



Five Ways to Bed a Duke

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Category: Romance, Adult, Historical

Description: "Men will beg to claim you when I'm done with you."

Catherine's attempts at securing a husband are nothing but a failure. Until the most rakish duke offers to help her...at the right price.

Duke Richard never sleeps with the same woman twice. So educating his sister on propriety seems impossible. Thankfully, the perfect tutor falls right into his arms...and her flirting attempts desperately need his touch.

So they make a deal: five lessons of seduction in exchange for etiquette tutoring.

Only, getting a taste of Catherine's lips is enough to wake the possessive beast within him...

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

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Chapter One

There were few things that Catherine Burlow, the eldest daughter of the Viscount Mowbray, enjoyed more than a quiet evening curled up on the sofa, immersed in some imaginary world that existed in some exotic book. It most certainly didn't include sitting in their stuffy carriage, on the way to one of the many tiresome affairs of the ton that constituted the famed London Season. Unfortunately, she had no say in the matter, as she desperately needed to secure a match this Season, or else she would be firmly on the shelf.

"My darling Cat, while I always long for your happiness and understand that you would rather stay in the comfort of your room, I am afraid that might not be possible this Season," her mother said beside her with a slightly rueful tone.

The Viscountess was a handsome woman in her fifties who was still a great beauty. In her face, Catherine could glimpse what she might look like in a few decades to come. With her dark hair and chocolate-brown eyes, she could as well be a younger replica of her mother. She counted that among the blessings she received by being born to the Viscountess Mowbray.

"I love you and want you to find love, but I am afraid that if you do not secure a match this Season, you will be firmly on the shelf, and that is not good for little Lily when she comes of age..."

Of course, that was the crux of the problem. On her own, Catherine did not practically care for the prospect of marriage, and she would be quite content to live her life as a spinster, renting out a cottage just for herself and maybe taking up work

as a companion to an older lady, provided that she was allowed to bury herself in her books.

She was fairly certain that getting married would rob her of the freedom to pursue her hobbies, since most titled gentlemen would rather die than have a bluestocking as a wife.

The institution of marriage held no charm for her, but Lily, even at the tender age of thirteen, showed idealistic romantic tendencies, and Catherine didn't want to be a stumbling block to her happiness in the future.

Catherine had seen enough love matches not to desire such a thing for herself. Her parents were an example of such a match, and to say their relationship was explosive was an understatement.

She had come to learn that the hotter the flames of their passion, the more explosive their disagreements. The sounds of banging doors, clanging cutlery, shouting matches and drama were part and parcel of her childhood. They always made up quickly after they quarreled. The lovebirds, unfortunately, lacked the ability to stay away from each other for too long. When they were at peace, their home was heaven on earth, but when they had a falling out, it became a biblical fiery pit.

Living constantly under her parents' display of the extremes of emotion was frankly exhausting—she, being the first of their offspring, had the thankless duty of mediating their disputes.

She literally had to raise herself and Lily and Hugh because her parents were so wrapped up in each other that there was hardly any space to accommodate them. Oh, they had tried. They at least made sure they had material possessions any young lady would want, and they made resources available for her to pursue her love for books, but their support ended there.

But then it was difficult to offer emotional support to anyone when you are having impassioned quarrels with your husband. So Catherine had learned to provide that care for her siblings and herself.

Doing that for over two decades of her existence had helped her to come to the conclusion that she didn't want the extreme passion that sometimes reduced her intelligent parents to petty primitive humans periodically. It was even worse that both her parents had fiery personalities, so when the fire raged, she had to become the ice that prevented their home from being burned down to ashes—figuratively, of course.

“... also, Emmeline just concluded her mourning and will be returning to London for the Season.”

Catherine was jolted out of her reverie at the mention of Emmeline, her beloved friend who had just come out of mourning for her late father.

“Poor girl,” the Viscountess continued in a sad tone. “It must be difficult to have lost both parents at such a tender age.”

It was indeed sad, as Emmeline was such a sweet girl and definitely did not deserve the hand that fate had dealt her.

“It is unfortunate that her older brother, the Duke, is a rake of the highest caliber. I wonder how he would properly chaperone such an impressionable young girl.” The Viscountess shook her head.

“Mother!” Catherine exclaimed in outrage.

“What? I was just stating facts here,” the Viscountess said in a bewildered tone.

Catherine hated to admit it, but her mother was definitely right. The Duke of St.

George, the older brother of her beloved friend, was definitely not a good guardian for any young lady, least of all her friend. He was more likely to be interested in flirting with the young matrons of the ton than keeping an eye out for his younger sister.

She couldn't blame him, he was quite easy on the eyes. With his height and athletic build, he was a delectable specimen of the male species. His blue eyes and curly hair just added to his charm. It was said that just a sight of the dimple on his jaw sent many ladies of the ton swooning.

That might sound like an exaggeration, and she really thought it was, until she witnessed it happen firsthand. The Dunley girl who had debuted last year had fallen into a dead faint once he flashed her his signature smile while asking her to dance.

While Catherine agreed that he was good-looking—maybe a little too much than was good for him—she didn't think his charm would inspire such a response. But then the Dunley girl had earned a reputation for being a ninny. Even if she was not, it was common for debutantes and young ladies of the ton to feign a faint to gain the attention of eligible suitors.

They believed it made them look more feminine. But more likely, it made them look like invalids—in her opinion. She had never been good at deception and pretense, and now that she thought about it, it might be part of the reason why she was still unmarried at the ripe age of two-and-twenty.

“We are here,” her mother informed her as soon as the carriage turned onto the drive of Townbrige Mansion.

A look outside the carriage window showed that indeed her mother was correct. A long queue of fashionable members of the ton extended from the front doors to the pavement.

Mentally, Catherine braced herself for a night of necessary, mind-numbing socialization. Remembering that her dear friend would be in attendance lifted her spirits somewhat. It had been several weeks since she had last seen her. Dear Emmeline had to travel to their countryside estate, where her father was eventually buried.

Catherine had tried as much as possible to provide support for her dear friend through letters, but she knew it would never suffice in comparison to an actual meeting. Granted, she was aware that there was no love lost between the late Duke and his children. But surely losing a parent no matter how estranged took its toll.

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The butler at the entrance announced her and her mother, and soon they were led inside. She was immediately hit by the sweltering air in the overpopulated ballroom.

Of course, what had she expected? Lady Townbrige's balls were highly sought-after, as every member of the ton wanted to see and be seen. As Catherine was an almost-spinster in search of a suitor, this was considered to be the best place to start. But she hardly thought any suitor was worth the heat she had to endure.

She was barely inside for a minute, and she could already feel the humidity on her skin and the sweat trickling down her back.

She had barely spent a minute in this ballroom, and she already longed for her cool beddings and the comfort of her goose-down pillow. She was already falling deep into her fantasy when she was jolted by the sound of a cold masculine voice beside her.

"It so nice of you to grace us with your presence, Miss Burlow."

Catherine turned towards that voice, and a dashing young man bowed deeply and took her hand, kissing it with reverence.

Benjamin Windham, the Viscount Livingston, was a prime example of a dashing suitor. He was handsome, titled, chivalrous, and just as practical as she was when it came to matrimony—at least she had gleaned that much from their earlier conversations.

This evening, he wore a white shirt with a midnight-blue waistcoat and a matching

jacket, which she must admit complemented his olive skin and made him practically glow under the light of the chandeliers. His hair was slicked back so ruthlessly that there was no single stray hair on his forehead. His cravat was ironed immaculately, and his hessian boots were polished to perfection, reflecting the light in the room.

This man was strong-willed, and the force of that will was evident in his appearance.

Overall, he cleaned up well. She could bet her last money that his valet was the happiest there ever was, as his master had never been seen out in public with a strand of hair out of place.

He was by no means a dandy, but he was severe about everything in his life. Catherine admired that trait in him. As a lady born into a family that easily descended into chaos at the drop of a hat, she was very particular about marrying a man who valued order and discipline.

He was the perfect match for her. She just hoped that she didn't scare him away like she did her previous suitors.

Every year, every Season, she gained a host of admirers, and it was no surprise, as she was quite aware she was well above average in the looks department. But, for some unfathomable reason, they all withdrew before the Season ended. It was an inexplicable phenomenon.

She was determined that whatever it was, it was not going to repeat itself. She was so not going to lose this prime suitor.

If everything went according to plan, she would be the Viscountess Livingston by the end of this Season. Never mind that a voice in the back of her head kept nagging her about an emptiness in her soul that the dashing Viscount would never fill. But that was just fanciful thinking, was it not? She squashed the thought faster than it could

sprout.

“May I ask, Miss Burlow, if you would grant me a dance later tonight?”

“Yes, of course,” she replied, raising the wrist bearing her dance card and waving it till the Viscount had to swerve to avoid being blinded by the square of paper.

Grabbing her forearm, he kept it steady enough to sign his name on her dance card and hurried off with a harassed look on his face.

To her, nothing showed her interest like waving a dance card in the face of a gentleman, but instead of interesting him, it seemed to have alarmed him. She had always been awkward in social gatherings, but over the Seasons, she had learned to conceal it and play the avid conversationalist.

But it seemed that skill was slipping, and she was reverting to the shy, awkward girl she had been when she had debuted three Seasons ago. She couldn't afford to lose that skill now that she needed it the most. Now that she desperately needed a suitor.

Suddenly, her reverie was interrupted by a high-pitched feminine voice.

“Cat...”

She turned to see the small frame of her dear friend forcing its way through the mass of human bodies. Her olive skin glowed with perspiration, while the blonde hair framing her face flew behind her like the halo of an angel. But that was where her angelic looks stopped, as the skirt of her white dress was raised with her hands, exposing her stockinged feet. When she ran, Catherine could swear she got glimpses of her calves, but Emmy did not seem to care as she made a beeline for her with such a wide smile on her face that Catherine half expected her face to split open.

Her friend's joy was so contagious that she couldn't resist cracking a smile of her own.

Trust Emmeline to show her enthusiasm in the most unladylike—and improper—of ways.

“Catherine!” Emmeline squealed, hugging her so tight that Catherine feared she would suffocate.

“Emmy, I need to breathe,” Catherine said in an amused tone.

“Oh, sorry.” Emmeline released her. “It is just that I have missed you so,” she added sheepishly.

“I missed you as well,” Catherine said, taking her friend's hands in hers, forcing her to let go of her dress.

She just hoped that the guests had not noticed that her friend had committed the faux pas of showing her calves and ankles in public. But a look around immediately dashed that hope, as she spotted several ladies tittering behind their fans and gesturing towards them.

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Returning her gaze to her friend, she noticed Emmeline was completely oblivious to her faux pas and was still smiling and regaling her with a tale with such enthusiasm that she didn't have the heart to call her attention to her misconduct.

“Oh, it was so beautiful, Cat. The countryside is so full of vibrant colors. The air itself tastes different, I swear it...”

Of course, the countryside air was going to be different, as the pollution in London was absent. Apart from the occasional odor of farm animals' excrement, the countryside air was remarkably fresh and calming. A fact that Emmeline had only recently come to appreciate.

It was unfortunate, but the only daughter of the late Duke of St. George had only visited her family's seat following news of her father's deteriorating health and eventual death—a father that she barely knew at that. But there was a good explanation for that.

The beautiful Dowager Duchess of St. George had been a remarkable woman in her prime, and when she had debuted in English Society, she had been the equivalent of a diamond.

She had been highly sought-after by the young gentlemen of the ton, and the late Duke had not been free from the fever of infatuation she had left in her wake. She had been the daughter of a baron, but her popularity made her family's modest townhouse the most popular location in London at the time.

Men fell over themselves to offer her flowers and poetry—some poorly written.

Deborah Terrel had been vain, as she did not hesitate to lap up the attention she received. She reveled in it. That singular trait should have warned the late Duke off, but at the time, he had been blinded by love.

When it came time for her to choose a suitor, she had settled for the young Duke of St. George. That was no surprise to the members of the ton, as they believed she had simply settled for the highest rank in the English aristocracy. There were whispers that she was only marrying him for his money, but the young Duke had paid them no mind, as he truly believed he had found his soulmate. He secured a special license so quickly that there were whispers that she was already with child, but the Duke had simply wanted to secure his prized diamond before a more discerning gentleman swept her off her feet and married her.

After marrying her, he whisked her away to his country estate, where, nine months later, she gave birth to a son whom they named Richard, after her father. That happy event had put to rest the rumors that had stemmed from their impromptu wedding, and eventually, everyone wrote it off as a true love match.

For the first year or so, they had lived in relative tranquility, savoring the quiet serenity of the countryside while raising their young heir. It was by far the closest to paradise that the late Duke had ever experienced. Until everything changed.

Deborah slowly started becoming restless, nagging and accusing her husband of imprisoning her in the countryside. She had decided that she preferred London's lavish lifestyle to the deafening silence of the countryside, and she wanted her husband to set up the family's permanent residence there.

The late Duke reminded her that he had informed her before their marriage of his need to remain in his country estate for most of the year, and she had agreed. But apparently, Deborah had not been paying attention at the time, as her mind was occupied with the fantasy of marrying a duke.

Over time, their quarrels turned into feuds, with the Duchess moving to a different wing of the mansion despite her husband's entreaties.

With time, the Duchess started to entertain the attentions of other men in the neighborhood, because, at her core, she was a vain woman. She had missed the euphoria of having men fawn over her, and no matter how much the late Duke tried, he was just one man unable to fulfill her obsession with external validation.

Her tawdry affairs eventually cemented the chasm between her and her husband, causing a cold atmosphere to permeate the mansion.

Richard had been unfortunate to grow up in that atmosphere, and even at a young age, he was forced to become conversant with the true definition of a cold war. A war fraught with deafening, cold silence. He had loved his mother and tried several times to win her affection when he was a boy, and she had at least loved him.

That was why everyone had been surprised when the Duchess's belly started swelling with another child ten years after she had Richard. The servants speculated that she must have been impregnated by one of her many lovers, but the late Duke proclaimed to everyone who cared to know that the child was his and forbade anyone from suggesting otherwise.

Even with their separation, he believed she was his wife and hence remained under his protection. This singular act made ten-year-old Richard swear never to allow a woman to jerk him around by the collar simply because he had the misfortune of falling in love with her.

All would have been well, but the worst was yet to come, as one day, when Emmy was barely a week old, the household woke up to the news that the Duchess had taken flight, leaving just a note behind.

She had decided that the secluded life of a duchess did not suit her. She had then decided to flee to the Continent with her new lover, leaving her newborn and her family behind.

That single act took a toll on those left behind. The late Duke shut down, emotionally distancing himself from his children, abandoning little Emmy to the care of the staff. Everyone suspected that one of the reasons he ignored the little girl was that she was the one symbol that reminded him of his beloved wife's infidelity.

By the time he was fifteen, Richard had taken her from the countryside to London, away from their negligent father. He didn't care if she had been born from the loins of his mother's lover or not. She was his sister, and she deserved his care. He then proceeded to raise her, hiring staff and assuming the role of a father.

For this singular decision, Catherine felt a modicum of respect for the man. Unfortunately, that also meant that Emmy had no real memory of their countryside home and was able to enjoy its charms only recently.

"Oh, I would have really loved to stay longer, but Richie insisted that I must return so I could be presented in Court." She scrunched up her pert nose in defiance. "I only agreed because I missed you so much. I cannot tell you how much I enjoyed reading your letters."

Her entire being radiated so much excitement that she was positively vibrating with it.

It must be true what they said that opposites attract because Emmy was a bright ball of energy compared to Catherine's more cool-headed personality.

"Ladies, what is so interesting, might I ask?" a rich baritone suddenly drawled in amusement.

Catherine looked up to see the Duke himself standing close to them, an amused smirk on his ridiculously handsome face.

“Your Grace,” she greeted, curtsying.

She noticed the uncomfortable look on his face, which he quickly covered with a teasing smile.

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That is quite interesting. It seems the new Duke is not used to being addressed by his title.

“Miss Burlow, I didn’t expect that you would grace us with your presence this Season. I always thought you would be hitched to some rich gentleman by now, considering your popularity among the ton.”

“Going by your logic, Your Grace, your popularity among the ton should have made you a married man by now,” Catherine retorted hotly.

She chanced a glance at her friend, only to see her mouth slightly agape in shock. Scratch her first evaluation—it seemed she was the hothead.

Catherine was quite levelheaded, but she had never been able to keep her calm in the face of a perceived insult, and something about the arrogant smirk on the Duke’s face ignited within her the urge to slap it off his face. But no matter how she felt about the man, she had been rude, and if there was something she had learned about high society, it was that you do not reply to a duke rudely, no matter the provocation.

She started to apologize, but he waved his hand dismissively.

“I guess I deserved that,” he said with a rueful smile. “Why are you two ladies standing here? You should be in some gentlemen’s arms, dancing.”

“As if,” Emmy snorted. “Catherine might have better luck, but the gentlemen seem to be avoiding me for some unknown reason.”

Catherine turned sharply to her friend in shock. Emmy was too beautiful to be without a dance partner. She was outraged on her behalf, but a close look at her friend revealed the reason for her lack of a dance partner. Catherine had been so carried away by the excitement of seeing her friend again that she had not taken note of her appearance.

Her dress, while still clean and the white that was recommended for debutantes, was high-necked with full, puffed sleeves. It was still in good condition. The problem was that it had gone out of fashion for at least two Seasons, and it was clearly too tight for her, as she had grown into a young lady. While that might be inconsequential to Emmy, many gentlemen were shallow enough to gauge the worth of a lady by the quality of her clothing.

The ton, unfortunately, espoused the notion that every member should update their wardrobe every Season. So many promising young ladies had been relegated to the fringes of the ballroom or left firmly on the shelves, collecting dust, simply because of their choice of clothing.

Catherine agreed that it was definitely ridiculous, but she didn't make the rules, and she was definitely not going to watch her friend suffer because of some ridiculous code of ethics the ton seemed to adhere to.

It was unfortunate that her friend was oblivious to all this. But those were the consequences of not having a guiding influence of an older woman in her life. It seemed to have fallen upon Catherine to take on that mantle. She might be friends with Emmy, but she was five years older than her.

She might not have secured a husband despite being out in Society for three years, but she had received firsthand knowledge about how to navigate the ton and the marriage mart. She was going to bring all that knowledge to bear on chaperoning Emmy during this Season.

Chapter Two

“Oh, Cathy, I feel so lost!” Emmy cried, looking around the room. “How do you do it? There are so many people here. However could I hope to speak to anyone, much less find a husband?”

Catherine laughed, understanding her friend’s worry. She had more or less felt the same at her debut but had adjusted quickly.

“It is not as bad as it seems, Emmy.”

“It is,” Emmy insisted, looking around the room once again. “This is almost all of England.”

“It is not.” Catherine shook her head. “You just have to enjoy yourself. It’s not something you force.”

“Oh, Cathy, how can I be as relaxed as you?” Emmy asked, pouting. Then, seeing some cake slices on the table, she squealed. “Let’s get some.”

Looking at the cheerful mien of her sweet friend, Catherine thought about how best to tell her of the necessary wardrobe and etiquette changes that she would have to make to increase her chances in the marriage mart.

While Emmy was a cheerful and sweet person, what so many people did not know was that she had a sensitive nature and did not take criticism well. So it would be quite a challenge to inform her of the changes she needed to make without hurting her feelings.

Catherine knew that the Duke, despite his numerous flaws, loved his little sister deeply, and this was evident by the sacrifices he had made to make sure she lived in

utmost comfort in every sense.

Unfortunately, there was only so much a bachelor could do for a young girl like Emmy.

While Emmy tried to appear content so as not to worry her older brother, she was secretly battling a sense of inadequacy. In one of her rare vulnerable moments, she revealed to Catherine that she believed that her mother must have left because she was not good enough, and thus she donned an overly cheerful personality just to keep her brother happy, so he would never leave her like her parents did.

Catherine thought it was quite terrible for a vibrant young lady like Emmy to have such a deep fear of abandonment. But then fate was quite cruel that way.

“Miss Burlow,” Lord Livingston’s familiar voice called, causing her to look up.

She had been so distracted that she had not heard or seen him approach.

“I believe this is our dance,” he said, extending his hand, palm open, a charming smile on his face.

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Catherine looked around to see that other couples were stepping onto the dance floor for the second dance of the night.

“Of course, My Lord,” she replied with a smile of her own, accepting his proffered hand.

He led her to the dance floor.

They faced each other, and then she curtseyed while he executed a deep bow. She placed her fingers lightly on his shoulder, his hand settled on her waist, and then he led her into the first steps of the dance.

Lord Livingston was a graceful dancer, and following his lead, they simply glided across the dance floor. It seemed that the man did everything in his life with a single-minded devotion that was almost scary.

As the dance progressed, Catherine’s mind drifted back to the dilemma of refining Emmy’s manners and teaching her decorum in preparation for the marriage mart. Emmy was truly sweet and deserved to secure a good match. If only Catherine could get her to agree without?—

“Something on your mind?” her dance partner murmured against her ear.

“What?” she blurted out, startled.

“You are in my arms, but you might as well be a million miles away, with how far your mind has wandered,” Lord Livingston said in an amused tone.

“I am sorry, My Lord,” she offered.

“Might I ask what was on your mind?”

“It is nothing, My Lord,” she answered.

There was an awkward pause, and she could feel that she had just shut down a window of conversation that might have helped them form a deeper bond, but she didn't know how to fix it.

“Have I told you that you look absolutely ravishing this evening?” he asked in an attempt to fill the awkward silence, but the glint in his eyes indicated that he meant his words.

Catherine waited for the warm pleasure that usually followed compliments, but it didn't come.

“I am flattered, My Lord,” she said flatly.

It was obvious that Lord Livingston picked up on it because, after a pause, he said, “You outshine every lady in this room. I am happy to be granted the privilege of dancing with such a goddess.”

“You flatter me, My Lord,” she answered in that deadpan tone that she could not get rid of.

Apparently deciding that making conversation with her was a lost cause, Lord Livingston remained silent throughout the remainder of the dance.

When the last strains of the music died down, they bowed and curtsied to each other. She wanted to escape from the suffocating silence between them.

“Miss Burlow, might I get you some lemonade or some sherry, perhaps?”

“My apologies, My Lord, but might I be excused? I need to get some fresh air.”

With that, she turned on her heel and hurried out of the ballroom as fast as she could without running.

The air in the ballroom was stifling, but she fled mostly to save herself from further embarrassment. She had always known she was terrible in social settings, and she was an evenworse conversationalist. But the recent conversation with Lord Livingston surely took the prize.

For as long as she could remember, she had always been terrible at making small talk, but any mention of her books and she became animated and talkative. She was a bluestocking through and through, and sometimes it got exhausting trying to pretend otherwise.

Once she was on the balcony, she gripped the rails firmly, breathing deeply to calm herself and silently urging herself to endure the rest of the night.

“You really do know how to get a man’s blood singing, don’t you, darling?” Richard asked, smiling knowingly at his companion.

With the way her eyes darkened and the way she kept looking at his lips, he could bet his entire estate that he was a few seconds away from experiencing a very satisfying tryst.

But then trysts in dark corners had to be the best way to pass time at these tiresome affairs. He should know, he had attended dozens of them over the years, so he believed he deserved a distraction if he was not to die of boredom.

So when the recently widowed Lady Tremaine, who had been shooting him seductive glances all night from beneath her long dark lashes, had whispered in his ear during their dance that he should meet her at the balcony in a few minutes, he had waited for the required ten minutes before following her. Who was he to turn down such a delectable offer? Only a fool would do that, and he most certainly was not a fool.

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Over the years, he had earned a reputation as a rake among polite society. It was not intentional, but the young matrons liked bad rakes because they made bedsport even more glorious. Some of them had fetishes that made him aghast sometimes. It was not uncommon to hear some of his bed partners boasting about having bedded “different titles.” He didn’t mind that he was just another title to them, he only cared about the pleasure—and he always left before things turned sour.

It seemed his new title attracted more female admirers, especially his preferred bedpartners—young widows and actresses. Women who understood the pursuit of pleasure and never expected more.

Unfortunately, Society matrons had doubled down their efforts to snag his hand in marriage. It was quite ironic that it took his father’s death to turn him into the most eligible bachelor in the whole of London, since the late Duke hardly did anything that could potentially benefit his prodigal son.

This was one other reason why a tryst would benefit him, granting him both pleasure and a respite from the clutches of the marriage-minded mamas for at least the night.

Now that he was pressed against the soft body of the delectable Lady Tremaine, he surrendered himself to the magic their bodies could create. His lady pulled his head down, and he began kissing her senseless. He could swear he was succeeding because the lady was moaning, squirming, and holding him even tighter.

But then she suddenly pushed him away.

“What...?” he sputtered, startled.

“Shh,” she hissed, placing a single finger on her lips, motioning for him to keep quiet. “Someone is coming,” she whispered.

Sure enough, when Richard strained his ears, he heard footsteps coming in their direction. But they were both hidden by a curtain in the corner.

Richard turned to reassure his partner of their seclusion, but she was already hurrying back inside. Lady Tremaine was a novice in love affairs. His more experienced partners would have relished that threat of exposure in a way that the recent widow clearly did not.

He silently cursed the intruder for interrupting them.

Richard stepped fully behind the curtain as the footsteps got closer.

A feminine figure stepped onto the balcony, and a sliver of light from the ballroom showed that it was his sister’s aggravating friend, Catherine Burlow.

What was the chit doing on this secluded balcony? Didn’t her mother warn her that she could get ruined that way? He guessed she had been on the marriage mart long enough to know the rules, so he was sure that she had her reasons for being alone on the balcony.

He turned to leave through the door behind him, but he stopped in his tracks when he saw the taller frame of a man stepping onto the balcony.

It was the viscount she had been dancing with earlier. They might have arranged for a tryst, but the surprised look on her face and her startled gasp disabused him of that notion.

She was his sister’s friend, and he was honor-bound to protect her from ruin. He

sighed as he remained in his spot, waiting.

God save him from reckless women.

Slowly, Catherine relaxed as the warm night breeze caressed her skin, her world righted on its axis once again.

For as long as she could remember, fresh air had always calmed her. She mentally prepared herself to plunge back into the chaos of the ballroom, but it was a glaring reality that she had to face. She needed these affairs if she were to secure a respectable match. For both her and her sister's sakes.

A hand touching her shoulder made her jump in fear, and she turned around sharply. The sight of the Viscount stifled the scream bubbling up her throat.

"I am sorry for startling you, Miss Burlow," he said ruefully.

Well, he should be. Considering the number of young ladies that had been ruined on balconies, she had a good reason to be scared. She wouldn't have taken the risk if she had not almost gone into hysterics inside that ballroom.

"What are you doing here, My Lord?" she asked stiffly.

At some hidden recesses of her mind, she acknowledged that she sounded cold. But she couldn't be happy when the Viscount interrupted her quiet time. Eligible suitor or not, he had no reason to follow her.

"I was worried you were unwell, Miss Burlow. I only followed you to check if you are well," he admitted in a concerned tone.

"I truly doubt that, My Lord. Unwell ladies hardly ask to get some fresh air. They are

more likely to swoon into the arms of the gallant gentlemen who were unfortunate to be their dance partners,” she scoffed, her words dripping with sarcasm.

At that, the Viscount threw his head back and laughed so loudly that she was afraid he would draw attention.

“First, Miss Burlow,” he said once his laughter died down, an earnest look on his face, “it wouldn’t consider it an unfortunate event should you swoon into my arms. I would be the happiest man in the world if I could have you in my arms. Second, You are right. I didn’t come to this balcony because I thought you were unwell. I came here because I really wanted to have a quiet moment with you, away from the chaos of the ballroom.”

Catherine cleared her throat daintily. “You do realize, My Lord, that if we are seen together on this balcony, I will be irrevocably ruined, and you will be forced to marry me?” she asked, cocking an eyebrow.

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Take that, Lord Livingston.

Most gentlemen of her acquaintance would bolt out of that balcony like their pantaloons were on fire at the mere mention of the institution of marriage.

So she was quite shocked when his lips curled into a smile and he took her hands in his.

“My dearest Miss Burlow, you seem to think that I would run under the threat of ruination,” he chided softly. “You do not understand how much I love the idea of getting married to you. I like you, Catherine Burlow, and I would love nothing more than to spend the rest of my life with you as my Viscountess,” he said passionately.

Catherine froze for a few seconds. This whole episode was like a dream come true. In some part of her mind, she knew she was supposed to be ecstatic—she was being given the opportunity of becoming a viscountess on a silver platter. But she could not move, paralyzed by a strange feeling of emptiness and something that felt suspiciously like fear.

She slowly pulled her hand away, feeling guilty when his hopeful expression turned to one of hurt.

“You know, Miss Burlow, I wonder why you accepted all my offers of a dance and made me believe you had a tendre for me. Do you even see me as a man at all? Or do you just enjoy the act of leading unsuspecting men on?”

“Benjamin,” she said weakly, “I-I really like you. I would love to get married to you.

It is just that..."

"It is just what?" he asked in a resigned tone. "Now that I think about it, I have been the only one chasing your affections, the only one trying to get to know you better. You always seemed to be distracted. Silly me, I just thought you were overwhelmed by the crowds. I am surprised you know my Christian name, since this is the first time you ever used it, knowing I had given you leave to use it the day we first met."

"I... I..." she stammered but gave up when the hurt look in his eyes grew.

"I am a man of principle, Miss Burlow, and I would never chase after an unwilling lady. Good night," he said.

He executed a deep bow, then turned on his heel and walked briskly out of the balcony.

Catherine sagged against the wall of the balcony, her throat clogged with guilt. Remembering the hurt look on the Viscount's face made her chest tighten. Had she really done that? She had never pegged Lord Livingston as the emotional type. Hell, the man behaved as if his life ran smoothly like a well-oiled machine. He didn't look like the type that dealt with messy things like emotions.

It was quite unfortunate that the first time he showed the vulnerable side of himself to her, she had hurt him quite terribly. She bowed her head in defeat. She guessed she had blown her chance of securing an advantageous match this Season. Lord Livingston had been her best option, and she had pushed him away.

"I guess that explains the reason you are still single after so many Seasons."

She looked up to see a pair of well-polished hessian boots, then up and up till she locked eyes with the arrogant Duke of St. George.

Goodness, was she to be cornered by yet another intruder? Couldn't a lady enjoy a moment of peace and quiet? It seemed the answer to that was obvious... Of course not.

Chapter Three

The intruder made himself comfortable, leaning against the wall beside her, folding his arms across his chest. That simple gesture made his muscles flex beneath his well-fitted clothes. The man was attractive, no doubt.

With a conscious effort, Catherine tore her eyes away. Thankfully, he did not seem to have noticed her momentary fixation with his flexing biceps.

"I think I have solved the mystery of how one of the most popular young ladies of the ton had managed to remain unmarried for three consecutive Seasons," Richard continued, holding up three fingers to show how many Seasons she had attended.

"Every Season, you always have a bevy of eligible bachelors fawning over you. I have heard tales of men queuing up outside your family townhouse. But by some miracle, you always remained single by the time everyone retired to the countryside. Thus, I came to two conclusions."

"And what might those be?" Catherine asked drily.

"You are either a snob."

Catherine rolled her eyes inelegantly at that.

"Or..." he said, before pausing dramatically. "You were holding out for love," he finished in a mocking tone.

“Well,” she drawled, rising from her crouched position, “I would hate to disappoint you, but you are wrong. I do not want to marry for love.”

At his dubious look, she continued. “I just want a responsible, levelheaded gentleman who would provide me with a steady home.”

“If that is what you want, I am sure it would be a simple matter for your father to sign a betrothal contract with one of your many suitors.”

“Unfortunately, that is not an option,” she sighed ruefully. “My parents want me to have a love match, contrary to my preferences. They will only choose a man for me if they believe I love him. I want a sensible match.”

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“That is quite a surprise. Most people born into a love match usually fantasize about the possibility of finding a love match themselves. Why are you running in the opposite direction?”

“Let us just say that I have seen the destruction that can be wrought by excessive passion, and I do not want that for myself and any children the good Lord blesses me with,” she replied.

“While I understand your resolve to never make a love match, unfortunately, you still have to attract and keep a suitor in order to get married. While you are quite an attractive lady, you, my darling, need to do something about your flirting skills.”

“But,” she answered, furrowing her brow in confusion, “I have never had problems attracting suitors. I think my flirting skills are all right, thank you very much.”

“Darling,” he drawled, his mocking smirk widening. “I hate to disappoint you. You do have many talents, I am sure, but flirting is definitely not one of them. Society teaches women to be prim and proper, but haven’t you noticed that the ladies who snag husbands very early in every Season have mastered one art?” He paused dramatically for effect.

“Well, go on,” she urged, exasperated when the silence stretched on.

“They had mastered the art of flirtation while maintaining the guise of innocence. What do you think they are doing when they simper and blush and flutter their fans like an extension of their fingers while casting innocent looks from beneath their lashes?”

As he spoke, some things became clearer to her. Catherine had seen all of that during the previous Seasons, but she had never aspired to pretentious behavior, so she never saw the need to emulate those ladies or pay attention to their shenanigans.

“You see,” Richard continued, “men, in general, are hunters at the elemental level, and they crave the exhilaration and thrill of a chase despite their claims of respectability and decorum. You, unfortunately, possess the beauty that would attract any red-blooded man within a mile, but you lack the ability to keep them in thrall and stroke their egos.”

Well, now that she thought about it, he might be right—no matter how much she wished he was not. It probably explained why she attracted a large number of suitors but finished the Season the way she began it—unmarried.

She was always polite to them, but when they showed amorous interest, she withdrew subconsciously, unsure how to respond in some cases. In other cases, she could not muster an iota of interest. It seemed it was time she unlocked the bold feminine side of her because it seemed time was not on her side, and she hoped to win back the Viscount and hopefully walk down the aisle towards him before the Season ended.

“I cannot believe I am saying this,” Richard suddenly spoke up.

Catherine looked up at him quizzically.

“I can help you,” he said.

Catherine was so astonished that she was speechless for a moment.

“Why would you do that, Your Grace?” she asked when she gathered herself.

“Well, it would be like a payment of sorts for you doing me a favor,” he explained

quietly.

“What favor?” she asked, folding her arms beneath her bosom.

That action pushed up her breasts, and she could have sworn that his eyes flicked to her bosom for a second. She would have missed it if she had not been watching him so intently.

He looked away, squaring his shoulders like he was preparing for some battle. Then he turned to her, his smirk replaced with a sober look.

“I love my younger sister to bits. But while she is a remarkable young lady, her grasp on etiquette and decorum is as feeble as a breeze—I am sure that you have noticed that. Part of that is my fault, and no matter what, I would not have her suffer censure because of my failings.”

It was quite interesting that the Duke thought himself a bad father figure for his younger sister. Despite his numerous flaws, he had done more than enough for his sister than a lot of men had done for their children. It was time someone told him so.

“Emmy is my best friend, so I know enough to know that you have been a fine brother to her, more than many people could ever wish for,” Catherine declared staunchly.

Richard coughed, obviously uncomfortable with the praise.

That was just the thing with him. He gave off the appearance of an arrogant man who was quite aware of his place in the world and made sure everyone knew it, but sometimes he showed a more vulnerable side of him that was uncomfortable with praise.

Which was the real man? Catherine wondered. It was obvious that some part of his character was a mask he wore for Society, but which member of the ton didn't? She had no business being curious about the possibility of unraveling his layers.

"As to the favor," he continued, unaware of the direction her thoughts were taking, "I want you to tutor my sister on the ways of the ton—fashion, etiquette and whatnot."

It was the second time she was surprised that night.

"Why do you think I am the best candidate for that? My consistent failure in the marriage mart should be ample reason to disqualify me from that role."

"You are the best teacher for her, I am afraid. For one, you are her best friend, so you are the best person to tutor her while taking into consideration her sensitive nature."

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Catherine started at his insight into his sister's nature. That was supposed to be a secret between her and Emmy.

"I see you are shocked. I have lived with Emmy all her life, I wonder why she thought she could hide her true nature from me. Foolish girl," Richard whispered affectionately. "As to your failure in the marriage mart, that is just because of a lack of strategy—which I intend to fix. In return for tutoring my sister, of course."

Catherine was bewildered. How did she go from wanting to go home earlier that night to contemplating taking flirting lessons from the rakish Duke standing beside her? It seemed like a scene from the dime novels she read in the privacy of her bedroom at night.

She had a boring life, surreal things didn't happen to her.

Well, it seemed they could, and they were happening to her.

"I fail to see why you would be the right instructor for these types of lessons. You are known as a rake around the ton, I wonder what you would know about attracting a proper gentleman," she argued.

She braced herself for his anger because if this was not a direct insult to his character, she didn't know what was. So she was shocked when he let out a chuckle.

"Sweet Cat, I was wondering when you were going to bare your claws," he teased, approaching her with a hot glint in his eyes. "Some people would argue that my reputation makes me the best candidate for an instructor in the art of seduction. If you

don't believe me, I will be very much obliged to demonstrate," he murmured, leaning closer to whisper the last word.

She opened her mouth to ask him to step back, but the words were stuck in her throat as she was swamped by his woody scent.

She had always been aware of him at an elemental level, but his sheer magnetism was intimidating at such a close proximity. She was shivering involuntarily in a way that she knew had nothing to do with the cool night air. Her skin felt tight beneath her clothes, and heat pooled low in her belly. It was mortifying, the way her body betrayed her when this man was near.

He maintained eye contact with her and then slowly lowered his face to hers. She was so sure he was going to kiss her, and even with her misgivings, her body still leaned towards his.

She closed her eyes, her breath coming faster than usual. She felt his warm breath on her cheek and then on her left ear. When he took her earlobe between his teeth, she hissed in pleasure.

"Call me Richard," he murmured in that rich baritone that made her knees tremble.

She was so busy trying to catch her breath that she did not fully understand what he said, until he tilted her chin to force her to look at him.

"I think we have outgrown the use of titles, don't you think?"

With that enigmatic utterance, he turned on his heel, leaving her shaking with unquenchable desire.

The Duke of St. George was dangerous, and taking him up on his offer had to be

madness because she knew she had been moments away from begging the dratted man to ravish her, whatever that meant. The man made her lose what common sense she prided herself on having. He was dangerous to her equilibrium and reputation.

After what had happened between them, she could not simply see him as her friend's older brother. Their relationship was irrevocably changed now, and she would be a fool to accept his offer. She had a sneaking suspicion that she might end up being the one seduced. She didn't delude herself that she had good self-control.

All the man had to do was smile at her, and her wits would fly out the window. It was unfortunate that she couldn't reject his offer because little Lily's fate depended on her success in the marriage mart.

As much as she hated to admit it, she did not have a chance of finding a respectable match without the Duke's help, as the earlier encounter with Lord Livingston had made clear.

It seemed she had to venture into the lion's den and hope that she wasn't devoured.

Chapter Four

"We will be having a guest this morning, so I suggest you finish your breakfast early and dress appropriately," Richard announced, looking disapprovingly at his sister, who just strolled into the dining room in her nightgown.

It was obvious she'd overslept again, an act he'd ignored in the past but now saw as one of the many flaws she possessed. He had tossed and turned all night, wondering how she would handle the news of her impending etiquette lessons with her bosom friend, but had decided he would rip the proverbial bandage off once and be done with it.

She might hate him and even stop speaking to him for a few weeks, but it was a small sacrifice he was willing to make if she agreed to be tutored by the mistress of propriety herself.

He'd watched Catherine move and speak and charm guests, and although she lacked the ability to flirt and seduce, she was absolutely graceful, and he hoped she would be able to instill what she'd spent a lifetime learning into Emmeline.

"Is it someone I know?" Emmy asked as she sat, curiosity lacing her voice.

"Yes." He nodded. "Rather intimately."

She raised an eyebrow at his vague answer, which elicited a sigh from him. He really didn't know how to phrase what he hoped to say in a manner that she wouldn't see as an insult. But he'd be damned if he let someone else, with no concern for her feelings, do it.

"I invited Miss Burlow to tea and to give you lessons in decorum." He didn't meet her eyes as he blurted out the last words.

“To do what?”

“Give you lessons in decorum.”

She dropped her fork and turned to him with a curious expression on her face. “And why would I need lessons in decorum?” she asked coolly.

Richard was surprised she had not told him off yet and wondered if her question needed a serious answer or if she was just biding her time.

“Because... well...” He waved a hand, indicating her overall manner.

“You’ve never had a problem with me having breakfast in my nightgown,” she pointed out.

Good point.

“And I should have long ago.”

“Is this about the ball last night?” she asked incredulously. “You’ve barely said a word to me since we got back. Did someone say something?”

“It’s more than that. I’ve been thinking about it for a while...”

“But you never bothered to discuss it with me or seek my consent. You stood back and judged me and took matters into your own hands,” she accused. “How then are you better than the ton?”

“Emmy.” He tried for a soothing tone. “Please understand that I only want what’s best for you.”

“And you’re the best judge of that?” she snapped. “And Catherine? Did she think me a harridan too?”

“You’ve just debuted, and you only danced once at your first ball of the Season,” he pointed out. “You need to secure marriageprospects now. And no, Catherine didn’t think you a harridan. She was quite against it.”

“If my only options are judgemental men who couldn’t look beyond a few faux pas, then I’d rather die single.” She pouted.

“Emmy!” His tone was harsh, but he needed her to see reason. “I only want you to be happy and well-settled with a man of good standing who will love you. But if you lack the necessary social skills, he might not even interact with you to know your brilliant mind. You know I wouldn’t be asking you to do this if I didn’t love you.”

Emmy sighed long and low, her face pinched. Richard had no doubt she felt insulted, but she was smarter than to turn down the help she desperately needed. Plus, he’d wanted to spare her the embarrassment of hiring one of those etiquette tutors he knew wouldn’t be able to keep quiet about tutoring a duke’s sister.

“Alright,” she agreed reluctantly. “I could use some help.”

He resisted the urge to whoop in triumph and nodded. “You’ll have to get dressed quickly then. I told her?—”

“Your Grace, Lady Emmeline,” the butler suddenly spoke from the doorway. “You have a letter, My Lady.”

“Oh.” Emmy bolted from her chair excitedly, snatching the letter from his hand and skipping away. “See you later, Brother.”

Richard sighed, shaking his head and taking a long sip of his morning brew. He sincerely hoped Catherine would be able to handle this Herculean task he’d given her.

As the carriage rolled up the cobblestoned path to the Terrels’ townhouse, a feeling of nostalgia hit Catherine, as it had been a while since she’d visited.

The same slightly overgrown shrubs lined the small path to the house, dotted with pretty pink roses that had seen better days. The house had aged in the last two years, and it was no surprise, considering the Terrels’ absence from town first due to their father’s illness and then his death in the following year.

She knew they were still well off, or else word of their ruin would have already gotten out, so she wondered why they had not bothered to refurbish their home.

Pushing the thought aside, she accepted the help of the footman as she alighted from the carriage and climbed the short steps to the house.

Once inside, she was led into the drawing room as her hosts were summoned. She sat straight, her hands folded primly in her lap, wondering what made her agree to this arrangement in the first place.

She was hardly that well-behaved, or she’d never have agreed to such an... uncouth arrangement in the first place. And it should have been seen as an insult, as she was yet to be declared a spinster, so it was unfair to ask her to play governess. But desperate times called for desperate measures.

Sure, she had sufficiently good manners and had not had a bad Season, but she’d failed to catch a husband, which was the ultimate goal of any unmarried young lady.

A voice at the back of her head whispered an answer that she immediately shut down as her host stepped into the room.

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“Your Grace,” she greeted, rising from her seat.

“You do not have to stand on ceremony with me, Catherine.” The Duke smiled. “We are old friends, are we not?”

Indeed they were, but when she remembered the pleasure he’d given her the night before with just an almost kiss, she needed to maintain a healthy distance if she was to escape their arrangement unscathed.

He was a renowned rake, after all, and even though she was inexperienced, she wasn’t so stupid that she didn’t know he could seduce her into ruin if he wanted to.

She really didn’t want him to, so she’d picked a practical dress. The high neckline and plain colors would definitely ward him off.

“Indeed, we are, but it is too improper for me to call you by your Christian name, Your Grace.”

“Is it not even more improper to refuse a duke?” he chided with a mischievous glint in his eyes.

“That’s why it’s best that we keep this conversation between us, Your Grace.”

He laughed and shook his head, and pride surged through her at the fact that she was able to make him laugh.

“I had forgotten how fun it is to speak with you,” he admitted. “I have missed you.”

Likewise.

But she kept that to herself.

A few moments later, Emmeline appeared in a gown that was two Seasons old, and Catherine knew then where she'd like to begin.

"Good morning, Catherine," Emmy greeted with a wave and a bright smile, sitting beside her. "I hear you will be giving me lessons in decorum."

"Indeed," Catherine confirmed, surprised at her friend's cheerful demeanor.

She'd feared that Emmy would see her involvement as a betrayal, but she was grateful to be spared from her ire.

"I look forward to it." Emmy beamed. "So, where do we begin?"

"Shopping," Catherine announced with a smile.

"Shopping?" the siblings asked in surprise.

"I am not sure how that even—" Richard started, only to be interrupted by Catherine.

"I have looked at Emmy's dresses between yesterday and today, and I must say they are too outdated if you want her to have good prospects. I, myself, am hardly fashionable, but I know a good modiste who will make her the belle of the Season."

"Oh." Emmy clapped excitedly. "You're really good at being a tutor, Cathy."

"If you think it's absolutely necessary," Richard relented. "I don't think a responsible man would be so concerned with a woman's dress when looking for a wife."

“If only all men shared the same opinion.” Catherine sighed. “We really must get going if we are going to be there on time. She gets really busy at noon.”

“Where is she, then?” he asked, frowning. “If she is that popular, why have I never heard of her?”

“Do you make a habit of visiting modistes, Your Grace?”

Emmy laughed and then clapped over her mouth. “Sorry, Brother.”

They hurried into the family’s carriage and were silent during the thirty-minute drive to the modiste’s. Thirty minutes because everyone in town apparently had somewhere to go.

“Good morning, Mesdames, Monsieur!” the modiste, Madame Francine, greeted when they stepped into her tastefully decorated shop, which was thankfully empty. “What can I help you with today?”

Usually, there was such a crush that there was barely any room to have a consultation with the woman herself.

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“Good morning, Madame Francine.” Catherine took the lead. “We would like to commission a few dresses for my darling friend here.”

Emmy waved her hands excitedly, her eyes still darting around the shop.

“Alright, if you’ll follow me, Lady...?”

“Emmeline,” Emmy supplied.

“Lady Emmeline, I’ll introduce you to a wonderful world of fashion. Tell me, what do you like?” the modiste asked, leading her into a back room.

Deciding her friend was in good hands, Catherine hung back, taking a seat on one of the velvet sofas and accepting the tea poured for her.

Richard took a seat beside her but declined the tea. She noted then that he too needed a change of wardrobe. His coat fit him a little too snugly to be proper, since he’d gotten bigger in the two years they’d been away. His bulging arms and forearms were too distracting to be proper.

“You should also visit a haberdasher while you’re here, Your Grace.”

He raised an eyebrow at her.

“I noticed your clothes are a bit... improper.”

He gave a mischievous smile that told her she was about to hear something that

would make her regret opening her mouth.

“I do not care much for my clothes, dear Cathy.” He smiled and leaned closer, his scent clouding her senses. “Most women prefer me out of them.”

A gasp escaped her lips as a hot blush rose to her cheeks and neck. She slapped his arm and inched away from him on the sofa.

“I am sorry if I offended your delicate sensibilities.” He smiled, obviously pleased with himself.

“You obviously are not.” She rolled her eyes.

“I am, sweet Cathy.” He pouted, feigning hurt. “Do you doubt the words of a duke?”

“No, but I’m starting to wonder if the curriculum at Oxford no longer includes proper speech,” she retorted once the heat in her cheeks dissipated.

“What about my speech was not proper? I only spoke the truth.” He laughed.

“A truth I was better off not knowing.”

“Why?” he asked, leaning closer. “Because you are one of them?”

Her eyes flicked down to his arms, and she looked away, trying to school her features. But damn her propensity to blush.

“Not at all.” She shook her head vigorously. “I will not entertain such a pointless thought, and I really think it’s not just Emmy who needs lessons in decorum.”

“Are you offering your services, Cathy?” he asked with a teasing smile. “Are you

trying to spend more time with me?”

She swatted his arm. “You wish.”

He laughed long and loud, and she found herself enjoying his company even though he was incorrigible.

“You look beautiful when you’re angry,” he commented suddenly, startling her.

“W-what?”

“You flush beautifully when you’re angry. I wonder what else would bring a beautiful red hue to your cheeks.”

“Your Grace, you?—”

“No, no, Cathy,” he scolded as if she was a naughty child. “When a man compliments you, you are not to scold him no matter how pig-headed he sounds. A blush will do.”

“I—”

“And you really should smile more often,” he added, rising from his seat. “Men like a woman with a ready laugh. Save the glowering for after you’re married.”

She stared at his back unseeingly. Did she really not smile?

She’d always thought that she had a near-approachable personality, but not so much that she attracted every George, William and Harry who glanced at her.

“More tea, Miss?” one of the assistants asked, interrupting her thoughts.

“Yes, please,” Catherine muttered.

The air was thick with the promise of rain, and Richard inhaled deeply, willing his body to relax.

He’d gotten too comfortable flirting with Catherine just now, and his body seemed to forget she was the plain, proper Catherine he’d seen playing with his sister when they were children.

He had to step outside to hide his body’s reaction at the sight of her pretty blush. He’d noticed the way her eyes ran over his arms, and he’d felt the urge to sit up straighter.

Her full pink lips had parted slightly, and a vein in her neck had throbbed furiously—a telltale sign she was attracted to him. The dark side of him wanted to

lure her into the dark waters to see just how much impropriety she was willing to dabble in.

He shook the thought out of his head, but just as he turned to step back into the shop, he spotted a dress on display that made his face split into a wide grin.

It seemed even Providence was out to get him to ruffle Catherine's feathers.

The dress was an exquisite dark green velvet piece that would bring out the golden flecks in her eyes, but that was beside the point. While she favored high necklines that hid all of her, this dress was a low-cut masterpiece that he knew she would never wear.

But he wondered...

He caught the eye of the modiste, and in a few minutes, his purchase was packaged under the strictest confidence and prepared to be delivered to Catherine's home.

"What has you smiling so, Brother?" Emmy asked, looking up at him with a wary expression.

"Nothing," he answered.

Catherine said nothing, even though he knew she was curious as well. He almost laughed, imagining the shock and anger that would cross her face when she read the penned note he'd asked them to deliver with the dress.

He was really looking forward to seeing her again.

"Come," he told his sister. "Let's take Miss Burlow home."

“Can we go for cake after?” Emmy asked excitedly.

“Men don’t want a chubby wife,” he teased.

“And women don’t want a husband who’d starve them.”

“Alright, we’ll go for cake afterward.”

“I love you, Brother.”

“You only love me when you’re spending my money.”

“Of course.” She smiled. “You’re as pigheaded as they come. That’s the only good thing about you.”

They shared a laugh and waited for Catherine to join them. When she did, she stared between them and shook her head. “Do I want to know?”

“Not at all.”

Chapter Five

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“Thank you, Your Grace. Emmy,” Catherine said as a footman helped her out of the carriage. “I had a lovely afternoon.”

“I should be thanking you, Cathy.” Emmy beamed. “Because of you, I have a whole new wardrobe. Dresses, nightgowns, undergarments...”

“I didn’t need to hear that,” Richard groaned.

“I am glad I am able to be of assistance in some way.” Catherine smiled, accepting the praise. “Do have a beautiful day.”

She waited until the carriage rounded the corner before turning around and stepping into the foyer. However, she frowned when the sound of shouting reached her ears.

“What is this about now?” she asked no one in particular.

Their butler, Mr. Stevens, answered with a sigh, “Her Ladyship mentioned her clothes were getting tighter, and His Lordship suggested she had been overindulging in sweets.”

Resisting the urge to groan at their childishness, Catherine went to find her parents in the drawing room. Their shouting became louder the closer she got to the room, and that only strengthened her resolve to marry a man who wanted nothing to do with her outside of probably conceiving his heirs.

She surely didn’t want to deal with any more volatile emotions the way she’d had to in her parents’ home. She was content to barely speak except when they had to keep

up appearances.

Hugh and Lily were huddled in a corner as their parents shouted at each other, oblivious to how scared their children were.

Hugh, fifteen, had his arms around Lily, who was given to panic attacks when their parents started one of their fights. Catherine's anger flared, and she was sorely tempted to give their parents a verbal lashing they would never forget, but her siblings' well-being came first.

"Hugh, Lily," she called, stepping into the room.

Her siblings rushed to her with a cry, wrapping their arms around her.

Hugh was already a head taller than her but still sought to hold her for comfort, and she smiled at how even though he put up a tough facade when his friends or recent crush, Miss Merriwether, were in the vicinity, he was still a baby at heart. Lily, on the other hand, had inherited her small frame and comfortably fit under her arm.

Their parents stopped their squabbling and turned to face her with guilty expressions, to which she replied with a dirty glare as she led her siblings out of the room.

That was not very ladylike of her, but she didn't care, considering how highly improper they were too.

"Cathy, we?—"

"Don't," Catherine hissed. "I don't want to hear it."

"But we truly are sorry," her mother insisted. "We just get so..."

“Angry with each other that it’s hard to keep our voices down,” her father finished.
“But that doesn’t mean we don’t love each other.”

“You promised us last time that you wouldn’t do this again. You promised.”

“We know. We really tried to, but...”

Catherine crossed her arms over her chest, waiting to see what excuse they’d give her this time. She loved her parents, she really did, but she loved her peace and quiet way more.

“You don’t love us enough to change,” Hugh sneered.

“Don’t say that, Hugh,” their mother scolded, sounding hurt.

“Why shouldn’t I?” he spat angrily. “You always apologize, yet you go on yelling at each other, not caring how it affects us. You are supposed to protect us and care for us, but more than half the time, you two are too distracted by your fighting to even notice we need anything.”

Catherine instantly felt guilty for not defusing the situation quickly. If she had, then perhaps she could have saved her parents Hugh’s scathing words.

If only things were simpler, she’d be enjoying her first successful tutoring session with Emmy.

“Don’t talk to us like that,” their father snapped. “We are your parents, and we have done our best to provide you with everything you need. This is how you repay us? You are so ungrateful, all of you!”

“We never asked for?—”

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“Oh, but you enjoy the fancy clothes and treats. You never asked, but Lily threw a tantrum when we said we couldn’t afford the trip to Bath for the holidays,” their father added, red with rage.

“Arthur, that is enough.”

“Jemima, you?—”

“That is enough, Father.” Catherine glared at him.

“I don’t?—”

“Hugh.” One word was all she needed to silence her brother when he flew into a rage.

“That is enough. Apologize.”

“What? Why?” he protested.

“Because you were rude and ungrateful,” she answered. “They might not be perfect, but you cannot deny they have done their best to take care of us.”

“But—”

“Apologize. Now.”

“I am sorry,” Hugh mumbled reluctantly.

“Go on.”

“That was rude and ungrateful of me. I should not have said what I did.”

“We forgive you.”

Hugh nodded but walked with slumped shoulders out of the room.

Catherine’s heart panged, but he needed to reflect on his actions and realize how rude he was.

He did have every right to be upset because as a child, he’d been ignored several times in uncomfortable situations till she’d found him bawling and soothed him. It’s why he’d gotten so close to her. She had cared for him since he was a child.

She shook her head at her parents before leading Lily out of the drawing room and to her chambers.

Lily usually didn’t talk after such incidents until a few days had passed.

“Lils, how are you?” Catherine asked once she’d shut the door. “Do you want some tea?”

Lily shook her head and went to lie on her bed, crumpling her dress. Their mother was going to throw a fit when she saw it.

“No, thank you.”

“But how do you feel?” Catherine pressed. “You never say anything, and it worries me.”

“I don’t really have anything to say, Cathy,” Lily sighed. “Do you think Mother would mind if I took a quick nap?”

“I doubt Mother would mind. I might even join you.”

Lily nodded and slid to the edge of the bed to make room for her. “Where did you go today?”

“I went to call on an old friend.”

“I didn’t know you had any friends,” Lily said, sounding surprised. “You never go out.”

If it weren’t almost entirely true, Catherine might have been offended. It was not as though she didn’t have friends, she just didn’t enjoy conversations revolving around nothing but gossip and the latest fashion trends.

“I guess there’s a lot you don’t know about me.” She laughed, kissing her sister’s hair. “Sleep, little one.”

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Lily nodded and turned onto her side, quickly falling asleep. A pleasure Catherine wished she could experience, but her mind was racing as she tried to draw up a mock syllabus she could cover with Emmy.

Feeling a bit of inspiration, she moved to her writing desk and pulled out a fresh sheet of paper, noting down things she'd noticed Emmy needed help with.

And there were alotof things.

By the time she was done, she'd almost filled both sides of the paper. She sighed, rubbing her forehead. She had a lot of things to cover in such a short time, but she hoped Emmy was a fast learner so she would still have time for her lessons with the Duke.

She remembered their interaction earlier, and a hot blush crawled up her cheeks when she remembered his words.

He'd told her to blush if anyone said such words to her, but in truth, if he were anyone else, she would have probably run away if she was in a good mood or slapped him across the face.

I do not care much for my clothes, dear Cathy. Most women prefer me out of them.

His eyes had lit up with such dark promise that she didn't doubt his words, and considering their past interactions, she couldn't help but wonder what he'd have done if she'd flirted back like all the heroines in the novels she would never admit to anyone she read.

Would he be so taken aback that he'd run from her, or would he take her in his arms and ravish her the way the heroes in the novels did?

She wondered what it would feel like to be wrapped in Richard's arms. He'd only nipped her earlobe, and that had made her feel uncomfortably warm throughout the evening.

Even his proximity earlier had left her with a buzz she couldn't shake off. She shuddered to think what the feel of his arms around her could do.

A knock sounded at her door, pulling her out of her reverie.

"Who is it?" she asked as she rose from her seat, making sure to keep her voice low enough so she wouldn't wake Lily.

"It's me, Miss," her handmaiden answered. "I have a delivery for you."

Delivery?

Did she buy something without knowing it?

Catherine opened the door and admitted her maid, who was holding a very large box that was unmistakably from the modiste she'd visited earlier.

"How do you know it's mine?" she asked.

"There's a note on top with your name on it," the maid answered, standing back even though her body buzzed with excitement.

Catherine took the note, frowning at the unfamiliar hand. She wondered who gifted her the dress, and even though she had an inkling, she wondered why he'd gift her a

dress.

Was it perhaps to thank her for helping his sister?

She accepted the paper-knife and opened the letter slowly because she didn't know what to expect. Her curiosity turned into a frown and then outrage when she read the letter again.

Dearest Catherine,

I hope this gift finds you well. You will find that I have taken care to fast-track our lessons by purchasing you this dress, which is guaranteed to get the attention of all the eligible bachelors in England as compared to the nun-like styles you favor.

I picture you frowning as you read this letter, so this is a reminder to smile. Men like a woman with a ready smile.

Do well to thank me later.

Yours lovingly,

Richard.

Catherine found herself laughing despite her anger and decided she'd give him the benefit of the doubt. Even if he spoke like a cad, that didn't mean he was one.

However, that sentiment evaporated the moment the dress was laid out before her.

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What the...?

The dress itself was a dream of green velvet embroidered with gold thread, but the neckline and exposed shoulders would indeed attract suitors of the worst kind.

If she were to wear this dress, her bust would be on full display, and she didn't dare imagine the scandal it would cause.

Just what exactly is he trying to do?

"Miss, it's beautiful, but your mother is?—"

"Mother is not going to see it," Catherine stated firmly.

"But—"

"Hide it in the bottom of the chest with my old dresses," she ordered. "And remember not to say one word about this. Did she see the box?"

"No, Miss."

"Good. You may leave now."

Bobbing a curtsey, the maid left Catherine to her thoughts.

It was obvious Richard was trying to get a rise out of her. Little did he know she also had a vengeful side to her.

She was already coming up with a little prank of her own that would teach him not to pull such silly tricks next time, and she knew just what to do.

Catherine lay down after unpinning her hair, running a hand through it to ease the tension in her scalp. An image of her in that dress flashed through her mind, and she was tempted to see the expression on his face when he saw her in it. She wondered if he'd flirt with her and if perhaps he'd be tempted to nip her earlobe again.

Pushing the silly thought aside, she fell asleep to dreams of dancing in the green dress.

Chapter Six

"Do you know if the Duke is courting anyone?" Miss Diana Applesworth asked Catherine when Richard walked into the Grimsbys' garden party.

Not wanting to meet his eyes, Catherine turned away from him. She was not sure she wanted anyone to know they were familiar with each other.

"I wouldn't know," she answered, sipping her punch.

"Oh, but you should," Miss Applesworth insisted. "I heard you went to call on them a few days ago."

"I went for Lady Emmeline," Catherine clarified, using her friend's title to prevent the girls currently hounding her from overstepping. "We are childhood friends."

"We know that, dear Cathy," Miss Fiona Merriwether interjected. "But the Duke would have been in residence, so you would be at least cordial with each other. Or are you trying to keep him for yourself?"

The other girls now regarded Catherine warily, as though she was officially a competitor. It was not as though she weren't beautiful, but compared to many of the great beauties that made their debuts in the last and current Season, she was somewhere in the middle.

And standing next to her current companions, the only thing that made them wary of her was her friendship with the Duke's sister.

"I have no designs on the Duke," she answered, only to be met with their scoffs. "Plus, we've hardly had a reason to talk aside from harried greetings. He's a busy man. You have nothing to worry about."

They still watched her with wary eyes, but Miss Applesworth, apparently getting some of her confidence back, sniffed.

"As if he'd consider the likes of you over me," she said snootily. "Come, girls, let's see if the Duke needs any refreshments. It is a hot day, after all."

Catherine watched their retreating backs in disbelief. This was exactly why she kept to herself. The only reason she even tolerated a conversation with them was to not come off as rude, but she was sorely tempted to snub anyone who came up to her again.

"Cathy!"

She heard her name from across the garden and winced as she turned to face Emmy, who apparently didn't care that people were turning their noses up at her.

“Emmy,” she chided softly. “It’s not proper to raise your voice like that.”

Emmy winced and hid her red face behind her fan. “Sorry. I was just so excited to see you,” she murmured. “I have gotten so many compliments on my dress. Do you like it?”

She spun, looking much like Lily, and Catherine couldn’t help but smile at her. It was like having another younger sister.

“You look beautiful, Emmy.” And she meant it.

“Of course, she’d look beautiful,” Richard declared proudly, coming up behind them. “You have a good eye. As do I, I hope?”

Catherine turned beet red as she remembered the dress she’d hidden away until she needed to pull off her prank. She’d finally tried it on when Lily had returned to her chambers and had had to clap a hand over her mouth to muffle her squeal. It was that decadent, and she’d loved it. But she’d be damned if she let him know how much she loved it.

“Thank you for the compliment, Your Grace, but I’m afraid the same cannot be said about you,” she joked.

Richard beamed at her jest. “You learn quickly. That is good.” He nodded. “But I am hurt. You didn’t like the dress?”

“What dress?” Miss Applesworth suddenly asked, shocking everyone with her

proximity and inserting herself into the conversation. “Good day, Your Grace. I’ve been looking for you.”

Catherine, once her heart rate had slowed, had to mentally applaud the girl for her bravery. Not only had she rudely ignored all the members of their group, but she’d gone ahead to initiate a conversation with Richard, who had a higher rank than her and to whom she’d not been introduced.

Catherine noticed Richard take in the petite blonde and wondered if perhaps he too would be ensnared by her cherubic charms. Miss Applesworth really was a beauty, with lush golden-blond hair that glimmered in the sun and glowing skin. Her pale blue dress accentuated the blue of her eyes.

Apparently, she was also better at flirting, for many of the men of their party could barely keep their eyes off her, always looking to engage her in conversation when she was free.

If Catherine was looking for a different sort of marriage, she might have felt jealous of how much attention the girl was getting. Seeing Richard’s eyes linger on her, though, sent a bitter feeling to the pit of her stomach that she couldn’t identify.

Miss Applesworth squared her shoulders at his perusal, pushing her chest forward. At least on that point, Catherine won, seeing as the girl was small-chested.

Miss Applesworth had enough confidence to make up for it, though.

“Is that so?” Richard asked coolly. “May I inquire why, Miss...?”

“Applesworth. Diana Applesworth,” she said, preening. She was definitely planning wedding dresses in her head now.

“Miss Applesworth,” Richard said slowly with a sour look on his face. “I wonder. Would Lord Smythe smile so brightly when I tell him how his daughter rudely inserted herself into a conversation when she’d not been properly introduced to the discussants?”

Her face paled as her eyes darted around the garden, and in a whiff of powdery perfume, she was gone.

Catherine resisted the urge to smirk. It was no news that the Viscount Smythe was a stickler for propriety and was even more so when it came to his only daughter. Miss Applesworth would probably be sent to the country for a year to avoid scandal.

“You sent Cathy a dress?” Emmy asked, surprised.

Catherine sighed inwardly, grateful that her friend had not mentioned what had just happened.

“Yes. To thank her for agreeing to tutor you.”

“Oh, you’re such a darling, Brother.”

“I am glad someone seems to think so.” He sniffed, and Catherine almost laughed.

Emmy put her hand on her friend’s arm. “Why didn’t you tell me he bought you a dress? Can I see it?”

“Yes, can we?” Richard asked teasingly.

“Someday maybe.” Catherine smiled at them, before walking away.

It was time for games, and she really was looking forward to doing something other

than making conversation. Her polite facade was slipping, and it was only a matter of time before she said some not-very-proper things to Miss Applesworth if she kept glaring daggers at her from across the garden.

The first game was Pall Mall, and Catherine partnered up with the lovely Sarah Dowding, wife of the Earl of Branden. They were to play against Lord Dunham and Miss West, an American heiress she'd yet to be introduced to.

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She and her partner easily won the first round, and that's how the day went, with her switching partners for each new game.

When it was time for cards, her opponent was Richard himself, and she smiled triumphantly when she looked at the cards she had in her hand.

"You might as well forfeit this round, Your Grace," she told him triumphantly.

"Why, Miss Burlow?" he asked cordially, as though they were newly acquainted. "Are you scared I'll end your winning streak?"

"Au contraire, Your Grace." She smiled, placing her cards down. "I only fear that if we were making a wager, I'd be the new owner of your estate."

Richard laughed long and loud and then put down his cards, and she laughed when she saw she had indeed beat him.

The other players at their table groaned as they put their cards down, and she noticed that she had beaten them all, although they didn't take it in stride like Richard had.

Why do men have such fragile egos?

They broke apart for refreshments, and while she sipped her punch, she made eye contact with Lord Evermore and Lord Riverton, players at her table during the last game of cards. But they looked away from her and then quickly walked off.

She frowned at their odd behavior, wondering what that was about.

“You seem to have scared away potential suitors again,” Richard noted from behind her, startling her.

Her drink spilled over the rim of her glass, nearly ruining the front of her dress. She turned to him with a glare, but he just winked at her and handed her a kerchief which she used to wipe her hands.

“Keep it,” he said when she tried to hand it back.

“Thank you,” she muttered.

They were calling for the final game, and she made to find her seat when Richard pulled her back with a hand on her arm. She looked around to make sure no one saw them.

“Why did you do that?” she asked, worried. “Someone could have seen us.”

“Relax, no one did,” he said softly. “Plus, it’s time for your second lesson.”

“Now?” she hissed. “We could have discussed this at your home.”

“Are you trying to spend time alone with me, Miss Burlow?”

“Richard!”

“Shh! Someone might hear you,” he teased.

She glared hotly at him when some curious eyes turned in their direction. He might not have much of a reputation to preserve, but she did.

“Fine. Fine.” He raised his arms in surrender. “I’m trying to help you.”

She looked warily at him and folded her arms across her chest. "I'm listening."

"What do you think you did wrong today?"

"Could you not just tell me and be done with it?"

He rolled his eyes. "Humor me."

"I really don't know what I did wrong."

"Lord Evermore and Lord Riverton are potential suitors who would suit you way more than you know, and you have nearly ruined your chances with them."

"Nearly? How?"

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“How many men do you think appreciate a woman beating them at games?” Richard asked mockingly.

Catherine stared at him blankly. “You can’t be serious.”

“Oh, but I am,” he stated matter of factly.

“But you took it in stride.”

“Because I am not interested in you.”

That stung, but she pushed the feeling aside.

“What do I do then?”

“Lose a few games and ask for help,” he said like it was the most obvious thing in the world. “Men, throughout history, have always loved a damsel in distress.”

“That’s the most ridiculous thing I’ve ever heard.”

“Is it?” He quirked an eyebrow at her. “Humor me for a few games and see.”

“Alright.”

“Let’s make a wager.” His smile was cat-like, chilling her to the bone. “If my plan works, you’ll owe me a favor I can collect any time and anywhere I want.”

“And if it doesn’t?” She smirked at him.

“The same applies to you.”

“This should be fun.”

He walked away from her with a confident, lazy gait she wished she could match. Confusion clouded her mind, and she wondered if perhaps she should test his theory.

What did she really have to lose except her pride?

Besides, when his plan didn’t work, she planned to use that favor against him so he’d regret making a fool out of her.

The next round of cards was shared, and for this round, Lord Hightown and Lord Grainsbury were at her table. Richard was playing with new partners but could see her clearly from where he was sitting.

He nodded at her and focused as his companions called for his attention. One of the ladies at his table placed her hand on his arm, showing him her cards, and he gave Catherine a look as if to say, See what I told you? She rolled her eyes and attempted the same move.

“Lord Hightown,” she asked softly, “would you mind showing me how to play the game?”

Lord Hightown stared at her in surprise and then gave a confident grin that indicated his ego was being stroked.

“Miss Burlow, it would be my pleasure,” he said and then went on to explain the game slowly as if she were a child, even though he ended up losing a few rounds.

Catherine lost a few as well but got fed up with his encouragement quickly.

Is this really what it takes to trap a husband? God, women really do suffer a lot.

She won a round and then turned to him, thanking him for his guidance.

He literally puffed out his chest. “I am glad I could tutor you.” He smiled.

She nodded and blushed as his stare became intense—he looked taken with her.

“Tell me, Miss Burlow,” he said as the cards were being shuffled. “If you are not otherwise engaged tomorrow, I’d like to take you on a ride at Hyde Park.”

Catherine was taken aback by that. Richard’s plan had actually worked?

“That will be nice.”

Lord Hightown beamed at her. “I’ll pick you up at ten.”

She nodded and continued the game, keeping up the act for the next few rounds. By the end of the day, she was surrounded by smitten men trying to make conversation with her.

She laughed when necessary and blushed when necessary and found herself enjoying their conversations, as she found out she shared hobbies with a few of the men—not that they didn’t make obnoxious comments sometimes, though.

She laughed at something Lord Kilmore said and turned to find Richard staring at her from across the garden, his brown hair silhouetted by the golden light of the setting sun. His eyes shone with humor and satisfaction.

God, he is handsome.

What?

He winked at her and turned away, and her heart started pounding in her chest.

She hadn’t even realized she had flushed until Lord Hightown called her attention to it.

“Are you well, Miss Burlow?” he asked, putting a hand on her back. “Do you need to sit down?”

“No. No,” she answered, shaking her head. “I am well.”

And oh did she hope so.

Richard looked away from Catherine with a satisfied smile as he saw her surrounded by gentlemen he knew fit her criteria. She had looked odd playing the small-brained lady, but she’d followed his instructions very well, and a dark part of him wondered just how well she’d follow his instructions on other things.

He shook the thought out of his brain as she approached him, looking every bit the smart, cool Catherine he’d seen playing with his sister when they were children.

But then sensual thoughts crossed his mind as he noticed the way her skirts swished around her long, elegant legs.

He’d never noticed how smoothly she walked before. He had never noticed many things about her, and now he noticed one thing—all her features started to stand out to him.

He frowned at that.

What the bloody hell was going on?

He couldn’t be attracted to practical Catherine, could he?

Yes, she was striking when she laughed freely without a care in the world, but that wasn’t enough to warrant attraction, was it?

Perhaps he’d stayed too long without a woman. That was the only explanation he could come up with for the inappropriate thoughts crossing his mind now.

“Is all well, Your Grace?” she asked, pouting with concern.

Had her lips always been that pink?

Damn.

He really needed to focus.

“Yes.” He swallowed past the lump in his throat. “All is well.”

“Do you need some punch?” she asked, handing him her cup. “God knows I’ve had enough.”

He laughed, and those sensual thoughts faded from his mind as he finally reminded his body that she was good old Catherine, his sister’s best friend. He should not be picturing how her legs looked bare.

He swallowed and then smiled at her. “I have had enough, thank you. I believe you owe me a favor.”

She sighed. “I do, but I must thank you.” She smiled. “I didn’t know flirting was so fun.”

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“I am glad I could help.” He nodded. “Now imagine how much more successful you’ll be in that dress.”

“Please don’t talk about it again.”

“Why not?” he asked innocently. “It is a beautiful dress, and I’ve been known to have good taste.”

“In women and not dresses.”

“And how do you know that?”

She didn’t answer.

Smart girl.

“It wasn’t appropriate for a garden party, but I’ll put it to good use at the next ball.”

She gave him a wink that went straight to his groin and strolled away.

Damn. What was she doing to him?

Chapter Seven

Over the last week, to say that he had restless nights would be a gross understatement. His mind had been consumed with thoughts of a certain brown-eyed witch who had no right to put him under her thrall.

In the last week, he had developed the habit of going to his club to engage in energetic boxing and fencing in the hope of physically exerting himself and possibly burning away whatever sorcery she had wrought on his mind. Instead, he got injuries and restless nights for his troubles.

The moment his exhausted eyes closed in slumber, she haunted him in his dreams. It was a common occurrence for him to wake up at night, his bedsheets twisted and wet from erotic dreams in which she was the main character.

He was sure that if she were to become aware of the contents of those dreams, she would run away from the perverted world that was his mind.

She had successfully turned him into an absentminded, sleep-deprived, irritable man who was addicted to cold baths and horse riding.

Richard heaved himself to the edge of his bed, getting up to his full height. He performed his morning ablutions and then rang the bell for his valet.

In a few minutes, the man arrived in a bloody cheerful mood that set Richard's teeth on edge. He wondered what had the younger man in such a disgustingly happy mood.

Since his former valet died, he had been replaced by his son, who he must admit was quite good at his job, if not for his tendency to chatter.

Usually, Richard welcomed his chatter because it made quite a bright opening for his day, but he was not feeling quite bright this morning—and all the mornings this week, if he was being honest. He was actively fighting the urge to yell at the younger man to shut up.

Stan was a good lad who did his job amazingly well. It wouldn't do to antagonize him simply because of his recent black moods.

In half an hour, Stan had managed to transform him into a proper gentleman, which was a welcome upgrade from the untamed pagan he must have resembled earlier this morning. But even Stan's best efforts could not erase the black bags under his eyes and the excess energy that simmered beneath his skin.

It seemed another early morning ride was in order. That way, he could burn off the excess energy and also avoid the presence of... Catherine.

Catherine, who had quickly become the bane of his existence. He was supposed to be her instructor, but what he felt towards her did not feel instructor-like at all.

When he stepped onto the landing, he saw Emmy handing a letter to the footman and saying something about sending it to Bath.

Richard furrowed his brow in curiosity. Who was in Bath, he wondered.

"Who is in Bath?" he asked as he came up behind her.

Emmy jumped, snatching the letter from the footman and hiding it behind her skirts. Her eyes darted around in guilt.

His eyes narrowed in suspicion at her reaction. He had known Emmy since she was an infant, and now she was definitely hiding something. Something she knew was going to get her in trouble with him.

He straightened to his full height, lifting his chin. "Give me the letter, Emmy," he said firmly, his hand outstretched.

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“It is mine, and no matter how much you try to intimidate me, I am not giving it to you,” she huffed, jutting her chin in defiance.

It seemed the little imp had really matured, since his usual intimidation tactics no longer fazed her. It seemed it was time to change tactics.

“Why are you trying so hard to conceal that letter? You are not doing something illegal, are you?” he asked, softening his voice.

But despite the change in his tone, the look of defiance in her eyes remained. She tried to run past him, but he used his body to block her path.

“Where do you think you are going, young lady? We have not concluded our discussion, and you haven’t told me what’s in that letter,” he said irritably.

He was definitely not in the mood for this altercation so early in the morning. Unfortunately, he had the thankless duty of protecting a young lady who was becoming more headstrong by the day.

“The earlier you give me the information I seek, the faster you will be free to return to your chambers,” he added.

It was quite uncharacteristic of Emmy to prolong a disagreement. She was more likely to give up so she could have her peace. The fact that she was steadfast in withholding that letter caused his hackles to rise, and they rose even higher when she used a tactic that had been used by all schoolroom girls.

She threw a tantrum.

Her eyes narrowed, and she stomped her feet.

“I am seventeen, Richie. I am a young lady now, and you are not entitled to read my letters, so drop your overbearing attitude and allow me to go up to my room.”

That annoyed him even more.

“Don’t you ever stomp your feet at me as long as you live under my roof. You remain my ward, and you must follow my rules for as long as you live here. If you refuse, I will forbid you from going to the park again.”

“You wouldn’t dare,” she huffed, flushing with outrage.

“Watch me,” he returned, a smirk on his face that was guaranteed to annoy her even more.

However, she still did not give up the letter. There were few things that could make a young lady send a secret letter, the prime example being a secret lover, and if Emmy had one, he had to know.

He was not going to allow his only sister to bring ruin upon herself, and—God forbid—he did not fancy the idea of chasing her down to Gretna Green.

He opened his mouth once again to demand answers but was interrupted by someone clearing their throat rather loudly.

He turned to find Catherine standing a few feet from them, watching them with an amused look on her face. He knew he was supposed to feel embarrassed or annoyed by her expression. Instead, he was transfixed, unable to tear his eyes away from the

sheer magnetism she radiated.

Today she wore an emerald-green walking dress with a slightly low bust that exposed the creamy skin of her cleavage, which became even more enticing when she folded her arms over her chest.

She was solely oblivious to the effect that action was having on him. It seemed the lady had the uncanny ability to drive him crazy without any effort.

Her hair was arranged in multiple curls, with several strands hanging around her face to give her that windswept look. On any other woman, her hair would have looked unkempt. And now he was fighting the urge to bury his fingers in her hair and tug on it.

The thought of having her dark hair spread across his immaculate bedsheets heightened his arousal. It seemed that he was definitely going to need to have several cold baths in the future.

“Your Grace,” she called, snapping him out of his reverie

She was advancing towards him with a concerned look on her face. He subconsciously took a step back, and he watched her eyes fill with pain. But that was probably better than the alternative. He was quite certain that if she touched him, he would have a hard time not ravishing her right there in the hall with no care for who was watching.

It seemed that Catherine had interpreted his reaction as him being disgusted by her, and that was rather evident by the way she squared her shoulders and jutted her chin.

“I am here to resume Emmy’s dancing lessons. Every fashionable lady is expected to at least be an average dancer, don’t you think?” she asked, raising an eyebrow at him.

“I...” His voice came out hoarse, and he coughed in order to clear it. “I think that is fine,” he replied evenly.

He turned back to see that his sister was looking at him. Her eyes narrowed in suspicion, and at that point, he was glad for his long coat, as it hid his arousal from his unwitting audience.

His sister was soon distracted by Catherine’s call for her to proceed to the ballroom for their lessons.

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Richard knew he should have left at that moment, but for some unfathomable reason, he found himself following them to the ballroom. It seemed that there was an invisible string that tethered him to Catherine, causing him to move in her direction without conscious thought.

It was mortifying, but he held on to the excuse of watching his sister dance. He was only being a supportive brother, and he was so going to ignore the tiny voice in his head that called him a liar. He was going to deny it for as long as he could because there was no reality in which he developed feelings or an attachment to a stuffy young woman who also happened to be a bluestocking. It was unacceptable that this lady also managed to draw his attention much easier than an entire circus.

He was fast becoming obsessed with her, and he knew he had to do something about it.

When they arrived at the ballroom, Catherine started teaching Emmy the basics of court dance, and he was quite impressed by the simplicity of her language and demonstrations. Emmy was nodding enthusiastically to show she understood, but the way her eyes darted around proved that she understood nothing. That fact became evident when they stood up to dance, with Catherine taking up the lead.

Catherine was remarkably calm and stopped, making sure to explain the steps again, but it was to no avail. Richard was feeling sorry for her toes because it seemed that his ungraceful sister had managed to step on them with each movement.

When they stopped the second time, Richard could not ignore the urge to tease his sister as he noticed the look of frustration on her face.

“It seemed that someone has had the misfortune of being blessed with two left feet. It is a miracle that you didn’t throw Cathy over with your exceptional dancing skills,” he said, his lips curling into a smirk that was sure to annoy her.

Predictably, her scowl deepened. “I would wager that I was a much better dancer than you were at my age.”

“No, my darling,” he drawled. “I have always been a good dancer because I always attended my dance classes. Unlike you, who ran away to play in the garden whenever the dance master showed up.”

“No, that is not true. Alvey told me a story of you almost tripping your dance partner during one of the balls you attended,” she said, a triumphant smile on her face.

“I am sorry to disappoint you, princess, but that was pure fiction. Alvey only made that story up to console you when he realized you couldn’t dance,” he replied mockingly.

An unholy delight filled his being as he watched her triumphant smile turn into a dark scowl.

She opened her mouth to retort but was interrupted by Catherine.

“That’s enough, both of you. Your Grace, I am surprised you would argue like a child,” she scolded.

But Richard didn’t feel any remorse at all. For some reason, the disapproving look on Catherine’s face made her more attractive to him. If he needed any other proof that he was addled, that thought just confirmed it.

“You could help Emmy, since you seem to have a wealth of knowledge,” Catherine

added.

“How do you suppose I do that? I can hardly break her head to force such knowledge into it.”

At that statement, his sister shot him a withering look that only made him laugh harder.

“You could dance with me,” Catherine suggested.

At that, Richard fell silent. While he would love nothing more than to be close to her, he also recognized the danger that such proximity presented to his self-control.

“Afraid, aren’t we?” Catherine taunted, noticing his hesitation.

It was quite unfortunate, but Richard had never been able to refuse a challenge, and he was not going to give her the satisfaction of thinking that she intimidated him on the dance floor.

Pushing off the wall, he made his way towards her, and when he stopped before her, he saw her eyes flash with awareness.

No matter how she pretended, it was obvious that she was affected by his proximity, and it soothed some part of him to know that he was not the only one suffering from the madness that seemed to consume him.

He executed a deep bow and offered her his hand, which she accepted. Then he placed one hand on her waist while she rested her other hand on his shoulder. He took a deep breath to brace himself and then began dancing.

With every whirl, he was becoming so intoxicated with her scent that he

unconsciously leaned in, drawing her closer to breathe her in.

Unfortunately, his partner did not anticipate that move, and she tripped over his foot, catching herself at the last minute by holding on to his shoulders.

“I think you are the one with the two left feet, and you are holding me too closely,” she said in an angry tone, her color high and her chest heaving with exertion.

“I held you to prevent you from falling,” he returned hotly.

“I never asked you to rescue me—I can do that myself,” she scoffed.

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“You are a thoroughly vexing woman. I will never dance with you again,” he replied, his voice rising.

“You are the arrogant one who cannot seem to do anything right,” she spat.

Richard was distantly aware that both of them were not reacting out of anger, but a rising heat that could only be expressed through anger, or else it would boil over into searing passion. But he couldn't stop himself from drawing breath to continue their shouting match.

Suddenly, the sound of a chair scraping on the floor drew his attention. He turned to see Emmeline trying to sneak away. He had totally forgotten about her.

“Where do you think you are going?” he asked her, his voice unnaturally high-pitched.

“Let her go,” Catherine interjected with a daring tilt to her chin. “I think you are the one who requires dancing classes.”

“You know what,” he said, his voice dropping to a sensual whisper, “I should continue our lessons.” He stepped closer to her. “Always compliment a man, never insult him.”

Her pupils dilated with awareness.

“I do not compliment those who have done nothing to deserve it,” she scoffed.

“I could give you something to compliment me about,” he purred, his eyes fixed on her cherry-red lips.

It happened so fast. One moment he was admiring her plump lips, the next he was tasting them. He took her bottom lip between his teeth and sucked on it, and was rewarded by a moan as she tightened her arms around his neck. His tongue darted out and probed her lips, but they remained closed.

Moving lower, he took her earlobe in his mouth, enjoying how she writhed in pleasure.

“Second rule. When a man kisses you, kiss him back,” he said, his voice hoarse with desire.

He kissed up the column of her throat before returning to her lips. He proceeded to kiss her again, and this time when his tongue probed her lips, she opened her mouth, allowing him entry.

He kissed her senseless, his arousal increasing with every moan that slipped past her lips.

The fever in his blood urged him to find a flat surface to lay her down on to consummate their passion, but he was saved by the sound of Emmeline’s feet running down the stairs towards them.

He released Catherine abruptly, causing her to sag against the wall, and moved away from the temptation that was her body. He pretended to pour himself some brandy while his hand shook with desire.

He was dimly aware of Emmy walking back into the room and Catherine making excuses to leave.

“I have to get something at the modiste for my mother,” she said to his sister.

He was surprised that her voice was steady because, at the moment, he couldn’t trust himself to speak.

“Are you alright?” Emmy asked, and he could hear the concern in her voice.

Of course, his sister was concerned about her friend because he was sure Catherine looked slightly disheveled despite her efforts to fix her hair and dress.

“I am quite fine,” Catherine replied. “I have to hurry.”

Richard heard the sound of footsteps hurrying towards the door as she called out her goodbyes.

When the door of the ballroom clicked shut, he braced himself for the questioning that was sure to follow.

“What did you do to Catherine that caused her to hurry out of the room in such a manner?”

“Why would you think I did anything to her?” he asked in what he hoped was a nonchalant tone.

“I left you here with her, and I come back to see her running away in fear. It stands to reason that you had something to do with it.”

Richard chose not to answer that question, instead taking a bracing sip of his brandy because there was no way he was going to explain to his innocent sister that he had been moments away from ravishing her dear friend. He aimed to protect her innocence even though he burned with the need to claim her friend.

But it seemed he also needed to protect Catherine from the monster inside him, and he needed to do it fast, starting with a cold dip in the lake nearby.

Chapter Eight

Richard was familiar with addictions. He had seen several members of the ton being swallowed by the lure of the bottle, squandering several pounds for the sweet oblivion it offered. For the perpetual quiet and peace that they swore could only be found at the bottom of the bottle.

Well, there was no easier way to destroy a body than a life of constant inebriation, forever lost to the real world, where lucid thoughts existed.

They believed it solved their problems, at least while the buzz lasted, but it soon faded. And when reality sank in, it was even worse, so they chased after more bottles, spending fortunes to attain that oblivion, continuing a vicious cycle that usually ended in their families' ruin and their inevitable deaths.

He knew men, intelligent good men, who had so many good qualities, but these virtues fell short in the face of their one vice: gambling. He had witnessed whole estates change owners at the flip of a card and a whole family fortune lost in a single game. He had seen several young men becoming fortune hunters, attending balls for the sole purpose of nabbing an heiress to restore the fortunes that were lost at the whims of a gambling addict.

The one addiction he was always amused by and was immune to was... women. As far as he was concerned, women were beautiful creatures, and he could never say he did not appreciate their charms, but that was just it—he appreciated their charms, sampled them, and chased pleasure with them. But no matter the level of ecstasy he enjoyed in their arms, they had never inspired any genuine feelings in him. He

appreciated them, but he did not obsess over them.

He always found it mildly amusing when he heard the odd man wax poetic about some lady he had recently met or, on rare occasions, when he had the misfortune of having to be in close contact with some besotted fool who was convinced that his wife was Venus made flesh. He shook his head, assuring himself that he could never fall prey to such an excessive display of emotions.

Because while women were beautiful creatures, they could also be capricious to such an extent that he was sure even the devil would gladly take notes from them. He should know, as he had witnessed firsthand what capriciousness can do to a woman. His mother being a prime example.

His earliest memories of her were that of a shapely woman with perfectly coiffed blonde hair who sometimes visited the nursery, ruffled his hair and gave him a bright smile that convinced him she could only be an angel. When she smiled at him, she praised him for how handsome he was.

Over time, he came to crave her angelic presence. Sometimes she'd come and instruct the maids to dress him in formal attire. Then, taking his hand, they'd walk together, him craning his little neck to keep looking at her angelic face. But even as she held his hand, she smiled while staring off into the distance.

His little heart always longed for his mother's smiles, but he only received one when they got to the drawing room filled with noble women so heavily perfumed that it irritated his throat. But he dared not cough or sneeze because it'd make the smile on her face disappear. So he endured the heavy perfumes while her friends oohed and aahed about his handsomeness and how he would make a perfect duke in the future.

And so it continued for at least the first six years of his life. Somehow he always looked forward to when her friends visited and he got to spend time with her—or

whatever time was left after the party.

But as he got older and lost that chubby baby looks the ladies gushed about, her visits became less frequent. Until one evening when he was wandering the gardens, singing a tune that he had heard from his nanny.

He didn't really understand the words, since they were in Gaelic. His nanny was Scottish, and he had pleaded with her to teach him the language or at least explain the words to him. But she had refused, evading his maneuvers with a sad smile. But he always sang the tune when he was alone because it was calming, as it had been his lullaby for years.

On that evening, however, his singing was interrupted by a rustling in the flowers, and he paused.

"Who is there?" he asked, trying to sound fearless while he quaked in his boots.

He was pleasantly surprised when his mother stepped out from behind the hedges. His lips curled into a smile. He had missed her.

"Mama," he said, running to her hug her waist.

He had grown taller, so his head only reached her abdomen. He had been too excited to notice that she did not hug him back.

However, he felt a tug on the back of his small coat—his cue to let go. He dropped his arms reluctantly.

"Were you the one singing just now?" she asked in a hopeful tone.

For some time, Richard was confused, but he quickly recovered.

“Yes... Yes, Mama,” he stuttered.

At his response, he saw her face break out into a smile that he had not seen in quite a long time. He had always known his mother was a beautiful woman, but at that point, he simply basked in her radiance, and he felt satisfaction for being the cause of her joy.

Over several months, that satisfaction became almost buried underneath the classes he had to take. His mother declared to anyone who cared to listen that her son was a music prodigy and proceeded to hire the best music teachers to refine his singing skills and teach him how to play the pianoforte.

He had endured those lessons, and when he tended to the back of his fingers, which had suffered the rap of his instructor’s ruler when he hit a wrong note, he reminded himself that it was all for the sake of his beautiful mother, who had an angelic smile.

Within a few months, he was on his way to becoming a budding musician, holding mini-concerts for his mother’s friends. While it was such hard work to prepare for those performances, he looked forward to them because she always praised him right after, declaring him her treasure.

His father had always spent the day with him fishing and riding, and he tried to explain away many of his mother’s absences, but even at such a young age, Richard could feel the strain in their relationship. They had a frosty relationship that even a blind man could have perceived from a mile away.

He had inadvertently eavesdropped on their conversations, but that was not really his fault, since his mother’s voice was raised to such a pitch that it could carry all the way to Mayfair. Her shouting was only interspersed by his father’s quieter voice trying to reason with her.

All their arguments ended the same way, with his mother storming out and taking a carriage to some unknown destination, until the row they had on his eighth birthday, which had ended with his mother moving her affairs out of the bedroom she shared with his father amidst his pleas for understanding.

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But if there was something Richard had come to understand about his mother as she aged, it was that she was resolutely stubborn, so she never yielded to his father's pleas. Instead, she started inviting over "new friends." The only problem was that these friends were men, and instead of receiving them in the drawing room, she received them in her bedroom.

Gradually, as he got older, the pity Richard had felt for his father turned into disgust. Disgust that a man of his father's caliber was helpless to put a stop to his wife's infidelity.

That feeling solidified as he interacted with other boys his age and observed their family dynamics. Gentlemen of his father's caliber did not follow their wives around, begging for crumbs of their affections. And while they didn't bat an eyelid at their wives' affairs, they insisted that they were discreet, provided that they had filled the nursery with heirs and spares.

Never mind that those noblemen were not particularly discreet about their mistresses, but society didn't ostracize them, unlike the ladies. But at the very least, their wives never made the unforgivable error of disrespecting them in public.

As he got closer to leaving for school in Edinburgh, the veil of love he had over his eyes lifted, and he started to see his mother in all her flaws, reinforced by the moment he had walked into their gallery to find her in a passionate embrace with one of her paramours.

It was safe to say that Richard could guess exactly what he was seeing, as the man was standing with his behind exposed, with his pantaloons around his ankles. When

they noticed his presence, his mother just looked up at him with no remorse on her face. Richard had to shake off the shock long enough to run out of the room. Holding on to the handrail of the staircase, he forced himself to take deep breaths.

On that day, he came to the conclusion that his mother was dead and that whoever he had seen in that room was just a woman with an ugly, wicked soul who just happened to look like his mother.

In the days following that incident, he maintained a healthy distance from the Duchess, refusing to play for her friends and spending most of his time with his friends outside the mansion walls.

During that time, he confirmed his theory that his mother only cared about him when she wanted to show off his musical prowess and that aside from that, she had no use for him.

She proceeded to ignore his existence completely after that, not even bothering to smile at him when they crossed paths on the streets of Mayfair. She did not seek him out either the few times she was at the mansion.

While he felt a slight twinge in his chest for having lost her attention, however meaningless it was, he was predominantly relieved and counted down the days until he could leave for Edinburgh for his studies. In no time, that day came, and as his carriage pulled away from the curb, his father waved at him with a deeply sad look on his once handsome face, now marked with heavy bags underneath his eyes.

Richard arrived at school with a smile on his face, having escaped the walls of their country home and the chaos that was his parents' marriage.

However, he soon realized he was horribly wrong, because one thing the ton ate for breakfast was gossip, and no matter how far he ran, the knowledge of his mother's

infidelity followed him, and if there was one thing young boys excelled at, it was being cruel for no reason.

He soon became a pariah, going to bed every night with stinging knuckles that he had busted during his countless pointless fights to defend his mother's honor.

Over time, he understood the futility of that endeavor and focused on his studies of philosophy and accounting while ignoring the snickers and whispers behind his back.

He became the best student, and that did not exactly endear him to the petty boys. They just added 'know-it-all' to the list of his sins.

He remained a social pariah for the first year or so till Simon, the son of the Viscount Talbot, joined their school and won him over simply because he pestered the quiet, brooding boy until he had no other choice but to become friends with him.

Together they became an unstoppable force, neutralizing the bullies through their practiced indifference. From Simon, Richard learned that bullies got disappointed when their jabs didn't provoke a reaction. He learned the art of easy charm, smiling in the faces of his haters and even joking about things that were supposed to traumatize him.

When he felt he was better as a man and could face his parents once again, he returned home to an even bigger shock.

His mother was pregnant, and according to the servants' tales, the Duchess had not been home for over six months, so it was safe to say that the Duke could not have been the father, and the faithless Duchess was most likely carrying the child of one of her many lovers.

For Richard, that was the straw that broke the proverbial camel's back. From his

limited knowledge, he was sure that no man, no matter how calm, would take such an insult lying down. But his father had to be an extraordinary man because he claimed the child, forcing everyone to perpetuate the deception.

Richard itched to tell him that he was not really fooling anybody because everyone knew that it was not possible for him to be the father of that child. But then he decided not to give unsolicited advice because, as he had come to learn, you do not give advice to a man in love, lest you find yourself the target of his scorn.

So he ignored them both, traveling over to Simon's family estate, where he spent most of the holiday. He only returned home when he heard the news that his mother had given birth to a baby girl.

He had been drawn by some unholy curiosity to see what the child born from such a soiled union would look like. However, he was disappointed because when he looked into the cot, all he saw was a tiny little creature who opened her blue eyes and gave him a toothless smile.

Over time, he found himself returning to the nursery several times, every day, to carry her in his arms, and for some reason, the little terror seemed to stop fussing when he placed her on his chest. By the end of the week, he was so attached to the child that he became convinced that angels could emerge from unexpected places and no matter his mother's sins, that innocent baby girl was his sister, and he was going to protect her the best way any older brother worthy of the name would.

But as it has always been said, a leopard does not easily shed its spots. He was not particularly surprised when a week after his sister's birth, his mother disappeared, leaving only a note that poorly explained her choice to flee with her new lover to the Continent. That singular act reduced his father to a mere shell of a man who just locked himself in his study, rummaging through papers.

Until the day his butler found him slumped over his desk. It had been the start of the decline of his health until his demise a year later.

And thus Richard resolved to never subject himself to the whims of capricious women. Never was he going to allow a woman so much control over his heart and life that she could destroy him with a click of her fingers. He would never be addicted to a woman.

“Never say never” seemed to be a saying that applied to his current condition because it seemed that by no will of his own, he seemed to be fast on his way to being addicted to one brown-haired lady in particular, and this was terrible. Very terrible, indeed.

So when Simon walked into his study at an unfashionably early hour, he welcomed the distraction

“Well, you look terrible,” Simon noted.

As much as Richard would like to deny it, it was true. His waistcoat was lost somewhere in the room, his shirtsleeves were roughly rolled up to his elbows, his cravat was partly undone, and his hair was mussed because of the countless times he had run his hand through it. He must look like a terrible mess—he felt like a terrible mess.

“Are you well? St. George?” Simon asked, furrowing his brow in concern.

“Very well, in fact,” Richard answered, affecting nonchalance.

“You have been drinking. I thought you had given up the vice, and don’t get me started on the state of your clothing. Did your valet go on vacation or anything of that sort?”

“Careful, Simon. You are starting to sound like my mother.”

Simon’s lips quirked up. “While I do not particularly care for the comparison, I can’t wait for you to marry so I can quit worrying about you,” he said, before heaving an exaggerated, long-suffering sigh.

Richard shivered in revulsion, and his reaction made Simon chuckle loudly.

“You know my stance on marriage. I would do almost anything to escape the Parson’s mousetrap,” he scoffed.

“We will see about it,” Simon drawled, eyeing him speculatively.

Richard narrowed his eyes in suspicion, heaving a tired sigh. He decided to change the topic.

“St. George? Since when do you address me by my title?”

“I do when my friend becomes the newest duke in the ton,” Simon said, a triumphant smile on his face. “I can’t wait to see those pricks swallow their words.”

While they had outgrown their experiences as schoolboys, unfortunately, noblemen seemed to carry their grudges into adulthood.

Simon, with his blonde Adonis looks, might seem like the fun-looking, charming nobleman, but Richard could attest to the fact that beneath the layers of his pristine clothing, his friend had a streak for pettiness. It could be amusing sometimes, but Simon was the best friend any man could ever ask for.

“... so we could go to the club. I am sure we could make some dents in their ego with well-placed blows.”

Richard snapped back to reality, realizing that Simon had been speaking with him the whole time he had been distracted.

“The club? I am in no mood for boxing now.”

“Come on, man, I am sure there is nothing like physical exertion to take your mind off whatever thoughts seem to plague you.”

Richard reluctantly agreed because if he refused, Simon would pester him till he agreed anyway.

When they arrived at the club, Richard swore that some part of him enjoyed the extra respect that was accorded to him by the patrons. It was nice to patronize the men who had once gossiped about him within hearing distance.

Within moments, he and Simon stood opposite each other in the boxing ring, but after a round, he gave up because he just kept getting hit by Simon. Considering that he was a better strategist than his friend, it was a testament to his absent-mindedness.

But why wouldn't he be distracted when his mind seemed to develop a fixation on Catherine's pink lips and how they felt underneath his, soft, succulent, sweet...

Damn and blast, he was back to that train of thought even while he made efforts to curb it. He guessed he should be grateful that he had only had a match with Simon. If he had a match with another opponent, he would have been nursing something worse than a broken nose and a black eye.

"What is wrong, man? Money problems?" Simon asked teasingly.

"Simon, I just inherited my father's title. Trust me, I have more money than I know what to do with," Richard answered, exasperated.

It was true, because it seemed the one good thing about having a father who buried himself in his estate accounts was that the estate's accounts were meticulously arranged, every penny accounted for.

"So, it is a woman then," Simon concluded with a cocky arch of his eyebrows.

"How did you get to that conclusion?" Richard asked, bewildered.

"Those are the only things that could bother a man deeply," Simon said, a solemn look in his eyes. But then, his lips curled into a smile. "How is the beautiful

Cynthia?”

Richard only gave him a blank look.

“Remember Cynthia?” Simon stressed the last syllable of the woman’s name like he was talking to a child or a very dumb person. “Your mistress?”

Richard’s expression remained blank for some time before the name finally registered.

“Oh, Cynthia is well,” he answered a little too quickly.

After a pause, Simon said mischievously, “Don’t tell me you have gone and fallen in love with another woman. Cynthia must be very disappointed.”

Richard shifted uncomfortably at how close that was to the truth.

Simon’s mention of Cynthia made him come up with a plan. It seemed that slender, beautiful Cynthia, who he had met several months ago and taken on as his mistress, would probably be his solution to regain his sanity. Although it had been a while since he’d visited the woman, she had always been the warm and welcoming sort.

He paid her too well for her not to be.

There was nothing like a satisfying romp beneath the sheets to chase whatever blue devils plagued him. Perhaps he’d entice her to show him whatever new tricks she’d learned. He wasn’t a fool to expect loyalty from her, and knowing his money spoke louder than any of the other gentlemen she let into her bed, she would be more than eager to please him.

He would try that in a week, so he would finally be free of this inconvenient attraction to good old Catherine.

Yes. His prolonged celibacy could be the reason why his manhood seemed to have a mind of its own. That had to be the only logical explanation for why he suddenly couldn't get her out of his mind even though he'd grown up with her.

Chapter Nine

"We should invite St. George over for dinner."

Catherine nearly jumped in surprise upon hearing her mother mention the Duke's title. Considering the man had been living continuously in her head in recent weeks, it was kind of startling to hear his name said out loud.

"Why would you want to do that, Mother?" she asked, confused.

"To congratulate him, of course, on becoming a duke, and we'll also get to see Emmeline. I have missed the sweet girl."

Catherine nearly snorted in disbelief because she was quite sure the bit about Emmy was just an afterthought. Even though her parents could be sweet people, they were not above using manipulative strategies to elevate their standing in polite society. She was sure forging a relationship with a newly minted duke was a step in the right direction for them.

Considering how hard she had worked to maintain a distance between the Duke and herself following that kiss in the ballroom of his townhouse, she didn't think it was a particularly good idea to invite him to dinner or any other events that would force them to be in close proximity.

It wasn't him she didn't trust. It was herself and the tendency of her body to betray her deepest desires. The man just seemed to have the uncanny ability to expose the most wanton part of her, and she was resolved to avoid him at all costs.

"We can always send a letter conveying our condolences and congratulations," she suggested hopefully.

There was an awkward silence while every member of her family gawked at her as if she had grown a second head.

"Cathy," Lily started. "Even I know that is quite rude, seeing as the Duke lives a few blocks away from us," she said, imitating their mother's admonishing tone while shaking her head in disapproval.

Catherine had forgotten how annoying little siblings could be. Lily was barely thirteen, but she already had a smart mouth and could be strongly opinionated. But that was the prerogative of the youngest child, in her experience.

Before she could reply, her mother interjected.

"Lily is quite right. You do not send paltry letters to a duke. Besides, he is like a family friend, seeing as you are friends with his younger sister. Emmeline is a sweet girl, would you deny us the chance to meet her older brother?" she asked, affecting a disappointed tone.

Trust her parents to descend to the level of guilt-tripping to get what they wanted. On cue, all her siblings fixed their hopeful eyes on her. Of course, they had to make her feel like an evil tyrant for not agreeing to the dinner.

"Alright, we could have the Duke come over for dinner this week. I will deliver the invitation myself," she said, defeated.

She didn't miss the triumphant look on her mother's face and the conspiratorial look she shared with her father.

It seemed they were thick as thieves again after having their latest row just a few hours before they broke their fast. She wondered if they could behave cordially in front of the Duke.

"But I'll agree to this only on one condition." She watched as the bright smile on her mother's face dimmed a little. "Mother, Father, you must promise to behave."

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At that, her mother gasped dramatically. “We are always well-behaved. Why would you?—”

“You know what I mean,” Catherine cut her off, giving them a pointed look. “No squabbling and no raised voices. At least while the Duke is here.”

“Alright, we promise,” her father answered, a chastized look on his face.

Catherine felt the familiar exhaustion creep over her. It was draining to have to play the role of parent while her parents were alive and well. Her parents were the sweetest people on earth, but they were so absorbed in their own love story that they barely had the parental skills and energy to train the children that resulted from that love.

Dropping her napkin, she rose from her seat. “Thank you for the meal, Mother, Father, but there is much to do if we are to host the Duke. I need to meet with Cook to decide the menu for that dinner.”

At least she hoped the extra work might keep her mind off the kiss that seemed to haunt both her sleeping and waking hours. A voice in the back of her head whispered that she might as well be deceiving herself.

Considering her need to avoid the Duke, it was probably ill-advised of her to offer to deliver the invitation herself.

When she arrived at the Duke’s house, she was welcomed warmly by Emmy.

“I hope you have not come to force me to dance because I have had enough dancing to last me a lifetime,” Emmy warned.

At that, Catherine laughed. “Do not fear, my friend. I am sure you are quite safe, at least for now. You know, you really need to perfect your dancing skills, regardless.”

“Yes, I know, but I’d rather defer that for now—it is too tasking,” Emmy complained, scowling.

Catherine laughed even harder. “Someone might think we are forcing you to cut your toes off.”

“Maybe if I did cut them off, I would not be stepping on yours so much when we’re practicing.”

“You will get better. I was worse when I began learning, trust me,” Catherine said in reassurance.

Emmy just gave her a dubious look.

Catherine opened her mouth to further reassure her, but it seemed her friend was done with the subject.

“If you are not here to teach me to dance, what did you come for? I have a suspicion this is no simple visit.”

“I am actually here to see your brother,” Catherine admitted, sighing.

“Is this about whatever happened between you two in the ballroom last time? Tell me, did he hurt you? I would give him hell if he did,” Emmy said, with concern on her face.

“Calm down, Tigress.” Catherine patted her arm affectionately, giggling. “No need to raise hell on my behalf.”

“You really looked distressed when you hurried out that day. Are you sure nothing happened?” Emmy pressed.

Something did happen, but Catherine doubted sweet, innocent Emmy wanted to know exactly what had transpired between her brother and her best friend.

Catherine cleared her throat. “I am fine, trust me. Your brother did not harm me.”

Just my sanity, she added silently.

Emmy looked at her suspiciously like she suspected she was hiding something, and knowing her, if they continued this conversation, she would find out exactly what happened. So Catherine rushed to distract her.

“I came to give him an invitation to dinner in our house. You are invited too.”

She watched as Emmy’s face lit up with joy.

“A dinner party? I love that! Your cook makes the best tarts. Please say she will make those,” Emmy begged, clinging to Catherine’s arm.

“I will make sure she does. Besides, you know you are welcome to our home anytime. My mother has really missed you. She asked that I ensure you are present for the dinner.”

Well, that was a little lie. But if it made Emmy this happy, Catherine felt no remorse.

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“So, is your brother at home?” she asked, trying to mask the hope in her voice.

“No, I am afraid not. He just left with Simon. I think they said they were going to the club or something of that sort,” Emmy answered.

Catherine felt a disappointment that was quite odd, considering the fact that she had been studiously avoiding the man.

“I could give him the invitation,” Emmy offered. “I solemnly promise to make him come,” she added, holding up her hand, her palm facing outwards in a mock vow.

Considering how much the Duke doted on Emmy, Catherine was sure that her friend would easily persuade him to go. So she gave her the invitation reluctantly, said her goodbyes, and declined all invitations to stay a little longer.

She had to get away from Emmy because she was quite sure if she stayed longer, she might end up confessing everything to her oldest friend, and no matter how sweet Emmy was, Catherine didn’t think she would be able to forgive her the sin of lusting after her older brother. Some things were better left hidden, and this was one of them.

When she arrived home, she handed her coat to the butler, who greeted her at the door, and then she made for the kitchen to discuss with the cook.

Mistress Jamie was a strong Scottish woman with red hair, and the sight of her stocky figure standing in the midst of the chaos that was the kitchen, making sure it ran smoothly, filled her with warmth. The woman had been a second mother to her in more ways than one.

“Lass...” Mistress Jamie smiled when Catherine entered, then turned to one of the kitchen maids. “Make sure ye turn the soup. If it burns, I will have yer ear, ye hear?”

She wiped her hands on her apron and then herded Catherine towards the kitchen garden.

“What brings you to the kitchen today?” she asked, concern on her face.

While Catherine loved the older woman, she did not particularly share her love for the kitchen. Something about inhaling smoke all day long did not agree with her. Hence she understood the woman’s surprise to see her.

“We’ll be having the Duke of St. George over for dinner by the end of the week.”

“St. George. He had not been among fancy folk for nigh on a decade. Besides, I heard he kicked the bucket recently.”

Mistress Jamie’s speech had improved over the years partly because of Catherine’s influence, but whenever she was passionate about something, her Scottish accent broke through.

“Not that duke, Nana Jamie. This is for his son.”

At that, Mistress Jamie laughed. “Pay me no mind, Miss Burlow. I swear me mind is a little slower these days, but I am no spring chicken. So it should be expected, no?” She let out a self-deprecating laugh.

“You are not that old, Nana,” Catherine said, rolling her eyes in exasperation.

“Don’t ye roll yer eyes at me, young lady. I am not above using a ladle to redden yer bottom, nevermind ye are a big lady now,” Mistress Jamie threatened, but the amused

look on her face showed that she was just joking.

Catherine rolled her eyes again for good measure, and the cook laughed.

“Alright, what would ye like on the menu?” Mistress Jamie asked when she got her mirth under control.

Together they put together a menu that promised a sumptuous feast.

“What about dessert?” Mistress Jamie asked when Catherine got up to leave.

“I will leave that in your capable hands. But please make sure that your delicious apple tarts remain available.”

Mistress Jamie flushed with pleasure at the praise. “Sure thing, lass. I will make sure that I make a batch of it. We wouldn’t want to disappoint Lady Emmeline now, would we?”

Catherine wasn’t surprised that the cook had taken note of Emmy’s addiction to her apple tarts. It was hard to miss, considering the speed at which Emmy polished off the treats whenever she visited.

She never stopped singing the cook’s praises, complaining that her brother had hired some bad-tempered Frenchman to man his kitchen. Unfortunately, the man seemed to think that plain meals were the best diet for health. So every day, she had to endure the bland, tasteless meals because her brother dined outside most times, so he never understood when she complained.

Catherine acknowledged that Mistress Jamie was a treasure, and with the way she flattered her, she was sure if she wanted apple tarts to last her the whole year, the cook would endeavor to make her just that.

Days passed, and the day of the dinner arrived. The aromas of several delicacies filled the entire hall, indicating that the cook had prepared a sumptuous feast worthy of a king.

By sunset, Catherine spotted a carriage bearing the Duke's crest, a warhorse rearing on its hind legs in mid-flight. She would recognize that crest anywhere. It was that unique, and the sight of it marked the beginning of what she believed would be an evening of pure torture, confined to a small space with the Duke.

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She could only pray that this night ended without her embarrassing herself. But then, even if she achieved that feat, her family might just embarrass her.

She loved her family, but they were not exactly popular for their self-control and proper behavior.

By the time she descended the stairs, she found her mother already ushering the Duke and Emmy inside, playing the gracious hostess—something she could excel at when she was not having emotionally charged spats with her husband.

When the Duke walked in, Catherine had to make a conscious effort to take a deep breath. She wanted to believe that her obsession with the man was some figment of her imagination.

The man in front of her was attractive in ways that her mind could not even comprehend. His dark suit and his slightly tousled hair were effortlessly seductive. She lowered her head while she curtsied to him to try as much as possible to hide the blush she was sure was gradually turning her face the color of a tomato.

“Welcome to our home, Your Grace,” she greeted in a voice that was surprisingly steady, considering her inner turmoil.

She went on to greet Emmy with the brightest smile she could muster. If her friend noticed anything, she did not show it.

When they walked into the dining room, Catherine realized with dismay that she had been placed directly across from the Duke. When she looked at him as he pulled out

his chair, he must have read the shock on her face because his lips curled into that infuriating smirk.

It didn't have to be so difficult to ignore a duke, did it? She soon found the answer to that question to be in the negative because this Duke had long legs that he insisted on stretching fully underneath the dinner table, causing their legs to inadvertently brush against each other whenever they reached for their dishes. Each brush of his legs against hers sent a shiver down her spine and made warmth pool in her belly. The Duke was not immune either if the hot glint in his eyes was any indication.

Catherine was convinced that she would go mad before the dinner ended if it continued this way. So she was grateful when her mother initiated a conversation.

“So, how does it feel to be a duke now, Your Grace?” the Viscountess asked.

At that, Richard smiled innocently, as if he was not stoking her daughter's desire with every touch under the dinner table.

“It is quite humbling, I must say. I have more responsibility now, so it seems I might have to spend most of the year in the countryside to keep an eye on the estate and make sure the people there do not suffer because of my absence.”

“That is wonderful, Your Grace,” the Viscountess replied, and the Duke inclined his head slightly in acknowledgment.

Catherine had hoped that the conversation would remain civil, but her father's next question quickly dashed that hope.

“Do you miss your father, St. George?” he asked.

The Viscountess shot him a scathing glare and slapped his arm. Catherine saw her

father's expression turn into that dark scowl that usually heralded the beginning of a spat. She braced herself for one, but it seemed that they had decided to leave it for now. She inwardly sighed in relief.

The Duke's charming smile had dimmed significantly. Everyone knew that his parents' absence was a sore spot with him.

But then he turned on that easy charm once again.

"My father was a great man with high acuity for mathematics. I just hope that I am able to preserve the estate accounts the way he did," he replied, his smile brittle at the edges.

Emmy, the sensitive soul that she was, recognized the tension in the room and decided to dispel it.

"This lamb is quite tender. You should try it, Brother," she suggested, sharing a look with her brother.

In that one look, Catherine recognized a lot of unspoken things.

Turning to her, Emmy continued. "Please extend my gratitude to Nana Jamie for the wonderful meal."

"I will," Catherine replied.

The conversation slowed down after that as everyone focused on their meal until Hugh, who had spent most of the dinner staring out the window, asked, "Your Grace, could I ride your carriage sometime? It seems quite grand."

"Hugh, we don't ask our guests for favors. Mind your manners," Catherine scolded

lightly.

Surprisingly, Richard smiled indulgently at Hugh. “I would be honored to take you on a carriage ride, Mr. Burlow,” he replied.

“Thank you, Your Grace,” Hugh said excitedly, almost upsetting the table trying to execute a full bow while seated.

Lily, spying that she was about to miss the fun, interjected. “Me too, I would love to go.”

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Richard turned to her, laughing. “I would be honored to take you with us, Miss Lily.”

The dinner went smoothly from then on. By the time everyone was busy eating their desserts, Catherine excused herself. Her job there was done, she had managed to host a dinner without her parents squabbling. She deserved a quiet moment away from the turmoil that the Duke inspired merely by being present.

She made her way to the library, the one place in the entire house where she could have peace. Once she got there, she took off her shoes and stockings, proceeding to curl her feet under her to continue reading Shakespeare’s Julius Caesar.

In a few moments, she was engrossed in the betrayal, friendship, and love that were woven within those pages.

Her concentration was broken by the sound of a man clearing his voice. She raised her head, a scowl already forming on her face because of the distraction. And she was shocked to find Richard standing in the doorway.

He walked in now that he had her attention.

“Julius Caesar is one of my favorites. I see you have good taste in books. I never thought you one to read, at least not these types of books,” he amended, seeing the deepening scowl on her face.

“I wonder why you would have thought that way,” she drawled.

Instead of arguing, he sat at the other end of the sofa. Facing her, he asked, “Are you

quite alright? You seemed tensed throughout the dinner.”

Catherine could not tell if it was the concern in his voice or the intimacy of the library that made her open up to him.

“I was scared that the dinner would be ruined. I am only relieved it ended with no squabbles.”

“Why would you be scared about that?” he asked, his brow furrowed in confusion. “The fare was delicious, and your family was delightful. I didn’t see anything that could have gone wrong.”

“They are not always that way.”

“How so?”

“As I am sure you know, my parents are a love match. They love each other so much, but their passion seems to spill over into their arguments. I grew up listening to their volatile quarrels. They eventually settled, but it was scarring being caught in the middle. They are so wrapped up in each other, it is almost like they have no room for anyone else—not even their children.”

She flashed him a rueful smile. “This is why I would never marry for love. I can’t stand bringing any child to this earth and abandoning it because I cannot be bothered to tear myself away from my husband. I’d rather have peace in my marriage if I have anything to say about it.”

Chapter Ten

Richard did remember that Catherine had told him she was not going to marry for love when he had encountered her on the balcony during that long-forgotten ball.

Back then, he had interpreted it as a statement of a naive, gently-reared lady who thought defying her parents' wishes counted as some form of rebellion. But now, listening to her speak and the pain that laced her words, he revised that opinion.

He imagined her as a little girl, scared and alone, enduring parents who yelled at each other, forgot their children's birthdays, and barely knew their ages, likes and dislikes. It must have been difficult having to learn basic survival skills with the help of the servants. The loneliness must have been excruciating, and he marveled at the fact that she had grown into a strongly opinionated woman.

He guessed having to parent your younger siblings yourself could make you strong by default. But the fact that she carried her burden gracefully didn't mean that it wasn't heavy, and he could hear from her voice that some part of her was exhausted from years of carrying a burden that wasn't supposed to be hers.

At least on his part, he had his father's love and attention. If there was one thing the late Duke had done well, it was raising a young boy into a man lovingly even in the midst of the chaos that was his marriage.

The only problem Richard had with the man was that when the woman he called his wife packed up and left, he shattered into pieces, and he couldn't pick up enough of those pieces to somehow be whole enough to care for his children. Instead, his father wallowed in his misery for so long that he turned into a ghost.

No matter how he tried to shake the feeling, Richard believed that his father didn't love him and little Emmy enough to fight the despair and hopelessness that had swallowed him whole.

He had always believed that marriages of convenience, while as cold as stone, were more peaceful and dignified than the so-called "love matches."

To him, those “love matches” produced more traumatized people than the typical arranged marriage, himself and Catherine being prime examples.

Some young friends of his who recently got married swore that their love was one for the ages. Richard was happy for them, but the jaded part of him believed that no matter how much they claimed to love each other, that love would turn toxic at some point, potentially destroying a lot of people at the very core.

This was why he would never marry. That love had destroyed him, and he frankly did not believe there was any decent part of himself to offer any well-bred lady.

But he could offer Catherine empathy, because in his experience, no matter how well he carried a burden, it always felt good to know he was not alone.

“My parents’ marriage was a love match—at least at first. But it was a lie. My mother was a beautiful woman, you must have heard. Many of the odes written about beauty were written in her honor. My father made the mistake of thinking that he could capture a butterfly and keep her beauty all to himself. For the first few years, it worked—or it seemed to work.

“We were the perfect family, but then my mother started feeling trapped, far away from the vibrant life she had thought she would enjoy when she became a duchess. She demanded that we move our permanent residence back to London. My father wouldn’t have it, so she nagged and sulked, and when that didn’t work, she started living recklessly, hoping to force him to bend to her wishes.

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“My father granted her that freedom, but what she did with it could only be described as atrocious. I think he always knew that the woman he married did not care for him, but he was too in love with her to see reason. He allowed her to destroy him till there was nothing left of him. So, no, I will not marry for love either. I don’t think I would marry at all, actually. I have seen that institution turn brilliant men into shells of their former selves. I would never let that happen to me if I could help it.”

When Richard stopped to take a breath, he became aware of a curious sense of emotional nakedness. He had meant to empathize with Catherine. He had not meant to flay open the scarred depths of his soul.

He looked up, half expecting to see the judgment on her face. But when he looked into her eyes, the compassion he saw there soothed a part of him that he didn’t realize was smarting.

She took his hand in both of hers, stroking it in consolation. He didn’t think she was fully aware of the motion, seeing as her eyes were locked on his face.

At that moment, he appreciated the need for human connection. To be completely understood by someone was a gift he had never appreciated. Gradually, that gratitude turned into something deeper as they held each other’s gazes. He sensed the moment when the sexual awareness that always underlined their interactions took over. Her eyelids fell to half-mast, giving her that sleepy-eyed look that was effortlessly seductive.

Richard realized that at some point, they had moved closer to each other, and now he was only a breath away from claiming the succulent plumpness of her sweet mouth.

He unconsciously took a deep breath, hoping to calm the fires of desire raging inside him.

But he soon regretted that action because he was assaulted by her scent. She smelled of lilies and something else that was uniquely hers. He leaned forward, a mere second away from claiming her lips, when she abruptly pulled away.

It took a moment for him to realize she was leaving. He reflexively tightened his grip on her hand and pulled her down onto his lap.

He must love torturing himself because being just a few inches away from the sweet paradise between her legs was hell. He started conjugating verbs in Latin. Anything to prevent him from giving in to the almost overwhelming urge to lay her on that sofa and rut within her like an animal.

The look of desire on her face told him that she might not refuse him. But he had to remind himself that she was an innocent, unschooled in the world of desire, and no matter the lure, he did not bed innocents. Even if he did, with the way his desire was raging inside him, he would not be gentle. He would be wild and uncontrolled.

He was panting with the effort to hold back, and he was astonished he hadn't rent the sofa apart with the way he held onto it.

He looked up to see the little minx's eyes fixed on his mouth while she adjusted herself on his lap.

Richard groaned and then seized her mouth, plundering it. Damnation, she tasted even better than he had imagined. He was drowning in need, burning in the flames of desire. He urged her to open her lips, and she did, admitting him into paradise.

He licked into her mouth, their tongues wrestling for dominance. Then he broke the

kiss to suck on her neckhard, wanting to mark her ashis.

It was only when Catherine pushed away from him did he regain some semblance of sanity. She looked at him with a slight fear in her eyes. It seemed he had shocked her with the rawness of his ardor. He didn't know what devil possessed him to crack the predatory grin that sent her running out of the room.

Even though his thrumming body protested the interruption, he was grateful for it because he had been seconds away from throwing her on the sofa, pushing her skirts up to her waist, and ravishing her till every part of her being had his stamp of possession.

Besides, they had run the risk of being interrupted by a family member—her father, perhaps. Even Emmy. In their passion, they had both forgotten that the library door was unlocked and any one of their relatives could have come looking for them, following their prolonged absence.

Richard had nearly ruined her. He was supposed to be the more experienced one, but even he had been so swept away by the tide of desire that he had actually considered deflowering a virgin under her own father's roof.

He was lucky he was not being challenged to a duel or being forced to marry Catherine. He had been careless, and he might have deserved it. It was strange that he didn't feel the familiar panic when he considered the possibility of being forced to marry Catherine.

But that was a thought he was not willing to examine closely

Catherine Burlow was a threat to his sanity, honor and everything that made him a man, and wise men avoided battles they couldn't win. So he was going to avoid her till his infatuation with her wore off.

Chapter Eleven

Catherine held on tightly to the hope that time away from each other might help ease the strong attraction between them that threatened to consume them and everything in its path.

The desire she felt for the Duke should be illegal, and it seemed he agreed with that assessment because the times that her resolve faltered and she visited Emmeline under the guise of seeing her best friend, he was either away on some business, or he was in residence and he instructed the butler to tell her he was absent.

But she somehow knew when he was in residence because when she stepped down from the carriage, she felt a tingle crawl up the nape of her neck, telling her somebody was watching her. And sure enough, when she looked up, she was sure she saw a shadow move behind one of the topmost windows.

It might just be fanciful thinking, but she was convinced that the Duke was avoiding her. She really couldn't blame him, seeing how this mad desire was gradually turning her into something she was not.

She had written to him about their flirting classes, and he had decided to reply via letters. Long explanatory letters written in his flowing, masculine handwriting. She read them more times than she would admit, and those readings were not done for the sake of internalizing the contents that gave explanations on the flirting techniques needed to ensnare a husband.

As the Chamberlains' ball approached, she expected to feel some level of excitement about the opportunity to practice the wiles she had gleaned from her correspondence with the Duke.

Instead, she was filled with mild disappointment. Her spirits rose, however, when she

received another package a few days before the ball with a card that simply said it was from the Duke.

The dress was a wonder, a gown of the most vibrant red. The skirt was made of several yards of tulle, and the bodice was adorned with lace. It seemed to hug her bosom so perfectly that there was no need for alterations. Red might be a daring color on an unmarried lady, but she was no longer a debutante, so she was allowed to bend some rules.

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When she arrived at the ball and handed her coat to the butler, she was rewarded for that choice by the attendees' murmurs of appreciation.

She walked into the crowd, holding her head up high like the Duke had told her, and while she naturally avoided attracting attention, she was going to revel in the appreciation like the queen she was to attract the suitors she sought.

Even while she confidently navigated the crowd, she became aware that she was looking for a particular person in the sea of faces surrounding her. A face that always sported a grin. In no time, she locked eyes with him from the edge of the ballroom.

She nodded in acknowledgment.

Look at me, her heart whispered. I am going to make you proud.

He nodded back to show his approval without once taking his eyes off her.

She was distracted by Emmy putting her hand on her arm, which was a welcome change from the unladylike running and disheveled hair. It seemed their lessons in etiquette and decorum were finally bearing fruit.

"Cathy!" Emmy greeted excitedly. "You look positively ravishing tonight. Your gown is absolutely wonderful!"

"I am truly flattered," Catherine replied, smiling. "Thank you for your kind words."

"I didn't say that to be kind," Emmy said in a slightly chastising tone. "I was just

stating a fact. I dare say you have the attention of all the eligible bachelors in this room. And I dare say that you would have your dance card full in no time.”

“We will have to see about that,” Catherine replied. Deciding to steer the subject away from her, she asked, “What about you? Any dance partners yet?”

In answer, Emmy raised the wrist to which a dance card was fastened by a ribbon. Apparently, three of her dances had already been claimed.

“It seems our classes have indeed made a difference. I have had more eligible bachelors approach me today than I had since the beginning of the Season, and the night is still young. You truly work wonders, my friend,” she gushed.

“I hardly had to do anything,” Catherine replied humbly. “You are a beautiful, charming, intelligent woman, Emmy, and you certainly did not require my help to attract suitors. All I did was make some changes to your clothes and refine your manners. I didn’t turn you into a desirable debutante—you did all that by yourself. By simply being your unique self.”

Emmy’s eyes filled with tears of appreciation, and Catherine took her hands in her own. It was quite unfortunate that a beautiful lady like Emmy had been deprived of validation, first by her mother, who was supposed to teach her to be a proper lady.

They were interrupted by someone clearing their throat. They broke apart to see Lord Livingston standing beside them.

“Miss Burlow,” he asked, “will you do me the honor of dancing with me?”

Catherine looked around to see that the musicians were already playing a classic tune, and several couples were stepping onto the dance floor

“It will be my honor, My Lord,” she replied, curtsying to him

She took his hand, and he led her to the dance floor. When they took their positions, he proceeded to twirl them gracefully across the dance floor.

“Forgive me if I haven’t commented on it, but you look absolutely ravishing tonight, Miss Burlow.”

“Thank you for your kind words, My Lord, I am flattered,” she said, a blush blooming in her cheeks.

Lord Livingston nodded in acknowledgment. “I realize it was truly bad form of me to react the way I did this last time we spoke. A gentleman should have the virtue to accept rejection from a lady with grace. It was quite impolite of me to harass you the way I did, and for that, I apologize,” he said, a remorseful expression on his handsome face.

For a while, Catherine was at a loss for words. It was not often that a gentleman admitted his fault to a lady. Instead, most of them would do anything but apologize to protect their fragile egos. This singular act showed that the Viscount was a gentleman through and through, and he would be a gem to have as a husband.

“My Lord, all is forgiven.” She watched him breathe a sigh of relief. “But I have wronged you, too. I must apologize as well.”

At that, he furrowed his brow in confusion. “How so, Miss Burlow? Everyone knows it is a lady’s prerogative to accept or reject a suitor. You hardly committed a crime simply because you rejected me.”

“That is the crux of the problem, My Lord. I never intended to reject your suit. I was just overwhelmed by your confession and reacted strangely. I apologize if I made you

believe the opposite. You, My Lord, are an exquisite gentleman, and I would be most honored to have you court me. If you are still interested, of course,” she added, flashing him a charming smile.

Lord Livingston beamed at her. “Excellent, I will call on you tomorrow to seek your father’s permission to court you. I earnestly hope my suit will be accepted,” he said.

Of course, his suit would be warmly accepted by her parents, who had despaired of her ever getting an offer from an eligible bachelor. He would be lucky if her parents did not try to talk him into applying for a special license to have them marry as quickly as possible, just in case he decided to change his mind.

On average, Catherine knew she could do worse in her choice of suitor. Lord Livingston was not only responsible, but he was also honest, well-to-do, and possessed one of the oldest titles in England. The man was perfect from the top of his hair to the soles of his specially crafted hessian boots.

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So why couldn't she summon any excitement about their impending courtship? Instead, she was unconsciously looking for someone else... another man while her suitor guided her across the dance floor. She was unhealthily obsessed with a certain dark-haired duke who had made it abundantly clear that he was never going to marry.

What was it about the man's elusiveness that made him more alluring? A man with the Duke's dangerous characteristics was supposed to send her running for the hills. Instead, she found herself drawn to him by some unseen force. But that attraction threatened disastrous consequences, so for her sake and that of her family, she had to resist it.

Besides, it wasn't fair to the nice, perfect Lord Livingston to have his intended infatuated with another man. If that ever made its way to the ears of the gossips, it would be humiliating for a man of his caliber.

So she resolved to focus her attention on Lord Livingston. Hopefully, with enough devotion, she might develop even a fraction of those warm feelings for him.

Richard knew it was a mistake to attend this ball knowing that Catherine, the bane of his existence, would be in attendance. He had come to this ball convincing himself that he needed to escort Emmy and that he needed to see Catherine's progress in her hunt for a suitor, seeing as she was his student. But even he knew that those excuses were just that, excuses. His sister could have made it to the ball with her maid as a chaperone, and Catherine, being the clever lady she was, was going to do brilliantly on her own, and on that account, he was absolutely right.

When she had appeared at the entrance dressed in the vibrant red gown he bought for

her, Richard had been sure his heart was going to burst out of his chest. He was not the only one who had noticed her sheer beauty and magnetism, though, because he could swear the room almost fell silent as most of the male population focused their attention on her.

Some primal part of him longed to declare, “She is mine!”

Except she wasn’t.

He had studiously avoided her, not trusting himself since that sensual episode in her family’s library. When she had suggested they continue their flirting classes, he had opted for corresponding via letters because he knew that spending time with the tempting minx behind closed doors would be a lesson in ignorance, and he was not ready to run the risk of tempting the beast that lingered under the surface.

He had stayed away in the hopes that the time away might extinguish his attraction towards her, but so far, it did not seem to have solved the problem.

The moment the Viscount Livingston had placed his hand on her waist, his vision turned red with jealousy as he wondered if the man was not holding her too close than was necessary for the dance. And why was she smiling so widely at him? Why was he so bloody happy that he was smiling like a fool?

Richard had been moments away from marching to the dance floor and snatching her away.

Unfortunately, that would destroy what they had worked so hard for. He had wanted her to secure a suitor, and now she was dancing with one. As her tutor, he should be proud, so why did he feel enraged instead?

With conscious effort, Richard unclenched the fist he didn’t know he had been

clenching.

“If you stare at them any longer, I am positive they will burst into flames,” Simon quipped beside him.

Richard turned to direct his glare on him, and Simon raised his hands in mock surrender while still chuckling.

Emmeline watched them carefully. “What is it, Brother? Do you not approve of her dress? While I know red to be a bold color on an unmarried lady, I still think it does wonders for her physique—it suits her perfectly. She looks absolutely ravishing, in my opinion,” she said in her friend’s defense.

Richard wanted to tell her that he certainly did not disapprove of the gown, seeing as he was the one who gifted it to Catherine. He did not intend to explain because then, he would need to provide reasons why he had sent a dress to an unmarried lady who was in no way betrothed to him, and that was a conversation he hoped to avoid.

As fate could have it, just at that moment, a lanky young man who seemed to just be finding his feet in Society approached Emmy for a dance. Richard was relieved that Emmy had been kind enough to accept, sparing the young man the embarrassment of rejection.

Going by the way the young fellow was fidgeting and his lack of composure, he must have recently joined Society and was not yet jaded like the other members of the ton.

Watching Emmy and the young Earl of Hutton take their positions for the dance, Richard marveled at their innocence, and some hidden part of him hoped desperately that they could hold on to that childlike innocence. But he knew enough about life and the capricious nature of fate to know that such a phenomenon was unlikely to happen. A year or so of mingling with the fashionable crowd was enough to make an

angel cynical and jaded, and it was safe to say that these younger ones could never escape it.

He was just grateful that his sister was attracting suitors and admirers. It seemed her lessons with Catherine had yielded some results because he suspected that they spent most of the time allocated for their lessons gossiping and laughing. He would know, since he heard Catherine's throaty laughter all the way from his study whenever she visited.

"You look even gloomier now than the last time I saw you. Don't tell me you haven't laid your woman problem to rest?" Simon asked, jolting him out of his gloomy thoughts.

When Richard did not answer. Simon continued.

"The woman you are in love with must be a paragon to have successfully tied you in knots the way she has. What do you intend to do about that, hmm?"

"I am not in love with anybody," Richard snapped.

"Alright, if you say so, Your Grace," Simon said in an exaggeratedly remorseful tone.

Richard opened his mouth to apologize, but his friend cut him off.

"So... did you visit the beautiful Cynthia like we discussed? I am certain she would have given you a good seeing-to—if you know what I mean," he said, wiggling his eyebrows, a lascivious grin on his face.

"Not that it is any of your business, but yes, I did visit Cynthia," Richard replied, exasperated. He rose from his chair. "I would like to take a walk in the garden. Please excuse me."

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He made his way to the foyer, where he took his coat from the footman. Bundling himself in the coat, he walked towards the gardens, contemplating the discussion he had just had with Simon.

Yes, he had visited Cynthia, but that very visit had concluded with him ending his relationship with the beautiful actress.

He had arrived at the apartment he had rented for her, and she had welcomed him warmly, wearing nearly transparent undergarments that ordinarily would have set the mood for a night of a delightful romp between the sheets. But curiously, as he watched her that day, he felt no stirring in his gut. Not even when she had stripped naked, climbed onto his lap, and worked her seductive wiles on him. He felt no desire at all. Instead, he felt dirty and tawdry. At one point, he had to pull the beautiful woman off him, ignoring the wounded look on her face.

He had apologized and then given her money and an emerald necklace for her troubles, and she had accepted it, expressing her understanding and respect for his decision.

Richard had been grateful for the quiet dissolution because in his experience, ending relationships with mistresses was usually messy, and he was grateful that Cynthia had been accepting and mature about the separation.

By the time he arrived at his home that night, he had finally acknowledged the truth—Catherine had ruined him for any other woman, and it was troubling. Very troubling, indeed.

Chapter Twelve

“I heard you also enjoy books on botany,” Lord Livingston commented with a smile.

“I do. It is one of my interests,” Catherine confirmed, grateful they had finally found common interests. “I particularly love evergreens. The science of them is so...”

“Mysterious?” he supplied.

“Indeed.” She laughed.

“I have a few palm seedlings in my London residence that I will be transplanting soon. Would you like to see them?” he offered. “My gardener is unavailable, so I would have to do it myself. I do hope you’re not one to squirm at the sight of dirt. Gardening is a messy job.”

Her eyes widened both in surprise that he would enjoy doing manual work and the prospect of seeing the seedlings.

“Not at all, My Lord. I would love to,” she answered with a broad smile that startled him. “I’m just surprised that you wouldn’t mind getting your hands dirty.”

He visibly preened at her admiration. “I am a simple man. When I’m not in town for the Season, I get to do all the planting I want at my country estate.”

“That is really nice to hear.”

“Do you garden yourself?” he inquired.

“No, but I am usually present when new roses are transplanted.”

And it wasn't for lack of interest. Her mother would have thrown a fit if she had gotten any of her dresses dirty.

Not that it stopped her. A number of times, she had bribed the gardener to let her handle some of the less dirty work, but she would never let Lord Livingston know that in case he was a man who didn't appreciate ladies who liked manual work.

"Oh, I will have to remedy that." He laughed. "Perhaps I'll invite you to my country estate so you can be away from the watchful eyes of the ton."

He winked at her, and she laughed.

"I still think my chaperone would have a lot to say about me playing in the dirt, My Lord."

He laughed again, slapping his thigh, and she straightened up, feeling proud that she had caused the most proper of men to break character.

"You are an absolute delight, Miss Burlow," he commented.

"Thank you, My Lord." She curtsied to him.

"I... It is my pleasure," he stammered, his ears turning red. "Would you... would you like to dance, Miss Burlow?"

Catherine placed her hand in his and nodded once. Although she'd said she wanted a quiet match, she realized she might not mind a man she could be cordial with.

Lord Livingston looked like a man she could actually enjoy being married to, but there was still a lot she needed to know about him.

“I would love to.” She smiled, handing him her dance card.

“I—”

“Lord Livingston, Miss Burlow,” Richard greeted, approaching them.

Catherine stepped back in surprise, dropping Lord Livingston’s hand as though she had been caught doing something bad.

“Your Grace.” She curtsied, surprised that she remembered her manners despite her initial shock. “Good evening.”

Richard wasn’t supposed to directly speak to her at events, especially not when she was with another man she was trying to get to court her.

“Pardon my intrusion,” he offered. He, too, looked surprised that he had come over to them and seemed at a loss for how to remedy the situation. “I need to speak with you urgently, Miss Burlow.”

“Is anything the matter?” she asked, suddenly worried. “Has something happened to Emmy?”

“No. Nothing’s happened. I?—”

“Pardon me, Your Grace,” Lord Livingston interjected, looking between the two of them. “I believe we can have our dance some other time, Miss Burlow. If you will excuse me.”

“Lord Living...”

He was gone before she could stop him, and she let out a deep sigh, turning to Richard with a glare.

“You shouldn’t have come here.”

“I shouldn’t have,” he admitted, causing her to frown.

“Then why did you?” Catherine asked, curious to know why, as he should have been most happy that she was conversing with a gentleman.

“I came to congratulate you,” Richard answered, his voice rising an octave. “It seems my lessons paid off. You were enjoying yourself. You made prim and proper Lord Livingston laugh.”

“I was until you came here.” She pouted.

However, she would never admit to him that her eyes were on him even while she was talking with Lord Livingston, and although she could picture things turning out well between them, she couldn’t help but wonder if she would perhaps be making a mistake.

She found herself starting to crave more than the life she’d thought she wanted, and now she couldn’t even choose if it was placed right in front of her.

“You’re confident in your flirting, aren’t you?” He laughed. “Why don’t we put that to the test?”

Richard’s blue eyes danced with mischief that should have warned her away from him, but somehow it had her leaning closer to hear what he was suggesting. It really was unlike her to ignore the warning bells in her head, but Richard made it so easy for her to do it.

He'd made her see and experience new things, and now she wanted to see just what she was capable of.

"What kind of test?"

He held a hand out to her and smiled challengingly. "Dance with me."

"Dance with you?"

"Yes." He nodded, taking the card that was tied to her wrist, his finger subtly brushing against her skin. "I need to see how well you can charm a man while dancing."

"But I already promised Lord Livingston a dance," she argued. "It wouldn't be proper."

"He will understand," he stated, shrugging his shoulders. "Besides, you didn't promise him this dance. Or are you scared to admit that you lack charm?"

She rolled her eyes at his childish attempt to bait her. "I can charm any other man, but..."

"Yes?"

She didn't want to admit that it would be difficult trying to charm him because she feared it would be her who was charmed in the end. He was an endlessly charming man if the glares she was getting from the ladies he'd danced with were anything to go by.

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“It might be weird flirting with you,” she answered, avoiding his eyes.

“Weird? Why? We’ve done this many times before.” He pouted.

A laugh almost escaped her lips, but she knew well to push it down. He was trying to make her comfortable enough to go through with the challenge.

“You’re like my brother,” she added.

He clutched his heart and groaned in pain. “There are no more terrible words than the ones you’ve just spoken.” He shook his head. “So you only see me as a brother, do you?”

No.

“Yes,” she answered. “As such, I can’t sufficiently charm you.”

“Humor me, then. I’ll be the judge of that.” He winked. “And who knows, maybe I could charm you into seeing me as more than a brother.”

She scoffed and said nothing, proud of herself that she’d convinced him of her lie. There was nothing brotherly about the way she studied his full lips, wondering if it were so wrong to imagine how soft they were.

When the musicians struck a familiar tune, Richard took her hand and led her to the middle of the ballroom for their first dance, which was a fast reel she had no trouble keeping up with. She looked at him once and found that he too had no trouble

keeping up with the dance.

“I didn’t know you could dance this well, Your Grace,” she commented.

“There are a lot of skills you don’t know I possess, Miss Burlow,” He winked at her.

“Would you be so kind as to tell me about some of them, Your Grace?” She winked back, playing his game.

He gave her a lopsided smile and leaned close to her ear. “It would be my utmost pleasure to show you instead.”

She reddened as the double entendre sank in, and she slapped his arm to indicate he’d scandalized her.

“That kind of talk could get us in trouble.”

“What kind of talk?” he asked innocently. “I’m only implying that I’m very good with my hands and lips on occasion.”

She laughed then, loud and long, earning her a few stares. “You are very naughty.”

“And you are a good student,” he praised. “I am impressed by how quickly you’ve absorbed my teachings.”

“You are a good teacher.”

He stood a little straighter at her praise. “And I must admit you do look ravishing in that dress. I have good taste in clothes.”

She looked down at her dress and smiled. “Indeed.” She did a little spin, showing off

the dress. “I would have never picked anything so daring before now. Mother was livid when she saw me in it.”

“But you still wore it.”

“Yes. I wanted to see your reaction when you saw me in it.”

“Indeed?”

She nodded, reddening at his surprise. She wondered how he’d take her admission that she’d worn the dress for him.

His reaction had given her the confidence she hadn’t known she’d needed when she’d stepped into the ball. The slight widening of his eyes and then the broad smile that followed had made her feel like the most beautiful woman in the room.

Catherine had wondered briefly what the future would look like if she were to marry Richard. He definitely promised nights that would never be cold and laughter for days, but she couldn’t delude herself into thinking that she could hope to keep his attention for the rest of their lives.

He was a man used to the attention of the most beautiful women. What hope did she have to keep his attention?

“And was my reaction sufficient?” he asked, pulling her out of her thoughts.

She nodded. "Quite."

He spun her again and then pulled her close to him. "I must admit again that you have sufficiently charmed me, Miss Burlow." He smiled. "If I were any other man, I would be asking for your hand."

But he wasn't any other man, so he would not be asking for it. The thought would have stung if he were on her rapidly growing list of prospects.

The music came to a close, and she clapped like everyone else, waiting for her heart rate to slow.

"Meet me in the gardens," Richard whispered in her ear suddenly.

His voice was barely audible above the din, but she heard him, and before she could turn around or ask why, he was gone.

She looked around to see if anyone had noticed them, and seeing no one, she stepped off the makeshift dance floor, wondering if it would be too risky to follow him.

Why she was even considering it, she didn't know.

It wasn't as though she was unaware of what happened in secret meetings, and considering everything that had already happened between her and Richard, she knew she had to put a stop to it. But the intrigue of doing something so utterly scandalous for the first time in her life had her crossing the double doors into the gardens.

He found her before she had to go far, and saying nothing, he led her deeper into the darkness.

Catherine wondered how often he'd done this, for he was so sure-footed as he moved. She prayed with each step she took that she didn't fall and make a fool of herself.

When he finally stopped, the gravity of their situation dawned on her. They were well and truly alone, and if he wanted to, he could ravish her thoroughly and no one would be the wiser.

"Why are we here, Richard?" she asked warily, wrapping her arms around her middle to fend off the chill in the night air. "If you wanted to speak, we could have done so in the ballroom."

She couldn't see much of his face in the dim moonlight, but she heard him chuckle and step closer to her.

"Tell me, Miss Burlow," he purred, his voice dangerously low. "Would you rather I kiss you here or in front of everyone?"

"I... I'm sorry, what?" she stammered.

He brought her outside to kiss her. Why?

"Before you get too worried, I only want to see if you're also lacking in that area," he added, disappointing her.

"Oh."

"It wouldn't do for you to be a sloppy kisser now that you have a serious suitor."

She glared at him even though he couldn't see it in the darkness. "And you would be the judge of that?" she sneered.

"Of course," he answered smugly. "There are enough testimonies to support my legitimacy."

"Out of the mouths of two or three witnesses."

"I like that you know your scripture."

She rolled her eyes. "It truly can't be that difficult to kiss someone, so there's really no need to?—"

His lips were on hers before she could finish her sentence, and she was glad that it was dark around them. Her eyes were wide open in shock, but when his lips moved over hers, they fluttered shut, and a moan escaped her lips.

Richard kissed like he was claiming her mouth, and his muscled arms, which she'd dreamed of touching several times, wrapped around her and pulled her up for better access. Her fingers dug into the hair at the nape of his neck, pulling softly, and he groaned into her mouth.

Pride surged through her that she was able to coax such a guttural sound from him even though he'd kissed and been with far more experienced women than her.

His teeth nipped her bottom lip, and she gasped in a mix of pain and pleasure. He wasn't her first kiss, but he was the first to kiss her so thoroughly that she didn't know how to breathe.

Finally, he slowed his kiss to playful nips, and then he pulled away from her, composing himself.

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She ran a hand over her hair and dress, and feeling nothing was out of place, she suddenly didn't know what to do with herself.

“Richard, I think we should head back. They might?—”

“We'll go back in a minute,” he said, voice sounding strained.

“Is something wrong?” she asked, suddenly worried. “Are you hurt?”

“Not exactly, no.” He laughed softly. “You just surprised me, that's all.”

“How?”

“You kiss well,” he stated plainly, as if she wouldn't be ruined if they were overheard. “I am almost tempted to ask if this wasn't your first kiss.”

She blushed hotly and was grateful for the darkness. “I assume that means I don't need more lessons.”

He stepped closer to her, and her heart beat a little faster with anticipation. Her lips parted as she tried to catch her breath.

“You make a very tempting point, Miss Burlow,” he whispered, but he stepped back after barely brushing her lips with his. “Come. It's best we head back now.”

She nodded and accepted his proffered hand, her other hand reaching up to rest above her racing heart.

Once inside the ballroom, her eyes subconsciously tracked his movements, noting every graceful slide of his body, and when he winked at her from across the room, she knew she had well and truly fallen for him.

Damn.

She moved into a hidden alcove, worrying her bottom lip with her teeth. She already knew that Richard in no way fit in the future she wanted for herself, and allowing him to continue to lead her down their current path would only set her up for unnecessary heartache.

If she wanted to live the quiet life she'd always wanted, she would have to end whatever this was between them before it was too late.

Chapter Thirteen

As Emmy tried to appropriately name the cutlery she'd spread out on the table, Catherine tried not to be distracted by the fact that she wanted to end her arrangement with Richard.

If she kept a constant appearance in their townhouse, she wasn't sure she would be able to maintain her stand on ending their forbidden relationship, and she knew very well that there were always new heights of ruination to be attained. With a man like Richard, who had no inhibitions, she didn't think her self-control could last.

She was grateful to hear that he wouldn't be back till late as he had some business matters to attend to.

"No, Emmy," she corrected for the fifth time. "That is the salad fork."

Emmy nodded and tried again, but she made the same mistake and kept looking over

her shoulder at the door as if expecting someone.

Usually, she was always focused and even excited about their lessons, but the girl looked somewhat distracted, as though something was weighing heavily on her mind.

“Is something wrong Emmy?” Catherine asked softly. “You don’t seem your usual self today.”

“No!” Emmy answered, wringing her hands. Then, as if realizing she was overreacting, she added softly, “No, nothing’s wrong.”

Catherine smiled at her friend. “You know you can tell me anything, right, Emmy?” she soothed, placing a hand on hers.

“Oh, Cathy,” Emmy sighed, squeezing her hand. “I am worried about Richard.”

Oh? Catherine was not expecting that.

“Has something happened to him?”

“No, not at all,” Emmy answered, shaking her head. “I just worry he’ll be upset with me when he finds out what I’ve been doing.”

“Emmy... should I be worried?”

What could she have been doing that would worry her brother?

Catherine thought back to what she had been doing with Richard and feared that perhaps Emmy had also done something scandalous.

“No,” Emmy sighed. “You know that our mother abandoned us when we were quite young, and Richard has never forgiven her for that. I hadn’t too, but...”

“But what, Emmy?”

She sighed and rose from her seat, going to stand by the window.

“She’s been writing to me, and she is sorry for leaving us with our father. I was so angry and told her as much, but I so long to have her in my life.”

“Why haven’t you told Richard about it yet?”

“Because, Cathy”—Emmy turned to Catherine with tear-filled eyes—“I am afraid he is going to forbid me from speaking to her. I know he will. He spent so many years after she left telling me that if she ever came back, he would throw her out. She wants to see me, Cathy, and I don’t know how to tell her I can’t see her. We’ve been writing to each other for a while, and there’s so much I still want to know about her. I really want to see her, but I can’t go anywhere without Richard or my maid chaperoning me.”

Catherine sighed and leaned back in her seat. She understood her friend’s fear and wanted to help, but she didn’t know how.

Richard had every right to be angry with their mother, but it was about time Emmy told him. How he hadn't even discovered her correspondence already was a miracle.

He would be very upset if he knew how long his sister had been writing to the woman he was so angry at, and now that Catherine knew, he would also be angry at her for knowing and not telling him.

"You could try talking to him," Catherine suggested. "It might not go as poorly as you expect."

"Cathy, I can't!" Emmy cried. "He will never forgive me. You have to promise me you'll keep this from him."

"I—"

"Please, Cathy. Promise me."

Sighing deeply, Catherine resigned herself to her fate. "I won't tell him."

"Oh, thank you!" Emmy cried, hugging her.

"Alright, alright." Catherine laughed, rubbing her back. "Let's finish your lessons quickly, so we can do something fun for a change."

"What do you have in mind?" Emmy asked gleefully. Her entire demeanor had changed, so one wouldn't know she had been crying.

"Cards."

"Are we going to make a wager?"

“Gambling isn’t ladylike, Emmy,” Catherine chided, shaking her head.

“But there’s no one here to see us.”

“Focus on your lessons.”

An hour later, she was proud of Emmy’s table manners and conversational skills, and then she announced the lessons were over for the day.

They went to the drawing room for cards and munched on sweet pastries and tea served by the parlor maids. Emmy proved to be proficient at cards but was no match for Catherine’s superior skills.

An hour passed before Catherine decided to return home, so she could also have time to rest before the evening meal.

As she was helped into her coat, Richard strolled in, looking tired. His eyes widened with surprise, and then he schooled his features into a neutral mask.

“Good day, Miss Burlow,” he greeted.

“Good day, Your Grace.”

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They were conscious of the butler and maids present, and considering the servants were the purveyors of gossip for the ton, it was only proper they didn't show how familiar they were with each other.

Her face reddened as she thought back to how familiar they'd become, and it seemed her train of thought wasn't lost on him, as he raised an eyebrow at her, shaking his head.

"I am done with my lessons for the day, so I'll be heading home," she explained once she was finally able to push the errant thought aside.

"I was hoping to catch you before you left," he admitted, halting her movement. "I have something I require your help with. We can discuss further in my study."

She nodded and handed her coat back to the butler.

Catherine followed behind Richard, heart beating fast as she wondered if perhaps he wanted to repeat what had happened the last time they'd been alone together.

When they stepped into his study and made straight for his desk after shutting the door, she felt disappointment settle in the pit of her stomach.

"I need your help in finding out if Emmy is being courted by someone," he announced suddenly.

"Excuse me?" she asked, sitting up.

“I know it’s an odd thing for me to ask, but I’m desperate.”

He did sound like he had given much thought to it, and it was a hard thing to ask her. It was obvious how much he loved his sister, and it was that fact that made it so hard for Catherine to lie to him.

“Why do you think she is being courted by someone?” she asked past the lump that had formed in her throat.

He shrugged his shoulders. “I have seen her receiving letters and hiding them, and I don’t want to seem overbearing by asking her about them.” He sighed. “If she does have someone she is courting, I would like to know. Could she be hiding him because he’s someone beneath her station? She should know I wouldn’t care about things as trivial as social standing, as long as he isn’t just after her dowry.”

“But there’s no reason I’d be in possession of such information, Richard,” Catherine argued.

“You’re the closest thing she has to a best friend now, Cathy,” he argued. “If she’s going to tell anyone, it will be you. Do you know anything about this?”

Catherine bit her lip and tried not to look guilty. She’d already promised Emmy that she would keep her secret, so she had to come up with a way to assuage her brother’s doubts.

“Unfortunately, no. Emmy hasn’t told me anything,” she started. “If she does have someone she likes, though, you’ll most definitely be the first one to know. She could be writing back to one of the girls that she befriended while you were in your country estate.”

She mentally clapped herself on the back for her quick thinking. Emmy had

mentioned the girls in passing but didn't realize she was giving Catherine the means to save her in the future.

"Oh, I forgot about that." Richard laughed awkwardly. "Thank you, Cathy. You have no idea how worried I've been."

"It is my pleasure." She smiled, rising from her seat. "If that is all..."

"I also have something else to ask," he added, rising from his seat as well. "But this has nothing to do with Emmy."

"Oh? What is it?"

He stepped even closer to her then, the scent of his spicy saffron and sandalwood cologne filling her senses. His eyes, normally a bright cerulean blue, had darkened to an almost midnight blue, and Catherine noted the stubble on his jaw. He'd most definitely rushed out of the house earlier.

It added a rugged appeal to his otherwise handsome features, and she decided then that it wasn't a bad look on him. She quite liked it and was tempted to run a hand over it to see how it felt against her skin.

If he were to kiss her now, would it be harsh enough to leave scars on her cheeks?

"I would like to know if Lord Livingston has called on you yet," he said, looking innocently curious, once again disappointing her with his question.

"Why would you want to know that?" she asked, folding her arms across her chest defensively.

The Viscount had yet to call on her, but that was to be expected, since he had only

claimed one dance, despite marking two on her dance card, and he'd been all but snubbed when Richard had interrupted them.

He was a man after all, and it seemed his ego was also easily bruised, so it didn't beg the question of him not calling on her.

But to let Richard know was to remind her of the fact that Lord Livingston hadn't actually called on her quite when she was looking forward to their discussion on botany and better yet an invitation to see the transplanting of the palm seedlings.

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“I am just curious to see if your charms were sufficient to secure his attention,” Richard answered, shrugging his shoulders as he sat on the edge of his desk. “You two seemed rather interested in each other.”

“And you would know that how?” she asked, arching an eyebrow. “Or were you spying on us the whole time?”

For a brief moment, his ears turned pink, and he looked like he’d been caught out, which brought a satisfied smile to her lips and warmed her insides.

Had he really been watching her the whole time?

“I wouldn’t say the whole time, but I did see you two,” he said nonchalantly. “I thought he would have proposed by now.”

“What if he is close to proposing?” she teased.

“Would you say yes?” he asked, his tone dark and serious.

She sensed then that the conversation had taken a much more serious turn than she’d expected.

“I might.” She pushed further, wanting to see what he thought of her marrying another man.

Some deluded part of her wondered if he was really attracted to her or if he was just looking to help her secure a match, and a tiny part of her she was learning to ignore

painted scenarios where Richard liked her.

“So you like him?” he probed further still with that air of nonchalance, though his arms tightened, and his body looked tense, as though he could snap at any moment.

Catherine didn’t derive joy in pushing anyone’s buttons, but she wanted to see whether he would be bothered by the prospect of her being with another man.

“It is too early to say, but he seems nice enough,” she answered honestly. “With time, I can learn to love him.”

“You would marry a man for being nice?” he asked with a mocking laugh.

“Many marriages have started on less,” she retorted. “This wouldn’t be the first one to do so. Plus, we at least have something in common.”

“You do realize you will be spending an eternity with him,” he pointed out, rising from the edge of his desk. “He will be the father of your children. You will have to warm his bed at night. Will you like him enough to share his bed?”

Her cheeks reddened at the prospect of sharing anyone’s bed, but she couldn’t help but wonder why Richard would enunciate it as though it bothered him.

It was no concern of his if she chose to marry a man she could barely stand.

“I will do my duty by my husband,” she declared, squaring her shoulders, incensed. “I do not need love to perform my duties.”

“Oh?” he said mockingly, looking down at her. “You would let a man you don’t like touch you so intimately?”

His breathing was labored, and his hands kept clenching and unclenching as though he didn't know what to do with them. Her brain kept yelling at her to kiss him even though she felt she should hit him for asking her such stupid questions.

Couldn't he tell she was lying?

It was not as though she was unaware of what went on in the marriage bed, but considering men still visited brothels, it was obvious love was not needed where the act was concerned.

"Women have been doing it for ages," she pointed out, not backing down. "Men, too, or there won't be so many brothels around."

He let out a loud laugh that ignited her rage further. How dare he laugh when she was being serious?

"You are one smart-mouthed woman," he said, grinning. "I don't think I've ever laughed so much with a woman."

"But am I wrong?" She frowned.

"No, you're not," he acknowledged. "I am still curious, though. If Lord Livingston were to kiss you suddenly, would you let him?"

"Richard, that is really?—"

"If he were to come up to you like this..." He moved forward. "Held you close to his body." His arms went around her waist. "Leaned forward and captured your lips, would you kiss him back or stop him?"

“Richard, you?—”

“Humor me, Cathy,” he murmured, nipping her ear. “I want to know if you’ve pictured him kissing you. Will you grip his hair the way you did mine?”

“Don’t bring it up, Richard,” she warned.

Catherine put her hand on his chest and tried to push him back. She was already struggling to breathe in his proximity.

“Why? Are you bothered by the thought of Livingston kissing you? Or is something else bothering you?”

“Richard, please,” she begged, her resolve faltering.

“Answer the question, Cathy.” He nipped her ear again. “Do you want Livingston to kiss you?”

She groaned and did the last thing she’d ever thought possible. She pulled his face down to hers and kissed him.

Her eyes popped open as shock filled her. What the bloody hell had she just done?

Chapter Fourteen

If Richard was shocked, he didn’t show it. He pulled her harder against his body and groaned against her mouth as he took her lips in a punishing kiss.

“Richard,” Catherine moaned in the brief moment he kissed her neck.

He palmed her buttocks and lifted her against his frame, and she instinctively wrapped her legs around him. He growled approvingly and then captured her lips again, pushing away the papers on his desk to lay her on it.

She buried her fingers in his hair, groaning at how soft it was, and pulled him even closer, as if she wasn’t already pressed so close to him.

“Catherine,” he moaned against her neck as his hands went to the laces at the back of her dress.

She gasped when her dress loosened and he pulled the neckline down to bare her breasts to him. She’d never been so exposed, so she moved to cover herself.

“No,” he warned. “Remove your hands and let me see you.”

She obeyed, leaning back on her hands. His eyes darkened as he took her in, emboldening her to arch her back and pushing her breasts forward.

“You are so beautiful,” he whispered, stepping closer to her and palming one breast. “It should be a crime to cover such perfection.”

She blushed as his eyes caressed her body, leaving a hot trail everywhere they landed.

“So you do blush as beautifully everywhere.” He chuckled darkly.

He leaned forward, kissing her collarbone, her neck, nipping gently that spot where her neck met her shoulder and then kissing up to her ear, nipping and licking while his hands kneaded her breasts.

A moan escaped her lips, and he put a hand over her mouth. At the crazed look in his eyes, she felt a moist heat pool between her legs, and her body begged for something she didn't understand.

"You have to be a little more quiet, darling," he warned. "I don't want anyone interrupting us before we even get started. Alright?"

She nodded with his hand still over her mouth.

"Good girl," he purred, patting her head.

He kissed her again, nipping her lip then moving back to her ear and down towards her neck as he gently pushed her down onto the desk.

When his mouth closed over one nipple, she could barely keep herself from flying off the desk. As if he'd been expecting her reaction, his other hand simply held her down by her hips, not easing up as he sucked and nipped and palmed her breast.

She'd never felt such a sharp stab of pleasure in her life, and for a brief moment, she knew that once this door had been opened by Richard, every other man would pale in comparison.

Was this how it was going to be?

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“Richard,” she moaned when he continued his ministrations. “Please.”

She didn’t know what she was begging for, but her body was taut with tension, and she knew he was the only one who could give her release.

He kissed his way further down, lifting her dress and then running his hands up her inner thighs. At the shocking sensation, she closed her legs, but he shook his head at her.

“Relax, darling.” He smiled. “I don’t intend to steal your virtue. Thoroughly.”

She wanted to, but her brain could barely process the shivers racking her body as his fingers played a dangerous game on her inner thigh.

When they moved higher to her slit, her hips bucked of their own accord.

“Richard.”

“I’m here, my dear.”

His fingers moved over her womanhood again, and she squirmed at how damp she felt. It was so embarrassing, so she tried shutting her legs again.

His eyes met hers, and seeing the confusion there, he smiled and leaned his forehead against hers.

“You are doing beautifully, darling,” he reassured her. “I know this must be foreign

to you, but you are making me rethink my decision not to ruin you.”

“So, it’s good?” Catherine asked, unable to meet his eyes.

She didn’t want to see any hint of disappointment that he might want to cover up with a compliment just so she didn’t stop.

“It’s perfect. You are perfect.”

She reddened again and nodded, opening her legs once more.

Richard smiled at her, nipping her lower lip playfully, but he didn’t dwell on it. His hand moved back over her womanhood as he played with the bundle of nerves that had her clapping a hand over her mouth so she didn’t scream and holding on to the desk for dear life so she didn’t throw herself off.

He slipped a finger inside her, groaning at the snug warmth, and set a steady pace that had her writhing underneath him. Her hand moved from her mouth to his arm as he did deliciously wicked things to her.

He laughed, but the sound was strained. His entire body was taut with tension, but he made no move to do anything more with her.

He kissed her again, moving down her body till he knelt between her legs, seeing her so intimately.

“Richard, you shouldn’t…”

“I believe there are many things we shouldn’t have done that we have now, darling. What’s one more?”

His voice was full of mirth that had her giggling and relaxing too.

“You are a terrible influence,” she scolded playfully.

“Only on people that I like.”

She tried not to dwell on his words, but her heart swelled at the thought that he actually liked her. She wasn't a fool that she didn't know whatever this was, was nothing to him, but somewhere inside her, she hoped he'd care for her beyond just using her body.

“But you really shouldn't see me there,” she protested again, biting her lip.

Richard rolled his eyes and kissed the inside of her knee. “I have wanted—no, craved tasting you since the moment I smelled your desire. It would kill me now if you deny me this pleasure.”

How was a woman to refuse when he pleaded so nicely?

Catherine nodded and bit her lip, tensing up as she braced herself for the unfamiliar sensation.

Shame washed over her as he lowered his face to her womanhood, and she closed her eyes, not wanting to see his reaction.

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“It will be much better if you relax, darling girl.” He laughed softly close to her center.

She gasped as his breath fanned her sex. It didn’t feel unpleasant at all.

“I don’t know how,” she admitted. “I haven’t experienced anything like this before.”

He chuckled again and shook his head. “If you had, I’d be worried,” he joked.

“Richard...”

“Let me show you how good this feels.”

That was all the notice he gave her before his tongue slid up her slit, nearly blinding her.

Her hips bucked off the edge of the desk so suddenly that he had to hold her down with one hand. If she wasn’t already blind with pleasure, she was pretty sure his strength would have been the final nail in her coffin.

One hand dug into his hair, holding him in place, and she tugged gently, loving how he shuddered against her.

“Richard,” she moaned, clapping a hand over her mouth to stop herself from crying out loudly.

He groaned against her as his tongue did wicked things to her, and it was only a short

moment before she experienced a sensation akin to ecstasy.

Her body and mind felt weightless, as if she was drifting into nothing even though her legs quivered. She wondered briefly how she was going to walk back home without anyone noticing something wrong with her gait.

Perhaps they'd stop and ask if she were alright and she would say she was, yet she would know what caused her to walk so. If she weren't so tired, she would have laughed at the naughtiness of her thoughts.

She sagged on the desk as she tried to collect herself and remember where and who she was.

Richard kissed her inner thigh once more before rising to his feet and pulling down her dress.

Now that her eyes were open, she could see the bulge in his trousers, and she bit her lip.

He must be in pain.

But that must mean he was attracted to her too.

She met his eyes, which were completely dark now, and blushed as he winked at her.

"Is that..." She swallowed. "Are you... in pain?"

"In pain?" He looked confused.

She pointed at the bulge and turned away.

He laughed again and pulled her against him. "I am in pain most definitely, but it is not a bad kind of pain," he explained.

"Can I do anything to help?" she asked seriously.

He shook his head and stepped away from her.

"You are so innocent," he said softly. "You shouldn't ask a man some kind of questions, or it will make him want to do wicked things to you."

"Oh."

He eyed her again and came close, kissing her deeply. It was unlike his usual lustful kisses, and she wondered what it meant. He pulled away from her with a sigh.

"You are so beautiful," he murmured. "I am jealous of the man who will get to see you like this every day." He squeezed her breast and then pulled back from her. "Come, let me help you with your dress."

Her mind was full of thoughts because his words had killed the image she'd started to entertain in her mind that perhaps he was starting to like her.

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“Do you never plan to be married?” she asked with her back to him.

His hands stilled as he tried to lace her dress, but then he cleared his throat and resumed his work.

“I do not,” he answered gruffly.

“Why?”

He sighed and dropped his hands. “Can we not talk about this?”

“Why not?” she asked stubbornly.

She already knew the outcome of their conversation, but she wanted to know more. It seemed she lived for the torture of hearing truths she didn’t want to hear.

“Because I never intend to marry anyone,” he spat angrily, not meeting her eyes. “For the sake of our friendship, I’ll ask you not to push this conversation.”

Catherine fell silent, but she knew that it was time to leave. She had long overstayed her welcome, and this would definitely be the last time she let herself toe this line of ruination with him again.

“Alright, I won’t,” she relented. “I will take my leave now. But, Richard... we can’t... I can’t go on like this. It’s too much...”

Her voice broke despite herself, but then she cleared he throat.

“Cathy...” He sighed, pulling her into his arms.

He kissed her long and deep, and she kissed him back, savoring the final kiss they’d ever share. If anything, she’d at least have the memories to sustain her.

“I understand,” he murmured against her lips.

Their foreheads were touching, and she could feel the tears well up in her eyes, but she didn’t let them fall.

“Thank you,” she said at last. “Your lessons have been more than helpful.”

“I should be thanking you too for helping with Emmy and for being a good student.” He laughed. “I do hope I’ll be getting an invitation to your wedding?”

“Of course, you will.”

“Then I wish you all the happiness in the world. God knows you deserve it.” He smiled. “May you marry the man who gives you all the stability and peace you desire.”

“Thank you, Richard,” she answered, even though her heart broke a little more.

She wondered how she could ever be happy knowing that she’d never experience such pleasure at his hands again. She couldn’t deny any longer that she had well and truly fallen for him, and he hadn’t caught her but let her heart fall to the ground.

“I don’t know what I’m going to do with myself, though,” she admitted. “You have come to haunt my days and thoughts, and it will be hard forgetting everything that has happened between us.”

“Cathy, you will be just fine.” He sighed. “I will have a hard time forgetting you, too. You are the most remarkable woman I have ever had the pleasure of meeting. It will be hard, but this... feeling, whatever it may be, will pass. It will have to. It will be unfair of me to keep such memories when you will soon marry someone else.”

“But I don’t have to. We could?—”

“No, Cathy.” He shook his head. “I can’t do this to you. I can’t bring you into my world of uncertainty. You want love. You’re a loving woman. So open and giving. I am nothing but a selfish man who will use you for your body and ruin you. You deserve someone better, someone who can give you the future you want. The dream home in the country with your babies. I am not capable of giving you that.”

“You are capable of whatever you set your mind to, Richard.” She sighed. “You just have to believe it.”

Her words seemed to have struck a chord inside him, but she didn’t push it.

“Goodbye, Richard,” she said at last, stepping away from him. “Do tell Emmy I can no longer come to your house.”

“She has nothing to do with?—”

“I know.” She nodded. “But it will be easier for me to set aside these feelings if I don’t see you as often.”

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“I will inform her.” He nodded, looking forlorn. “I will send for my carriage to take you home—and please don’t refuse. Let me do you this last favor.”

She nodded and said nothing, walking to the door and ignoring the questioning stares of the staff.

When the coach arrived, she let him help her into her coat and stepped out without looking back at him. It was only when the carriage rounded the corner that she let her tears fall.

She had always known it was pointless giving her heart away, and to do so as early as she had was a foolhardy thing, but she’d done it anyway, forgetting that Richard was first and foremost a rake despite his nice words and offer of help.

He hadn’t even forced her into anything but made use of her lack of clear boundaries so she couldn’t even hate him if she wanted to.

She sniffed, wiping her eyes with her hands. She would fix herself up and not let this small incident distract her from her lifelong dream.

She would pick the most carefree suitor and settle into a life where she could reside in solitude as long as she wanted.

Chapter Fifteen

After enduring a tortuous week of pining, Catherine had come to the conclusion that the heart was a fickle organ. The Duke had practically told her that he had no plans to

marry just a few minutes after completely ravaging her senses in ways that she had not previously known was possible. She should be angry with the man and be cursing him to Hades.

Yes, some part of her ached at the thought that he did not value her enough to think of pursuing her. Otherwise, she was a giant ball of longing, unable to let go of the unattainable entity that was Richard.

She had filled the last week with several activities, like sitting in on Hugh's Latin classes and lecturing Emmy on etiquette as they walked down the banks of the Serpentine because visiting their townhouse was sure to be unbearable torture.

Despite how fast-paced her days were, she spent her nights tossing and turning in bed, unable to sleep, plagued by thoughts and dreams of one brown-haired duke in particular. Some nights, she hated him for initiating her into the world of desire and abandoning her to be ravaged by the fires of that desire with no relief in sight. Other nights, she longed to have the comfort of his body around hers, and her fickle heart refused to accept the reality that it was impossible.

The longing in her chest had worsened when she stepped into Lady Tremaine's ball and sighted his dark, dashing form in the ballroom. As usual, he was his impeccable self, his hair managing to look slightly disheveled and tidy as well. She swore his hair had a character just like its owner, that glimpse of wildness beneath the proper attire.

The dark look in his eyes threatened to burn her alive, even with the distance that separated them, and she shivered involuntarily with desire. She hurriedly averted her gaze. If she was to survive this evening, she had to manage the no-small feat of pretending the Duke was not present, which was as close to impossible as can be, as she could feel the heat of his gaze on the back of her neck.

For a man who claimed he never wanted to have anything to do with her, he was

surely showing more interest than any other suitor standing in this room. But then it was a widely accepted fact that men were contrary creatures.

“Miss Burlow.”

Catherine looked up to see Lord Livingston approaching her with a bright smile on his dashing face. She felt a twinge of guilt, looking at his cheerful face.

She had a handsome, rich, and respectable suitor in the dashing Viscount. She should be overjoyed, since she was aware that several ladies of the ton would do practically anything to be the recipient of his attention. Why oh why could she not summon any modicum of excitement when she saw him? Instead, her body vibrated simply because a certain duke occupied the same room as her, even though he stood several feet away.

It was unfair to the Viscount, but unfortunately, he was her ideal suitor. She just had to try her hardest to nurture affection for him. If she did not—or could not—she was doomed. Maybe if she kissed the man, she might free herself from the dangerous desire Richard stirred within her? Any man could stir her desires, couldn't they?

“Miss Burlow, permit me to say that you look absolutely ravishing.” The Viscount leaned in with a conspiratorial smile on his face. “I am quite privileged to be the one courting you.”

In reply to that, she managed a tight smile. She was not sure he would still think that way should he become privy to the direction of her thoughts.

She wondered what he would think if he knew that his intended was considering kissing him to test the theory that she could feel wanton desire towards him. Knowing Lord Livingston's personality, he was most likely to turn down such an offer in the hope of preserving her innocence for their wedding night.

She wondered what he would think if he learned that she was no longer innocent. That even while she stood with him, smiling like a proper young lady, she was reliving the feel of the Duke's hands on her body just a week ago.

The man was definitely too good for her. Unfortunately, he was her only choice. She could grow to love him, she was sure.

"I missed you at the park yesterday morning. I hope you are well?" he asked, concerned.

Catherine and Lord Livingston had taken to taking morning strolls around the Serpentine with her chaperone, her maid following just a few steps behind. During those walks, she had come to know the compassionate man that was hidden beneath his proper attire.

He regaled her with tales from his travels and some of the antics of his younger sisters, assuring her that she would love their company when she moved to his home. Catherine did not disagree, his sisters seemed to be delightful based on his stories. Even if they were not, she had enough experience dealing with children who threw tantrums—she was sure she could handle them. She was not blind to the fact that love made people see their loved ones with rose-colored lenses, but she was sure she would have a good marriage with Lord Livingston.

From their conversations, she had come to the conclusion that he would be a terrific father to their children. Even though he told her he was not looking for romantic love, primarily because he believed love was a myth at best, he possessed the capacity for selfless, affectionate love towards his children. His relationship with his sisters was evidence of that.

If Catherine was to choose a father for her children, she could not choose a better one than Lord Livingston. The question was, did she want him to be her husband?

“I was unwell that morning. I am sorry for leaving you stranded. I should have sent a note to notify you. My apologies, My Lord.”

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“No need for apologies. I must say the quiet time worked out for me. Allowed me time to resolve some issues. A quiet walk does wonders, I gather,” he said, chuckling.

It was obvious he was trying to relieve her of the guilt of abandoning him. She had truly been unwell. Having writhed on her bed all night, she had drifted off to a fitful sleep in the early hours of the morning and slept past the time for their meeting.

“I hear the strings of a waltz. What do you say, Miss Burlow? Grant me this dance?” he asked, offering her his hand.

She accepted his hand, smiling widely at him.

As they took their places on the dance floor, he put his hand on her waist, smiled down at her with adoration, and then proceeded to twirl her around in the opening steps of the dance.

Catherine was quite sure she was being selfish in hoarding the man’s attention and affection while she was attracted to someone else. Even while she stood in Lord Livingston’s arms, she could feel the heat of Richard’s gaze on the nape of her neck, and sure enough, when she turned in his direction, the man was watching them with the dark fires of jealousy in his eyes. At first, she had to suppress a shiver of desire, but that feeling quickly transformed into anger.

What right did he have to be jealous when he was the one who rejected her, deeming her unworthy to be his Duchess?

She could never tell what prompted her to do it, but she was suddenly filled with the

urge to stoke the fires of his jealousy even further. Turning back to Lord Livingston, she smiled widely at him. Lowering her head, she looked up at him from beneath her lashes, affecting the sultry look that Richard had taught her.

“I don’t think I have mentioned it, My Lord, but you are quite a graceful dancer. Whenever I dance with you, we float across the dance floor. I am confident you can lead us to success every time,” she said in a breathy whisper that Richard assured her made gentlemen lose their heads.

She was gratified when Lord Livingston faltered slightly, and his cheeks darkened with a splash of color.

He cleared his throat. “I thank you for the compliment, Miss Burlow, but,” he said, dropping his voice, “if we are to finish this dance with no incident at all, I think that would be the only compliment I can take for now.”

Now it was Catherine’s turn to blush. She never knew that the Viscount had a mischievous side to him. Maybe because she saw him as a friend, she tended to forget that he was a man too. A virile gentleman at that.

Coughing slightly to hide her flustered state, she gave him a bright smile. “I am sure that I don’t know what you’re speaking of,” she returned, affecting an innocent smile.

The knowing smirk on Lord Livingston’s face told her he did not agree with her, but he was too much of a gentleman to voice that.

She had started this whole situation by making innuendos, and what red-blooded man would not play along when he was interested in the lady in question? Catherine would do well to remember that in her future interactions with the Viscount.

“I think the dance is coming to an end,” she said when she noticed that he was staring

intently at her. She recognized that look—he desired her.

Sure enough, when the Viscount looked up, the gentlemen were bowing to their partners and leading them off the dance floor.

He turned back to her. “I believe you are right, Miss Burlow.”

He executed a perfect bow, and she curtsied in return and then took his arm as he led her off the dance floor.

Catherine could still feel Richard’s gaze from across the room, and sure enough, she could see that his expression had turned thunderous. The way he clenched his fist told her that he was on the verge of losing his self-control. That look should have scared her. Instead, her body was flooded with delicious heat. Unconsciously, she waved her fan in an attempt to cool down a little.

“You seem flushed, Miss Burlow.”

She looked up to see Lord Livingston looking at her with concern.

“I’ll get you a drink. A lemonade or sherry, perhaps?”

“Lemonade will be fantastic, My Lord,” she replied, smiling sweetly at him.

With a bow, he strolled away to the refreshments table.

Catherine seriously doubted the lemonade would cool her down, not when she was in close quarters with the source of the heat.

It seemed she was doomed to battle with the heat Richard stirred inside her with no relief in sight.

“Cat,” a whisper came from the ferns along the wall.

She turned around, and sure enough, Emmy was hiding behind a fern, only her face showing off the side of the shrub. With a hand, she beckoned to her.

Looking around to ensure that no one was paying attention to them, Catherine followed her behind the fern. When she reached her, Emmy took her hand, dragging her towards the hallway.

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“This better be important, Emmy. Where are we going?” Catherine asked in an urgent whisper.

“I will tell you, but we must find a private place first,” Emmy answered without pausing her quick steps.

“You are aware that this is dangerous, Emmy? Unmarried women do not wander down lonely paths when they attend balls. I thought I taught you that?”

A defeated sigh escaped Emmy’s lips, but she did not stop. “There is a perfect reason for this, trust me.”

Catherine did trust her. While Emmy could be impetuous at times, Catherine trusted her judgment most of the time. She decided to hold her tongue till they arrived someplace private.

As they walked, they heard voices coming from a room ahead of them. Emmy dragged her, and they ducked into a coat closet. When the sounds of voices and walking feet faded in the distance, Catherine turned to Emmy in the semi-darkness.

“I think I have waited enough. What is this about, and why this need for privacy?” she asked curiously.

She watched as Emmy bowed her head and took a deep breath as if bracing for something. That behavior raised Catherine’s hackles, and her curiosity gradually turned into wariness.

“Cat, you do remember how much I have always wanted to have a mother, seeing as I have been estranged from mine my whole life! I know Richie has been wonderful, stepping in and providing me with the protection and care I needed. I thank you also for your efforts in trying to fill in the knowledge of the more feminine nature that I would have ordinarily acquired from my mother if she had been present. I am grateful, I really am, but a part of me has always longed for my mother,” Emmy said, sounding like a child caught with her hand in the cookie jar.

At this point, Catherine had an inkling of where this conversation was heading, but she was not quite sure she liked it.

“Darling, I hate to say this to you, but you are stalling. What is wrong?” she pressed.

Taking a bracing breath, Emmy admitted, “I sent a letter to my mother, and she is here now to see me.”

To say Catherine was shocked would be the understatement of the century. Of all the things she had expected Emmy to say, this was definitely not it. She had always known that Emmy had longed to reconcile with her mother. She understood why she felt she needed the presence of her birth mother in her life.

She also knew that Richard did not share that enthusiasm, and she was sure it had to do with the fact that he grew up watching his mother display the ugly aspects of her character. That was enough to scar a child deeply, and the man he had grown into did not seem interested in ignoring that trauma because of some far-fetched repentance.

“I never knew you were corresponding with your mother,” Catherine said calmly, trying not to allow the panic she felt to leech into her voice. “Have you considered that your brother will be absolutely furious if he finds out?”

“Yes, I know,” Emmy replied in a remorseful tone. But then she jutted her chin in

defiance. “She is my mother, too. Why should I be denied the opportunity to meet her because of some misunderstanding they had years before I was born? I know Richard would not support it. That is why I need you.”

Taking Catherine’s hands in her own, she looked up at her with a pleading look. “I need you to help me, Cat. All you have to do is tell him I was with you when he asks about me later. An alibi of sorts. Besides, I want to introduce you to my mother. I have spoken to her about you several times in my letters, and she expressed a desire to meet you as well. Please?”

Catherine could feel the longing in her dear friend’s voice, and she could feel her resolve faltering. She knew that if Richard found out, there would be hell to pay. They just had to ensure that he never did find out while ensuring her friend did not lose the one-in-a-lifetime opportunity to make peace with her mother.

“Alright, you win.” She could feel Emmy vibrating with joy. “But we have to be careful. Richard must never find out.”

“I agree,” Emmy said. Taking her hand, she led her through the back door that led to the gardens.

Catherine itched to ask her how she had a detailed knowledge of the architecture of the place. But then she guessed if her friend had been planning this meeting for long, she must have done her due diligence to get it done with utmost secrecy. Because Emmy could be thorough when she needed to be.

Soon they were weaving through the dark hedges of the garden till they stepped into a clearing where a stone bench sat at the center.

A woman stood with her back to them. The moonlight reflected the pale color of her hair. Even from her profile, she cut a graceful figure.

“Mother?” Emmy called quietly.

The woman turned, and Catherine confirmed her hypothesis that the woman was indeed the estranged Dowager Duchess. She saw now that Emmy was a spitting image of the woman, down to her blonde hair.

The Dowager Duchess’s eyes glittered with unshed tears. She held out her arms, nodding to Emmy with a watery smile.

Emmy rushed into her embrace, hugging her tightly.

“Emmeline,” the Dowager Duchess said in a teary voice when they finally broke apart. “You have grown into a beautiful woman. I cannot tell you how sorry I am. I should never have left you. I should never have abandoned you or your brother. I was so devastated when I heard about your papa’s death. I had always wanted to return to ask for his forgiveness, but I guess I am a coward of the highest order. I developed cold feet each time,” she croaked, sniffing into a handkerchief while Emmy patted her back in consolation.

Catherine was not sure she felt pity for the woman, seeing as she had abandoned her children for years. It seemed quite suspicious that the Dowager Duchess had returned at such a time. Why did she have a sneaking suspicion that her return had something to do with Richard inheriting the dukedom?

The timing was just far too convenient. But that might just be her cynical side.

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After some bouts of sobs, the Dowager Duchess seemed to acknowledge Catherine's presence. Giving her a smile, she said, "You must be Catherine. Emmy wouldn't stop writing about you in her letters." Coming closer, she took Catherine's hands in her own. "Thank you for being a good friend to her."

Catherine nodded, at a loss for words. The Dowager Duchess's hands were slightly damp, and she fought the urge to pull her hand away.

"Thank you so much for guiding my beautiful Emmy." Releasing her hands, the Dowager Duchess turned back to Emmy, pulling her into another tight embrace. "I guess it is my punishment to miss so much of her life."

"I don't think you have been punished enough!" a masculine voice thundered.

They all turned and watched with absolute dismay as Richard marched towards them, volatile anger radiating from him in waves, his face like thunder. He dragged Emmy away from the Dowager Duchess.

"You think you can desert your family for years on end while you squander your life on the Continent and then come back, claiming to be some repentant prodigal mother?" he said, his voice dropping to a menacing whisper.

"Listen," he hissed, his voice rising in anger. "I am only going to say this once. I never want to see you anywhere near me or Emmy. We do not have a mother, so your coming back after all these years is pointless. You are dead to me, do you understand? Dead!"

The Dowager Duchess burst into tears, and even Catherine had to admit that Richard had been ruthless in his rebuke.

“Your Grace...” she started.

She was taken aback by the blazing look in his eyes when he turned towards her.

“And you, I have always known that you are impetuous and sometimes behave in a manner that borders on indecent. I regret that I had once thought that you would be a good influence on Emmy. But you dared to connive with this woman,” he growled, pointing at the Dowager Duchess. “To corrupt Emmy and lead her astray. I never should have trusted you with her. I would warn you now to keep your distance from my family as well.”

With that scathing response, he stomped away, dragging Emmy along, leaving Catherine standing there in a state of shock.

Emmy kept turning back, shooting her remorseful looks, but Catherine was still reeling from the sharp pain in her chest, where Richard’s words had cut deep.

Chapter Sixteen

Richard had always thought he knew his sister best, and that delusion might have had something to do with the fact that he had watched her grow and carried her in his arms when she was just a tiny infant.

The events of the previous night proved that idea to be wrong because he never believed that his sister would ever conceive the idea of meeting their estranged mother all alone in a dark clearing.

When Catherine had finished dancing with Lord Livingston, Richard had been unable

to tear his away from her. His eyes had followed her across the room unbidden until Simon had to tap him on the shoulder to draw his attention to another gentleman who had stopped beside them to exchange pleasantries.

Richard had greeted the gentleman absent-mindedly before unconsciously seeking Catherine once again. When he turned back, she was no longer in the ballroom, and with that knowledge, his chest ached with a curious feeling of loss.

From the corner of his eye, he caught a flash of the royal blue color of her dress at the edges of one of the ferns that their hostess had placed along the wall to complete the conversion of the ballroom into a woodland.

But then those ferns rustled, and he saw Emmy leading her out of the ballroom and into the hallway. He furrowed his brow in confusion. What were two women doing, wandering in a house that was not theirs?

He quickly rationalized it, assuring himself that they might have just gone to the powder room to freshen up. Women tended to do that a lot, and for some reason, they preferred to visit the powder room in groups. That reason eluded him, but then it was a generally accepted fact in the world of men that women were very mysterious creatures that could never be fully understood.

When time passed and they had not returned, he grew concerned and considered stepping out of the ballroom to find them. But he could hardly burst into the powder room, claiming he was looking for his sister. He would just be labeled a pervert, and he would rather save himself the embarrassment.

When he eventually became too distracted, he excused himself, heading to the balcony in the hope that the cool night breeze might ease some of his apprehension.

Imagine his shock when he sighted the figures of two women that he could guess

were his sister and Catherine creeping along the hedges in the garden. He watched as they met a third lady when they got to the clearing.

Something about the newcomer raised his hackles, and he raced down the steps leading into the garden. His fears were confirmed when he found his sister embracing a slightly older version of his estranged mother.

He had thought he had grown numb to his mother's infidelity and abandonment, but the ugly, twisting feeling of betrayal that had reared its head upon witnessing that embrace belied that belief.

He had been overcome with so much anger, and in some distant part of his mind, he knew he was reacting a little too harshly, but that was the only way he could suppress the overwhelming pain and betrayal that were constricting his chest.

The fact that Emmy and Catherine, the two most important women in his life, had somehow connived to bring back that faithless woman in some amateur attempt at reconciliation made it even more painful.

The creaking of the door to the study made him look up, only to see Emmy standing there, staring at him.

"We need to talk, Richie," she said.

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“Not now, Emmy,” he replied shortly, repositioning himself on the sofa.

Ignoring his warnings, Emmy walked into the room, making sure to close the door behind her. She took a seat on the sofa opposite him and fixed him with a defiant stare until he gave up and heaved himself into a sitting position.

It seemed his sister was determined to have the conversation now, whether he wished it or not.

With a heavy sigh, he asked, “What is this about?”

“We need to speak about what happened last night at the ball.”

“I don’t think there is anything to discuss. You’ll never meet that woman again. There. I think that concludes the matter,” he pronounced, leaning back on the sofa, signaling that their discussion was over.

But Emmy seemed to ignore all that.

“It cannot be concluded, since you have failed to hear my opinion on the matter. I just wanted to meet my mother. I have not seen her for as long as I have been alive. Don’t you think I deserve to meet her at least once? Don’t you think you can set aside your deep hatred for her so we could have her back?”

“What you deserve is safety, peace, and unconditional love. That woman,” he hissed, jabbing a finger in the air with barely leashed anger, “she is not family. We might be bound by blood, but she is not family. She cannot be, because no person with a

conscience would abandon their family the way she did—with nary a gaze backward.”

“But forgiveness is divine, Brother,” Emmy reasoned.

“I am not divine, Emmeline. I have protected you all your life and tried as much as possible to be a father to you. I cannot believe you would dismiss that on the off chance that you could reconcile with a woman who had betrayed us. That was really rash of you, and I must confess I am greatly disappointed in you.”

“I just wanted my mother back. What could she have done that was so unforgivable?”

“She abandoned you. She gave birth to a perfect, beautiful baby girl, only to abandon her and flee with her lover with no thought to the consequences. I hated her so much for that. She abandoned Father, and he became a shell of himself—a recluse that was hardly any use to anybody, least of all himself. She did not just render you motherless with her selfish decision, but she also made you an orphan because Father was hardly able to care for himself, least of all his children.” He let out a shuddering sigh.

“What about me?” he continued, his voice dropping with anguish. “I had to live without the love of a mother, even though I had a living one. Why do I have to live with the constant reminder of her indiscretion? I have tried to protect you as much as I can, but my title does not completely protect me from the disdain of so many members of the ton.

“She grew up among them, so she must have been aware of the consequences of her actions. But she did not care enough to spare us the shame. She is not a mother, and she cannot be a mother, since she lacks motherly instincts.”

When he paused, he realized he was panting and trembling. He also became aware that Emmy was staring at him with a bewildered expression that was gradually

turning into pity.

Richard had never been so angry that he ranted this way, and he had never meant to tell his sister about their sordid family history the way he had, but he guessed the subject of his mother was still a sensitive one.

He definitely did not want her pity. He was her older brother, and for the past decade, he had been a father figure to her. He was not supposed to appear this vulnerable in her presence, but he had inadvertently done that.

He opened his mouth to salvage the situation but was interrupted by her.

“I now understand why you want me to stay away from the Dowager Duchess and why you felt the need to banish her forever from our lives. However, I never said I had forgiven her. We have lived in bitterness for too long, and while you might deny it, I can see how that childhood experience has tainted every one of your relationships over the years.

“I just wanted to understand what happened so we could heal. Not for her, but for you and I. I want both of us to heal, because I love you, and I want to see you free from the pain and tears you have carried from your childhood. I am just pleading with you to give me a chance to unravel this chain that has kept us trapped for years on end. I promise to give up if it is hopeless,” she reasoned, placing her hand on her chest solemnly.

Richard took her hands in his after a prolonged pause.

“I have always hated the Dowager Duchess, and a part of me would always be skeptical about the reason for her return, but I would hate to be the stumbling block that prevents you from having a chance of experiencing motherly care. It pains me to allow this, but you can listen to her version of events from a distance.

“While I still think she is a terrible liar with no hope for redemption, I am willing to push my feelings aside for the greater good, but you must take a footman with you whenever you have a meeting with her because I am not above hiring Runners to bundle and banish her back to the Continent should I catch a whiff of any nefarious plans on her part,” he said solemnly.

Emmy squeezed his hands and then gave him a bright smile. “Thank you, Brother.”

She received a non-committal grunt in response.

“However,” she continued, “I don’t understand why you felt the need to banish Cat from our lives, too. She is my best friend. She followed me because I asked her to help me. She did nothing wrong.”

“The simple fact that she went along with your hare-brained schemes without trying to stop you cements my opinion that she is a bad influence on you. Since you started having your classes with her, your impetuous tendencies seem to have grown instead of dwindling. For both our sakes, I suggest you stop talking about Catherine. She is henceforth forbidden from ever setting foot in this house, and that is final,” he declared, leaning his head back and closing his eyes to indicate that their conversation was over.

“But she is my best friend, and that is what friends do—they help you when you badly need their help. I fail to see how that makes her a terrible person. Besides, you thought she was a good person when you asked her to teach me etiquette. I still need those lessons to do well in the marriage mart. I might have improved, but I am still a long way away from being a perfect young lady,” Emmy argued, hoping to change his stance on the matter.

The deafening silence that followed and the fact that he did not move from his relaxed position made her believe he was ignoring her.

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“You know, Richard, I don’t think you want Catherine to stay away simply because you think she is a bad influence on me. I think you’re pretending to be angry with her to run away from the feelings you have for her. I would be the first to tell you that you are fooling no one. Everyone with eyes can see the way you look at her. I have never thought you a coward, but in this matter, it seems you are.”

That statement caused him to jerk up into a sitting position.

“There is no relationship between Catherine and I. She is just an acquaintance to me. Nothing more,” Richard stated heatedly.

“Are you sure about that, Brother? because I don’t think you look at your other female acquaintances the way you look at her. You certainly don’t follow them everywhere with your eyes, looking like you would love to devour them. You are in love with her, admit it.”

“I am in love with no one,” he said, but his words lacked heat.

He stood up, hoping to escape the awkward conversation, but the sound of Emmeline’s laughter followed him as he hurried out of the room.

Damn and blast, he should have known that with how distracted he had been, it would become obvious to anyone who cared to look that he harbored a terrible infatuation for Catherine Burlow, the daughter of the Viscount Mowbray.

On the surface, she might be best described as ordinary-looking with her brown hair and chocolate-brown eyes, but it just might be the little things that fed his obsession

with her.

The twitch in her lips and the twinkle in her brown eyes when she was amused or excited about something, her graceful movements on the dance floor, or the feel of her warm, sweet lips beneath his.

The lady had become a fever in his blood that he had been unable to get rid of. So, of course, why wouldn't anyone notice when he followed her every movement with greedy eyes, when his hands clenched in barely leashed jealousy whenever Lord Livingston or any of the countless gentlemen who paid court to her made the mistake of holding her waist for too long or holding her a little closer than necessary when they danced.

Whenever she finished a dance, he always released a sigh of relief, realizing only then that his body had been tense throughout the dance. That totally begged the question as to why he would decide to attend these balls, when it was pure torture to watch Catherine dance with those gentlemen while he slowly stewed in jealousy.

He concluded that he must love to torture himself. When he had seen her there with his sister at their ill-fated meeting with his estranged mother, he had seen an outlet for the confusing cocktail of emotions that resided in his chest permanently, growing from the first day of their meeting. So he had lashed out at her. Even though a part of him had been aware that he had been overreacting, he had been helpless to stop himself. With every day that followed, he developed a healthy fear of how easily the petite woman could push him to extreme emotions without making an effort.

It seemed the more he resisted this attraction between them, the worse it became. It had grown to an extent that his innocent little sister had noticed it.

Emmy was right, he was a coward. He was afraid, afraid of how easily Catherine could change everything he knew about himself simply by being present.

Chapter Seventeen

Catherine sat on the window ledge in her room, staring out at the busy streets of London unseeingly.

For the better part of the week, she had been fixated on what happened that night over a week ago, on how she had seen a very different side of Richard—a very angry side.

She had known that Richard carried serious trauma from his mother's abandonment and love scandal, which had plagued him most of his life, but she had not really comprehended the depth of his pain and how deeply it had eaten at him and shaped him into the man he was today—a strong, kind gentleman who believed women were not to be trusted and had a strong aversion to commitment.

After he had lashed out at her and left with Emmy, she had stood there for quite a while, shocked by the events of the last hour, how she had gone from just helping a friend to becoming the villain, even though a part of her recognized that he had lashed out at her in a bid to ease some of his pain. She saw how his eyes flashed and his body trembled with barely contained rage, and in some part of her heart, she felt pity and compassion for him because no matter her parents' fault, they had not managed to cause such damage as to turn their children into giant balls of fury, irrevocably changing them.

She also believed that the woman sitting on the ground, weeping, deserved very little pity from her because she had managed to break a whole family in her selfish pursuit of pleasure.

Now that Catherine thought about it, the Dowager Duchess had indirectly contributed to her emotional turmoil because her actions had turned an innocent, trusting child into a distrustful young man, and for that, Catherine did not truly believe that there was much the Dowager Duchess could do to make up for that. So she had left,

walking until she found a hackney to take her home so she could process her thoughts.

Catherine looked up when her mother stepped into the room. The pointed look her mother gave the covered plate still sitting on the table in the center of the room reminded her that she had not eaten her breakfast since her maid brought it up.

“Mother, I will eat the food now. I just had something to do. I will eat now, you don’t need to worry,” she said, getting up and moving to the table.

She had hoped her mother would leave her alone after that. Instead, her mother closed the door behind her, walked to the bed, sat on it, and motioned for her to sit beside her.

Catherine hesitated but went over to sit beside her, and then turned slightly and gave her an expectant look. It was a rare occurrence for her mother to call her to sit for a discussion, so her hackles were a little raised, but she tried to keep an open mind.

“Is there any problem, Mother?” Catherine asked expectantly.

“Yes, there is. You, my darling, have been withdrawn lately. You hardly join us downstairs for breakfast or dinner, and the few times I check on you, I find you lost in thought, forgetting to eat sometimes. I know something is wrong, and I would be grateful if you could tell me what it is. Two heads are truly better than one sometimes,” the Viscountess said with an encouraging smile.

“Nothing is wrong, Mother. I just have been slightly unwell, but I am recovering. Do not worry,” Catherine replied dismissively.

Her mother gave her a droll look that told her she did not believe her. “Catherine Burlow, you seem to forget that I am your mother, and while I am aware we might

not have the closest relationship, I do know when you are not being completely honest with me. Something is up, and I would wager it has something to do with matters of the heart.” She fixed her with a pointed look that dared her to deny her statement.

“There is someone,” Catherine started haltingly, but the encouraging smile on her mother’s face pushed her to continue. “I met him in one of the balls. He is kind, tall, and if I do say so... handsome.” Her face flushed with embarrassment.

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“That is excellent! You seem to have developed a tendre for this mysterious gentleman, so I fail to see the problem. Does he not reciprocate your feelings?”

“I believe he does, but he is not interested in marriage, and frankly, I am not looking for a love match. I would prefer a sensible match with a respectable and responsible gentleman.”

“Who says you cannot have it both? A responsible man who you have feelings for. Besides, if my guess is correct, I would venture to say that your mysterious gentleman is none other than the Duke of St. George.”

At the mention of that name, Catherine’s head jerked upwards with a shock that she fought to conceal with outrage.

“Why would you think I have developed feelings for Richard? It is a widely known fact that he is a rake of the highest order.”

At that, her mother just gave her an amused smile. “Child,” she said, taking her hands in her own. “You and I both know that his status as a rake has no bearing on your feelings for him because the heart, my dear, chooses who it wants no matter how we fight it.”

“And,” she added when Catherine shook her head in denial, “don’t bother to deny that the Duke is the topic of this discussion because I am your mother, and beyond that, I am sure half of the ton must have guessed your relationship, going by the calf-eyed looks you exchange when you are convinced no one is looking.”

“You love this man,” she continued in a mellow voice. “I fail to see why you would want a sensible, loveless marriage when you can have a lovely one with a person you genuinely love and respect.”

“Unfortunately, Mother, I do not desire a love match. I want a peaceful home, devoid of conflict, with a calm partner who is not overwrought by emotions that result from being in love,” Catherine said drily.

Silence fell over them, and Catherine could guess that her veiled reference to her parents’ marriage did not fly over her mother’s head. Jemima Burlow might be impetuous and hot-headed, but one thing she was not was stupid.

“Darling,” she murmured, “look at me.”

When Catherine raised her head to look into her mother’s eyes, she did not notice any sign of censorship in them.

“I am sorry,” the Viscountess continued. “I am immensely mortified that our spats have given you a bad view of marriage. Even when you were much younger, you had always been so strong, surviving and thriving on your own while we were distracted. I realize now that it was not fair to you to force you to raise yourself and your siblings. I know that the damage has been done, but, darling, love is beautiful. At the beginning of our marriage, your father and I were so happy—we were inseparable.” Her eyes took on a dreamy look, and a reminiscing smile touched her lips.

“Over time—and I am ashamed to say this—we soon realized that we were two different people with very strong opinions about everything. While that fact did not diminish our love for each other, we quarreled like children just out of the schoolroom. It soon became a game to know who apologized first, and I must admit I loved those games.” Her smile faded to be replaced by a sober look.

“But I realized we neglected you and your siblings in favor of remaining eternal newlyweds with no responsibilities, and it has made you skeptical about love. But it is worth it. I bet my life on it.”

“Mother, I love you, and I know that your and Father’s love is rare, but what I feel for Richard... it is dangerous.” Catherine forced a smile. “Besides, I already have a good suitor. Lord Livingston is the perfect gentleman, and if he proposes to me, I will wholeheartedly accept. He is kind, good-looking, cool-headed, and most importantly, he cares for me. He would make a good father.”

“Yes, he might make a good father, but is he the right husband for you?”

With that cryptic question, her mother stood up, patted her shoulder, and then headed out of the room, closing the door behind her with a soft click, leaving her to her thoughts.

Richard looked up from the ledger he had been scrutinizing for the better part of an hour when he heard a knock on his study door.

“You may come in,” he called out, closing the ledger. He might as well put it away, seeing as he had spent the better part of the last hour staring at the same column of numbers without any hope of comprehending it.

The door opened to admit the butler.

“What is it, James?” he asked expectantly.

“You have a guest, Your Grace,” the butler announced.

“Inform them that I am not home. I am in no state of mind to receive guests at this time,” Richard said dismissively, turning back to open the ledger.

He waited for the sound of the butler leaving, but when it did not come, he looked up to see that the butler was still standing in the doorway, staring at him with a flustered expression.

“What is it?” he asked, feeling slightly annoyed.

“The guest is actually a woman, Your Grace, and she is veiled,” the butler answered.

The mention of a veil intrigued Richard, and he did not care to examine that feeling because a part of him hoped that she might be Catherine. He blamed his numerous daydreams for that thought.

Making sure to keep his expression neutral, he said, “Send her in.”

Several moments later, a tall, veiled figure stepped into the study. The figure was obviously a woman’s, going by the curves and the satin, but the height was wrong, and Richard could see a strand of blonde hair that escaped the veil. The sight of that familiar color sent a shiver down his spine.

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His hunch was proved right when the woman removed the veil to reveal a weathered face surrounded by blonde curls. It was the Dowager Duchess, the woman also known as his mother.

“What are you doing here?” he asked, feeling the familiar rage rise in his chest. “You really must be fearless to come here, considering the warning I gave you the last time we met, Madam,” he sneered.

A slight gasp was the only reaction that indicated his mother had heard him, but she remained standing in the middle of his study, her head held high, daring him to continue. He must admit that he admired her confidence and bravery, but that did not mean he did not still harbor great anger towards her.

“Madam, for my sanity and yours, I would request that you leave.”

“Richie, Son—” the Dowager Duchess started.

Richard raised a hand, interrupting her. “It is ‘Duke’ to you, Madam. I hardly think we are acquainted enough for us to be on a first-name basis. For the preservation of your dignity and mine, I ask that you leave. I would hate to order the footmen to forcibly remove you from these premises, Duchess or not.”

At that moment, the door opened to admit Emmy.

“Brother, what is all this commotion about?” she asked. But when she noticed their mother standing there, her expression warmed. “You are already here, Mother. Please take a seat and make yourself comfortable,” she said, indicating the sofa.

“Emmy,” Richard interjected, “I don’t think that would be necessary. The Dowager Duchess was just about to leave, seeing as her presence here is not needed.”

“Well, she cannot leave,” Emmy scoffed, her voice brimming with defiance. “She is my guest, so I have the right to entertain her however I want to. She had not accomplished what she had come here for, so she cannot leave.”

“I am the head of this household!” Richard thundered. “I decide who stays and who goes, and this woman”—he pointed an accusatory finger at his mother—“cannot be here. I forbid it!”

“Richard, could you calm down and listen? We could just give her the benefit of the doubt. I don’t know about you, but I have lived in bitterness long enough to decide that I no longer want to be part of it. This might be our only chance to pursue happiness. Would you really throw it all away simply because of anger?”

“I am not interested in pursuing any peace that might mean this woman would live under my roof. She has to leave.”

“Well, you leave me no choice, Brother. If she leaves, I leave as well. I would love to see you thrive with no family surrounding you,” Emmy said, folding her arms over her chest.

Her posture reminded him of the younger version of her when she wanted to throw a tantrum. It just lacked the stomping of her feet.

Seeing the defiant look on her face seemed to cool his decade-old anger until he felt exhausted. He had carried this hatred in his heart for years and had watched it destroy him and his family. It was fast on its way to destroying his bond with Emmy, the person he cared about most in the world. This fact made him wonder if it was worth it to hold on to that poison while its source led a better, happier life.

Maybe a talk with the Dowager Duchess might be a step in the right direction towards healing for both himself and his beloved sister. He was going to borrow a page from his sister's book and give his mother the benefit of the doubt.

He owed his sister that, at least.

Chapter Eighteen

"You have about half an hour, Madam," he said, looking at his timepiece. "I suggest you make your point and be precise about it."

"Thank you." The Dowager Duchess dropped onto the sofa in one swift, graceful movement.

Richard stepped out from behind his desk and crossed the room to take a seat on the armchair across from the sofa. Leaning back, he crossed his legs at the ankles. He affected a picture of nonchalant relaxation.

When his mother did not speak for a few moments, he raised an eyebrow in question.

"Richard, Emmy," the Dowager Duchess began, clearing her throat. "I know this might be too late, but I wanted to say I am sorry. You did not deserve to be abandoned the way you were." She sniffled, dabbing at her eyes with a handkerchief.

"Of course, we did not deserve that," Richard sneered.

"Richie," Emmy warned, shaking her head.

He sighed, shifting on the chair.

"Why did you do it, Mother?" Emmy asked in a small voice.

Richard thought the answer to that question should be obvious. That is what selfish people do—they leave people behind when they no longer serve their needs.

“Why did you leave a newborn that still needed the care of their mother? Why did you feel the need to do that?” Emmy continued, her voice catching.

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He must admit that he also wanted an answer to that question. Heartless mothers abandoned their children when they became burdens to them all the time. He had seen it happen among the peasants. At least the rich nobles had the option of leaving their children at the mercy of nannies and nursemaids. However, it took a certain kind of coldheartedness to abandon an infant one just birthed in favor of fleeing with a lover. A part of him was curious to know what sort of excuse his mother would give that would make it acceptable.

He watched as the Dowager Duchess bowed her head and tears streamed down her face. His mother might be older, but she was still a beauty, and the years had been quite kind to her. The sight of the tears on her face made her look vulnerable, and Richard was shocked that he felt the need to console her. He made sure to push that thought aside before it took root.

“Emmy, I am so sorry, but back then, I felt overwhelmed, and I was sure that if I spent another day in that house, I would suffocate to death. I figured that you would be well taken care of, since I could see how attached your brother was to you. I knew he would never let harm come to you.”

“I was a child, Mother,” Richard blurted out. “Why would you think I would be a good influence on her when I barely had any?” he asked, feeling the anger returning.

“You were quite mature for your age, and at that time, I really needed solitude,” the Dowager Duchess replied.

“Solitude?” He chuckled darkly. “I hardly think you sought solitude when you left with a lover—that would have hardly granted you the solitude you so desired.”

“A lover? You believe I ran away with a lover? Is that what your father told you?”

“Yes, you cheated on him several times and decided to crown it by running off with your lover, who was too cowardly to claim his own child,” he spat out.

“Richard, I understand you hate me, and you have the right to, but there is one truth that must be said. I did run away with a lover, but not in the manner you think.”

The siblings stared at her with confusion.

The Dowager Duchess sighed. “I think I need to start from the very beginning,” she said, bracing herself for what was going to be a long, difficult story.

“You must have known that your father married me when I was in my prime. I had a lot of suitors who mostly wanted me for my beauty, and while I accepted their attentions, I wanted someone who loved me for myself. Then I met your father, and he was everything I wanted in a man. He was kind, handsome, charming, and he also possessed one of the oldest titles in the kingdom. He was a duke,” she began, a rueful smile touching her lips.

“He courted me with perfect charm, and before long, I fell irrevocably in love with him. So, when he proposed to me, I gladly accepted. Granted, I loved the city, and I might have married him under the assumption that we would establish our permanent residence in London—I was too in love to care about the details.

“When we finally got married and he explained his attachment to the countryside, I was disappointed, but I also chose to accept the situation. We lived happily, and when I became pregnant with you”—she looked affectionately at Richard—“he was overjoyed and overly concerned for my well-being. Unfortunately, while I was pregnant, I became sick, and I was sickly throughout the pregnancy. He was the perfect husband at that time, coming several times a day to check in on me.

“When I finally gave birth to you, he was overjoyed to have an heir. His happiness gladdened my heart. I felt that I was living the perfect life with my perfect, little family, but that illusion fell apart barely two months after your birth. My maid, a young woman my age who I have known my entire life, fell ill. She was throwing up and feeling fatigued all the time. I was scared for her life, seeing as she was the only person from my childhood home with me. In my panic, I requested that the physician be called to examine her.”

Her smile turned bitter.

“I remember standing outside the door when the physician, an old kindly man, came out and informed me that my quiet, innocent maid was with child. At first, I was shocked, then I was annoyed that any man would lie with her without marrying her first.

“When I went into the room, she was apologizing profusely, swearing to leave my service if that was her punishment. I calmed her down and asked her to let me know who was the father of her child. I promised her that I would use my husband’s influence to force the man to take responsibility for her and her child.

“But instead of feeling relief, she started crying, and after several moments of consoling her and cajoling her, she told me the most devastating news of my existence. Your father, my husband, was the father of her child. Apparently, while I was pregnant and barely able to move, he needed an outlet for his primal needs, and fresh-faced Rose was the perfect candidate.

“After hearing the news, I was in denial at first. My husband was the most caring man in the world, there was no way he would cheat on me with anyone. But when my maid insisted that he was her child’s father, I reacted with rage and requested that she keep quiet. I left that room so fast, you might I was being chased by devils.

“I ran through the woods for so long until my strength failed me. When I felt better, I retraced my steps back to the mansion, and when I arrived sweaty and dirty, I went straight to your father’s study. I can still remember the look of surprise, then concern on his face when he asked if I was alright and why I looked disheveled. Just that look of concern on his face almost halted the words on the tip of my tongue, but I needed to know, or the uncertainty and doubt would have festered in my heart. Besides, I believed that what I heard could not be true.

“So I asked him about the absurd rumor I had heard, waiting to see a look of outrage preceding his denying it. Instead, I watched my darling husband transform before my eyes into a cold-eyed stranger. He told me that he was a peer and a man with great desire, that I would have saved myself the embarrassment had I known that. He had only sated an appetite. It was not his fault that the chit that was my maid had not taken precautions to avoid conceiving.

“After delivering his speech, he proceeded to ignore me. I remember standing there in shock for a long time before I left the room feeling numb. By the time I got back to my chambers, the pain finally overwhelmed me, and I wept.

“The next day, I woke up to find him in bed with me. I was shocked and revulsed. But apparently, he was back to being his normal charming self. He apologized and said he was drunk when it happened. He pleaded and pleaded. I could feel my heart thawing, but a part of me remained skeptical. Over the next weeks, he proceeded to woo me all over again until I finally forgave him.

“And so the cycle began—of me finding out about his indiscretion, getting heartbroken, and then placated. I began to build a tolerance for it. I even convinced myself that it was just a little flaw in such a perfect man, and as his wife, I felt it was my duty to tolerate it. So I became the long-suffering trophy wife.

“It was fine until the summer you turned eight, Richard. I found out something

terrible. He had impregnated a maid, a little girl barely fourteen. She nearly died in childbirth after he sent her away to give birth in Scotland. He abandoned them and left them to fend for themselves. The young maid eventually returned with her child and complained to me of their plight. I was so disgusted and ashamed. I met him and relayed what I was told, but this time, he blatantly denied the act even though there was glaring evidence against him.

“It was at that point that I decided to move out of our chambers, since my husband, who I had thought was just flawed, was devilish to an unimaginable extent. When he saw I was leaving, he finally confessed his wrongdoing, begging me to return. But my mind was made up, and this time it was sealed shut with resolve.

“I moved to a different wing of the mansion. All his attempts to woo me failed. I was too riddled with guilt to appreciate his efforts. To ease my emotional torment, I turned to the bottle, getting roaring drunk every night that he was revulsed enough not to attempt intimacy with me. It was unfortunate that during my Season, I made a lot of friends, but when I was in distress, it dawned on me that they were just superficial connections at best.

“It was during that period that I met someone, a man. He was young, tilted, just out of Oxford, and wanted to sow his wild oats. I was aware that he was just interested in chasing pleasure, but I did not care, since I thought that was what I wanted or needed at the time to numb my pain. He introduced me to a world of hedonism that I never knew existed. Soon I was lost in the countless erotic parties he threw. Sometimes I went weeks at a time without returning home. I believed I was living my best life, and I quite enjoyed the look of rage on your father’s face when I returned. Seeing him jealous fed my ego and hunger for revenge.

“Over time, my libertine ways caught up with me when I found out I was with child. The thought of bringing a child into my reckless, fast-paced life gave me a moment of clarity, and for those few months of pregnancy, I was sober. I returned to your father

and was surprised to see that he had changed. He looked older and seemed to have abandoned his old ways.

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“Something about seeing the older version of my first love filled me with remorse and nostalgia. I was even surprised when he agreed to claim the pregnancy. I moved back in, and throughout my confinement, he protected me from the rumors and gossip that surrounded my return.

“He became once again my doting husband, caring for me. He even helped pick out a name for the baby. We were so peaceful that I dreamed of a second chance at the love we shared at the beginning of our marriage, until the child was born. I was happy because she was a perfect girl with my blonde hair.

“That joy, unfortunately, was overshadowed because the moment your father stepped into the nursery, he took one look at Emmy sleeping peacefully in her cot, turned, left, and never returned. He locked himself in his study, refusing to allow me in. It was then that the guilt and shame hit.

“It did not help when you walked into the nursery, Richard, just returning from your friend’s home. I could feel your disdain and hatred for me—it radiated from every pore in your body. I already felt the guilt choking me, and just like clockwork, I returned to my chambers one day to find a letter from my old lover inviting me back to a party held in his townhouse in London. He also promised me a voyage on his father’s ship all the way to the Continent. It all sounded exciting, a distraction from the guilt and pain I felt.

“I knew that I was falling back into the vices I had thought I left behind, but I guess I always was an addict because the next day, I packed my meager belongings and I was on my way to the Continent, leaving only a letter behind. When I left before daybreak, my heart ached with guilt, but a voice in my head kept urging me away,

promising oblivion aboard a ship to the Continent. So that is how I left, without looking back.”

A deep silence lingered after her long explanation while her children pondered a version of events completely different from the one they knew.

Hearing her speak gave them a deeper view of who she really was. Another human being who felt all the different emotions of love, hurt, anger, pain, and addiction. It was easier to hate her from a distance because pain was always better when there was a target for blame and hatred. It was unfortunate she became that target when at the time, she had needed the unconditional love of family.

It was difficult to fathom that his father had been a serial womanizer and abuser. An abuser because Richard firmly believed that any man who would take advantage of a fourteen-year-old girl, especially one in his employ, was a monster and an abuser. It was quite shocking to imagine his father, a man he had thought attached to his ledgers, could have the time to womanize.

But then his father was a duke, he didn't really need to leave the comfort of his home to acquire a mistress when many women worked in his house. Richard was quite sure that those girls were not willing, since they depended on his father for food and sustenance.

It was one thing for his father to have a mistress outside his marriage, but it was another to carry out his affairs under his wife's nose, completely unconcerned about the hurt he was causing. The Dowager Duchess was no saint because she had chosen one of the worst ways in history to show her anger.

Her story, if it was true, threw everything Richard thought he knew about his father in shadow.

To distract himself from the turmoil of marrying the two versions of events, he asked, “Why did you come back, then, if you had found joy in the Continent?”

“It was not true joy. I know that now, because true joy could never be that self-destructive. I soon realized that when I fell ill at one of our stops. They took me to a healer close by. My so-called friends and my lover left me there for dead.

“The healer, a kindly woman, cared for me till I was healthy enough. When I got better, I helped her with her house chores—cutting wood for cooking and other menial chores I wouldn’t have imagined doing as the Duchess of St. George.”

Looking closely at his mother’s hands, Richard realized that they were callused and bronzed with exposure to the sun. He also noted that some of her nails were broken.

“Later on,” she continued, “she sent me to apprentice under a textile maker in the village there. Over time, I learned and started making textiles, saving money to return to England. It was very long, difficult work, but in the end, I saved enough money to return.

“When I returned, I went straight to the country house and found out I was now a widow, since your father had died a month ago. I was devastated because I had hoped to make amends. But fate is cruel, isn’t it?” she said with a rueful smile.

His mother had lived a reckless life, but Richard believed that she had paid enough for it, with everything she had been through. He had not quite forgiven her yet. Grudges that old could not be easily let go. He was, however, ready to move in the direction of reconciliation.

“I know it is a little late, but I would love to be part of your lives.” At their nod of assent, she continued brightly, “I guess we have a wedding to plan.”

“Whose wedding?” Richard asked, confused.

“Yours, of course,” the Dowager Duchess said with a laugh. “With the besotted looks you have been giving Miss Burlow, I thought you would be halfway down the aisle by now.”

“Why would you think that?” he asked, feigning ignorance.

“Everybody in Society knows, silly,” Emmy snorted.

He had quite forgotten she was in the room because of her uncharacteristic quietness. But he looked up to see that her eyes, while luminescent, were red-rimmed and puffy.

“You and Cat are so obviously in love that it is very vexing to watch you both circle each other while pinning for one another. Just marry her already and save us all the torment,” Emmy complained.

Richard looked away, mortified. He had thought Emmy was exaggerating when she said that everyone was aware of his infatuation with Catherine. It seemed it was true, since his mother, who had barely spent a fortnight with him and Emmy, had noticed that something was weighing heavily on his mind.

“Son,” his mother called.

He looked up to see an indulgent look in her eyes.

“I realize how scary it must be to fall in love, especially for a man like you who prides himself on his ability to control every aspect of his life. Unfortunately, love cannot be controlled that easily. I have watched you over the last few days as I visited Emmy, and I can tell that whatever happened between you two hurts you more than you would admit to anyone. Not even yourself.

“What you feel for Miss Burlow is beautiful, and I would hate to watch you let it go to waste because of the fear of what happened to your father and me repeating itself. You are not your father, and Miss Burlow is more intelligent than I was at that point in my marriage. I believe you would be very happy with her as a wife,” she advised.

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Her insight into the root of his fears was shocking and reassuring at the same time. It seemed that having a mother had its uses, and he was quite grateful for her concern for him even when he had not hidden his hatred for her.

“I have an important question, Mother,” Emmy piped up. “How did you attend balls when you had no invitation?”

The Dowager Duchess’s lips curled into a mischievous smile identical to the one on her daughter’s face. “I have my ways. I am still a duchess, after all.”

Chapter Nineteen

“She will be down soon,” Catherine heard her mother say to who she suspected was Lord Livingston.

They had planned an outing in the park as well as tea at one of her favorite shops later, with her mother chaperoning her this time. It was a little embarrassing having her mother out and about with them, but Catherine trusted the woman to maintain a healthy distance, so it wouldn’t be too much of a bother.

She descended the stairs into the foyer and smiled when Lord Livingston’s eyes lit up when he spotted her. He rushed to the foot of the stairs and held out a hand to her.

“Miss Burlow, you’re a vision this morning,” he praised.

She blushed as was expected but wondered if that was a good compliment. Was it only that morning she happened to look beautiful?

“Thank you, Lord Livingston.”

“Cathy, dear, are you ready?” her mother asked with a bright smile.

“Yes, Mother.” Catherine nodded. “I’ll just grab a parasol.”

In a few short moments, they were out and on their way to the park in Lord Livingston’s tasteful coach. Thankfully, there were not many people at the park, but that was probably also due to the early hour.

Lord Livingston had arranged it thus so they would have enough time to study the flora of the park and discuss his latest acquisition, an orchid from the Orient that required special care to grow.

“It cost me a fortune to import it.” He laughed. “I had to get a gardener all the way from the Orient to personally escort it and protect it until it was well-situated in my greenhouse.”

“You seem the sort to go above and beyond to satisfy your desires,” Catherine noted.

“I am such a man. In business as well as pleasure.”

His gaze was meaningful and full of promise as he looked at her, and she knew it wouldn’t be much longer before he proposed to her. He obviously liked her, and from the hints he had dropped in past conversations, she had all the qualities he was looking for in a partner.

She had really tried to be happy because she was finally securing the match she had dreamed of for so long, but all her traitorous heart could do was pine for someone else who cared nothing for her.

She bowed her head and continued walking, causing him to fall into step with her. She was grateful that her mother was a good distance away from her, or else she'd have elbowed her for not being more excited.

“So, what kind of dress did you get for the Summers' ball?” she heard a familiar voice ask ahead of her.

Her forehead creased into a frown as she wondered at the possibility that the one family she was trying to avoid had somehow appeared in front of her as though her thoughts had conjured them up.

She looked up, and lo and behold, Richard, Emmeline and their mother were standing a few feet away from her, looking like they'd also had the idea to avoid the crush that was sure to come later in the morning once the bonton finally awoke.

Catherine looked around, trying to find any way she could avoid being spotted as her heart fluttered at the thought of Richard seeing her.

She'd skipped many events in the hope of avoiding him, as she knew she couldn't look into those beautiful blue eyes and not feel that sharp stab of pain his words had caused.

Now he was standing right in front of her, and she had nowhere to hide.

Lord Livingston stopped in his tracks with a glare on his face. He had never quite forgiven or forgotten Richard's slight at the previous ball, but being of a lower social standing, he could do nothing more than glare daggers at the man when he was not looking.

“It's a lovely burgundy—Cathy?!”

Damn. Catherine wanted to groan, but she put on a fake smile and waved at her friend as if she had not just been trying to hide behind Lord Livingston.

Emmy rushed forward and wrapped her in a hug so tight that she couldn't breathe.

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“Oh, I have missed you so!” she cried when she released her. “Richard told me you were ending our arrangement because of your ill health. Are you better now? You do look a little pale. I’m still upset you did not think to tell me yourself, but you are forgiven.”

Catherine did not meet Lord Livingston’s eyes because she was sure he had a curious look on his face. He would definitely be asking her about the said arrangement later, so she would have to think up an excuse quickly.

“It is good to see you too, Emmy,” she answered once she was finally free of her friend’s grip. “I am sorry also for not informing you of my illness. I am better now, so we will have time to speak later. Maybe you could call on me tomorrow?”

“Alright.” Emmy smiled. “Will you be attending the Summers’ ball?”

Catherine was grateful for the question because it helped her ignore Richard’s presence, but out of the corner of her eye, she could see her mother and the Dowager Duchess talking and looking at them with matching smiles. She wondered briefly what that was about.

“I will be attending,” she answered with a nod.

Emmy let out an excited squeal that had her covering her ears. “I am glad! I look forward to seeing you.”

“Likewise.”

Catherine noticed Lord Livingston and Richard were having a tense discussion out of the corner of her eye and tried hard not to stare at them, but her traitorous heart and body remembered too well everything that had happened between her and Richard.

She felt the familiar sparks of desire inside her as her eyes roamed over his powerful body, her mind replaying with vivid detail how he had imprinted himself on her body with his hands and lips.

When her eyes moved back up to his face, she found that his eyes were on her. Startled, she moved away from their party, not looking where she went.

Watching Catherine leave and continuing the annoying conversation with Lord Livingston was one of the hardest things Richard had to do in a long while, second to watching her walk out of his house and life, knowing he had hurt her terribly.

But he had decided it was best to let her go because there were too many eyes on them, waiting to see what would happen.

He had spotted her even before Emmy had noticed her, and he had seen the exact moment she had spotted them. The alarm that flashed in her eyes had been hilarious, but the effect was minimized by the fact that she had been walking hand in hand with Lord Livingston, laughing and flirting if her blush was anything to go by.

He had felt an unfamiliar pang in his chest as he had seen what the future would look like for her if only he stayed away from her. Lord Livingston could give her the dream life she wanted. Yes, he might not keep her bed sufficiently warm like Richard could, but he could give her the stability that she craved.

It was that thought that kept Richard from punching the man who was trying and failing to keep him away from Catherine.

“I have bought a pretty emerald ring that will complement her eyes perfectly. But since you know her better than I do, what kind of proposal do you think she favors?” Lord Livingston asked, grinning with self-satisfaction.

He obviously thought the news should bother Richard. It did, but Richard would be damned if he gave the man the satisfaction of knowing that.

“She seems the type to prefer private proposals, but if I know anything about women, it’s that they always say the opposite of what they mean. Plus, I’d like to send a message to other men that she is finally off the marriage mart and is going to be mine.” Lord Livingston added that last part with a wink, squaring his shoulders.

Richard was sorely tempted to discard his chivalry and confess his feelings to Catherine and be done with it. She might not agree to marry him, but it would at least leave her confused enough to not marry this cad.

“I see no reason why this is any concern of mine,” he answered tonelessly.

“You are friends with my dear Cathy, are you not?” Lord Livingston asked, still grinning. “I hear she has been a close friend of your family since childhood. I wonder how you neversaw her charms and took her for yourself. She is a rather nice lady.”

Richard scoffed and looked away from the man. The only reason he had stayed away from Catherine was to not ruin her courtship, but with every word coming out of the Viscount’s mouth, it was obvious he was only marrying her to prove a point to him and not because he cared for her.

“I wonder about your reasons for marrying her,” Richard mused. “It seems as though you’re trying to market her charms to me instead of waxing lyrical like a man in love. Do you even like her?”

Ideally, he wouldn't even give away the fact that he cared for Catherine by asking such a question, but he would be damned before he let anyone hurt her again.

It was better that she remained single than trapped in a marriage she would surely regret for the rest of her life.

The Viscount grinned as though he had finally gotten the reaction he had been aiming for, but Richard ignored it, very much wanting to know the answer to his question.

“Why? Do you care so much for her?” Lord Livingston teased. “I do like her. I mean, she is not a great beauty, but she has the necessary curves, so she'll do. Plus, she has a great sense of humor and has an innocence about her that I haven't seen in a while. It stirs something inside me, and I cannot wait to teach her new tricks. She is also well-learned, so I could grow to like her even more. So yes, Your Grace, I do like Miss Burlow.”

Richard's vision turned red—he had to clench his fists to stop himself from punching the man. But finally, he had gotten all the answers he needed.

He would find a way to warn Catherine off agreeing to the Viscount's proposal. There were many more decent gentlemen than him.

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Richard would do her that last favor before traveling somewhere for a long while. Perhaps it would help dull the pain piercing his heart every time he imagined Catherine being married to someone else.

“I wish you all the very best, then,” he said through gritted teeth.

The Viscount beamed. But before he could respond, the Dowager Duchess and Catherine’s mother came up to them.

“Your Grace,” the Viscountess greeted, “it’s a pleasure to see you again.”

“Likewise, Lady Mowbray.” Richard smiled. “It has been an age. How is Lord Mowbray?”

“He is well.” She smiled. “Would you mind terribly if I borrowed Lord Livingston? The girls and I need his expertise on botany to end our debate.”

“Not at all,” Richard answered, grinning at her.

And he meant it because he was not sure he could tolerate one more minute of seeing the man’s face without throwing a punch.

He watched the Viscountess lead him over to where Catherine and Emmy were chatting animatedly. He took in how pale and muted Catherine looked. Even though she seemed excited talking to his sister, he could spot the exhaustion in her posture.

Guilt ate at him as he wondered if perhaps he was to blame for the sudden illness that

made her skip the past few Society events.

His mother walked up to him without him noticing, and by the time he did, she had followed his gaze and smiled knowingly at him.

“I know this isn’t the right time to bring this up, but I think it is necessary before you strangle that ignorant man.”

“What are you talking about?” he asked, feigning ignorance.

She shook her head and laughed softly. “You forget I gave birth to you and raised you in your formative years. I know all your tells, my darling boy.” She laughed, ruffling his hair.

Richard wrinkled his nose at the gesture, but instead of red-hot anger, he felt an ember of the emotion. If anything, he felt comforted by her.

“I think it’s time you finally told the poor girl how you feel about her,” she added suddenly, startling him.

“I already told you?—”

“Yes, I have heard your reservations, but have you ever stopped to think that your having those reservations shows that you might actually care for her way more than you let on? It takes a selfless and loving person to try to avoid hurting someone else.”

“I do care for her, and I do not want to hurt her, but that cannot mean I love her,” he argued. “I cannot come to love her.”

“You’re right.” His mother nodded, smiling at him. “You cannot come to love her because you already do.”

A frown creased his forehead at her logic.

He did not love Catherine. How could he? He did not even know what love was.

“I do not.”

“You are willing to put her happiness above your own, and you actually do care more than you let on,” she continued. “I do believe that is what love is. Selflessness. Consideration. Protectiveness. Desire.”

The last word prompted him to look over at Catherine again, and the thought of Lord Livingston touching her sent a surge of anger through him.

The Viscount did not deserve to see how beautiful Catherine looked when she climaxed. For all Richard knew, the man wouldn't care about her needs, and she might never experience bliss again.

A woman as passionate as Catherine needed a man who knew how to stoke her fires and not extinguish them.

“I feel if I had come a second later than I did, Lord Livingston would have been in need of a doctor if your glare is anything to go by.” The Dowager Duchess laughed. “Tell her how you feel, Son. The worst thing she could say is no.”

Her words echoed in his mind. He had never considered the possibility that Catherine could actually reject him, and now that the idea had been planted in his mind, he wondered.

“How?” he sighed. “Livingston's circling her like a hawk.”

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“I have a plan.” His mother smiled. “Do you trust me?”

He shook his head, causing her to roll her eyes.

“Follow my lead.”

That was all the warning she gave him before she fell to the ground in a dead faint.

“Mother,” he called softly at first, and then he went down on one knee to check her, shaking her softly. “Mother!”

His call was a little louder now and had attracted the attention of the other members of their party.

The Dowager Duchess opened one eye and winked at him, before closing her eye when the others reached them.

“What happened?” Lady Mowbray asked.

“Mother!” Emmy cried.

“We were just talking when she fainted,” Richard explained, trying for a worried voice.

Was this really what his mother had in mind?

Lord Livingston was still firmly by Catherine’s side.

“Does anyone have smelling salts?” Lady Mowbray asked, rummaging through her reticule.

Catherine searched hers and gave a cry of frustration when she couldn’t find any.

“There should be one in the carriage,” Emmy suggested.

Richard lifted his mother into his arms and turned to them. “Don’t worry, Lady Mowbray, Emmy and I can take care of her,” he said, finally catching on to the plan his sister and the two women were hatching.

“Cathy, please come with us,” Emmy begged.

“I don’t think I’m needed,” Catherine argued, trying not to meet his eyes.

Richard had already begun walking so he wouldn’t betray his amusement at the entire situation as well as the anxiety that coursed through him at the thought that their plan might fail if she remained as determined as she was to avoid him.

“What if she doesn’t come?” he asked his mother, who had started giggling in his arms.

Did she not realize her dress weighed a ton? If she kept up with her laughter, both of them might end up on the floor.

He heaved and lifted her properly, giving her a stern glare that silenced her.

“Have faith,” she answered, winking at him and then resuming her act.

He shook his head and continued walking. By the time they were less than three feet from the carriage, his mother decided to wake up dramatically.

“Quick. Get in the carriage,” she hissed, all but pushing him inside.

While inside, his heart pounded an unsteady rhythm as he waited with bated breath for Catherine to arrive. He tried to come up with a speech, but words failed him.

Richard did not want to trap her in a marriage that might leave her unhappy, but at the same time, he wanted her desperately. He couldn't stomach the thought of another man calling her his. He did not want to see her in another man's arms.

But...

“Oh, Your Grace, you are well.”

Her voice pulled him out of his thoughts.

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He moved to the door and waited with bated breath as their plan unfolded.

“Yes, Miss Burlow,” his mother answered.

“Mother, where is Richard?” he heard Emmy ask.

“Oh, I sent him back to pick up my reticule,” the Dowager Duchess answered.

He heard Catherine’s audible sigh of relief and smiled to himself. She would be making a different sound soon, and it would delight him greatly.

“Alright.”

“Catherine, would you be a dear and fetch my smelling salts from the carriage? I’m starting to feel a bit dizzy again.”

“Alright.”

The door opened, and before Catherine could put her foot on the step, Richard’s hand shot out and pulled her inside. The driver, already informed of the plan, whipped the horses into motion so she would have no choice but to sit still.

“Richard, what in the bloody hell is wrong with you?” she scolded. “You gave me a fright.”

Richard laughed when he saw the angry flush on her neck and cheeks and the scowl on her face. He’d told her once how much he liked the look on her, and indeed it was

by far his favorite look on her.

God, he was crazy for this woman.

It was about time he told her.

Chapter Twenty

“Richard, what in the bloody hell is wrong with you?” Catherine scolded. “You gave me a fright.”

She watched the annoying man laugh, her ire growing with each minute. But his laughter only seemed to grow louder, till he was slapping his thigh.

When he finally calmed down, he wiped a stray tear from his eye and gave her that annoying smile that did terrible things to her insides.

“I cannot believe you fell for my mother’s trick.” He laughed again.

“How was I to know that her fainting was just a trick?” she scoffed.

She was definitely going to give her mother a piece of her mind when she got home. But for now, she’d face the man she had been actively avoiding for weeks.

“They did play a good charade.” Richard laughed again, but seeing the scowl on her face, he stopped. “I am sorry, Catherine. We shouldn’t have played such a prank on you, but it was the only way they could get us to talk.”

“They couldn’t have just asked me?” she argued, even though she knew full well she would have disagreed vehemently.

“Would you have come?” he retorted with a raised eyebrow.

She turned away from him with a stubborn set of her jaw.

“Exactly,” he said. “I already know how stubbornly you would have refused. They all did. Well, except Lord Livingston, of course. I’m sure he’s cursing me furiously now.”

“Why are you doing this?” she asked angrily. “I was perfectly fine. I had adjusted to... not seeing you. What do you want from me?”

“Catherine, it’s?—”

“No, Richard.” She shook her head. “You told me to stay away from Emmy and you, and I did. I was finally happy. Lord Livingston was going to propose. This little stunt of yours could ruin that.”

“And it would be a good thing, too!” he yelled.

She flinched back in shock, her eyes wide with fear.

Shite.

She had the same look in her eyes as on the last night he'd seen her.

“Cathy, I’m sorry,” he started. “I shouldn’t have lost my temper with you like that, but you don’t know what that... I am sorry for yelling at you and for calling you a bad influence. You are none of those things. It was not fair to accuse you of something you had no part in...”

“Richard, it is fine. I forgave you long ago,” she said, trying to stop him.

She had not expected such a profuse apology from him, and even though she'd desired it, now that he was apologizing, she did not know how to feel. She had never seen him this way. Now that she was sitting so close to him, she could see the dark circles underneath his eyes—he had not been sleeping well either.

She did not deign to think she was the reason for his sleepless nights, but a tiny bit of her hoped that he had been as tortured as she was.

Her heart still hurt as she looked him over, taking in his rugged beauty, knowing that even if he did care somewhat for her, he would never be hers because he wouldn't let himself be with her.

She could understand his reasons and respected them.

“No, Cathy. I need to say this.”

She nodded and let him continue, even though she'd already forgiven him. Even if she had wanted to hate him, she couldn't bring herself to. It just was not possible where Richard was concerned.

He had somehow imprinted himself on her heart and mind so deeply that he haunted her waking and sleeping hours.

She had hoped that marrying Lord Livingston would distract her from her lingering feelings for Richard and that perhaps, with time, she may even grow to love him, but sitting with Richard now, breathing in his sandalwood cologne and watching his lips move as he spoke, she knew there was no helping it.

These feelings weren't leaving her anytime soon.

"I shouldn't have said those things to you. You weren't to blame for Emmy's decision, and even then, my anger was not directed at you but more at myself for being a coward who couldn't face his past," he told her, taking her hand in his. "You have been more than a friend to Emmy. You have been the sister she has always wanted. I should be thanking you for being so brave where I have been so afraid."

His words were so beautiful that they left her speechless. How was anyone to respond to such a well-worded apology? It was obvious he had given serious thought to his actions, and she appreciated it.

"I have already forgiven you," Catherine said once she found her voice.

He nodded, and they settled into an uncomfortable silence she wondered how to fill.

"I really don't think you should marry Lord Livingston," he declared suddenly.

"What?" she blurted out, turning to him.

“I don’t think you should marry Lord Livingston,” he repeated in a serious tone. “I don’t think he is right for you.”

“And you are the perfect judge of that for what reason?” she asked, folding her arms.

He really did know how to take her from happy to angry in less than a second, but he really did have audacity in abundance.

“I know men, and I know him,” he argued, a deep frown on his face. “He cannot make you happy.”

She sighed, exasperated at his insistence on telling her who she could and could not marry.

“You do not know that,” she protested. “He makes me very happy.”

“Oh, really?” he asked mockingly, folding his arms. “Enlighten me then.”

She frowned and looked away, trying to pull up the mental list she had made to rationalize how Lord Livingston was a much better choice than Richard.

“He is funny...”

“You’ll marry a man because he is funny?” Richard scoffed.

“Yes, I will,” she answered stubbornly. “People have married for less, mind you.”

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He raised his hands in mock surrender. "I'll concede that point." He nodded. "Do go on with his list of charms."

She stuck her tongue out at him for using her love for well-written lists against her. She was slightly flattered that he remembered, but she pushed the thought aside and continued.

"He and I share a common love of botany, so we'll have a lot to discuss," she added.

"Almost every young man in England is into botany these days. They literally have nothing else to do with their time except drink or visit brothels."

She raised an eyebrow at his comment.

"Sorry. Do go on. I won't interrupt again."

"I surely hope so," she bit out. "He is a good listener and doesn't treat me like I cannot have opinions just because I am a woman."

Richard nodded in understanding, and she knew he wanted to make a snide remark but refrained from doing so because he had already given her his word.

Annoying man.

"Best of all, he seems to really like me and isn't one to delay letting a woman know his intentions towards her. He is not afraid to let me know of his feelings for me," she added.

Catherine looked at him purposefully at that last point, feeling her anger rise again. Why did she have to defend her choice of spouse to this man, who cared nothing for her?

“Those are valid points, but trust me when I say he doesn’t care for you the way you think he does. He?—”

“You cannot possibly know that,” she argued, shaking her head.

“I do know it to be true,” he insisted. “He told me so himself. He is only marrying you to get back at me.”

She scoffed and gave a mocking laugh. He really was so full of himself.

“Not everything revolves around you, Your Grace,” she spat. “How can you say something so mean? I know you don’t care for me, but for the sake of the short friendship we had, couldn’t you wish me happiness?”

“I’m trying to save you from a lifetime of sorrow, Catherine. And I...” He heaved a deep sigh, rubbing a hand over his face. “I do care for you. More than you could imagine. I?—”

“You cannot say you care for me now. You do not have that right. Not after you spent so long acting as though it was nothing more than a flu that would pass with time.”

“Catherine, I have never experienced anything as all-consuming as this.” He sighed, exasperated. “You have somehow rendered my fears of marriage baseless, and for the first time, I find myself hoping, wanting something. Wanting to make someone other than myself and my sister happy. I have no reason to lie to you, Cathy.”

Tears filled her eyes, turning her vision blurry. She wanted to believe him, wanted to

throw herself into his arms now that he was finally admitting that he did have feelings for her, but she did not think that he would be confessing that if he did not see Lord Livingston as a threat.

“How am I supposed to believe you, Richard?” she asked in a small voice as a lone tear fell. “You waited until Lord Livingston was so close to proposing to decide. I cannot trust that your feelings are as you say they are.”

He took her hands in his, shocking her, his blue eyes glittering intensely.

“I do understand your reservations, but... I cannot do anything to prove my sincerity, but I do promise that these feelings aren’t based on jealousy,” he explained. “I have talked to my sister and mother, and they’ve helped me understand that the reason I cannot get you out of my head night and day is that I’m hopelessly in love with you.”

Catherine’s head snapped up to his, her eyes going wide at his confession. His face revealed his vulnerability in admitting that.

Not one to use people’s feelings against them, she shook her head. “I don’t understand. You... you love me?”

The words were too hard to believe even though they’d come from her mouth.

“Yes, Cathy mine.” He laughed. “I do love you. I spent so long trying to deny it, but with each glare you shot me and every challenging tilt of your chin, you gradually wormed your way into my heart. I have never wanted to be with anyone as much as I have wanted to be with you. These past two weeks have been one sleepless night after another. My dreams are plagued with memories of you lying on my desk, and I want to make those dreams come true for the rest of my life if you will have me.”

Catherine gasped just as the carriage came to a stop. She recognized they’d just

stopped outside his townhouse.

“What are you asking, Richard?” she asked, even though she had understood him.

“I am asking you to marry me, Catherine.” He smiled, looking unsure for the first time ever. “If you wouldn’t mind the extra work of teaching me to love you the way you deserve every day.”

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She laughed and flung herself into his arms as happy tears escaped her eyes and ran down her cheeks.

“Yes, I’ll marry you!” she cried. “I love you, too.”

He laughed and hugged her fiercely. When she finally calmed down, she realized she was all but straddling him.

“Oh. I...” she trailed off, trying to climb off him, but he just gave her a naughty smile and pulled her closer. “Richard, we can’t. We’re in the street. Anyone could see us.”

Any minute now, a helpful footman could open the door and catch them in a compromising position.

“Let them.” Richard smiled, leaning closer. “We’re getting married, after all. They will only help speed up the process.”

She giggled despite herself, surprising them both by placing a chaste kiss on his lip.

“We really are getting married?” she asked shyly.

He pulled her close and took her lips in a deep kiss that had her panting. It was one of those kisses that were full of dark promises, and she wondered if he’d fulfill them right then.

Her hands went into his hair, and she let out a moan when his hands pulled her even closer. Her groaned against her mouth, and she decided it was the best sound she had

ever heard.

“Richard...” she begged, not knowing what for. “Please.”

Her words seemed to snap him into awareness. He opened the door, took her hand, and led through his house past gaping servants, and finally to his chambers.

Catherine did not have time to appreciate the decor because he was on her with his hands and lips, and she couldn't complain.

He touched her purposefully, his hands undoing the stays of her dress and undergarments till she was fully naked before him. She lifted her hands to cover herself, but he stopped her.

“You are mine now, Catherine,” he told her, palming one of her breasts. “I have a right to see you as you are now. You would not deny your husband his rights, would you?”

She gave him a lopsided smile that visibly stunned him.

“You're not my husband yet, Your Grace,” she pointed out, burying a hand in his hair. “And I believe marriage also means I have a right to your body. Would you deny your wife her pleasure?”

He groaned and pulled her to him, kissing her deeply.

“Have I said I love you yet?” he groaned against her lips. “You complement me beautifully.”

She smiled as she watched him undress, each piece of fabric falling off his body making her aware that she was about to embark on a journey with him that would

make or break her, but she was not afraid. He had kept his word to her from the start, and she knew he would keep his promises to her.

When he led her to the bed and lay atop her, his eyes shone with admiration and what she now knew to be love.

“You are so beautiful, Catherine mine,” he murmured.

“You are too, Richard,” she told him, running a hand over his powerful shoulders and arms.

He kissed her deep and slow and made her see the stars with his tongue and fingers, climbing over her again once she came to herself.

“Are you afraid?” he asked her as he guided himself to her entrance.

She looked into his eyes, seeing their future clearly in the cerulean depths, and shook her head. “With you? Never.”

“This might hurt a bit,” he warned.

“I trust you,” she told him, and she meant it.

Richard had been a confidante from the beginning of their friendship and had kept his word to her at every turn.

He gave her a look acknowledging her trust in him and then claimed her in one thrust. Her body shook at the unfamiliar fullness, but he was right there with her, soothing her into pleasure with sweet words.

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“I am well, Richard,” she whispered once the pain subsided. “Make me feel good.”

“God, you’re perfect,” he groaned, laughing into her hair.

She laughed with him, which then turned into a moan when he started moving.

“You’re absolutely perfect,” he told her, groaning as he thrust in and out of her, slowly at first and then picking up speed. “I love you, Cathy mine.”

“I love you too, Richard.”

Catherine was sure their cries could be heard by the entire household, but he seemed not to care, so she did not hold back either.

When Richard collapsed on top of her, she sighed, loving his weight atop her. But all too soon, he rolled onto his side, pulling her to lie on his chest. His heart was beating as fast as hers, his breathing still labored.

Catherine let her eyes roam over his chamber, admiring the masculinity of the decor.

“That is a really exquisite rug,” she noted, and he laughed so loudly that she could feel the vibrations in her chest.

“You are an extremely odd woman.”

“But you love me anyway?”

“I wouldn’t have you any other way.”

Epilogue

THREE MONTHS LATER

“Oh, Cathy, you look so beautiful!” Lily cried when the final flower was pinned in Catherine’s hair.

Catherine gave her a watery smile. She indeed looked a vision in the beautiful pale green lace dress that had been commissioned for the wedding. Her hair had been styled and pinned in a mass of curls she hoped she did not ruin when it was time to dance.

“Indeed.” Her mother smiled, her eyes also filled with tears.

At the sight, her own tears fell.

“Oh, Mother,” Catherine cried, hugging her.

“My darling girl,” her mother said against her shoulder, “you make such a beautiful bride.”

They cried for a few minutes before realizing they were running late. Their faces had to be redone, and they had received stern looks from the maids.

“What if he changes his mind?” Catherine asked. “What if I’m making a mistake? How do I know he’s the one, Mother? I am scared that we might get tired of each other too early and fight all the time...”

“Are you saying that because of your father and I?” the Viscountess asked, looking

alarmed.

Catherine tried to hide her guilt, but she couldn't hide it quickly enough from her mother, who had a hurt look on her face.

“Mother, I didn't mean to?—”

“I do understand that your father and I haven't been the best examples, but I believe we have done our best to show you that even though we fight a lot, we do love each other very much,” the Viscountess interrupted her. “It might be hard to believe that, but it is true. Richard is a good man, and I have seen you two interact over the years. You're different when you're with him. He makes you laugh, he makes you smile, he makes you drop that mask you hide behind, and he makes you free. You're not even that free with your own family. He makes you put down those walls you have hidden behind for so long. He brings out the best parts of you, my dear, and that is why your father and I agreed to the marriage.”

“But do we have to fight?”

“Fighting doesn't mean anything, Cathy. Or rather, fighting doesn't mean you don't love each other. You won't always see eye to eye, but love is found in choosing each other even after a fight,” the Viscountess explained.

“That are many things that we don't agree on and that we might never agree on. I just really want to know, how do I know that he's the one for me?”

“There isn't just one answer to that question, Cathy. I had the same experience with your father. We were childhood friends who never agreed on anything. We never saw eye to eye, and then one day, my mother jokingly said that we would eventually get married. Even though I tried to ignore it, I started to see the good sides of him, and then even the bad began to pale in comparison to who I knew him to be. A loyal

friend who stood by me despite all my shortcomings. The fact that Richard chose you above all else, the fact that he was willing to see you married to someone else to protect you from him are signs that he is a good man. He is after your happiness, not even his own. Those are all the signs you need, my darling.”

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“Oh, Mother, I will miss you terribly.”

“No, you won’t.” The Viscountess laughed. “Maybe not for the next few weeks. You’ll be too busy being a married woman and enjoying marital bliss.”

She shot her a knowing look, which Catherine pretended not to see even though a blush crept up her neck and cheeks.

The night before, they’d had the talk, and she couldn’t bring herself to tell her mother that Richard had given her all the education she could possibly need and had said he would continue to do so.

“What is marital bliss, Mother?” Lily asked innocently.

“You will know in due time.” The Viscountess laughed. “Now I believe we’ve kept the entire house waiting. Come, let’s go downstairs.”

The Viscount’s eyes filled with tears when Catherine descended the stairs, and Hugh smiled and said she was the prettiest bride he had ever seen. She smiled and kissed his cheek, which he wiped furiously.

“I hear Miss Pembroke is coming today,” she teased when their parents were out of earshot.

His latest crush was a pretty brunette with such good manners that Catherine hoped his infatuation with her would last. Her brother was the picky sort, even worse than her, and looked for perfection everywhere. She knew he would be a pain in the future.

“Are we all ready?” their father asked.

“Indeed,” their mother answered.

The closer they got to the church, the harder Catherine’s heart pounded in her chest, both in anticipation and fear.

Her mother and siblings went inside, and soon it was just her and her father.

“Are you well, Cathy?” he asked, holding her hand.

Her father wasn’t one to ask questions like that often because he usually kept to his work. Her mother was the only person who could bring him out of his shell. It was a marvel how Catherine was able to do it.

“I am, Father,” she answered, smiling at him. “Thank you.”

He smiled back at her. “I know I haven’t really spent time with you to ask you anything about your relationship with Richard, but do you think he’ll make you happy?”

Happy?

Catherine thought back to all of her and Richard’s interactions and smiled. Hewouldmake her happy.

“Yes, Father,” she answered.

“Good.” The Viscount nodded. “If you don’t want to go through with this marriage, you know you’ll have mine and your mother’s support.”

“I want to do this.”

He nodded, and the church doors opened. She took a steadying breath and focused on putting one leg in front of the other.

She saw the faces of friends and family surrounding her but still felt fear until her eyes landed on Richard. He looked so handsome that her heart swelled with love for him.

He was hers now. Well and truly hers.

“What if she changes her mind?” Richard asked, sighing deeply. He had been pacing the chapel’s entrance since they had arrived, and he couldn’t seem to stop.

Emmeline and Simon watched him with concerned looks, seeming to communicate with their eyes.

He paused for a moment, observing the two of them, and shook his head, coughing when their silent discussion lasted longer than his patience could take.

“Sorry, Brother,” Emmy mumbled, blushing. “Did you ask a question?”

“Is there something you two want to tell me?” he asked, folding his arms across his chest.

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It would be the oddest thing if somehow his best friend and sister had fallen for each other. He would be against it, staunchly, because he knew Simon was a rake of the highest order. He did not need anyone risking his sister's virtue.

But he would also be thoroughly perplexed because they had never gotten along from their first encounter, when Emmy had been ten and Simon had come for a visit.

She had screamed at him and run away, crying, and they had been at each other's throats since then. It would be something if they eventually saw past their differences.

"Nothing, Brother," Emmy answered, shaking her head earnestly.

Simon remained silent, so Richard made a mental note to watch them closely. The man was normally talkative, so his silence meant something fishy was afoot.

Guests started arriving, so he put aside his anxiety. He greeted the lords and ladies of the ton, including their daughters, who were weeping at the fact that he was no longer on the marriage mart.

When they were all seated and it was time for the bride to enter, his heart started pounding in his chest, and the moment he saw her, his breath caught in his throat.

She was a vision in the dress she'd finally chosen after almost two months of indecision. The wedding planning had revealed an indecisive side to her that he found endearing.

When her father gave him her hand, he nodded at him once, and the man patted his

hand. They had found shared interests in certain investments and had been working quite closely with each other since Catherine introduced them.

When saying his vows, Richard looked into her eyes, knowing he meant every word, and when it was finally time to kiss her, he did so chastely, knowing if he went any further, his body would embarrass him with his lust for her, which had only burned hotter as she had sworn him to wait until after the wedding to touch her again.

Catherine stared up at him, her cheeks and neck a pretty red as everyone cheered.

The ball was grand, and he watched his sister and Simon dance and laugh. He shook his head, wanting to see what could come out of this new development.

“Who is that gentleman with Emmy?” Catherine asked from beside him.

“Lord Talbot, my best friend,” he answered.

“They look happy,” she noted, smiling.

What was it with married women and matchmaking?

She was only just newly married, and she already had started matchmaking.

“There is nothing there.” Richard shook his head. “They hate each other.”

Just then, Emmy laughed at something Simon said and slapped his arm.

Catherine shot Richard a smirk that had him frowning. She laughed and squeezed his arm.

“Come, husband,” she said, rising from her seat. “Make me happy.”

Richard took her hand and practically dragged her to their chambers. She laughed at the urgency in his steps and quickened her pace.

He looked back at her and wondered what he had done to deserve such perfection in his life. She smiled at him, her eyes shining with love and trust.

He swore to himself that he would do everything in his power to keep that look in her eyes.

The End?