closer, he could hear Cordelia’s laugh.

Eyes from the nearby Ton held onto her and the Earl.

Michael was seething by the time he reached Cordelia, almost tempted to carry her

over his shoulder out of the gardens. If the entire city wasn't watching, he might've been more inclined to do just that. He reached for her, and snatched onto her wrist.

"Come along," he snarled as he loomed over her, "Wife."

Cordelia stared at him in confusion, hardly an ounce of fear visible across her way. She tugged back on him slightly. "The party is hardly over!" she hissed. "We were staying in order to -"

"Do not try and scold me like a tutor, Cordelia," Michael quickly whispered. He hardly recognized himself with the venom in his voice. "We are leaving."

The crowd parted all around them simultaneously, curious eyes creening to get a snippet at the gossip unfolding right in front of their eyes. Michael kept his stare straightforward, not loosening his grip over Cordelia's thin wrist one bit. She begrudgingly trudged along behind him. Cordelia didn't offer any more bouts of arguing, but there was an annoyance in the way she walked, a certain sort of march that spoke more words than she ever actually said.

They were silent all the way to the carriage. Michael informed the driver of their early departure, and climbed into the carriage after his wife. Cordelia crossed her arms over her chest as she sat in the corner farthest away from Michael, her gaze focused on the world passing by out the window.

Michael sat diagonally from her as the carriage began to rumble along the London streets. He glanced in Cordelia's direction every now and then, unable to stop himself from sneaking a look at her. The irritation in her stare never changed, radiating a sort of anger he hadn't seen on her before.

He bit back his scoff. What was there for Cordelia to be mad about? Michael was the one who saw her talking with her previously betrothed suitor, who now had a wife

and children of his own. Cordelia hadn't even realized all the Ton members surrounding her, all the eyes that curiously watched the scandal unfold in front of them. Michael intervened at the right time, he told himself. He could've come by sooner, if he had only realized it. He told those words to himself over and over again, desperate to erase the desperate heat of jealousy that plagued him still.

If he was jealous, that proved the very thing Michael sought incredibly hard to avoid.

Feelings, unmistakable and blatant, for Cordelia.

Don't be ridiculous!

As quickly as the thought came, Michael shoved it away, raising his chin within the carriage. He didn't have a shadow of a doubt regarding the matter. He did not have feelings for Cordelia, but rather the feeling of an impending responsibility that came along with signing the marriage contract. Despite not living aside one another for a few years, Michael was bound to make sure the rumors were separated from their name, no longer plaguing him or the legacy he might leave behind.

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That was why he tore her away from the Earl.

Responsibility and duty.

The words repeated like an incoherent mantra as the carriage rolled to a stop in front of Solshire.

Cordelia, ignoring the rules of decorum, ripped open the small compartment's door, and burst out of the carriage without a hand to help her. The skirt of her dress flew in the spring breeze as she stormed away from the carriage, and up the stairs towards the front of the estate. Michael quickly stepped out, surprising the footman for a second time. He ran up the steps two at a time, following behind his angry wife.

The doors parted to reveal Hunters and the housekeeper, Mrs. Bellflower. Michael was moments away from speaking to them, when Cordelia beat him to it, her hands tightened into small fists.

"Won't you two leave the Duke and I alone in the foyer for a moment?" Cordelia asked.

Hunters and Mrs. Bellflower bowed their heads simultaneously, not daring to utter an argument, but sharing a very telling look. They left the foyer the moment afterwards.

"What," Cordelia began, her voice sharp, "Is wrong with you, Michael?"

His brow furrowed. "Perhaps I could ask you the same thing!"

“Me?” She threw her hands in the air. “What could I have done to earn such a thing? Did you stop to consider what the Ton might think, seeing the Duke become a beast after all?”

Michael surged forward, closing the space between them. “I was thinking of the Ton all along!” The words hung in the air, and he prayed they didn’t sound as hollow as they felt as they left his mouth. “Do not act as though you weren’t doing anything wrong.”

“Tell me, Michael, what you believed to have been such a sinful act,” Cordelia hissed. “Was it my walk with Irene? Or was it after, when we paused to admire the flowers?”

“Or was it when the Earl of Vaun approached you,” Michael whispered, “And you willingly continued in conversation with him?” He searched her eyes as her short breaths wafted against his chin. “Do you deny it?”

“Of course not,” she said. “What harm have I done in talking to Colin?”

Michael scoffed. “You even address him so informally. What am I supposed to think?”

“If you mean to say I ruin our chances in swaying the Ton to what we wish them to see, through the mere circumstance of seeing an old acquaintance, you are hiding the truth from yourself as much as you withdraw it from me.”

He clenched his hands into tight fists. Everything he wished to say rested on the tip of his tongue. He wanted to grab her, to shake her and demand to know why she would ever spare the Earl the time of day. He wanted to demand to know her truth, to know whether or not she still felt bound to the man.

Michael shook his head. They were ridiculously jealous things that he couldn't dare to tread upon. It was not his truth.

"You have risked the work we have done to rewrite the Ton's beliefs of our marriage," Michael said in a rushed whisper. "Everything could be ignored at the mere sighting of you with the Earl of Vaun. Why can't you see that?"

"Because there is a different truth behind your eyes," Cordelia snapped. "Something you do not wish to say. Perhaps you might like to act as if I do not know you, Michael, but you might as well start getting used to it."

Michael tilted his head at her. "You cannot know me."

"I know you," she whispered. "And I can see past your walls. Blame your anger on the Ton, blame it on the rumors they might expel about you and your damned name. I hardly care. When you're ready to speak the truth, you'll know where you might find me."

Cordelia gathered her skirts in one hand, and began to storm off, marching towards the main staircase.

Michael's eyes were clutching to her with every step she took. The further she went, the sicker he felt, the desperate need to have her close almost becoming too much for a man to bear. He reached for her, but she was too far away. Michael pulled back. He couldn't tell her the truth. He couldn't let her in close enough to know how attached to her he already was. Soon, if she let him, Cordelia would see the truth about the man she was married to, and would beg to be freed from him.

Perhaps Michael was not the beast the Ton made him out to be, but it did not change the simple truth of the matter. Michael was nowhere near the better man, the right suitor, the gentleman, the perfect husband. It wasn't him, and it was what women like

Cordelia sought out. Everything she wanted to have, he could never hand over.

But then she was going too far, and Michael could hardly stand it. There was a simple thing he needed to know, one question that needed to be answered. At least then, he might be able to carry on, to sleep at night. Michael rushed forward, snatching onto Cordelia's wrist when she had already gone up a few of the steps.

Cordelia turned, her gaze muddled with confusion. Even then, when he had the power to frighten her in ways she could only imagine, Cordelia did not show a hint of fear across her fight. He looked down at his hand around her wrist, unable to stop himself, and circled his thumb around her soft skin, feeling the distinctly rushed patter of her heartbeat. When he looked back up at her, Cordelia's lips were parted, her face growing flushed.

"I will only ask one thing of you, Cordelia," he whispered.

She merely breathed.

"Do you love him?"

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Cordelia blinked, her mouth opening but not a word able to tumble out.

Michael pressed his lips together. “Did you love him then? Before it all came crashing down?”

She tilted her head, the corner of her lip twitching into a small smile. “No, Michael,” she murmured. “I did not love him then, and I do not love him still.”

Michael released a heavy sigh, a breath he didn’t realize he held within his chest so tightly. The relief overcame him instantly, like a tidal wave, soothing the nerves that had plagued him since he saw them together at the garden party. He almost sank to his knees, unaware of himself, when he came to his senses.

How could Michael feel relieved? To be happy that she did not love the man who came before him was a sign of something else, something that would be too difficult to fight if he was already knee deep within it. But, suddenly, as he gripped onto Cordelia’s wrist, her last words still echoing in the back of his mind, Michael felt as though he had been entirely engulfed in a dangerous infatuation.

Feelings grew to an exuberant amount within the center of his chest. He looked upon Cordelia and felt his heart stammer, missing a beat or two at the mere sight of her. That would be something that wouldn’t do at all. To feel so bound to someone was far too dangerous to handle with ease. He needed to get away, and he needed to do it fast.

Michael slowly pulled his hand away from her, the echoing hollowness in his chest almost threatening to engulf him in despair. Dipping his head down in a low bow,

Michael avoided meeting her gaze another time.

“Forgive me,” he whispered, so quiet he thought she couldn’t have heard.

Michael twisted around, and crossed the foyer, not daring to look back as he disappeared around the corner. Even as the distance between them grew, Michael couldn’t shake the grip she had over him, the infatuation that flourished stronger still. He shook his head as he walked, desperate to return to the man he once was. Every time he closed his eyes, Cordelia came back to him, and Michael felt obliged to turn around and return to her.

He held fast, remained strong.

Distance, he thought to himself.

That is what I need.

CHAPTER 20

Cordelia rose with the sun the next morning. The evening was restless and unsure, but the moment her eyes popped open, adrenaline rushed through her limbs, pulling her out from beneath the silk sheets. Butterflies swirled through her stomach, an eagerness to get ready for the day almost overwhelming her. It had been so long since she felt such a surge of life through her, an incandescent need to see the husband she once so readily scorned.

Mrs. Bellflower rapped her knuckles against the door before slipping inside. The expression on her face contorted into surprise when she noticed how Cordelia was already rising from her bed.

“Dear me, your Grace!” The housekeeper went to the windows, pulling the curtains

to the sides and tying them together. “I hardly expected to find you already awake. Are you well, your Grace?”

“More than well.” Cordelia stretched high above her head before crossing to the window, popping open the glass to breathe the morning air in. “Isn’t it a beautiful day outside, Mrs. Bellflower?”

She nodded. “An incredibly pleasant morning, your Grace. Shall I prepare you for a morning stroll? Perhaps breakfast in the orangery?”

“While that all sounds very lovely, Mrs. Bellflower, I believe I’d much prefer to have a morning with my husband.”

The housekeeper paused in front of Cordelia’s wardrobe, her attention piqued curiously. “Indeed, your Grace.” She pressed her lips together, keeping the words she wished to say trapped behind her teeth.

Cordelia watched the curiosity sink into Mrs. Bellflower’s skin. She let out an airy laugh as she sat at the windowsill, the morning breeze slipping through her long hair like hands. “Is there something else you wish to ask, Mrs. Bellflower?”

She glanced around before rushing towards Cordelia, a few dresses already draped across her arm. The eagerness in her eyes flared as her voice lowered, as if there was someone else who could possibly over hear their conversation.

“I am beyond pleased at the sound of you and His Grace setting aside your differences to settle in Solshire,” Mrs. Bellflower said with a raised brow, “If that is indeed the case?”

Cordelia felt the smile tug at her lips before she realized she was doing it. Looking away, she covered her mouth sheepishly, growing red beneath the housekeeper’s

persistent and eager gaze. “After recent events,” she began, “I believe that might be where we are headed.”

“Oh,” Mrs. Bellflower drawled, placing a weak hand over her bosom, “How delighted I am to hear such a thing, your Grace!”

“Truly?”

“Your Grace, the light you have shone upon Solshire is something we have not seen in years,” Mrs. Bellflower blurted, her eyes wide and glossy. “Whether or not you see it yourself, your Grace, you must know that you have made a change here. A change that cannot easily be undone.”

Cordelia watched the housekeeper with parted lips. Despite living at the estate for a few years, she hadn’t heard such an outburst before from Mrs. Bellflower. In fact, it took almost an entire year to gain the respect and trust of the estate’s original staff, including the housekeeper and the butler, Hunters. Even though they opened their arms to her eventually, there was something far more gratifying about the words Mrs. Bellflower said.

Everything she had done brightened Solshire. To press even further, Cordelia supposed she managed to shine a light upon Michael, too. And after the garden party, the interaction she had with her husband seemed to prove another thing. Talking to Colin drove a fiery jealousy through him. One that pulled him to take her hand in his own, rubbing his thumb along the sensitive skin on her wrist. The feeling remained with her still, despite an entire night spent apart. She touched the spot he once held.

Perhaps the future she once envisioned for herself was not as far away as she assumed it was. Although she was more than willing to settle for a friendship and nothing more, Cordelia could not pull the smile from her lips. There was something more on the horizon. There just had to be.

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“Your Grace,” Mrs. Bellflower said in a quiet voice, pulling Cordelia out of her reverie.

“Hm?”

The housekeeper had laid the dresses along the bed while Cordelia was lost in her thoughts, and had returned to the closet to retrieve something else. Resting in her arms was the portrait Cordelia had done of Michael, the likeness striking her suddenly, as if he had been within the room the entire time. But then she noticed her familiar handiwork, and pushed herself off the windowsill.

“My painting,” she murmured, tracing her fingertip along the striking line of his jaw.

“Perhaps now might be the time to deliver this to His Grace.”

Cordelia’s brow furrowed. “Of that, Mrs. Bellflower, I am unsure.”

“Why?” Mrs. Bellflower lowered the painting to take a look at it herself, a smile immediately slipping across her face. “It is too lovely to be left in the dark of the closet, your Grace.”

“Do you not find it odd?”

“What, your Grace?”

Cordelia sighed. “To present Michael with a gift such as this.” She shook her head. “Who’s to say he would like the piece, anyhow? Has he shown an affinity for art

before?”

Mrs. Bellflower let a smirk begin to crawl across her face, looking rather proud of what she was about to say. “Perhaps he hasn’t,” she replied, “But he has shown an affinity for you, hasn’t he, your Grace?”

Cordelia’s eyes widened. Had Michael truly expressed an interest in Cordelia, one that she had failed to recognize? No, she told herself. He disappeared for years, but... He was swayed by her in the end. The original intention of his arrival to Solshire seemed to trickle away, leaving only a more personal reason for his stay at the estate. Perhaps he remained for her, and her alone. Cordelia reached for the painting, holding it close to her chest.

“Answer me honestly, Mrs. Bellflower.”

“Of course, your Grace.”

“Would he,” her voice trailed off, embarrassment she was not used to feeling threatening to climb up her throat. She inhaled deeply, calming the rush of butterflies that swarmed through her stomach once more. “Would he like it?”

Mrs. Bellflower’s aged face softened. “I truly believe so, your Grace. But,” she paused, gesturing towards the dresses she had already laid out, “You might never know until you see him.”

With a newfound burst of energy, Cordelia placed the painting aside and began to get dressed for the day. Each passing minute meant another second closer to seeing Michael. She chose a baby blue dress for that day, one that was light and simple but fit her extraordinarily well. In the past, she might’ve scoffed and huffed at the idea of dressing for another person, with the intention of impressing them towards her favor. And yet, as she glanced at herself in the mirror, noticing how flushed her cheeks

were, Cordelia couldn't imagine doing anything else than that.

"Shall you bring the portrait with you, your Grace?"

Cordelia shook her head as she walked to the door. "Perhaps you might bring it along with you," she said. "Later, once we have spoken."

"Of course, your Grace."

Gathering up herself, Cordelia left her bedroom behind, making her way down towards the dining room. The closer she went, the more excited she became, her prospects looking brighter than they ever had before. A brighter future stared back at her, one that could be life long and as gratifying as she yearned for it to be. A few members of staff were trickling out of the room when she came upon it, slipping around them and over the threshold.

The room was full of morning light. Breakfast filled the round table, freshly squeezed orange juice already set at her spot. Cordelia's smile was as bright as the sun as she laid her eyes upon Michael. He sat at his regular spot at the table, his plate pushed aside as he diligently wrote a letter. The sound of his quill scratching against the papers filled the air as she inched closer.

"Good morning, Michael," Cordelia finally said, straightening out her skirts at the same time.

Lifting his head, Michael's dark eyes found hers instantly. A frown was already on his lips, and it tugged further down the longer he stared. "Good morning," he said. "Please, take a seat." He gestured at the chair across from him, as though she was nothing more than a guest.

Cordelia, feeling slightly stunted by his cold demeanor, kept the smile on her face as

she did as he said. Her eyes lingered on the papers he worked on, but the angle was too obscured by the plates of food and his glass. Curiosity nipped at her, but she remained quiet, her eyes holding onto him eagerly.

“You have played your part well.”

Cordelia’s brow rose. “My part?”

“In our efforts to diminish the rumors surrounding our names.” Michael finally set his quill down, letting his serious stare land on her heavily. “As far as I am concerned, the Ton’s gossip no longer linger on the events following our sudden marriage.”

“T-That is very well,” she replied in a quiet voice. There was something about his look, something about his very air that drove an unpleasant feeling into Cordelia’s stomach. The adrenaline and excitement she once felt became ill suited and sickening. She kept one hand over her stomach while pushing the plate of food away with the other.

If there was anything she was still sure of, it was a need for honesty. No matter what he planned on saying next, Cordelia knew what it was that she wanted to say, and could hardly go another day with the truth trapped within her heart. There was more that she wanted, a future that required him to remain by her side, beyond the Season.

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“Michael,” Cordelia began, “I wish -”

“I will be taking my leave, now that the rumors have ceased to plague us.”

Cordelia froze. “I beg your pardon?”

“The rumors,” Michael repeated, his expression unchanging, “They do not hang over us like a stormcloud any longer. Now that I have finished doing what I returned for, I will leave Solshire at once.”

The wordsat oncerang through Cordelia’s head like the ringing of a sharp bell. She swallowed, glancing around at the staff that trickled in and out of the room. The morning light suddenly felt too hot, too much to bear. Though she hoped for something to change in his face, something that showed everything he said was nothing more than a fluke, Cordelia knew that she was wishing for far too much.

The anger, then, arose.

“Did you forget what you originally said?” She snapped. “Till the end of the Season, Michael. This is hardly the end of the Season! There are weeks left, weeks left to -”

“That is hardly necessary.”

She gaped, unable to stop herself. “What is the reason, Michael?”

“I have told you.”

“Therealreason.”

Michael’s brow furrowed. “Do you take me for a liar?”

“I never said -”

“If you believe there to be something wrong, something ill-suited in my behavior,” he began, his voice infuriatingly calm and collected, “I will gladly correct you.”

Cordelia watched him quietly for a moment. She breathed in deeply, desperate to retain her composure when he looked as still as a statue. Suddenly, everything she felt that morning was nothing more than a silly ruse. She led herself to believe in a relationship that obviously did not exist for Michael. But then, as she tried to let her emotions simmer and diminish into some sort of calm reason, Cordelia only felt the anger grow stronger and stronger. Perhaps, after everything, she was nothing more than a fool who had fallen too quickly, loved too hard, felt too much when there was nothing to feel. Her hands tightened into fists beneath the table.

“If that is your true feelings,” she whispered, “Then perhaps you should have corrected me long ago.”

Michael’s eyes narrowed. “I never promised to remain forever, Cordelia.”

“Do not condescend me.”

“I merely try to tell you my plans for the future.”

Cordelia scoffed, unable to hide it any longer. Pushing herself away from the table, she rose with a huff, gathering her skirts in one hand. The food remained untouched across the table, but she hardly cared for one second. Let it all grow cold and old, even stink up the room. She was too far in her anger and growing disappointment to

even think about it.

“Say what you will, Michael, but I can see you for what you truly are. Perhaps that is why you insist on running away.”

Michael huffed. “I am not-”

“You are a coward.” She strode to the door. “A coward who will one day run out of chances.”

Before he could say another word, Cordelia rushed out of the dining room, practically running face first into Mrs. Bellflower down the hall. The housekeeper held the portrait in her hands, a long cloth draped over it to hide the artwork beneath. With an excited glimmer in her eyes, Mrs. Bellflower held the painting towards her.

The housekeeper glanced around, her excitement beginning to dim. “What has happened, your Grace?”

Cordelia felt the tears streaming down her cheeks before she realized she was even crying. Angrily, she held her chin up, refusing to look at the painting. The housekeeper could keep it for herself, for all she cared. There was no point in it anymore, unless she wished to feel an immeasurable heartache every time she laid eyes on it. And so, she brushed by the housekeeper simply, hiking up her skirts with one hand. The words came out before she understood what they meant.

“Burn it, for all I care.”

CHAPTER 21

“Pack my bags at once.”

Michael strode out of the dining room in a hurry. The staff stepped aside as he shot around them, pressing their backs against the wall and waiting till he got far enough to whisper questions and surprised murmurs. Behind him, following close to his heels, was Hunters, his footsteps almost quiet when compared to Michael's unavoidable strides.

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“Your Grace,” Hunters called out to him, widening his strides to walk alongside him. “Can I ask what the meaning behind this abrupt exit is?”

“You may,” Michael replied, “But that does not mean I’d answer.”

In the back of his mind, Michael could only see Cordelia’s stricken face from the dining room. Each time he blinked, his eyes shuttering close for a second, her soft features warped with concern and anger flashed across his vision. It was as if she haunted him, making sure that he would never forget the pain he insisted on inflicting her with.

Perhaps he never should have returned in the first place. If he remained far away from Solshire, the rumors would have still lingered over her head, but his business could have continued. There would have been a hurdle to leap over every now and then, but at least he would not have been plagued in the way he was now. Cordelia sunk into his skin like a disease, grabbing a hold of his heart and refusing to let go. No matter what medicine he ingested, she remained within him like a lingering cough.

The wordcowardhung over him. Her sharp voice, tainted with brimming tears and frustration, echoed through his ears. He did not need much convincing to know she was entirely right. Michael was a coward, and had been one all his life. Events from his past shaped him into a reclusive creature, one who feared the light Cordelia threatened to bring into his life. No matter how much he wished to turn around and seek her out once more, to hold her within his arms and say the things she wanted him to say, Michael remained head strong, his heart hardened towards everything he wanted to have.

Because, in the end, the love Cordelia sought, the life she believed he could give her, was out of his hands. He had been rendered incapable of such a thing a long time ago, and there was barely any chance of getting it back. Either way, he had already made up his mind, and ordered the arrangements to be made. His things would be returned to his townhouse within the city. He planned on continuing his business for the rest of the Season. Earn as much profit for Cordelia to be as comfortable as she wished.

Perhaps he might order her an influx of canvases, enough to last her a lifetime. The idea of no longer seeing her artwork stunted him for a moment, but he pushed past it.

Once at his bedroom, Hunters whipped around to stand in front of him. “As your Butler,” Hunters snapped, practically out of breath, “And as your friend, I wish to implore you on making a different decision, your Grace.”

“Friend?”

Hunters winced. “Have I not been there for you all these years, your Grace? Have I not seen you grow, seen you fall? Does that give my word any sort of weight in your mind?”

“Perhaps,” Michael murmured, “But it will do you no good today. The arrangements have been made.”

Hunters’ shoulders sagged as Michael passed by him, retrieving his case. He watched as Michael gathered a few of his important papers and work things, remaining silent until the clasp snapped through the air, the bag shut.

“Your Grace,” Hunters began again, “I fear you might regret your actions in the future.”

“My future is beyond your worries.”

And then, the unthinkable happened.

Hunters shot forward, his arms finding their way around Michael's body, bringing him into a tight embrace. Michael felt himself stiffen as the butler grabbed a hold of him, his arms snapping around him in a hug. He could hardly pull himself away, and barely found the will to force himself out of it. The embrace jerked him back in time, to when he was nothing more than a clueless child.

"Your future," Hunters said, "Has been at the forefront of my worries for years, your Grace. For much longer than you might imagine."

"Hunters -"

"You cannot see the good that has been brought to Solshire because you are so quick to leave it. Perhaps you believe you are undeserving of it, or that a life alongside a gentle and kind-hearted woman is out of your reach." Hunters pulled away, bowing his head down. "I only wish you could hold yourself in the same regard as I do, your Grace, and realize that a settled life is very capable to be had in your future."

Michael remained as still as a statue for a moment. He could only watch the butler, and see how much he believed the words he spoke. But Michael already has his mind made. Everything had been made the moment he realized how bound to Cordelia he felt. The jealousy of her speaking so publicly with Colin, how her hand felt within his own, how her smile and laugh riled him in a way he still could not understand. All of it led to one thing, and it was the single thing Michael refused to hand over.

"Hunters," Michael finally said, barely recognizing his own voice, "I expect you to take care of Solshire while I am gone."

The butler's eyes narrowed. "Do you mean the estate, or the wife you leave behind?"

“Take it as you must.”

Turning away, Michael finished collecting his last few things, desperate to put space between him and Cordelia. Much to his surprise, Hunters stepped forward silently, beginning to help him get a hold of his things. Hunters grabbed a hold of his case and another bag of luggage, slipping out of the room without sparing another word.

Michael followed close behind him. They made their way to the foyer in no time, the rest of Michael's things already being stored within the back of a carriage in front of the estate's steps. Hunters went with the rest of the staff to place the rest of his bags with the others. Michael breathed in deeply as he began to walk towards the front doors.

“Your Grace!”

Pausing at the threshold, Michael glanced over his shoulder. Mrs. Bellflower hurriedly scurried towards him, something squared and rather large in her hands. A cloth covered whatever it was she held, wrapped neatly and tightly. She panted breathlessly when she came up to him, holding the package forward.

“What is this?” he asked.

Mrs. Bellflower merely extended it closer to him. “Something I believe you are meant to have, your Grace.”

He raised a brow. “I am going to need more information than that, Mrs. Bellflower.”

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The housekeeper pressed her lips together as she looked down at the package, running one hand over it as though there was something priceless beneath it. “It is not my place to tell you, your Grace. I can only hope that you’d take it, and understand the meaning that is so blatantly behind it.”

Michael eyed the package warily. Not that he was afraid of its contents, but rather concerned on what it might force him to feel. He breathed deeply before reaching, and taking the package within his hands.

“You will return, won’t you?” Mrs. Bellflower asked.

Michael hesitated, unsure of what to say.

The housekeeper pressed her lips together and nodded slowly. “Perhaps you might consider returning sometime soon, your Grace. You are leaving...” she breathed in deeply, pulling a sorrowful smile across her face. “You leave far too much behind.”

Something about Mrs. Bellflower’s words hit him harder than he imagined they would. Michael merely gave her a nod, unable to even force a smile across his face. With the package tucked neatly beneath his arm, Michael spun around on his heel, and passed over the threshold of his childhood home, refusing to look behind him.

Hunters stood beside the carriage, overseeing the final pieces of luggage being stowed inside. “Your carriage is about ready, your Grace.”

Michael sighed. “Collect my steed, won’t you? I wish to ride there.”

“As you wish, your Grace.”

Hunters began to walk around the estate, heading towards the stables.

“Shall I pack that with the others, your Grace?”

Michael blinked a few times, needing an extra second to register the footman’s words.

“What?”

“Your package, your Grace.” The footman gestured towards the wrapped thing he held.

Michael shook his head, though he wasn’t sure why. The footman bowed his head before turning away, closing up the carriage to send it on its way. Looking down at the package in his hands, Michael pulled at the twine, loosening the fabric till it fell away.

His eyes widened. As if he stared into a looking glass, Michael stared down at a portrait of himself. He could hardly remember the last time he posed for a painting. Perhaps it was after his mother’s passing, when they needed new paintings to hang above the mantel. He could remember it as if it happened the day before: sitting in an ornate chair while his father, the late Duke, posed behind him, one heavy hand resting over Michael’s narrow shoulder. Each of them had sour expressions on their faces, and the painting remained within Solshire to that very day.

The portrait he looked at now, however, had a different air about it. While he wasn’t entirely smiling in it, there was something gentle about his expression. His brow was not furrowed, his shoulders relaxed and calm. His lips spread into a straight line, the corner tugging into the slightest of smiles. In an even greater surprise, the portrait had bright white scars peering up from his collar, striking across the exposed skin around his neck. No other paintings done of him ever showed the scars. Perhaps the artist

never noticed them, or was too frightened of his scowl to include them in the final piece.

Michael flipped the canvas over. There was a name done in incredibly neat handwriting at the bottom corner, marking who the canvas originally belonged to. The air caught on the back of Michael's throat as he realized who the artist was.

Cordelia Celeston.

"Hold there," Michael called out, stopping the carriage from leaving the steps. He took a few wide strides towards it before slipping the painting in alongside the rest of his belongings. It disappeared the moment he dropped it within. As the carriage rumbled away, he could not understand the origin of the ache within the center of his chest.

Hunters rounded the corner with a horse trotting along behind him. "Your horse, your Grace," the butler said, handing the sleek black reins over.

"Thank you, Hunters," Michael said as he ran his hands down the steed's long neck. The horse shook his head beneath his touch, letting out a short sound. Breathing in deeply, Michael pulled himself over the side of the horse, his feet slipping into place on either side of the steed. With the saddle fitting in perfectly beneath him, Michael felt at ease knowing that he would be flying through the countryside, the wind flowing through his hair and leaving everything he regretted behind.

"Your Grace."

Michael looked down at the butler. "What is it, Hunters?"

"I hope to see you soon."

The ache grew within him as he pulled his stare away from Hunters. Without saying another word, he flicked the reins, pressing his heel into the horse's side. The steed let out another neigh before beginning to trot away from Solshire's front steps. The further the horse took him, the more the pain within his chest seized him entirely. It was as if there was a rope tied around his waist that stretched all throughout the estate's halls, till the other end tightened along Cordelia's narrow figure. Somehow, after only a few short weeks, he found himself bound to her in more ways than he realized. But, still, he pressed on, refusing to disappoint her more than he already had.

Michael wasn't too far from the front of the estate when he paused and took a greedy glance over his shoulder. While Hunters was no longer at the front steps, his eyes naturally gravitated towards where Cordelia's room windows were. Perhaps what he saw was nothing more than a trick of the eye, but he could not look away.

Cordelia stood at her window, one hand holding the curtains back, staring out to where he was. Her expression was unreadable from the distance, but perhaps that was a blessing in disguise. He shook his head, sure that he was imagining seeing her there, and turned away. She did not know it now, but Michael was sure that his absence would lead to her ultimate happiness. She believed she wanted him to remain with her, to give her a life she believed she wanted. Michael, no matter how much it truly hurt him, knew that removing himself from her presence could bring her a peaceful existence.

Michael only wished he could say the same for himself.

CHAPTER 22

Once, Cordelia thought herself to be quite fond of the outdoors. The sun, she believed, healed her in more ways than she could even imagine. While doctors might wave around their remedies as the cure for any sickness, Cordelia simply needed to spend some time outside, and found herself to be repaired beyond belief. It was not

until she faced the greatest wound she might ever encounter that the sun failed to do what it was meant to.

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Four days ago, Michael took his leave from Solshire.

On the first day, Cordelia remained in her chambers, stuck to the window. She watched him leave on horseback, watched as he took a final look at the life he left behind, his gaze looking up where she stood - though she believed it to be a trick of the eye. Without a moment to lose, Michael sped off, the horse kicking up dirt with how fast it went. He was gone within an instant. Despite his immediate disappearance, Cordelia found herself to be stuck to the window. Even if she wanted to, her feet remained still, the only movement coming from her insistent heartbeat.

When it came time for lunch, a knock came from her door, and familiar footsteps echoed through the bedroom. And yet, Cordelia hardly had the strength to look over her shoulder, to leave her spot in the rare case that Michael returned over the horizon.

“Your Grace,” Mrs. Bellflower cooed from behind her. “It has been quite some time since you’ve eaten, or even taken a seat.”

Cordelia remained there still, all the words she wished to say trapped behind her tightly shut lips. The housekeeper stepped closer to her, the woman’s short reflection slowly appearing on the window. Concern was etched onto her face, undeniable pity lacing her eyes, visible even in the muddled reflection.

Mrs. Bellflower treaded closer. “Won’t you eat something as simple as crackers, your Grace? A few sips of tea?”

“I cannot,” Cordelia breathed, her voice unrecognizable. “Do not make me.”

The housekeeper let out a sad sigh. "I wouldn't dare to, your Grace."

And, without another word, Mrs. Bellflower took her leave, making sure to gently shut the door behind her. From where she stood, Cordelia watched the sunset. Perhaps her head met the pillow at some point, but she could hardly remember. Maybe she leaned against the wall and slept, or curled up alongside the windowsill, waking up every hour to peer outside, each time hoping to see Michael appear at Solshire's front steps. The disappointment sunk so deep into her that the hunger or thirst she must have felt went unnoticed. There was only a growing sense of despair, the realization that her life was returning to a period of solitude too much for her to sanely bear.

On the second day, it was Hunters who entered her bedroom. He remained at the threshold, his hands held behind his back. Cordelia noticed him, suddenly, in the window's reflection, entirely unaware that he even opened the door. She glanced at herself within the window, noticing how there were dark circles beginning to creep beneath her eyes, a hollowness taking over her normally round and pink cheeks.

"Your Grace," Hunters called out to her, "Perhaps a trip to the orangery would do you some good."

The moment he said orangery, Cordelia flinched, the memory of Michael's lips upon her own rattling her to the core. She clutched onto the curtain, afraid that her legs might give out from beneath her.

"Do not speak to me of the orangery," she whispered, her voice hoarse and scratchy from a lack of water. "Do not."

Hunters remained there for a few moments, merely watching her. Finally, after what felt like an eternity, Cordelia watched him bow in the window's reflection.

“As you wish, your Grace,” he murmured, before leaving, and shutting the door behind him.

There was not much more that she remembered happening during her dark days. Cordelia remained beside the window for as long as she could, till Michael’s absence stretched onto the fourth day. She allowed herself a few moments of a reprieve, leaving the windowsill to rest her legs or change the old dress she wore. In the end, she always returned to the spot, refusing to leave it for something to eat or drink. Even when her dog, Silas, yipped at her feet, desperate for some attention, she turned the yorkshire terrier to one of the members of staff instead.

On the fourth day, when the sun was high in the sky, a distant storm creeping over the horizon, bringing a sharp chill to the air, Cordelia’s bedroom door snapped open once more.

“Good Lord, Cordelia!”

She flinched at the familiar voice, surprised at her siblings' sudden arrival. Cordelia turned away from the window, her eyes falling upon Irene and Duncan within the threshold of her bedroom. Behind them, Mrs. Bellflower lurked before disappearing down the hall. Though Cordelia wondered what the staff might’ve told them about her recent attitude, she was not bothered enough to ask. Her gaze slowly slipped back towards the front lawn of Solshire.

“What has happened to you?” Irene asked, her voice gentle but dripping with a deep concern. “Our correspondence went flat, so I insisted Duncan come along with me for a visit. This was the last thing I expected to find.”

Duncan stepped into the room after her, his dark brow sharply furrowed as he looked around. “Gracious, Cordelia, you look as if you haven’t slept in days.” He stormed forward, one hand grabbing a hold of her wrist to pull her away from the window.

“You looked like a downright ghost in that damned window when our carriage arrived.” Duncan investigated her face closer, his eyes narrowing in suspicion. “Irene, fetch a servant. I demand an audience with the Duke of Solshire!”

Cordelia shook her head. “You will come up as empty handed as I have.”

“What on earth do you mean?”

“Michael no longer resides in Solshire,” she whispered, barely having enough energy to raise her voice. “He left days ago.”

Irene stepped forward. “Dear sister, what has happened?”

As Cordelia recounted the events that drove Michael far from her side, she allowed Duncan to guide her towards a chair, unable to deny how gracious she was to let her legs rest for a moment or two. Seeing her beloved siblings was a wonderful change towards staring out into the front of Solshire, though she felt quite adamant about returning to her position the moment she could.

Irene took a seat beside Cordelia, letting her arm drape across her shoulders, pulling the youngest sibling into a tight embrace against her bosom. “I can hardly understand what madness struck the Duke for him to leave in such a sudden way.”

“Who cares about understanding his reasons?” Duncan was pacing in front of the sofa in which his sisters sat, his hands clenched into tight fists on either side of him. Duncan’s heavy breathing filled the air as his anger grew. “I ought to seek the man out and demand a duel the moment I lay my eyes upon him! To deliver such disrespect to a Celeston, a sibling of mine, it drives me more up a wall than anything else!”

Cordelia suddenly shot up from her seat. “You will do no such thing!” The sudden movement swayed her head slightly, the room spinning for a moment. “Duncan, do

you hear me?"

He paused in his pacing, eyeing her over his shoulder. "You can hardly stand, Cordelia."

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“I am fine,” she snapped, crossing her arms as the dizziness threatened to topple her. “I am standing now, am I not?”

“Cordelia -”

Irene rose alongside her, resting a gentle hand over Cordelia’s shoulder. “Might we settle for a simple walk in the sun, sister?”

Cordelia eyed her temperamental brother, who looked to have no intention of settling for something as simple as a walk. “If I agree to leave my chambers,” she began, “Duncan must promise not to approach Michael. Especially not with the intention of summoning a duel.”

Irene smiled. “I believe that to be a fair compromise.” She shot a glare towards their brother. “Don’t you agree, Duncan?”

His dark stare flicked between the two of them before thrusting an accusatory finger in Cordelia’s direction. “A walk, Cordelia,” he snapped. “A long one, at that. Throw in some food afterwards, and I’ll be satisfied.”

Cordelia let a small smile pull across her lips, though she did not feel it to be genuine. “If you wish, brother, I will see it done.”

The Celeston siblings lingered a little longer before taking their leave, satisfied with Cordelia’s agreement to take a walk around Solshire. She left her chambers once they left, ignoring the surprised looks the staff gave her.

Outside of the estate, a thunderstorm approached in the distance. It lingered over the treetops, an enveloping darkness swallowing up the countryside the closer it came. Cordelia quite enjoyed how it looked, and in any other time, she might've found herself quick to capture a painting of the dramatic landscape. The trees seemed to lean towards the oncoming rain, desperate to catch a droplet or two upon its leaves.

Cordelia followed a narrow dirt path around the estate, one that dipped down towards the lake. A gentle wind coaxed ripples throughout the water, the sharp grass swaying back and forth in rhythm with it. Cordelia crept closer to the ominous water, noticing how it reflected the darkness growing in the sky overhead. She went further to the lake, ignoring how the ground became muddy alongside the shore, her indoor shoes failing to provide enough support against it. Despite that, she continued forward still, finding herself to be almost hypnotized by the quiet waves.

Thunder crashed in the distance, jolting Cordelia. She slipped against the mud slightly, her foot dipping into the icy cold water before she managed to regain her balance. But the wobble brought along an unavoidable dizziness, one that came along from her lack of appropriate sustenance. Even when she swayed and trembled, her vision growing unfocused as she looked over the water, Cordelia refused to turn around. There was something about the lake that reminded her of Michael. Perhaps it was the unseen mystery that laid beneath it, or the unusual lull that radiated off it.

Cordelia took another step as a gust of cold wind rushed through her, as if she were made of nothing but bones. The dark storm approached quicker than she thought it would, the wind growing stronger and more forceful with each gust. Cordelia shivered, and the world spun around her. Feeling rather faint, she took a single step away from the lake, realizing that she was close to teetering into unconsciousness.

“Oh!”

Cordelia released a sharp gasp as she lost her footing, the muddy ground giving way

from beneath her. Unlike last time, when she managed to regain her balance, Cordelia lacked the strength to do so. She wavered and shook, her legs giving out and forcing her to tumble into the icy water.

The inky black lake greedily swallowed her up.

For a moment, Cordelia felt rather at home. It was dark and cold, wrapping itself around her like a blanket. She reveled in the lake, everything that had once plagued her slowly slipping out of her mind. But then, as she faced the growing darkness, Cordelia could see Michael's face within it, and the pain rushed back forward.

Cordelia splashed out the surface of the lake, her arms flailing in the air as she desperately clawed against the shore.

“Your Grace!”

Figures ran from the estate, rushing down the short hill and towards the lake. She imagined seeing Michael within the rush of people, imagining that it was him who reached into the darkness for her. Though she knew that hardly wasn't the case, arms hoisted her out of the lake, and rested her against the grassy shore. Cordelia felt the coughs and gasps leave her lips, though she could hardly catch her breath. The cold clung to her mercilessly, her limbs trembling nonstop. Even when cloths were draped across her, even when the arms returned to hoist her off the ground, the chill never left.

“I believe her leg to be fractured,” a voice said on her left.

“We must fetch the doctor,” another exclaimed to her right.

Countless sounds filled the air around Cordelia, but everything was too muddled for her to truly see them. Instead, all she could see was Michael, who stood in front of

her in her imagination. He reached for her, radiating the warmth she seemed unable to grasp. Cordelia tried to reach but her arms felt as heavy as stone. Michael inched further and further away from her, the cold grasping a hold of her heart and refusing to let go. She wished to beg, she wished to plead to be rid of the lake, of how it grasped a hold of her, but it was to no use.

Michael was not at Solshire. Michael did not return in the lick of time to rescue her.

Cordelia wept as the staff carried her back into the estate.

CHAPTER23

The private boxing ring in which Michael had practiced all his life did not hold the same comfort as it used to. Perhaps he was imagining things, but the room echoed darkness all around him. He merely stood within the middle, already dressed in his loose clothes to box, already wearing his thin gloves and padding. A part of him felt as though he had been there for days, maybe even weeks, just standing there. Every once and a while, there would be a voice in the back of his mind, one that desperately called out to him.

“Michael,” the familiar voice said into his ear. “Why did you leave me?”

He flinched and shuttered.

For the last four days, Michael found himself in a pit of unavoidable despair. The life he left behind in Solshire haunted him still, keeping him from sleeping or behaving like a regular person. He saw Cordelia everywhere he looked. She was in the swaying trees outside of his townhouse, she was in the geese that flew overhead. She was the gentle breeze that coaxed his hair, the very grass beneath his feet. She was in everything the light touched. Michael felt as though he was haunted by her, despite death never touching her.

He waited impatiently for Rhys to arrive, pacing throughout the ring. He sent a rushed letter late in the evening a few days ago, imploring him to meet him for a boxing match as soon as he could. Though he had said in the letter that he needed some form of social interaction after parting ways from Cordelia, Michael was well aware of how it was an unmistakable lie. He needed the rush of adrenaline that came with a fight, he needed the feeling of pain to rock through him, he needed the bruises and the scars. And the only person in all of London willing to do such a thing without a single drop of fear, was Rhys.

Behind him, the door to the boxing ring opened.

Rhys stepped inside the room, his regular bag thrown over his shoulder. “You’re early,” he commented nonchalantly as he passed him by, lowering his bag onto a chair and retrieving his things.

“You’re late.”

“No humor in you today?”

Michael glared. “Get your gloves on.”

As he pulled on his protective padding, Rhys straightened up, moving to stand in front of his friend. Rhys had one brow raised quizzically as his eyes looked all over him, the frown growing with each passing second.

“What’s the matter with you?” Rhys asked. “You hardly look like yourself at all.”

Michael pressed his lips together. “I haven’t been sleeping well.”

“That’s it?”

He rolled his eyes, turning around to step into the ring. “Don’t push me, Rhys,” he called out over his shoulder, “And you might find me to not be the best sparring partner.”

Following behind him, Rhys kept the look of concern on his face. “Did you forget

that you invited me, Michael?"

"Of course not."

Rhys shook his head and chuckled humorlessly. "Not that you aren't regularly a grouch," he muttered, "But what happened? Your anger is... It's practically tangible."

Michael raised his fists instead. "You seem to think I asked you here to talk."

"Didn't you?"

"What does it look like, Rhys?"

Leaning against the ring's ropes, Rhys shook his head again. "I can't box with someone who can hardly stand on their own two feet."

Michael frowned. He didn't think he looked that bad, but once he swiveled his head towards one of the mirrors along the wall across from him, he slowly realized what Rhys referred to. There was an echoing dark shadow beneath his eyes, his hair disheveled and entirely unlike himself. He hadn't shaved in a few days, allowing the short hair to grow along his jawline and chin. He looked gaunt and hollow.

"You can take it back, you know."

Michael met his friend's gaze. "What?"

"Whatever you did to Cordelia." Rhys stepped closer to him. "Your reason for leaving. You can take it back, and return to Solshire."

"Why would I want to do that?"

“Look,” Rhys started, sounding rather exasperated, “I think you -”

Michael let out a frustrated grunt and shoved his friend backwards a few steps. “I am in no mood for talking.”

Rhys glared at him. “I won’t fight a man who can hardly stand,” he snarled again.

“Look at me standing, Rhys!” Michael held his arms out. “I wouldn’t have insisted on sparring if I did not believe I could do it.”

Rhys watched him suspiciously for a few moments before letting out a heavy sigh, and raising his fists to his face. Relief flooded through Michael as his friend stepped closer, the determination clear in his eyes. Their fight began rather timidly at first, with Rhys holding back. Michael didn’t realize how little energy he had within him when he failed to dodge the third and fourth punch, hardly able to sustain himself as Rhys’s knuckles made contact with his ribs, then his right side.

By the fifth hit, Michael stumbled backwards, his vision growing foggy and blurred for longer than he expected. He shook his head a few times, desperate to regain himself but still unable to regain his balance. Michael fell against the ropes around the ring, leaning heavily against them.

“It’s no fun winning when you can’t fight back,” Rhys grumbled.

“Who said you won?”

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Rhys rolled his eyes. “Come on, Michael,” he snapped. “Do you take me for a blind man? Perhaps a foolish one, is that it?”

Michael remained silent, determined to stop the room from spinning all around him. He breathed in deeply before pushing himself off the ropes, his fists desperately launching forward without entirely seeing where he was going. Rhys merely needed to side step out of the way, letting Michael tumble till he landed on the opposite side of the ring, leaning against the ropes once more. Rhys paced behind him.

“Michael -”

Letting out a pained grunt, Michael pulled himself off again, the world beginning to take shape around him once more. He threw punches towards Rhys, though his depth perception was wildly off. Rhys kept blocking and parrying, obviously making sure not to deliver another hit to Michael. The frustration grew louder and louder in the back of his head as Rhys continuously avoided landing a punch, merely tapping him on the chest every now and then.

“Rhys,” Michael growled. “Are you a coward?”

“What?”

Michael threw another punch but drastically missed. “You refuse to hit me! You are a coward! I wanted a fight, and you give me a pandering game!” He shouted, dipping forward again and launching his fists forward as fast as he could. “I demanded a fight! I demanded -”

Rhys suddenly lurched forward, ducking beneath Michael's onslaught and delivering a rough shove. Michael crashed down back into the ropes another time, his head swirling. He swayed and rocked, unable to carry himself on his feet as the exhaustion crept into his vision. He shook his head once and another time, but it was to no avail.

Rhys slowly walked towards him, barely even breaking a sweat. "I know what you want," he muttered, "And I refuse to give it to you."

"How can you possibly know a thing?" Michael angrily grunted, desperately trying to hold himself up on the ropes. He could taste the venom in his mouth when he spoke, but he hardly cared. Despite Rhys being his closest friend, the one person he had leaned on throughout his entire life, Michael found himself desperate to hurt him, desperate to poke his buttons till he could unleash some sort of pain upon him. He was beyond desperate for it.

Rhys sighed. "You want me to punish you in a way that you cannot punish yourself."

Silence answered him, only the sound of Michael's heavy pants filling the air.

"Do you want to know how I know that?"

Michael pressed his lips together. He already knew what Rhys was going to say, and it was nothing he wished to hear.

"I lost a cousin to the very heartache you wish to succumb to right now," Rhys continued, not waiting for an answer, his voice rising in anger. "The poor sod went to war for it. Eager to punish himself for the things he had done, but only managing to be lost to everyone who ever loved him. To this very day, Michael, we know not what became of him." Rhys stepped closer, trying to meet Michael's eyes. "Is that the same fate you wish for yourself?"

Michael kept his gaze down, his teeth clenched together so hard it rattled his head.

“Answer me!”

“You know nothing,” Michael finally hissed. It was a lie, he knew, but he wished to convince himself of the opposite. Deep down, Michael was very much aware of how it all seemed, of how it looked to Rhys, and he was entirely right to believe it. Michael sought a punishment for what he had done to Cordelia. He never should have returned in the first place, and that needed to be hammered into his head.

Just like how his father used to crack the whip against his back.

“I look at you now,” Rhys continued, “And do you know who it is I see?”

Michael looked up at him.

“Your father.”

The anger rushed through his arms like adrenaline, pulling him off the ropes almost instantly. He let a yell out, the sound slamming against the walls and echoing throughout the private practice room. The newfound energy in his arms riled Michael forward, allowing him to land punch after punch against Rhys’s chest. His friend stumbled backwards in surprise, his teeth gritted with every hit. Michael was seething as he delivered a hit to his friend's cheek, stunning him further.

Despite the injury delivered to Rhys’s face, he merely spit on the floor, and returned to his stance. “You’re pushing Cordelia away,” he shouted, “In the same way the old Duke pushed your mother, pushed her all the way to -”

“Shut up!” Michael growled. “Say another word, Rhys, and you’ll regret it!”

“Why? Because you know I am right?”

Michael surged forward, shoving Rhys against the ropes. He continued forward still, clutching his friend's collar in his hands, raising a fist over his head. Despite this, Rhys remained still beneath his hold, meeting his clenched fist straight on.

“You are taking away the best thing that has happened to you,” Rhys said through gritted teeth, a bruise already forming on his cheek, “And for what? To prove a point to yourself? To become more like the beastly Duke that all of London already believes you to be?”

“You are wrong!”

“Am I?” Rhys shook his head. “They said the same about your father, and you know that. You grow more like him with each passing day, and you are too afraid to admit it!”

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“This is not the same!” Michael’s hands shook as he held onto Rhys’s collar. The scars his father once gave him peered out from beneath his clothes, taunting him in a dreadfully poignant way. “Leaving was the best thing I could do for her! Without me, she has a chance! She has a real chance!”

“For what?” Rhys snapped. “A sorrow as long as life itself?”

Michael was breathing heavily, the truth of his pain beginning to reveal itself. “Do you really believe I do not look in the mirror, and see that cursed man staring back at me?”

Rhys faltered slightly.

“My mother was trapped,” he whispered. “My mother was forced to endure a darkness she was incapable of surviving on her own. I am doing the honorable thing, the one option my father refused to do. The honorable thing.”

“What is honorable about this?”

Michael’s hold over Rhys’s collar loosened. “Everything, Rhys.”

“But -”

“I cannot divorce her,” he said. “The least I can do - the only thing - is to grant her freedom. The one thing I am capable of.”

Rhys’s lips tugged into a frown. “Michael -”

“I am through with this.”

Releasing his hold on his friend, Michael slipped out from beneath the ropes, and stumbled towards the chairs. Words he never wished to expel now hung in the air all around him. He wished to be free of the pain that haunted him, to feel something other than Cordelia’s phantom touch across his lips. He felt as though she was within him still, holding onto his very soul without any intention of ever letting go.

Michael reached his bag, already undoing the wraps around his hands and removing the gloves. There were aches all across his chest and sides, Rhys’s sharp punches sure to leave bruises along his skin.

“I believe you hold yourself in a regard much lower than what you deserve,” Rhys said from behind him.

Michael shook his head. “You said it yourself. I become more like my father with every passing day.”

“Continue on this path,” Rhys replied, “And there won’t be any chance of bringing you back. You understand that, don’t you?” He walked till he stood in front of Michael, his gaze hard and persistent. “The only one stopping you from becoming like the old Duke is yourself.”

Michael wished for it to be as easy as that. “I cannot return, Rhys. Cordelia deserves far more than a marriage like what my parents had.”

“Then don’t let it come to that!”

“Can’t you see?” Michael snapped desperately, stunted by the own weakness in his voice, something he hadn’t heard in quite a long time. “It is far too late to turn back! I have abandoned her already, I have already left her behind. In what life do you see

her letting me back into her heart?”

Rhys reached and rested his hand over Michael's shoulder, giving him a reassuring squeeze. “You will never know until you dare to try.”

Michael watched his friend's face fill with a hope he could not match. Perhaps if he was stronger or more resilient, he could nod his head and make his way back to Solshire. He could try to imagine a future where he was a kind husband, a man who would one day raise a family and leave behind a legacy. But now, when he thought it over, Michael only saw the same despair that once plagued his mother. He saw a life ended at his hands. He saw Cordelia's future ripped away from her. At least, in solitude, Cordelia could do as she pleased. She might build another orangery, if that was what she wished for.

He would see it through, no matter what.

Michael's lips parted to speak, right when the door to their private room snapped open. Shrouded by the afternoon light, all Michael saw at first was a tall silhouette storming towards him. The closer the figure came, the more his vision sharpened, and he recognized the man as Duncan Celeston, Cordelia's older brother.

Immediately, Michael was put on edge at the sight of him, questions blaring through the back of his mind. What could have brought the man to him in such a rush, with such a flurry of anger behind him?

“Michael Rayson,” Duncan exclaimed, his voice shrouded by a growl, his cheeks burning a brilliant red. “I call you to a duel of honor!”

Michael's brow shot up in surprise. Rhys was moments away from stepping in front of him, but he shot his arm out, stopping him from doing so. “Duncan,” he said, walking towards him, “What is the meaning of this? In what vein have I insulted your

honor to force you to make such a drastic measure?"

"Do not act as if you are unaware of the things you have done!" Duncan stormed closer, thrusting his hand forward accusingly. "Your selfish actions for solitude have left my dear sister to the wolves, an innocent girl who has done nothing more than follow the things our father demanded her to do!"

Michael shook his head, the words swimming around his head. "To the wolves?" he repeated. "What do you speak of? Is Cordelia -"

"You have no right to even speak her name!" Duncan surged forward, violence obvious in his eyes. It was not until Rhys slipped around, stopping him from doing something he might've regretted later. Rhys held him by the shoulders, planting his feet on the ground to fight against Duncan's obvious strength.

Michael almost had a mind to tell Rhys to let him go, to take every hit Duncan was willing to give. But before he could even think to do such a thing, the Celeston sibling continued shouting, his voice bouncing off the walls and hitting Michael like a punch to each cheek.

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“My sister has been harmed because of you,” Duncan spat. “My sister fell into that damned lake because of you. She lies in a bed like a dying bird because of you!”

Michael’s eyes went wide. That damned lake.

A flash of a memory he wished to keep trapped and buried deep within him rose to the surface, threatening to bring Michael to his knees right then and there. Instead, he shoved it aside, the world around him growing red with a hot and unavoidable rage. No longer did he care of Duncan’s presence or even Rhys’s. Where he was did not matter. None of it meant a single thing. There was only Cordelia, and she was wounded. Hurt, all because of him.

Michael stormed forward, his shoulder shoving past Duncan. Snatching his coat from beside the door, he surged out of the private boxing ring, racing towards where he had left his horse. In the distance, a thunderstorm crept closer and closer to London’s city streets. Michael ignored the threat of rain, throwing himself onto the back of his horse and gripping onto the reins as though they were tethered to his life. He pressed his heel into the horse’s side, and snapped the reins.

Within an instant, he was racing forward, shooting through the city streets and towards the countryside, where Solshire stood. All throughout the ride, even when the rain began to pelt down over him, Michael imagined seeing Cordelia within the inky dark lake, her pale body standing out like a bolt of lightning within the darkened sky.

Michael pushed himself faster, her name already on his lips.

Cordelia.

CHAPTER 24

Crash!

Thunder rocked through the countryside as Michael's steed clobbered down the dirt roads towards Solshire. The streaming rain blurred his vision, but didn't dare stop him in his tracks. The loose clothes he wore for his boxing session stuck to his skin, and the coat he wore flew out behind him, catching the stream of wind. Thunder slammed into the earth another time, jolting Michael as he gripped onto the reins tighter.

All he could imagine was seeing Cordelia's nimble body floating in the lake. Swimming in the inky darkness before haunting tendrils wrapped around her ankles to slowly pull her into its mysteries. Michael saw her pale white hands erecting out from between the waves every time he closed his eyes, using it as fuel to push him even faster. Though he never considered himself to be a devoutly religious man, Michael couldn't stop the prayers from echoing in the back of his mind. He prayed for retribution, to be forgiven. He prayed for Cordelia's safety. He prayed for her life.

Solshire appeared within the midst of the dreadful storm. In the distance, as he flew over a hill, the orangery caught Michael's eye, looking like a sanctuary. He went to the front stairs of the estate, leaping off his horse and throwing the reins over the saddle. Perhaps the horse would make its way back to the stables, but he hardly cared. All that mattered was reaching Cordelia.

Michael shot up the front steps of Solshire, all the way to the front doors. Dripping with rainwater, he ripped the doors open, and stepped within the drafty and dark halls. There wasn't a servant or member of staff in sight, just as he expected. As his clothes made a mess on the floor, Michael ran through the halls and up another grand staircase, his heart hammering like a drum the closer he came to Cordelia's chambers.

The panic that settled within his chest was all too familiar. He inched closer to the bedroom door, which was cracked slightly, his hand already outstretched. His fingers twitched and quivered, a tremble passing through his entire body. A question, one that he hated to even consider, slipped through his mind, growing louder and louder as his hand reached for the doorknob.

What if she perishes? What then?

Michael shook his head till he felt as though everything within him was rattling. The door swung open with a gentle push. He stepped over the threshold, and was met with a great warmth. A fire roasted in the furnace, the windows sealed shut and the curtains drawn. Every spare pillow and blanket had been thrown onto the bed, covering an incredibly pale figure with thick sheets. Michael crept closer.

Michael never considered Cordelia to have ever been petite or small, but within the fluffed sheets and pillows, she looked no bigger than his finger. Chestnut colored hair sprawled out beneath her, looking much longer than he remembered. The freckles that once danced across her tanned skin stood out like stars across the bridge of her nose, the deep color of her skin no longer as it should be. Her left leg poked out from beneath the covers, a few extra pillows placed beneath it to prop it up. Michael eyed the bandages and felt his heart sink to the floor beneath his feet.

Michael collapsed to his knees at her bedside.

Everything felt all too familiar. Suddenly, he lost himself, grasping at the fringes of his life but hardly able to see where he really stood. He looked upon Cordelia and he also saw his mother, though her fate was not as forgiving. He reached, taking a hold of her small hand within his own. The scars along his palms rubbed against her soft and gentle skin, his calluses rubbing against her smoothness. He stared and watched his own hands tremble, his composure left out within the raging storm.

“Forgive me,” he murmured, barely hearing himself over the raging thoughts in his head.

Somehow, it always came back to that. He would never be able to leave the trauma and nightmare that held onto him. Fate had a way of reminding him of all the things that once plagued him, taking the one beautiful thing he had and thrusting it towards the same mistake. In the end, everything he ever loved went out to that lake, and they never returned the same.

His hands shook more as his vision muddled, unsure of whether or not he knelt at his mother’s coffin or his wife’s bedside. Michael lowered himself, his lips falling upon Cordelia’s icy cold hand. He kissed her knuckles, the tips of her fingers, the rough patch on her palm. He kissed her hand and whispered against her skin, desperate for his words to reach her in some shape or form.

“Forgive me,” he whispered again. “I do not deserve it, but forgive me.”

Michael’s shoulders shook as he lowered himself, unable to lift his face to see the horror in front of him. He gripped onto her hand as tightly as he could, as if that would stop the cold from claiming her.

“Michael?”

He shook his head, his eyes hot and burning from the despair that was beginning to grab a hold of him. Who was it that called out for him? The voice rang familiar, but it was too distant to tell.

“Michael.”

Perhaps it was his mother, coming to claim another woman from his life.

“Michael!”

Perhaps it was his regrets and mistakes, all ready to grab a hold of him and to never let go. To plague him for as long as he lived. He remembered the portrait Cordelia drew of him, the likeliness of her work without ever needing him to pose for her. How had he not realized the power and love behind something like that? Why did he leave after Mrs. Bellflower handed that to him?

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Why did he leave Cordelia to the same fate his father subjected his mother to?

“Michael,” the voice came again, “Look at me.”

The voice strangely sounded like Cordelia, but he knew that wasn’t possible. He pressed his face into her hand, desperate to feel her touch though he knew it would never be the same. A shudder ran through his body. It would never be the same again.

Michael was too far within his memories to notice how Cordelia was leaning forward in her bed, reaching with her other arm to wrap herself around him. Her breath, steady and even, trickled down his shoulder, brushing the hair on his neck. Despite how drenched he was from the rain, the side of Cordelia’s face pressed against his own, her warm cheek almost jolting him backwards.

She was warm.

“Michael,” Cordelia murmured into his ear. “Michael, open your eyes.”

He blinked a few times before he realized what was happening. The room came rushing back to him, the roasting fire on one end already in the process of drying his clothes. Cordelia stretched across him, holding her arms around his neck and squeezing as hard as her slender frame allowed her to. Even with the wound at her leg, even though the cold threatened to nip at her. She came for him all the same, trying to bring him back to the reality he stepped away from. Michael inhaled deeply, recognizing her citrusy scent, and wrapped his arms around her torso.

“My Cordelia.” The words came out before he could even think about them.

They remained like that for a few moments, merely holding one another. The shakes threatened to come back to Michael every now and then, but Cordelia merely tightened her embrace on him, as if she was trying to hold all of his fractured pieces together. All the words they never said hung in the air above their heads, and Michael was desperate to let them out. Even if Cordelia wished for him to leave in the end, too betrayed by how he had left a second time, Michael would still say what he needed to say, and he would leave her all the same.

Michael pulled himself out from her tight grasp, holding her upper arms and guiding her back towards the bed, before taking a seat beside her. He reached to tuck a thick strand of brown hair behind her ear. Cordelia, much to his surprise, leaned into his feather-like touch.

“You came back,” she whispered.

Michael sighed. “I came back.”

“Why?”

“I-I thought you were,” he began, the panic quickly returning to him. He looked up at her window, where she could see the lake. He fisted the sheets, trying to stop himself from trembling like a madman but hardly able to control it. “I thought that the lake had claimed you. And I cannot - I cannot - I cannot lose you.”

Cordelia’s eyes widened.

“I love you,” he whispered, staring into her sharp green eyes. “I love you, and I will drain the lake if that would make you happy. I love you, and I will fly into an untamable rage if I were ever to lose you.” Michael raised her hand to his lips, merely brushing the skin against him, desperate for her contact. “Anything you ask, anything you wish, I will deliver, as long as you never leave me, Cordelia.”

Her eyes searched his face quietly for a moment, her expression warping into something of concern. “Michael,” she finally said, a small smile tugging at her lips, “You need not do grand things to have me.” Cordelia’s smile broadened. “I love you. I loved you before you left. I still love you now.”

Michael shuddered again, the words falling over him like the torrential rain outside her window. He leaned forward, his forehead falling against her arm. He did not feel close enough, still wrangling with the idea that she did not survive the lake, that at any given point, she’d be whisked away from him without another word. He gripped onto her tightly, determined to keep her beside him.

“Michael,” she breathed, using her small hand to raise his face, “Why do you look so burdened? I am alright, I promise. It was a silly fall, with no one to blame other than myself. The doctor said my leg was fractured, and the cold air threatened to take me, but I am well.” Cordelia grasped at his face, forcing him to stare into her eyes. “I am well, Michael.”

“But you could have not been,” he murmured.

Cordelia’s head tilted. “Tell me what burdens you.”

“I cannot.”

“You can,” she said. “Perhaps you were unable to in the past, but I am not your past, Michael.” She straightened to sit up on the bed, meeting his eyes and refusing to let them go. “I wish to be your future. And the only way forward, is to relinquish that which burdens you. Rest it upon my shoulders, so that I might carry it for you.”

Michael stared at her with wide eyes. Never had another person said such words to him, in a way that resonated deeply within his heart. There wasn’t any doubt behind her voice, no betraying emotions that meant she didn’t really wish to hear it. Cordelia

wanted to know his truth, and he was beginning to feel as though he could release it.

“I feel as though that lake was meant to torment me all my life,” he finally murmured.

Cordelia sighed. “It is only a lake.”

“Perhaps,” he whispered, “But it has swallowed more than simply water.”

Her eyes narrowed as she watched him, entirely listening to what he had to say.

“It has always been known that my father, the old Duke, was a beast of a man,” he began to explain. “When the time came for him to take a wife, he found my mother, who wished for nothing - except for her freedom. The marriage between them was forced down her throat. The old Duke grew older, and he needed an heir from a young wife to continue his legacy. Courtship was out of his hands. And so, he took what he wanted, and got everything he needed.”

Michael gulped down his fears, and continued. “Not long after their marriage, my mother tried to escape from Solshire, only to find out that she was pregnant, and was too bound to my father to even consider leaving.”

“So she returned?”

He nodded. “Perhaps many people might have assumed her mind would have been changed the moment she gave birth,” Michael said. “Perhaps she even believed that herself, though it never truly came. My mother could hardly look at me, not without scowling and turning away angrily.”

Cordelia reached, taking one of his hands within both of hers.

“She tried to be the mother everyone expected to be,” Michael said. “Though she was never truly affectionate. And when the old Duke decided it was time to begin his... violence against me, to shape me into the man I was meant to be, my mother tried to stop it. She tried, and earned the whip herself.”

Cordelia gasped, one hand covering her mouth. “He hit her?”

“More than I probably know,” he replied. “In the end, her resentment no longer only rested within her husband, but was rather shared between him and I, as though we were both the causes of her entrapment in Solshire. Which,” Michael paused, the guilt already grabbing a hold of his neck, “I can hardly blame her for.”

“Being born is not your fault.” Cordelia’s gaze grew hardened. “You understand that, don’t you? The blame is meant for the old Duke.”

“There is only one of us alive, Cordelia, and I doubt one feels regret in the afterlife.”

Cordelia’s lips parted. Instead of saying anything else, she lifted Michael’s hands to

her lips, pressing a gentle kiss against his knuckles, another along his creeping scars. She did it till he felt the courage to speak again.

“I was ten years old when it happened.”

Cordelia looked up. “When what happened, Michael?”

Michael could not recall the last time he even dared to speak the words aloud. They haunted his mind, without fail, always lingering within him even when he refused to think about it. Even his father refused to mention it, due to the distaste that surrounded it. Not a soul within London knew the truth behind her death, believing it to have been a dreadful accident that ended with a young life being stolen from a growing family. He could remember the funeral as if it happened yesterday: the opened mausoleum, the socialites from London flooding in and out of Solshire. He remembered their whispers and murmurs, the gossip already beginning, even before her body grew cold.

Michael trembled.

“Do not be afraid,” Cordelia whispered. “I will protect you from the pain that haunts you.”

And when he looked upon his wife, seeing the determination within her eyes, Michael knew that she believed every word she said. “My spitfire,” he murmured.

“I mean it.”

Michael gave her a small smile. “I know.” He drew in a long sigh, readying the words that felt like a curse to speak aloud. “My mother took her life. I found her. In the lake.”

Her eyes were the widest he had ever seen them. Cordelia gripped onto him tighter, her mouth opening and closing as she searched for the right words to say. Michael felt as though a cavity within him was being filled, the words said aloud finally pulling the despair out from within him. The only other person who knew the truth of his mother's passing was Rhys, and he knew from how many years they spent alongside each other. To speak the words aloud to Cordelia felt like their marriage was becoming solidified, the bond between them finally snapping into something resilient, something strong. It would take far more than a simple few days apart to drive them away from each other.

When Michael looked back at his wife, tears streamed down her face.

"Cordelia," he murmured, reaching to swipe the sadness away. "Do not weep."

She fell into his chest, pressing her face against his clothes, despite how damp they still were from his ride. She burrowed herself within him, as if she wished to be united with his beating heart.

"No one deserves such a story to start their lives," Cordelia finally whispered. "To be plagued with a burden that was never theirs to carry. What rested upon your mother's shoulders was not meant for you, and yet, you still embraced it as your own. You never deserved such a thing. And neither did she."

Michael gently pulled her off his chest to look into her eyes, one hand tucked beneath her chin. "Which is why I left you, Cordelia," he whispered.

"What?"

"My father knew I would be plagued with my past, incapable of taking a wife after seeing what my mother was forced to do, how it brought her such an unbearable sadness." Michael shook his head. "And so, he wrote it into his will, that I would be

forced to marry in order to take a hold of everything that belonged to me.” Michael buried his shame deep within his chest, desperate to expel everything he wished to say. “On the night of our marriage, I saw you within your window, and I believed...I believed you intended to take your life. All because you married me.”

“Michael,” Cordelia whispered, her shoulders falling.

“And when I left days ago,” he continued, “I only wished to grant you freedom from a marriage that could plague you for the rest of your life. It was all I could give to you.”

“Michael.” She grabbed a hold of his face, her warm hands pressing into his cheeks. “I wish for nothing more than to be beside you for the rest of my days.”

He pressed his lips together. “You should think about it before -”

“I have thought for days,” she whispered. “I have imagined my life pressing forward on two different paths, and each time, I always chose the one that is by your side. You said before that you would give me anything I wished.”

Michael nodded fervently. “Anything.”

“I wish for you to say.”

For the first time in his life, Michael felt something other than darkness and despair fill the emptiness within his chest. Instead, there was a timid light in his heart, steadily growing stronger and stronger. The future he never believed he could have, the one that had been torn away from him, suddenly seemed to be within his reach. He flinched at it, unsure if he could trust that light that was beginning to grow. But then his eyes fell upon Cordelia once more, and the feeling of her hands over his cheeks became more and more apparent.

Michael leaned into her hand, no longer doubting if she’d be able and willing to hold him up. And when he spoke again, there was nothing but certainty in his voice, a strength he forgot he had within him all along.

“Then I shall stay.”

Cordelia smiled and closed the space between them, pressing a delicate and feather-like kiss to his lips. He let his eyes flutter shut, breathing her in and letting the hope cascade over him like a waterfall.

Life, he realized, had never tasted so sweet.

CHAPTER 25

The sun crept in through the windows late in the morning. While the countryside was

doused with a grand thunderstorm, the morning after was something of a heaven like beauty. The colors of the earth glistened in the sunlight after soaking up all the rain. Grass shimmered a deeply pungent green, while the trees were sturdier than ever before, housing all sorts of creatures that were ready to see what the rain managed to pull out of the soil. Fresh buds of wildflowers began to grow, their roots already stretching into the land below.

And the sky was immaculately clear, the brightest blue Cordelia had ever seen. The first thought she had when her eyes lazily opened was to retrieve her canvas. Everything was far too beautiful for her to ignore it, demanding to be memorialized with her paint. But then, the moment she was about to jerk out of her bed, Cordelia remembered the events that transpired late in the previous evening.

Beside her, partly sitting on a plush chair and leaning heavily on the bed, was Michael. He slept soundly, his breathing deep and heavy. Dark brown hair fell across his neck and face, slightly curled from the rain he was forced to endure. From where she sat, the scars he bared crept up from beneath his collar, striking his tanned skin and shimmering in the light. Cordelia reached, twisting her fingers within his hair and moving them from his eyes. Perhaps the world outside of Solshire was presenting itself in a beauty demanded to be painted, but Cordelia could only see Michael, and all of his glory.

Her fingers lingered on his neck, delicately tracing the scars, when he began to stir. Cordelia jerked her hand away, almost embarrassed. The last time she had seen him in such a vulnerable state was when she entered the bathroom after he had just finished, his scar filled back entirely exposed to her. Now, there was a difference in his vulnerability, one that was not out of accident or mere folly. What happened next was entirely real, and Cordelia found herself unable to believe it right away.

Michael lifted his head, his eyes furrowed as he tried to wake himself up. When he looked upon her, his dark eyes crinkled as a smile tugged at his lips.

A smile, Cordelia thought to herself. When was the last time she had truly seen him smile?

“Good morning,” he said, his voice cracked and hoarse from sleep. “Are you well?”

Cordelia looked down at her leg. “I believe I am,” she replied. “Though I might be bedridden longer than I’d like.”

“Healing is important.”

“Bed rest for at least a week is more like torture than the words of a healer,” Cordelia teased, unable to tread to the more important things that lurked in her mind. Their early morning interaction felt like a fever dream, one she came up with all on her own.

Michael returned with a teasing smirk. “Perhaps we should make that a fortnight, then.”

Cordelia laughed, hardly able to keep it in any longer.

She glanced back at him, holding his intense stare. The longer they remained in silence, the more she remembered their talk the night before. Everything came rushing back to her, a heat rising to her face. Perhaps she had imagined it all, and he returned to only see if she needed any assistance. Maybe her dreams were plagued with the idea of him devoting himself to her, admitting his love as she said it back. It couldn’t have all been true, could it? It was far too fantastical, far too good to be really true.

“Michael,” she finally said. “Was it all real?”

His brow furrowed. “Was what real?”

“Everything,” she whispered. “Everything that was said.”

Michael’s face softened. He reached, tucking one of her curls behind her ear, his fingertips lingering on the curve of her cheek. The touch was simple but heavy, pulling a feeling of pleasure out from her stomach.

“It was real.”

She breathed a sigh of relief. “If not, it would’ve been the grandest dream I ever had.”

“I am glad it was not a dream,” he said. “Are you?”

Cordelia returned his smile. “I am more than glad, Michael.”

Michael watched her closely, the corner of his lip turned upwards. “I got your painting, you know.”

“What?”

“The portrait,” he explained. “Mrs. Bellflower gave it to me before I left.”

Cordelia’s jaw slacked for a second before she snapped her mouth shut. She hadn’t even stopped to consider what the housekeeper decided to do with the piece of art. Though she remembered telling her to burn the thing, she was very glad the housekeeper decided against it. But, now as she avoided Michael’s watchful gaze, she wished to hide beneath the covers in embarrassment. The painting would have remained in the dark of her closet, if she had a say in it. She looked down at her hands, pulling up her blankets.

“Are you ashamed?” Michael asked.

“Well, I -” she stopped herself, her shoulders falling. “Yes.”

“What on earth for?”

Cordelia frowned. “Well, i-it was poorly done, you see, and I’d much rather -”

Sweeping forward suddenly, Michael caught her lips on his own, the kiss gentle but full of an unmistakable emotion. Warmth swelled within Cordelia’s chest. When he pulled away, his face looked as flushed as hers felt, the smile already growing along his lips.

“I plan on putting each and every one of your paintings up within Solshire.” He tilted his head, his smile growing into something mischievous. “Every last one.”

“All of them?”

Michael grinned. “All of them.”

After being an aspiring artist for so long, Cordelia never believed her work to be stellar enough to be put along a wall. There were a few in the orangery, but she always doubted there’d be other eyes looking at them. To put them within Solshire felt like an honor she never knew she was destined to be granted. Perhaps she was a true artist after all.

Cordelia was moments away from kissing him again, hardly able to come up with any words that were grand enough to express her gratitude, when a knock came from the door.

Michael rose and straightened his clothes.

The door crept open and Mrs. Bellflower stuck her head inside, her eyes almost popping out of her head at the sight of Michael.

“Y-Your Grace!” she exclaimed. “I had no idea you returned!” She glanced down at Cordelia, her lip twitching into a smile. “And all the color has come back to your face, your Grace! What splendid news!” She pressed into the room, leaving the door ajar. “If you are able to take visitors, your Grace, your siblings have arrived to see how you are faring.”

Cordelia glanced at Michael, who merely looked at her for an answer. “You may let them in, Mrs. Bellflower. Thank you.”

Michael quickly leaned over the bed, trying to get a few words out before the pair of siblings arrived within the chambers. “There is something I should -”

But then the Celeston siblings shot into the room, Irene quickly diving to Cordelia's side. The moment Duncan trickled in after her, his eyes snapped towards Michael, his posture changing into something aggressive and forward.

"You," Duncan spat, ready to point an accusatory finger at her husband. The anger stormed to his face almost instantly, as if the rage had been brewing there all along, just waiting for the moment it could be expelled.

Michael raised his hands. "I do not wish to duel you."

Cordelia almost snapped up out of the bed, ignoring the bandages over her leg. "Duel?" She glared towards Duncan. "Did I not tell you, brother, to be rid of that foolish idea?"

"You fell into the lake, Cordelia!"

"Which was no one's fault!"

Michael stepped closer to Duncan, bowing his head down respectfully. "The blame, despite what my gracious wife insists, rests on my shoulders," he began. "I will take it and remember it for as long as I live." Straightening himself, he faced Duncan with a serious and affirming stare. "The rest of my life will be spent making up for it. I have no plans of leaving Solshire again, and I hope that one day you might be able to place your trust with me, though I know that is something to be earned."

Duncan, who was normally not one to be easily surprised, gaped at Michael. His eyes flickered towards Cordelia and Irene, his mouth opening and closing like a fish on land. As the silence began to settle into something awkward, Duncan cleared his throat, and stuck his hand out towards Michael.

"That was... Quite a fine start," Duncan said with a nod.

Michael shook his hand, the both of them sharing incredibly stoic looks.

“Well,” Irene drawled, her attention turning back towards Cordelia, “Now that the gentlemen are finished playing -” she paused to hold the side of her sister’s face, “ - How are you?”

Cordelia breathed in deeply as she overlooked the people around her. All her life, she was burdened with the idea of who she wasn’t, and how it was the person everyone else expected. Instead of being wed when she was meant to be, Cordelia avoided it like a disease, intent on keeping her freedom or succumbing to a genuine love. In the end, she did what it was that her father demanded, and somehow managed to be beside Michael, a once beastly man who finally showed his true colors.

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She thought about how, once, she was painting a flock of geese on the front lawn of her home, intent on one day becoming free like them. It turned out that freedom showed itself in many different ways, and the one in which she found herself in was exactly what she had been seeking out all along. Cordelia reached for her sister's hand, and gave it a tight squeeze, her next words more genuine than they had ever been before.

"I am beyond well, Irene," she said.

Her sister's brow shot up. "Is that so?" She touched her aching leg. "Even with a fracture?"

"Even with a fracture."

"You might not paint for a few more days."

"Then so be it," Cordelia replied. She reached out towards Michael, eagerly taking his hand within her own and pressing a short kiss to his palm. "I have all that I need, right here."

Irene glanced between them, her smile growing more and more. "How wonderful," she murmured. With a deep sigh, she picked herself off the bed, and crossed the room, her arm tucked alongside Duncan's. "Come along, brother," she said.

He frowned. "But -"

"Didn't you hear our little sister?" Irene smiled, her eyes glossy with emotion. "I

believe she is quite well.”

The Celeston siblings quickly said their goodbyes before leaving Cordelia’s chambers, shutting the door gently behind them. There was a sound in the distance, one that was familiar but muffled by the shut windows.

“Michael,” Cordelia said. “Can you help me to the window?”

He frowned. “What for?”

“Can you hear them?”

“Hear what?”

Cordelia laughed. “Just help me up!”

Michael rounded the bed, tucking an arm around her waist before hoisting her out from beneath the sheets. Carefully, he allowed her to lean her weight against him, her fractured leg hovering in the air. They stumbled towards the window, and Michael pulled up a chair before resting her back on it. He pushed the window open as much as he could, keeping one steady and cautious hand on the back of her chair.

Cordelia leaned forward, breathing in the summer breeze. It smelt like rain, still, and freshly ground up earth. Below, she could see the orangery, the sun hitting the glass ceiling brightly. The gardens were being tended to, the flowers looking better than they ever had since the storm. A few members of staff walked outside, using shears to work on the wide hedge maze. But it wasn’t any of that that caught her attention. No, there was a sound in the distance, quickly coming over the roof of Solshire and flying off to a place she could not see or even imagine.

A flock of geese went by overhead, their honks filling the morning air. Cordelia’s

face lit up with a beaming smile, unable to look away from their beauty. Beside her, Michael watched the same flock, the corner of his lip tugging upwards.

Cordelia, suddenly, felt incredibly content with herself, unable to spot the smile from stretching so far that it ached.

Everything was just as it was supposed to be.

EPILOGUE

Before the summer season managed to melt into a chilly autumn, Cordelia managed to get Michael to take a swim in the lake alongside her. Though the months of convincing were troubled and hard, the trust they built between each other was too hard for either one of them to ignore. And Cordelia could hardly stand how his body tensed up at the sight of the lake, how he clenched his hands into fists and forced himself to look the other way. Despite everything terrible that happened within the dark waters, Cordelia wished for him to understand that it was not the fault of nature, but rather the mind of man.

It was the early afternoon one day, and they lounged within the orangery. Cordelia finished another painting, one that was of the front of Solshire, and was struggling to find a place to hang it up. While Michael spent days growing through the paintings already hanging within the estate, Cordelia chose her own pieces that were fit for her orangery, without any embarrassment daring to come up her throat. She placed the canvas on a hook beside a few plants, a ray of light sliding through the windows and landing on that particular spot. She stepped away, hands on her hips, as she looked over it.

“I believe,” a familiar voice cooed from behind her, “It isn’t straight.”

Cordelia frowned and held up her thumb. The painting’s edge lined up with her hand.

“Well, it looks mighty straight to me!”

Arms came around her waist suddenly. “No, no,” Michael murmured from behind her, twisting her around to step closer to the painting. “Don’t you see?” He tapped the corner, and the canvas swayed till it landed on being off centered. “Not straight at all.”

“You trouble maker,” Cordelia muttered as she wrangled herself out of his grasp. She stepped forward and fixed the painting. “What do you think?”

Michael stepped closer and looked over it, the corner of his lip turning up in a smile. “Incredible likeness,” he said. His eyes trailed to one side, where the beginning of the lake could be seen in the painting. Michael straightened and cleared his throat. “There was something I wished to say, Cordelia.”

“What is it?”

He hesitated and glanced around the orangery, his hand grazing over a particularly large leaf. Cordelia couldn’t help but watch and admire him. A few years ago, when they first were married, she wouldn’t have ever imagined seeing him in such a comfortable way alongside her. Even months ago, when he came back to Solshire to put an end to the rumors plaguing their names. But, after he could finally open up to her, Cordelia began to slowly witness the true Michael Rayson, a brilliantly stoic man who had a heart of gold buried beneath his beastly atmosphere.

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And with each passing day, Cordelia grew more in love with that man.

Michael finally drew in a long breath, his eyes falling on her once more. "I can do it," he said. "I will do it."

She raised a brow. "It?"

"The -" he huffed irritably, arms crossing over his chest. "The lake, Cordelia. I'll take a swim in the lake, if you still insist on -"

Cordelia jumped in the air and clapped a few times. The excitement rushed through her. After so long of asking and wanting, arguing against the trauma that lay within him, Michael was finally ready to face his fears alongside her. Cordelia bit back her immense pride for him, not wanting to embarrass him out of his decision. Instead, she closed the gap between them, and grasped onto his hands.

"The sun is bright and warm today, Michael," she exclaimed. "A perfect day for swimming!"

"If you say so," he muttered.

Cordelia, ignoring his sour attitude, began to tug him out of the orangery, and back towards the estate. The staff readily prepared their swimwear, along with a few long sheets for drying. Cordelia could hardly contain herself as she awaited Michael to join her. When she first came to Solshire, she imagined what it would be like to have springs alongside the lake, or a hot summer beside the cool water. She imagined taking children out there, having moments alone, or simply alongside Michael. But

his resilient antagonist perspective of the lake stopped those things from being real.

When he left the estate, following behind her to the lake, Cordelia could feel the tension begin to radiate off him. She paused in her path to reach for his hand, holding him tight as they continued forward. The sun was directly over their heads, rendering the water cool to the touch.

“Are you alright?” Cordelia asked him, her thumb circling over his scars.

Michael pressed his lips together and nodded.

Perhaps the only way forward was to have fun with it, showing Michael that the water was nothing to be feared, but merely enjoyed. It did not need to be a place of sorrow, if he did not wish for it to be. Cordelia inched closer to the shore, slipping one foot in.

“What if there are fish?” Michael suddenly blurted. “You wouldn’t want to swim over fish, would you?” He shook his head. “I’m sure you wouldn’t.”

Cordelia smirked. “Who are you trying to convince, Michael?”

“Well, I certainly am no man who would be afraid of some lake fish.”

She shrugged, slipping deeper within the water. “I am a woman,” she called out, “Whocertainlyisn’t afraid of the fish.”

His face burnt redder from her teasing. “If you are trying to imply something,” Michael paused to let a proud grin pass over his lips, “Then perhaps you should getoutof the water, and tell it to me.”

“Perhaps,” Cordelia mocked, the water coming up to her hips. She watched Michael’s

eyes widen, his hands clench and release. “Aren’t you warm, Michael? You look a little red. The water will cool you right off!”

Michael frowned, growing redder by the second. “If insulting and teasing me is your strategy to get me comfortable with the lake, you are dreadfully mistaken.” Turning around on his heel, he began to stubbornly march up the hill, back towards the estate.

Cordelia, dipped down into the water, scooping up a handful and throwing it in his direction. The water flew through the air till it landed with a splash across Michael’s back. He froze in his tracks, slowly turning around with a menacing look on his face. She covered her mouth, trying to hide the laughter but hardly able to do so.

“You find that funny, don’t you?” Michael snapped.

“I do, actually!” She swiped a stray tear from her eye. “You got in your swim clothes, Michael! You have to get them wet, at least!”

Michael rested his hands on his hips angrily, a smile beginning to peak out. “Well, you are far too drenched for the both of us. Let’s go back.”

“You are extraordinarily stubborn.”

He scoffed. “And you, Cordelia Celeston, are entirely too adventurous.” As he spoke, he drew closer and closer to the edge of the lake. Whether or not he realized it, he was as close as Cordelia had ever seen him go towards the water. Another step, and he’d practically be dipping his toes in it.

Cordelia grinned. “Is there really such a thing?”

“There is,” he replied. “And you read about it in novels!”

She laughed again. “All this to try and get me out of the water, or to keep you from having to come in?”

“There will be far too much to clean up if I go in.”

“Since when do you do any of the cleaning?”

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Michael glared, though he couldn't come up with a logical argument for it. He leaned over the water slightly as Cordelia waded further into the lake. "Have you felt those fish yet, darling?"

"Not quite," she called out. "Perhaps I should go under and look for one!"

"Have you gone mad, Cordelia?"

She giggled. "Heavens, no, Michael." Wading her arms through the water, she swam closer to where he stood. "There is no need to go under the water. I was only teasing."

Michael crossed his arms, trying to look defiant though the relief was rather obvious in his expression. "You seem to insinuate that I am afraid of the water."

"Aren't you?"

"Of course not!" He shrugged his shoulders. "I only think of what has happened due to its presence, and I see no point in treading closer to it."

"Why?"

"Well," he replied, "I wouldn't want to be harmed by it also, would I?"

Cordelia smiled. "So you are afraid of it."

"What?" He shook his head rapidly, the frustration mounting as he pressed in closer,

not even noticing how his feet were already within the lake. “Devils, Cordelia, why must you insist on putting your words in my mouth?”

“Is that not what you just said?” She shrugged, slowly and discreetly sinking further into the lake. “If you believe the lake itself to be a dangerous thing, one that might cause you harm or pain, that would drive you to be afraid of it. Wouldn’t that be the very definition of fear?”

Michael stared at her blankly. “Well, I-I would -”

“And,” Cordelia watched him wade into the water, his gaze fixated on her entirely, “You have seen things and experienced things that were brought along from the lake. Is that right?”

He nodded.

“But would you agree that it would have happened either way?” She shrugged again. “With or without the lake?”

Michael sighed. “I seem to have been beaten by you, darling.”

“It seems so.”

“Well,” he said, “Perhaps I am afraid of it.”

Cordelia shook her head. “I don’t think so.”

“Was that not what you were just trying to prove?”

She dragged her arms through the water, slowly coming back closer to him. The water was nearing his waist, and he still didn’t realize he waded into the lake all on

his own. The pride and relief she felt was immense, far more powerful than any emotion she had ever experienced before. Cordelia peered up at him, a broadening smile on her face.

“I believe there was something else I was seeking to prove,” she murmured.

Michael’s eyes narrowed apprehensively. “I haven’t the foggiest clue what you’re trying to get at.”

“Look around you, Michael,” Cordelia said, standing where he stood to press a short kiss to his cheek. “You have gone into the lake all on your own. Someone who is afraid wouldn’t do such a thing like that, would they?”

He raised his arms, looking down at the lake beneath him. The water swayed gently around him, rising up to his stomach slowly. For a moment, he only stared, and Cordelia frowned, growing worried about his mental composure. Perhaps he was frightened on the inside, moments away from having a breakdown she wouldn’t be able to bring him back from. She was about to reach for him, to whisper how sorry she was for not telling him sooner, when Michael did the strangest thing.

Michael crouched, dipping himself within the water. He slunk forward, dragging his arms through and pulling the gentle waves all around him. For someone that hadn’t ventured into the lake for over ten years, Michael seemed to remember how to swim quite well. He looked as if he had been waiting to do it all his life, to feel the water collapse all around him. Michael swam a little ways away before coming back towards Cordelia, and facing her. He was breathless and wide eyed, his brown curls sticking up in all sorts of directions.

“How do you feel?” Cordelia whispered.

Michael reached and pressed a salty kiss on her lips. “I am not afraid,” he murmured

to her. “I am not afraid.”

“Oh, Michael,” she breathed, the smile beaming across her face. “You don’t know how proud I am of you. I do not believe you were ever afraid at all!”

“No, darling,” he said. “I was afraid.”

“But -”

He reached for her as he waded through the water, pulling her along with him. “I had seen the lake take everything I loved,” he murmured, “And I spent my childhood believing that it could, someday, decide to take me next. Even as I grew, the idea never left me, no matter how foolish it might’ve been. And when you...” Michael slowed to a stop.

Cordelia swam around to be in front of him, resting her hand upon his cheek. “Michael,” she said. “It’s all right.”

He met her gaze. “When you fell into the lake, I thought that fear had finally come true once more,” he continued. “But I came into the water. I did it without even realizing.”

“You are strong.”

“No,” he said, his lips pulling back into the widest smile she had ever seen him have, “You are strong, Cordelia. You have brought me back from the brink of collapsing into a darkness I would’ve never been able to pull myself out of. The fear that once grabbed a hold of me had no power when I looked at you. Because you are brave. You have taught me that, darling, and I will be forever grateful for what you have done for me.”

Cordelia swallowed the tears that threatened to streak down her face. Though she

doubted he would've noticed them when she was already soaking wet. The words were priceless and she wished to save them like she did in her paintings. If she could've captured that very moment with a paintbrush, she would've spent the rest of her life just admiring it. She cleared her throat, her voice thick with emotion on the cloudless and beautiful day.

"I wonder how you can repay me," she finally said.

Michael smirked. "Is there something you wish for?"

"Let's see." Cordelia started to lazily drift through the water alongside him. "What is it that I could possibly ask for?"

He laughed, the sound low and musical. "I'm sure you are capable of thinking of something."

She shrugged, the smile growing along her face. "Well, there just happen to be a few things."

"Oh, really?"

"But I'm not sure if you can handle them, Michael!"

He swam next to her. "Now I'm far too curious for you to not say it."

"Perhaps I ask for you to hire some workers," Cordelia said.

He frowned. "I beg your pardon?"

"Hire some workers," she repeated with a nonchalant shrug. "We'll need them to build an addition to the estate, of course."

Michael's eyes widened. "Good lord, Cordelia. An entire addition?"

"What happened to repaying me?"

"Well, an entire-"

She waved her hand through the water, splashing him a few times. "Where else will we have the nursery?"

Michael froze. "Nursery?"

"It can't possibly go in any other rooms," she continued, ignoring how he was no longer following her. "The redecorating I have already done is still practically new to be set aside and done all over again. No, it won't do." Cordelia tilted her head. "And what of the children's rooms? They require something other than the guest rooms you -"

Michael's hand suddenly clasped down on her wrist, and he effortlessly pulled her through the lake, till she was directly in front of him. The sun's constant gaze rendered his cheeks a delightful red, the shade beginning to take over his neck and shoulders. Blocking out the sun, Michael tucked his finger beneath her chin, keeping her eyes entirely focused on him. Disbelief filled his expression the longer he stared.

"Be clear with me," he whispered, "Do you still tease?"

Her eyes widened. "Do you wish it to be so?"

"Cordelia," he sternly said. "Tell me."

Whatever fear she might've ever had about his response no longer touched her. In fact, she could hardly remember a time when she was ever truly afraid of him. While London's Ton feared the man with scars and a sour looking face, Cordelia never quite

understood it. He was simply a man, and a wounded one at that. She saw a blank canvas that slowly began to have streaks of color splash across it. Tears finally pooled in her eyes and she had no intention of stopping them that time. They were joyous and glad tears, ones that deserved to be shed on that beautiful moment.

“We are with child,” she whispered.

Michael gasped, the breath hitching in the back of his throat. He searched her face once more, before his eyes filled with delight. He laughed, the smile beaming from ear to ear as he swallowed her up into a tight embrace, the water splashing around all around them. He held her tight against him, one hand holding the back of her head. It was gentle but affirming, his heartbeat hammering loudly against her ear.

“I love you,” he said into her hair.

Cordelia breathed in deeply. “And I love you.”

If only she could have painted the moment, to be remembered for the rest of time.

The End?