



# Her Bear of a Duke

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**Category:** Romance, Historical

**Description:** "You kissed a stranger in the dark, my lady. Did you think I would never find you again?"

Dorothy Godwin shares a stolen moment with a stranger, desperate for just one taste of freedom. And she never expected to see him again. Until he arrives the next day, introduced as her betrothed... Morgan Lockheart never planned to marry. But with his carefully guarded world on the verge of exposure, a convenient marriage becomes the perfect solution. And Dorothy, the perfect bride. He tells himself it's only duty. But from the moment she steps into his life, every vow he's ever made begins to unravel. And all he can think about... is one last kiss.

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

**Total Pages (Source):** 93

## CHAPTER 1

"Now, Dorothy," her father said in a low voice as they traveled, "you must remember what we told you. Your betrothed will be here tonight, and we do not want any mishaps."

"We will not have any mishaps," her mother corrected.

Dorothy nodded, but it was not as though she was in any position to argue about it.

"An animal theme, can you believe it?" her father, Connor Godwin the Earl of Bolton, grumbled to himself in the carriage. "Must all of high society lower themselves to such things as this?"

"It is only some fun," her mother, Louisa, sighed, though she did not seem too pleased with her costume either. "Besides, it is not as though anyone will know who we are."

"Of course they will. Who else in the ton will be accompanied by such a—"

He had cut himself off, but Dorothy knew what he was going to say. He was already looking directly at her.

The first ball of the season was a masquerade one. It gave all the young ladies equal opportunity to meet a gentleman without being judged too harshly on her appearance. Dorothy would have appreciated such a chance, but she realized as she smoothed her skirts that it might well not have helped in the end. A mask could not cover her fuller

figure, which she had decided to cover in silvery fabric. It had made the most sense, given the animal that had chosen for her by her family.

It had been because of her stature that she had been given a small woodland creature.

Mercifully, the carriage came to a halt and they fixed their masks. Her parents had chosen a tiger and a panther, two very large cats that Dorothy was ashamed to admit she would have loved to approach if faced with one, and they had made her a mouse. It was quite fitting, she thought, given how they so enjoyed hunting her. It was because she was so quiet, they said.

And so small and round, she had heard muttered immediately after.

As they walked toward the household, Dorothy decided that she would not be as quiet as her costume alluded to. She had far too many questions and not at all enough answers.

"How will I know who he is?" she asked. "It will be impossible, especially when you have not even told me who he is yet."

"It would have been difficult, yes," her father replied bluntly, "if we had not arranged for a signal to be given."

Dorothy could not possibly fathom the sort of signal that would have worked, but she knew better than to question her parents. Fortunately, until the poor gentleman was found, she could spend her evening in the way she liked to.

It was also very fortunate that her friends made themselves heard before they were seen.

She could hear the squabbling from the other side of the ballroom and she recognized

Cecilia's voice in an instant. It was the usual affair; a gentleman had asked her to dance and she had inevitably mocked him, not at all interested in parading herself around. Dorothy found them and took a moment to look at what they had decided on. They had, for the most part, been more fortunate than she had been, and they were at least given the opportunity to truly express themselves, and that was precisely what they had done.

Cecilia was wearing a deep burned orange gown, her mask resembling a fox. She had quite foxlike features, too, Dorothy thought, and would have been so beautiful if she did not wear a permanent scowl. Beatrice was a doe, and was wearing a gown of a chocolate color. Together, they were quite autumnal, and Dorothy almost did not wish to ruin the way they looked together.

Almost.

She quickly made her way to them, taking her place beside Beatrice as Cecilia finished what she had unquestionably started.

"Good evening," Beatrice whispered as they listened. "Are you well?"

"Do I seem otherwise?"

"No, although I wouldn't have been able to see your face if there was something wrong. There is the matter of your...situation, though."

"Yes," she replied, biting her lip. "The suitor."

"Dot, I know that this has all made you unhappy, but you must begin calling him what he truly is now. He is more than a suitor."

"I know he is, but until I have met him I cannot truly believe that he is my betrothed."

"You have a ring, though."

Dorothy looked down at her hand, the large diamond sparkling in the candlelight. She should have felt blissful happiness looking at it, as it suggested that she would be very well taken care of, but all she felt was shame.

"He will not want to be my husband," she sighed. "I have been out in society for three years now, and if he did not notice me then of his own accord, then why would he have any interest now?"

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"It isn't as though you liked to be noticed. Come now, you know as well as I do that you are an interesting young lady."

Dorothy shook her head. It had always been her friends that were interesting. Beatrice had a passion for baking, Cecilia was fierce and outspoken, and Emma had always been the most loyal person Dorothy had ever known.

"There is nothing notable about me, aside from the putrid colors Eleanor insists I wear."

"I cannot believe that your parents allow her to do that. They have not seen her in years, now."

"Yes, well, under threat of her telling the town where she was truly married, they do not have much of a choice. I wish I knew why she was so determined to do that to me."

"Perhaps it is so that you push against it. You should, by the way."

At last, Cecilia finished with the unfortunate young man and turned back to them, greeting Dorothy warmly.

"Oh, Dot, can you believe it?" she sighed wistfully. "You shall be a wife within the month."

"Do not pretend you are pleased with that," Dorothy replied, but she couldn't help but smile at how hard her friend was trying. "You are the first to say that marriage is the end of a lady's life."

"Perhaps, but I will admit that my way of thinking has changed since Emma became a duchess. She has such influence now, and so much power. Can you imagine how wonderful that must be?"

"I can imagine, and likely nothing more. If my parents have chosen my husband, they will have simply taken the first gentleman that offered, and with how I am it is likely that it will be some physician that they have deemed good enough."

"You do not know that," Beatrice assured her. "Your parents would never have allowed you to have a match that they did not think would benefit them, after all."

Dorothy had to laugh at that.

"Anyway," Cecilia continued, "have either of you heard who is in attendance tonight?"

The two of them looked at one another, much to their friend's disappointment.

"I was hoping you might somehow know more than me," she huffed. "All I have heard is that there is a reclusive duke that is supposed to attend tonight. The hosts, the Lowthers, had sent an invitation to all members of the ton, including those that do not partake in these things, and they received a response from him. They refuse to say who he is, though, as it might have made him less inclined to come. It is believed that he is only attending because of the masks."

Dorothy raised her hand tentatively, toying with her own mask between her fingers. She suddenly felt unwell at the thought of people being around her and her not knowing who any of them were. She felt a sense of unease, as though she were being watched, and the hairs on the back of her neck rose.

"Surprise!" came a voice behind her, startling her greatly.

She turned sharply, only to instantly feel relief. It was none other than Emma and her husband Levi. Emma was wearing a rabbit mask, her husband a wolf.

"Oh!" she gasped. "Emma, what are you doing here? You are supposed to be resting."

All three ladies looked at their friend carefully. She was with child, and from what she had disclosed it had not been the easiest thing to handle. She had been quite unwell in the mornings, and had not been able to stand for long periods of time.

"I was feeling well today," she explained, "and though we had declined the invitation we thought we might try to enter regardless and we were fortunate that our hosts allowed us in."

"You say that as though they would have refused entry to a duke and duchess."

"Well, when you put it like that," she laughed warmly.

"I see my good friend there," Levi said suddenly, looking just beyond the group. "I shall not be long."

"Feel free to be," Emma replied firmly, and he squeezed her arm before leaving.

The Duke left to see his friend, one dressed as a lion. The three ladies then turned back to their own.

"Is everything all right?" Beatrice asked.

"Of course, but with all of the complications my husband has been a little too protective of me. He seems to think I am some sickly thing when I am the same as always."



"In many ways, yes," Cecilia said uncertainly, "but if you are unwell then you must not push yourself too far. It is not good for you."

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"I know what I am and am not capable of. You mustn't worry either, especially when we truly do have a pressing matter at hand."

"Please," Dorothy groaned, "might we discuss anything else? Anything at all? I cannot stand this."

"You must be prepared," Emma soothed. "And you must not worry. Everything will be all right in the end. I know that better than anyone."

"You were incredibly fortunate. I do not believe that I shall be afforded such a luxury."

"And when you think that way, you are already going into your marriage miserable. It will never work like that."

Dorothy wanted to believe her friends, wanted to hope that everything would be all right and she would be happy the same way Emma was, but it had never been something that was afforded to her. She was not fortunate like her friends; she did not have a sister that cared about her like Emma did, nor the ability to declare that she did not want to marry and have such declarations heard like Cecilia, nor did she have Beatrice's youth that meant her family were not yet pressuring her. She was risking spinsterhood, and her parents were not the sort to allow that. They would not accept a black mark on their family name a second time.

"We are not asking for you to be pleased," Beatrice said gently, "but do try to see the good in it. It might not be the perfect match you have dreamed of, but such a thing does not exist. Even Emma, as happy as she is, is not afraid to say that there will be

issues."

"Precisely," Emma nodded. "A marriage requires work, and as long as you both are willing to do that all will be well, even if you do not know who he is yet."

"And what if he is unwilling?"

"Then you always have a home with us," Emma promised, though Dorothy knew she could never burden her friend in such a way.

Suddenly, she heard her parents approaching. Her father took her wrist, mumbling something about them needing a word. Her friends through her pitying glances, which Dorothy hoped her parents would not see beneath the masks.

"Is everything all right?" she asked, though she knew it couldn't be anything good.

"It appears your betrothed has changed his mind, and will not be attending tonight."

Dorothy struggled to hide her contentment with that. It meant she would not meet him until their wedding, but it at least gave her another night of freedom.

"I do not know why I expected anything more," her mother sighed, addressing her husband. "Why would a gentleman go out of his way to attend an event for her?"

"He had given us his word, so I do not know why he would do this, but it is through no fault of ours."

"Yes," Dorothy nodded, hoping to end her time with them sooner rather than later. "It is perhaps nobody's fault."

"No, I said it is not the fault of your mother and me. If you had been known as a

better prize, then he would have come at any cost."

"But, Father, I—"

"No, Dorothy. What do you expect me to say? I attended this event and allowed you to come because it was for the betterment of your match. If you do not try harder, then what is it all for?"

Dorothy did not know how to make them see that she had no control over a gentleman attending a ball, as it did not matter what she said. Somehow, they would find a way to blame everything on her regardless.

Her mother looked at her with more pity, but she did not want it. It was her father that used cruel words, but it was not as though her mother ever even tried to defend her. She stood back and allowed it, and that hurt even more.

Her father stormed away, leaving Dorothy alone with her mother. The pity was still in her eyes, but she could not quite face her. Dorothy hoped that her mother felt guilty about what she was doing, though she was not so certain that it was the case.

"I know this is not what you want," she mumbled. "I know that you have always hoped to find a match for yourself. That is what I wanted for you. It is what your father wanted too, but you must understand that we have been left with no other choice. This is how it must be."

"Because of Eleanor?" she asked.

"Partly, but also because we must make our way in society. We have no heir, and with your sister gone it is vital that we have our affairs in order before anything should happen. You must be married, and you must help our family name. The Lord knows that your sister will never do that."

Her older sister Eleanor hardly ever spoke with them, but she always made an effort to assist with Dorothy's wardrobe. Their parents had allowed it, too, for Eleanor had made her own match and disappeared into the Scottish Highlands with her Baron years prior. They were not best pleased with her for choosing a man of such low rank, nor for causing the family such scandal by vanishing, but there was not much that could be done when she had already escaped to Gretna Green and then beyond.

"I need a moment," she whispered, and left the ballroom, and then the household altogether.

## CHAPTER 2

Dorothy held herself together as she left, though she did not know how.

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The coldness of the night air against her skin soothed her a little, but all that she could think about was how desperately her family needed her to succeed. Her father blamed all three ladies in his life; his wife never gave him an heir, his oldest daughter brought shame on the household, and his youngest... Well, she had never done anything that he could be proud of.

She was nobody of interest, she thought as she hid among the plants. They were the only things that brought her real peace. If she had been a man, and the heir that her father had always wanted so terribly, she would have been able to study botany at a university and been able to expand on her passions, but she was not. The most that she could do was read books about plants and learn about them herself. It was not an awful way to be, and she was grateful that she had at least been allowed to read, but she wanted more.

Perhaps, when she was married, she would have even that taken from her.

She had gone to the gardens for some air, and for some quiet, but the night was too silent and the air was too cold. She wrapped her hands around her arms and bowed her head into her chest, taking deep breaths. It was an unbecoming way to stand, but her mask was on and she hoped that nobody would care even if they did see her. She was vaguely aware of the fact that she was alone, but for a brief moment she was pleased with that. It was thrilling, in a way, to know that she had done something for herself in what she was quite certain was the first time in her life, rather than leaving herself at the mercy of her father.

Then she heard rustling behind her.

She had expected it to be a rabbit, or perhaps even a snake, though that that was not as likely. What she had not expected, as her head tilted up and her hand flew to her bosom, was an enormous bear.

Startled, she froze in place and had no choice but to look at what was before her. Fortunately, before she gained the capacity to scream, she saw that it had only been a trick of the light. In the darkness, the figure had seemed to be a beast, but now that she was truly looking she saw that it was simply a very large man, wearing a brown suit and a bear mask.

She felt like such a fool.

Laughing nervously, she took a moment to catch her breath, all the while eyeing the man carefully.

"My apologies," he said in a deep voice. "I did not mean to scare you."

"Then why on Earth did you come through a bush like that?"

"I... I do not have a decent response to that."

"Surely there was something that made you do it? Gentlemen do not typically make appearances using such means, as far as I am aware."

"No, they do not."

They fell into silence for a moment, and she truly studied him. He was taller than any man she had ever seen, and broader and more muscular than was liked in polite society. She wondered if he was not a member of the ton at all, and was using the event as a way to cause trouble. In a way, she hoped that he was.

"I was avoiding someone," he explained suddenly.

"Dare I ask who?"

"You may ask, but I doubt that I can tell you."

"Whyever not? I do not know who you are, nor do you know who I am, and so what is the harm?"

He chuckled, a dark and gravelly sound, and he shook his head.

"If you must know, there are people in there that would very much like to find me. I had hoped that with this disguise I could avoid such a dreadful fate, but it appears that other men do not look like me."

"No," she whispered, "no, they do not."

Though she could not see his face, she swore that he was grinning.

"And why are you out here?" he asked.

Dorothy bit her lip. She did not want to answer, but it was not as though she could keep her tongue held when she had pressed him in the first place.

"I cannot say," she replied sheepishly.

"Come, now, that is hardly fair," he said gently, taking a step toward her. "You cannot expect me to divulge such private information and receive nothing in return."

Her heart pounded just looking at him. He was enormous, and he towered over her in a way that should have frightened her but instead only served to excite. She was alone



with a man in the dark, and anyone could have seen them at any moment and she would have been ruined, a lifetime of building a reputation gone in an instant.

It was precisely what she wanted.

She sighed, knowing that she never had been one to flirt. She had never tried, as she knew it would only lead to embarrassment. There was no use in making an attempt.

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"Why do you sigh?" he asked.

"Because I am running out of hope," she replied, laughing emptily. "I have never been able to decide anything for myself, and now my life is to be over before it has truly begun."

"Why is that?"

"Because my father hates me."

She did not want to tell him the truth of the matter, but that was the crux of it.

"And that is why you are out here?"

"Yes, I— I needed a moment to myself."

"And I am intruding on that. Is that it?"

"Yes. No. Oh, I do not know. I do not know anything. I have never been any good at thinking. That is probably why nobody has ever let me. I simply wish that I could have done something with my life. Do you know what I mean? Of course you do not. You are a man."

"I understand more than you might think, Miss."

She looked at him, studying his frame once more. He stood tall, no trace of anything such as fear or nerves. If she had to guess, she would have said that he had been given

anything he wanted all his life, and nobody had ever dared refuse him. She knew as much, because she knew that if he wanted something from her she would not have questioned it.

"You do not understand what it is to be a young lady that will soon be married to a man you do not know. You do not know what it means to be going from one prison to another, destined to never be good enough."

"Do you truly believe you are not good enough? Has your betrothed said that?"

"No, but he will. I am yet to meet him, and I already know that he will hate me. I am not pretty, or interesting, or the perfect lady. He will loathe me entirely, and the blame is entirely mine for that."

He took another step toward her, and gently raised his hand to her face so her mask was between his finger and thumb.

"That is a pretty ring on your finger," he commented.

"Yes, it is beautiful. He must be a very wealthy man, with extraordinary expectations that I shall never meet."

"Perhaps you should let him be the judge of that?"

"I already know."

He chuckled, raising her mask slightly from her face. His cool fingertips brushed her warm cheek and sent a strange feeling to her chest. His eyes met hers, a startling shade of pale green, and suddenly her breath became staggered.

"If you could do anything," he asked, stopping where he was, "what would you do?"

"I- I would... I would very much like to learn about botany."

It was a foolish thing to say, and she felt quite ridiculous for having said it. She could have said something wild, and interesting, but she had simply talked about plants again.

"I studied botany," he replied quietly.

She froze in place. She wondered if he was toying with her, as it was not possible that she had been so fortunate as to meet someone who cared about plants as much as she did.

"At a university?"

"Indeed. My father was furious, but it hardly mattered. I thoroughly enjoyed it, and I learned a lot."

"I could only dream of that. You are very fortunate."

"I suppose I am, yes. I suspect your husband will be willing to find books for you, though. You can learn that way, though it is no comparison to having a tutor and the rest of it."

"I certainly hope so."

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"And, if that is the case, that means that you can choose to do something else that you dream of. Something reckless. You are telling me that you have no control, and that you are unable to do what you want, and so I will ask you again. If you could do anything, what would it be?"

Her heart pounded, and she longed to return to the safety of the ballroom. He was making her think dangerous thoughts, and it was too great a risk to do that. If she was ruined, and her betrothed refused to marry her because of it, she would never have been able to forgive herself.

And yet, she wanted to revel in how she was feeling. She wanted to do something awful and devilish and risk her reputation. She had only ever done what was expected of her, and it had never been enough, so what had it been for? What was the use in trying?

"I would want to be kissed," she whispered without thinking. "I would want to do something that I never would have been allowed to do, and something that terrifies me. I shall soon have every part of myself taken from me, and before that happens I would want to do one final thing for myself."

She could not believe that she was speaking so brazenly to a man. She felt like a wanton, even worse than Cecilia who was quite determined to ruin herself if anything.

At last, he moved again, removing her mask for her. She gasped, loathing the fact that he was now able to see her entirely. She had always hated how she looked, and the only reason that she had been able to hold a conversation at all was that there was that

lovely chance that they would never see one another again.

"You need not look so frightened," he whispered. "You look perfectly lovely."

Yes, if you enjoyed looking at farmgirls, she thought, though she did not argue with him.

Instead, she looked up at him and gingerly raised a hand to his mask in response. She waited for him to swat her away, to admonish her for daring to act in such a way, but he seemed to welcome it. His eyes met hers, as if he were daring her to take it off.

And so she did.

He was so incredibly handsome. His hair was black and dipped in front of his face in a way that was perhaps not in fashion but very much to her liking. He had a grin on his face that revealed perfect teeth and lit up the entirety of his face. He was undeniably the most perfect man she had ever seen, and she was to marry another, and she had to return to the ballroom before she could do anything that would jeopardize her future.

She did not know the man before her, no matter how much she might have liked to. He was a threat to her, though a beautiful threat, and she had to leave.

Despite her telling herself that, she did not make a single attempt to move away. If she were honest, she was happy there, with a stranger and engaging in improper conversation. He thought she looked lovely, her! Nobody had ever seen her that way with the exception of her friends, and even then she had not believed them; they had to tell her she was beautiful.

When he said it, though, she believed it. Her hand fell back to her side, still holding the mask. His fingers rested beneath her chin, tilting her head back to look at him.

She was growing desperate for him to say something more, as she so enjoyed the sound of his voice.

He chuckled, lowering himself so that his lips were a tantalizingly short distance from hers.

"I will not go any further," he whispered. "Ruining ladies is not something I choose to do. However, should you truly want this, I will not stop you."

The decision was hers to make, but before she could think about it at all she had already closed the gap. Her lips pressed to his and in an instant one-and-twenty years of wanting to do as she pleased tumbled out of her. She wanted to be the very opposite of who she had always been. She wanted to be desirable, interesting, worthy of something more than an arranged marriage.

They broke apart, however, and she realized that such things could only have been true for a short while. Her family was inside, waiting for her to return to them so that they could finish their evening and then return home so that they could prepare her for her wedding.

Her wedding to a man that would be none the wiser to the fact that she had ruined herself.

"I must go," she said sharply, pushing passed him and fixing her mask again.

He took her wrist, gently pulling her back.

"If you insist," he whispered. "But do cheer up, little mouse."

He let her go, and she returned to the ballroom. Mercifully, her mask covered the scarlet color that she had undoubtedly turned. She continued her evening with her

friends, who did not question where she had been and did not ask her how her conversation had been, only whether or not she was feeling all right to which she nodded and assured them that she was.

She had never thought that she would become such a skilled liar.

### CHAPTER 3

Dorothy wondered, when she awoke the following morning, if she had dreamed the entire thing.

It had been such a wonderful night once she escaped into the garden, and though she feared what was to come she couldn't help but feel a sense of pride. She had rebelled, and done something for herself and herself alone. No matter what came of her marriage, she would always have that moment. It was hers.

Her mother and father, however, were not as impressed.

"What were you doing last night?" her father demanded at breakfast. "I left you with your mother, and she came to me alone."

"I needed air," she explained. "Nothing bad happened, Father, I assure you."



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"I do not care whether or not anything happened. I care about your reputation, and how it reflects on ours. I will not be known as a man with two willful daughters, Dorothy."

"And you are not. I was outside for merely a few minutes, and then I returned to the ballroom to see my friends."

"Those friends of yours do not bring me comfort. I am pleased that within the month you will no longer see them."

"Perhaps my husband will be pleased to see me with friends?"

He sighed at her, then ate a mouthful of toast. He motioned to her mother, who cleared her throat. This meant, to Dorothy, that her father was angry and was trying to give her grace. Her mother would be far calmer than him. In a way, she was almost grateful to him.

"You are to be a married lady soon," her mother explained. "The expectations that are placed upon you will change. You must be the very picture of propriety, and disappearing at social events is anything but that."

"I understand, Mother, and I apologize. I suppose I was simply disappointed that I was unable to meet my fiancé. Though this marriage is not what I had in mind, it would have been nice to meet him."

"And you will. He made it quite clear to your father that he will not be your husband without meeting you first. We do not know, however, when that will be. We had

thought it would have been the ball, but he seemed to have other ideas."

"I do not blame him for that," her father grumbled. "A man like him will have higher expectations than a young lady that has extended absences from events."

Dorothy was no longer listening. She had tried to pay attention, but her mind continued to drift back to the night before, to the kiss that she never should have wanted. The man she had met was everything that she could have wanted; handsome, charismatic, devilish. He was precisely the sort of danger that she had craved, and thankfully it appeared that nothing bad would come from her recklessness.

After breakfast, she left for the garden. There, at least Dorothy could think about the night's events in peace. She tried to think about what was happening around them, and if there might have been anyone that had seen her unmasked and alone with a man, but she could not remember anything but the man. There had never been anyone that she had met that had captivated her so effortlessly, and part of her was saddened that she would never see him again. She would be married to another, and their one clandestine moment would have to be forgotten.

Unless, of course, she refused to forget about it. If the gentleman chose to forget about her, and she was quite certain that he had already done so, then that was his decision. She, on the other hand, would choose to remember. It was the one time she had deliberately disobeyed the rules, and she could not bring herself to regret it. She felt willful and wicked, and she only felt more and more pride the more she thought about it.

"Dorothy?" her mother called. "Dorothy, are you out here?"

"Yes Mother," she replied. "Is everything all right?"

She returned to her mother, who was looking at her with uncertainty. All at once, her

nerves came back to her and she returned to her usual state.

"Your betrothed will be visiting you this afternoon. He has sent a letter to your father explaining his absence, though I have been forbidden from reading it. He will be taking tea with us, and your father wishes to speak with you before his arrival."

She could have fallen to the ground then and there.

She did not want to speak with her father. She did not want to stand in his study and listen to him tell her about all of the ways she had failed him and how she must do better. It was a cruel reminder that she could do anything she pleased, but the day after would always come and she would always be back where she had started.

Marriage would not change that.

She nodded to her mother and made her way to the study. She hesitated before knocking, as she truly did not wish to hear what he had to say, but she knew that the sooner it began the sooner it could end. She knocked, and a gruff voice on the other side of the door instructed her to enter.

Her father was not physically the most frightening man. He was short and of average build, but from the years of torment he had given Dorothy, she had grown afraid of him. He had complete control over her and always had done, and now he was handing that control to a man he deemed able to represent their family. She did not dare imagine the sort of man that had to be.

"Mother said you wished to see me."

"Indeed," he nodded, gesturing for her to take a seat. "I want to discuss your soon to be husband with you."

"I would like that very much."

"I was wondering. Are you concerned about meeting him today?"

"A little. I shall not pretend that I am not nervous. After all, I do not know a thing about the man, and though I am certain that you have chosen well, I am hesitant to marry someone that I do not know, and who does not know me."

"I can understand that. After all, your mother and I were not a love match."

Dorothy's eyes widened. She had always assumed that her parents had a marriage born of love, though not the sort of love she would ever wanted for herself. They saw each other as equals, and as above others in society. It had made sense to Dorothy, therefore, that as they were the only people they could stand that they simply had to have been in love.

"You mustn't look so surprised," he continued. "It truly is not that strange. I needed a wife and so I spoke to your grandfather. He arranged the match and we were married. Your mother has always been grateful for that, as she did not want to be a debutante and do all of those social things."

"But how did you choose her?" she found herself asking. "Did you not know one another at all?"

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"I knew what was necessary. People talk, and from what I had heard your mother was one for social climbing. Such a thing should have been detrimental to her fortunes, but not to me. I thought that it was a trait I shared."

Dorothy agreed with that.

"What I am trying to say," he continued, as if he was struggling, "is that we men can overlook certain aspects of a lady, but not everything."

There it was, the beginning of his lecture.

"We are fortunate that your absence last night was not made known to him, given his absence, but you must try harder now. You will be a duchess, I remind you. It is imperative that you do right by this family, especially after all that has happened."

She blinked.

"A duchess? Is that to say that I shall marry a duke?"

"That is what that title would suggest, would it not? I do wish that you would try harder to understand, Dorothy."

"I do know what it suggests, but... Well, I had not expected you to find a duke that would be willing to marry me."

"Believe me, I do not know why he has decided he has agreed to it, but that is not something that we are going to question. He wishes to marry you, and so you shall."

Dorothy hardly ever had a conversation with her father that did not devolve into him telling her of her own supposed failings, but he seemed to be in high spirits after the news that her future husband would be paying a visit. She wished that he could have told her what had made the Duke want to marry her, but if he could not tell her that, then perhaps...

"I understand. Father, if I may, might you tell me what happened with Eleanor?"

His face darkened in an instant.

"I only ask because I do not wish to follow in her footsteps. Not only that, but it is possible that she might wish to see me when she learns that I am to marry a duke. It is best that I know whether or not I can see her, and if not, I should at least know why."

Her father seemed reluctant, but her reasoning was sound. Perhaps, she considered, she had a quicker wit than she gave herself credit for.

"Your sister," he began, raking a hand through his hair, "was not willing to follow my instructions. I tried, truly I did, but she never had any interest in doing what was best for our family. I had allowed her three seasons, as I did with you, and then I found her a match. She was unhappy with it, and one night she disappeared."

"To Gretna Green?"

"Precisely."

"But if she had done that, that must have meant she had found a match of her own. Did you not know?"

"Of course I knew, but that baron was not good enough for Eleanor and I will never believe otherwise. In spite of what the two of you might think, I want what is best for

you. That man had little money and a small house in Scotland. Your sister could have been so much more. I did everything I could for her, and what did I get in return? She risked ruining our family."

Dorothy tried not to pity her father, knowing how he had treated her all her life, but she could not help herself. He had tried to replicate his own marriage for them, which, while misguided, was a very honorable thing for him to have done. There was no doubt that the match he planned for Eleanor would have led to scandal when it fell through, but was it enough to never want to see one's own daughter again?

"Is that to say that you do not want me to speak to her?"

"You are no longer a child, Dorothy. You were but five-and-ten years of age when it happened, and so you will hardly remember it now, but you know what is expected of a Bolton. We act with pride. Can you truly be proud of someone that could behave so recklessly?"

Dorothy was willing to wager that her sister had not done anything much worse than she had herself, but she was never going to tell her father that.

"No, I suppose not."

"Good," he replied, leaning back in his chair. "Is there anything else you might like to know?"

"Yes. When she writes to you, telling you what the fashionable colors and fabrics are, do you ever write back?"

He did not seem too happy with that question.

"No, and I think that is for the best. I do not even know where she lives now. I

assume it is in Scotland, but who is to say? In any case, she knows where we are. Should she ever want to speak to us, I would consider it."

It had been six years since Dorothy had seen her sister, and given that Eleanor had left of her own accord and had seemingly chosen to disappear in the same way, Dorothy envied her greatly. She had not made her own decisions; she had been told what was to happen to her and she had accepted it in every way that mattered.



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"Thank you, Father," she said politely, rising to her feet. "For explaining all of this to me, but also of course for making the arrangements that you have."

"It is for the best, Dorothy, even if you do not believe me yet."

She hoped he was right.

She waited in her bedchambers until her betrothed arrived. She tried not to think about what he would look like and how he would act, but it was impossible. She invented a hundred different men, and each time they changed in her mind's eye until they had black hair and green eyes. It brought her shame to think about the man again, but she wondered if seeing her future husband would help her move past her encounter. Not forget, as she did not want to do that, but at least be able to find happiness elsewhere.

When he arrived, she took a deep breath and checked herself in the mirror a final time. She approached the drawing room slowly, trying to steady herself before entering.

She took a breath, resigning herself to whatever fate awaited her, and entered the drawing room.

Her mother and father sat on one of the blue settees, sitting perfectly upright and perhaps a little too tightly wound. She could hear the hum of polite conversation, and though she could hear a very deep voice she did not take too much notice of it.

"Ah, here she is now," her mother said brightly. "Dorothy, dear, this is Morgan

Lockheart, the Duke of Ulverston."

The Duke, her husband.

He rose from his seat, and she was taken aback by his stature, and how similar it was to the one she had seen before. Tall and muscular but not one that threatened her. Large arms that she wished would be used to protect her.

Then he turned to her, and all at once she realized just how great of a predicament she was in. His eyes were that same startlingly pale green, and his grin was mischievous.

"It is a pleasure to finally meet you," he bowed. "And do not call me by my formal name. In light of the circumstances it would be best if we drop such formalities."

Her parents would think that was because they were to be married, but Dorothy knew better than that.

This was the man that she had kissed, and the man she had thought about incessantly since then, and he was clearly not going to let her forget it.

## CHAPTER 4

Morgan had always intended to attend the ball.

What was important to him, however, was that the Boltons did not know his intentions. He did not want them to be present the first time he saw the lady that he had promised to marry. Lady Dorothy did not deserve such a fate as being his wife, and so he wanted to ensure his beliefs were correct. He wished to be absolutely certain that he was saving her from her family, and one encounter with her was all he had needed to reach that point.

She did not enjoy life. She was but one-and-twenty, yet there was hardly any light in her eyes. She was not pleased to be at a ball and enjoying herself, she was resigned to it. It had saddened him.

The morning of his visit, he was breaking his fast with Catherine. He wondered, with how intelligent she was, just how she could possibly be his niece. His brother had certainly lacked that trait. Then again, with how particular she was and how insistent she was about it, he had to admit that was a familial resemblance in that way. She scarcely ate, for example, unless the food contained chocolate in some way, which was an expensive diet but one he was more than willing to provide.

"Are you going to see her today?" she asked, toying with the fruit on her plate.

"My bride? Yes, I will be. Is that all right?"

"Of course. I have been waiting for you to. I need you to answer all of my questions about her."

"Do you have any that I might be able to ask for you?"

Catherine shuffled anxiously before looking at him.

"Does she want to have me sent away?"

Morgan's breath caught in his throat. His niece was a concern to him when it came to his marriage, but under no circumstances would he ever have sent her away. He had been worried about how Lady Dorothy would react to him caring for his niece, but their encounter the night before had proven to him that she was too gentle to say anything against having Catherine in the home.

"She does not," he promised.

"How could you know? You have never met her."

"No, but she is to be my wife, and your aunt. Do you truly think I would marry a lady that did not want you?"

The little girl smiled at that, satisfied. She was so pleased, in fact, that she began eating her fruit.

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"Will you be all right with Mrs. Herrington for the afternoon?"

"Of course. I spend most of my time with her, especially when you are busy."

Morgan hated that his dukedom kept him so occupied that it led to him neglecting Catherine, but he was grateful that his housekeeper had built a bond with her so that she had someone. It was an odd friendship, but that was how he liked to call it.

"When I am married, you will have another lady to spend time with too."

"If she likes me."

"Which she will."

But Catherine did not seem too certain.

Standing in the Bolton household, Morgan wondered if the family liked anything at all. There was a pianoforte in the corner of the room, but it was clearly for decoration as the chair was visibly unused. Other than that, there was nothing of note in the room save for paintings and the family itself. Morgan had not been the greatest fan of the Earl, as he could see through his act as a doting father that was simply doing what was best for his daughter, but he had hoped the Countess would be different. She was decidedly not, and he could see that from the moment he arrived.

"Was your journey pleasant?" she asked. "We are hoping that you appreciated the gardens."

"Yes, they are lovely. Will your daughter be with us soon?"

"She will. I do not know what has gotten into her, for she is always on time. Perhaps it is because she is so excited to meet you?"

Or because she wishes to avoid you, he thought.

Objectively, there was nothing wrong with the Boltons. They were respectable, and their lineage was strong, and perhaps if Morgan was not so good at knowing people's true intentions he might have been able to spend time with them without feeling ill at ease. Unfortunately, he could see at once that they were being dishonest about who they were and he loathed that.

At least their daughter seemed to have missed that trait.

When she entered, he watched her face change as she began to recognize who he was. It was hard not to chuckle at her as the little mouse he had met the night before stared up at him in disbelief. It was as though she could not believe that a man she had behaved so unbecomingly with was still willing to marry her.

If anything, it would have been what he had to do in order to save her reputation.

"Good afternoon, Your Grace," she said softly. "It is a shame that we did not meet one another last night."

"Indeed. I apologize for that. There was something at home that simply had to be taken care of. I explained everything to your father."

The Earl grunted, and though Morgan did not seem to know what that meant, his wife and daughter did as the both fell silent. He assumed, in that case, that they had not been told the contents of the letter. It was for the best, as part of the lie Morgan had

told pertained to Catherine. The Earl knew that he had his niece, and that she was a sickly child, and so even though Morgan felt unfair pretending something was worse than usual, it was the easiest way to make them think they would not see him.

"You are a duke," Lady Bolton smiled. "We understand that things happen."

He was more inclined to believe that the Countess had been furious about his absence, and the forced smile on her face did not help that.

"I was wondering, Lady Dorothy, if you might like to promenade with me tomorrow."

"Yes," her mother said in an instant. "She would love to, isn't that right, Dear?"

But his bride's eyes were on the ground. Their interaction was too stilted, too forced, and he knew it was because her every word would undoubtedly be scrutinized when he was gone. It was better for her to say nothing at all, and even then there would inevitably be fault found in that.

But that would be changing when they were married, and so it was time for her to begin making adjustments.

"With all due respect, Lady Bolton, I was asking your daughter. I would like to know what she thinks."

Based on her reaction, the way her brows raised and her mouth was stuck halfway open, Morgan wondered if this was the first time anyone had said something like that to her. He turned back to Lady Dorothy, who was looking up at him with something resembling admiration.

But then her gaze slid away from his, and she looked out of the window instead. It

was as though she was there, but she was also not. She was not acting as though she was truly present, as if things were happening to her rather than including her.

"Lady Dorothy," he said carefully, "do you want this match?"

"She does—" Lady Bolton began, but she stopped herself.



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He raised an eyebrow at his betrothed, and again she was unable to meet his eye.

"Of course I do," she nodded. "Why would I not?"

"Because we are strangers, and because you do not seem best pleased with any of this. I will not be forcing your hand, and so if this is not what you want then I will walk away now. The choice is yours."

But he knew that she would not refuse him. She could not do so, not with her parents watching her. He did not dare think what might happen if she rejected a duke's proposal that had been arranged for her. Even the most loving parents would have been against it, and Morgan was not at all convinced that she was in a loving family to begin with.

It was precisely why he needed to have time with her alone.

"Would you like to promenade with me?"

"Yes, Your Grace."

"Very well. I will be here to collect you in the morning."

"Why not go now?" the Earl asked. "It is a fine day, and the sooner we have all of this arranged the better."

"I understand that, but I am in no rush. I would like to spend what little time we have before the wedding coming to know my fiancée, but I will not pretend that if she does

not wish to marry me I will force her hand. I would much sooner walk away before too many know that we are already engaged."

"But you are here to sign the marriage contract!"

The fear in Lady Dorothy's eyes told Morgan that she had not been made aware of that.

"That can wait until tomorrow, can it not? What is one more day? Besides, I will not change my mind about this. Your daughter will only be my wife if she chooses to be, and you will not do anything to force her. I will learn of it, and then I will ensure that the ton is made aware of what your family does."

As he said it, he wondered just how empty the threat he had made was. He had expected it to mean nothing, but as he said it he did indeed consider ensuring society knew of their wedding tactics.

"I should like to promenade with you tomorrow, Your Grace," Lady Dorothy said politely. "It has been a while since I saw the lake."

"Then that is where we shall go tomorrow afternoon. You can bring your lady's maid with you as your chaperone."

Fortunately, there were no further protests. He made his promise to see her the following day, and then took his leave. He hoped that the rest of her day would not be too dreadful, but he was not entirely convinced. The Earl and Countess were not the worst people that he had ever met, especially given the characters his brother had liked to bring home, but something about them made him dislike them and he hoped that would change. He wanted so badly to have misjudged them, as his wife would need to have someone in her life that she could talk to, as he could not be that person.

He hoped that she would understand that.

The moment the door closed, Dorothy knew that she would be in for it.

"The nerve!" her mother gasped. "To come into our home and speak to us that way—it is deplorable!"

"Well, you hardly helped, Louisa," her father sighed. "He seems to want to hear what she has to say. You should have remained quiet."

"But why does he care what she thinks? He is not going to bargain with the next mare he wishes to buy, is he?"

Dorothy pretended that her mother had not just called her a horse.

"Do you want this match to work or not?" her father continued. "If we want to see her married, we must do as the Duke says whether we agree with it or not. We do not have the luxury of dictating what a man such as himself can and cannot do."

Her mother sighed, pressing her hand to her forehead. She had never liked being told what to do, and it was fortunate that her parents rarely disagreed. She did not do well when she was told that she had done something wrong. She felt offended, slighted, and she did not know how to respond to such feelings beyond expressing anger.

"Very well," she sighed before turning to Dorothy. "You should consider yourself lucky that this man seems to care about how you feel, but mark my words. You will promenade with him, you will express gratitude for it, and you will marry him. I do not care how many times he asks you, nor how sincere he seems to be, you will not tell him that you do not want this match. Am I making myself clear?"

"Yes, Mother, of course. I would never do anything to ruin this match."

At last, her mother seemed to calm herself. She composed herself and left the room. Dorothy was going to follow her, but then her father called her back. Bristling slightly, she turned back and sat with him.

"That was perhaps not the ideal first meeting between the two of you."

"No. I know, I should have been more willing. It is my fault."

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"No, for once it is your mother's. I do hope, though, that you can see just how much this means to her. She wants what is best for our family, and whether you think it is perfect or not, this is what is best. You will not receive a better offer than this."

Somehow, her father being kind to her unsettled her more than when his voice was raised. She did not know what to do with his kindness, nor whether or not she could trust it. She wanted to, but after so many years it had become impossible.

"Now," he continued, "would you like to tell me any requests you have for your wedding? You shall be seeing the modiste this week for your gown, but I am afraid your mother has already designed that. She believes that you will like it, though."

It was only a gown, but Dorothy wished that she could have had a say in it. The modiste had a lace that was floral, and it was precisely what she wanted, but her mother would not have chosen that for her. Her parents hated her passions for plants, as it was not ladylike and would only turn men away.

Except, the Duke had liked it about her. It was something they shared, even if he had been able to do more with his interest than she had. It gave her hope for her marriage, if they had so easily found something in common.

"I would like flowers," she said suddenly. "If not at the ceremony, then at least at the wedding breakfast."

"Dorothy, you know how I feel about your little obsession with plants. Your mother feels the same way."

"I know, but it is the one thing that I shall ever ask of you. You can choose the flowers, I am only saying that I want them."

"I suppose it would not hurt, especially given how amenable you have been about everything else."

"Thank you, Father. The Duke will also be most pleased."

It had been the wrong thing to say. As far as her father knew, that had been their very first meeting, and she could not tell him that it was not the case.

"The Duke?" he asked. "Why is that?"

"He likes plants. He studied botany at university."

He raised an eyebrow at her. She should have lied, but she was not any good at it and it would only have made things worse. Her father was being kind to her, and she so wanted that to continue.

"Is that so? And how, pray tell, did you come to know that?"

"I... I learned of his name at the ball. Cecilia had already heard that the Duke of Ulverston had found a bride, and when they saw my ring, my friends knew that it had to be me. Cecilia knew quite a lot about him."

"Yes, well, you are to be careful around that girl. I do not like her."

"I know, but she has been nothing but a good friend to me. Besides, Father, do you have any idea how wonderful that is? We both like the same thing!"

"A marriage requires more than that, but it is a start. Tomorrow, you must charm him."

Wear one of those gowns your sister had made for you."

Dorothy stifled a groan.

"Can I not wear pink? You know it is my favorite. I do not understand why you listen to Eleanor's advice when you do not otherwise speak to her."

"I listen to her because she was always the fashionable one in the family."

"Yes, and when did you ever see her wearing yellow?"

Her father was silent for a moment, and then at last he chuckled.

"Now that you mention it, I do not believe that I ever did. Very well, you may choose your gown, but I want no mishaps tomorrow. He will be your husband, and you will be grateful about that."

"Of course, Father."

She left the drawing room to prepare for tea with the friends she knew her father could not stand. Since her engagement, her father had been nicer to her about seeing them, with the exception of Cecilia. She was a bad influence, he said, one that would turn all of them into bluestockings like her if she could. Dorothy had never believed him, especially when Cecilia had been the one to be so confident that Emma wanted to marry her husband. There had been no attempts on her part to stop the union, only efforts made to ensure it was what her friend had wanted. Dorothy knew that to be true, for it was all she had received since her own betrothal was announced.

She simply wished that she was a better liar whenever Cecilia asked her.

## CHAPTER 5

"And here I thought your parents would never be told what was what!"



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Dorothy's friends had adored the retelling that she had given them about her meeting with the Duke. She had not told them about their other, clandestine meeting, but that was only because she did not know how. Thy thought she was too afraid to even speak to a man, which had always been true, and she did not think they would have even believed her if she did tell them.

Not only that, but it was the exact situation that Emma had found herself in the year before, and she had been less fortunate than Dorothy. She had been seen, and though the subsequent marriage that followed had been good, and they had truly fallen for one another, it had been a terrifying ordeal and it did not seem fair for Dorothy to tell Emma that she had done the same thing as her without the subsequent loss of reputation.

But they would have to know soon enough. They did not keep secrets from one another, and Dorothy did not wish to be the first one to do so.

"Something is wrong," Cecilia commented, looking directly at her. "You cannot hide it from me. What is it?"

"The wedding," she lied. "It is daunting, and I do not know what I shall do about it."

"Well, there is nothing that can be done," Emma said gently. "Either you do it, and you marry the Duke, or you do not. It may be that you dislike either option, but that does not mean you do not have any."

Dorothy sighed. She wished that those were not her choices.

"In any case," Cecilia continued, "I can see that it is more than your wedding. You were at peace with what was to come a few days ago. Something has changed."

With a deep breath to steady herself, Dorothy cleared her throat. She did not want to lie to her friends, and so she would have to be truthful whether she was ashamed of what she had done or not.

"You see, at the ball, I made a terrible mistake. After speaking with my parents, I spent some time in the gardens. I was hoping for some time alone, so that I could be among the flowers and steady my nerves, but out from the shadows came the strangest man."

Emma shook her head with a smile, clearly knowing precisely what she was about to say.

"He was an enormous man, dressed as a bear of all things, but he was kind to me and I suppose that was all I had needed. I have been in need of that for a long time. It was more than that, though. I will soon have no choice but to submit to a man that I do not know, and the thought of that terrified me. I wanted to do something bold and defiant, something that I never would otherwise have done. It was foolish of me, but I... Well, I kissed the stranger."

Beatrice gasped, but Cecilia and Emma looked at her with pride. It was true; she had been shocking and daring, but that was precisely the sort of thing that her friends would have wanted for her.

There was a reason that her father considered them bad influences, after all.

"What if he tells others?" Beatrice asked. "What would become of you? If you are not yet married, your betrothed will surely change his mind, and if by then you are married, he could just as easily annul it. What will you do?"

"I do not believe he will say anything."

"But he is a man. They tend to gloat."

"Not this one. It would not help his reputation, I know that much."

"But you do not know that," Emma said gently.

"I do. It would be unwise for a gentleman to speak ill of his own wife, and so while possible I do not believe it will happen."

Silence fell as they tried to comprehend what she had told them. The chances of them meeting when they did had been so slim, and yet it had happened and now everything had changed. She had met her husband twice, and she had quite liked what she had seen, but that did not mean that everything would work well in the end. She hardly knew him at all, and she wished that she had an opportunity to know him better before they married.

"Do you plan to discuss this with him?" Emma asked.

"I shall have to, I suppose, though I do not know what I will say to him. What can I say?"

"You could compliment his kisses, if he is deserving," Cecilia suggested, grinning. "Truly, Dot, I never thought you could be capable of something like this. Even I am not that bad."

Her friend was laughing, but Dorothy did not find the humor in it. She was positively mortified by what she had done, and the idea of someone else having witnessed them and now planning to ruin her made her feel unwell.

"In any case," Dorothy continued, "I do not think it matters. He is yet to propose himself, as he gave the ring to my father to give me, and today he refused to sign the marriage contract."

"Does that mean he does not wish to marry you?" Beatrice asked.

"I do not know. It is possible, but he has asked me to promenade with him tomorrow. Perhaps he will decide then?"

"I will assume it is for your sake," Emma nodded. "So that you can decide for yourself whether or not this match is what you want... this is what you want, is it not?"

"It is. I might as well take a husband of my father's choosing if I cannot find a husband of my own. I am grateful for this, truly I am. It was a terrible mistake for me to do what I did. I should have been grateful."

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"You do not need to be grateful for a match you did not ask for," Cecilia said firmly. "If it were me, I would have escaped to the country long ago. I cannot believe that the two of you simply accept this."

She was looking almost accusingly at Dorothy and Emma, and though she wished her friend could be kinder Dorothy knew that it was what she needed to hear. She was not happy with what was happening to her, and the only reason she had accepted it was because she did not want to become like her sister. She did not want to be cut off from society, with even her family uncertain as to where she was and whether or not she was all right.

"You know perfectly well why I accepted what happened to me," Emma argued. "I had acted in an unbecoming manner, and in response I had to take Levi as my husband. We are all aware of the consequences that could follow from such behavior, Cecilia."

"Then you of all people should know not to ask Dorothy whether or not she wants this. If she did not, she would have done something about it. She certainly would not have kissed him."

"I did not know that he was my husband-to-be at the time," Dorothy tried to explain, but neither lady was looking at her.

"You are not perfect, Cecilia. Instead of passing judgment, do what we must now do and comfort our friend. She has enough to think about without us chastising her. What's happened has happened."

"You might not like thinking about this, as it reminds you of what you did, but it is the truth. I do not want to sit and listen to you pretending there was nothing more that Dorothy could have done."

Without another word, Cecilia left the room.

Beatrice and Dorothy exchanged worried glances, while Emma remained where she was.

"I– I will go and speak with her," Beatrice said quietly before following after Cecilia.

Emma did not look at Dorothy. Instead, she looked at her teacup, her head down.

"I do not know what she wants from us," she sighed.

"I do not think she meant anything by it. She is concerned for me, that is all. I had thought, if anything, she would be rather proud of me for what I did."

"She is, believe me. I wonder if that is what she is truly upset about."

Dorothy raised an eyebrow at her.

"Think about it, Dot. In all of the time we have known her, our parents have labelled her a terrible influence, claiming that we should avoid her. She is not stupid. She knows what people think of her. Now that the both of us have done something so reckless, while she has never done anything of the sort, it likely has changed things."

"I suppose it is quite unfair that we have done what we have, yet she is the one to have gained a reputation such as hers."

"Precisely, but that does not mean that she can blame us. I pity her, but I will not

allow her to speak to you for doing something for yourself for the first time."

The two ladies fell silent for a moment. Dorothy did not know what to say to her; with all that had happened in the last year, she had tried to bite her tongue about her own match so that they could have some peace for a while, but that had not been what had happened.

The issue was that when she was quiet, she began to think. The silence led to her thoughts running away from her time and time again, and the closer to the wedding she came the worse it was.

She was to be a wife to a stranger, and though he seemed perfectly fine there was nothing stopping him from changing once she was his. It happened often enough. She wanted to believe that he was a good man, and that he would care for her, but it was just as likely that he would leave her alone most of the time, and she would have no company with the exception of an children they might have.

"Did you want children?" she asked aloud.

"I did," Emma nodded, smiling softly. "I will admit, it is not what I had planned, and sometimes I am terrified of what is to come, but it is something that Levi and I are excited about more than anything."

"What are you afraid of? You have a loving marriage, and you will be able to take care of the baby's needs."

"I worry that I will not be a good mother. It is entirely possible."

"No it isn't. You will be a wonderful mother, especially given that you practically raised your sister yourself."

"I did, but that does not mean that I will be any good as a mother. Besides, there is more to it than that. I fear that something will happen to me, the same way we lost my mother after my sister was born. Again, it may not happen, but it could, and that frightens me."

Dorothy had not considered that, and it gave her even more fears about what was to come.

"All that to say," Emma continued, placing a hand on Dorothy's shoulder, "we do not know what is coming. It is frightening, but if we live in fear then we will not live at all. I am choosing to be excited for the next part of my life, and I believe it would be best if you did the same thing."

Dorothy nodded in agreement. Her marriage was a daunting prospect, but Emma was right. She had to look forward to it, or else she would risk ruining it before it had even begun. She could not control her husband, but she could control whether or not she was a good wife, which she was determined to be.



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Cecilia and Beatrice returned shortly after. Cecilia had a calmness about her as she took her seat, and Beatrice poured her tea.

"I would like to apologize," Cecilia said clearly, "to the both of you. I had no reason to be so angry with you. I know that you did what you thought was best at the time, and you had no control over what came afterward. I should be a better friend to you."

"Not at all," Dorothy replied firmly. "We did act in unbecoming ways, and you are right, we should face consequences for that. Whatever comes next, however, it is better that the four of us are together. I cannot bear the thought of having to withstand all of this alone."

Cecilia moved so that Dorothy was between her and Emma. Beatrice rose to her feet and stood behind her, placing a hand on her shoulder in support. In spite of how afraid she was, she couldn't help but feel relief at that. She had her friends, and they would be there for her no matter what happened. She was not alone, which made her more fortunate than most ladies in the town.

It had been the first dispute that anyone in their group had had, and it had felt horrible, but in a way Dorothy was pleased that it had happened. It had given her a clarity that she otherwise would not have had.

"Are you looking forward to your promenade tomorrow?" Beatrice asked.

"I am. Regardless of how it goes, I will at least know more about my betrothed. I hope that he is a good man, one that aims to give me the best life he can. I will not ask much of him, only that he becomes a friend to me."

"And if he does not," Emma smiled, "I will gladly send Levi his way."

The ladies all laughed at that, and for the first time in weeks Dorothy felt as though all would be well.

Then she returned home.

## CHAPTER 6

Dorothy had not expected to be ambushed the moment she entered her household.

Granted, it was not a terrible thing that she had become a part of, but it was quite overwhelming. The modiste had arrived, and the drawing room was covered in an array of fabrics which her mother was choosing from.

"Ah, Dorothy," she said brightly, "do come and help me with this, if you wish."

She was suspicious in an instant, as her mother had never allowed her to choose anything, but it was too tempting an offer to miss. She joined the two ladies, and in an instant she saw that floral lace that she had so adored each time she saw it.

"Is this for my wedding gown?" she asked.

"Indeed, though you must not tell your father. He believes that this was all arranged weeks in advance, but the truth is that I wanted you to tell me what you wanted. Your father is away until tomorrow, and so I thought you might appreciate helping us."

"Oh, Mother, thank you!"

It had been a strange time, when both her mother and father had been trying to be kinder to her without the other knowing about it. Dorothy knew that it was something

she should have questioned, but she was enjoying the positive attention too much to do so.

Instinctively, she reached for the lace. The modiste nodded at her choice, and suggested a fabric to match it. Aside from that one decision, however, Dorothy was happy to not choose anything else. She trusted the modiste and her mother to make the perfect gown, and she did not wish to interrupt them as they did so.

Then came time for her measurements to be taken. It had always been a terrible part of the process, and Dorothy hated it. It was an awful reminder that she was not tall and slender like the beautiful young ladies that had sneered at her before she met Cecilia and Emma. They had been so unkind to her, and thankfully her two new friends were always more than willing to speak for her when that happened. Beatrice, when she joined them, did not say anything herself, but she was always standing beside Dorothy, unashamed of her.

It did not make remembering that she was different any easier, however.

The modiste measured her waist, and instinctively she breathed in, holding herself together tightly. She heard as the woman tutted quietly at her, and she was positively mortified by it.

"I will be placing her on a reducing diet," her mother noted. "It should be feasible before her wedding day, and then all will be well."

The modiste nodded, but she did not seem to agree at all. Dorothy shared such sentiments as that. She had always been softer and rounder than the other girls, and nothing she tried had ever changed that. A mere reducing diet for a few weeks would not be any different.

A familiar sting of tears came to her eyes, but she willed them not to fall. This was

supposed to be a joyous time, and that was what she was determined to make it no matter what. She was having her dream wedding dress created, and that was something to be pleased about.

When the modiste left, however, her confidence faltered. She knew that she was disappointing her family, and that she always had, and there was nothing that she could do to fix it. She had never been good enough.

"Well?" her mother asked. "Are you excited yet?"

"Yes, Mother. I feel prepared, now, which has quite surprised me."

"Good. We have a few short weeks to ensure you are ready. I meant what I said, by the way, about that reducing diet."

"I know. I understand."

Her mother smiled at her, leaving the room. Dorothy watched her go and remained standing in the drawing room, feeling rather empty. Her mother's plan would not work, and then what would she do?

The following day, Dorothy awoke and stared at her ceiling. She had to dress and go downstairs so that she could join the Duke on a promenade, but she could not bring herself to leave her bed. He was a good man, one seemingly still willing to marry her, but that did not mean he would like her, or that he would feel any sort of particular attraction to her. It pained her to know that he would not see her as a worthy duchess, and that even if he did, they would not. They would see her as a weak lady, one undeserving of the title.

That was, after all, how she saw herself.

There was a sudden bang on her door, which made her jolt into a sitting position.

"Dorothy," her father boomed. "It is time to come downstairs."

She called that she would not be long, and soon enough her lady's maid came to prepare her. As her father had allowed, she wore her favorite pink gown and her lady's maid pinned her hair into place in such a way that she had some semblance of elegance to her. She thanked her profusely before going to the drawing room. The Duke was already there, and he did not seem very pleased to be.

"Good morning, Your Grace."

"Good morning," he smiled at last. "Are you ready to go?"

"Yes, as is my maid."

She had half expected a conversation to follow, but it did not. Instead, he bundled her into his carriage and they left immediately.

"My apologies," he said after they had left. "I prefer not to speak in their presence, if I can help it."

"Oh. That is all right. Might I ask you why?"

"It has nothing to do with you, if that is what you are concerned about. What troubles me about them is their apparent desperation to be seen as something more than they are."

She should have taken offense to it, and she knew that, but in actuality she found it refreshing. She had had her fill of those that said and did everything they could to be seen as perfection, and she liked that the Duke did not hold himself to such impossible standards.

"Do you not believe that I would do such a thing?" she asked.

"No, I can clearly tell that you would never do so. I like that about you."

Dorothy somehow managed not to ask him what else he liked about her.

"How is it so obvious that I do not wish to climb socially?"

"Well, if you did, you would not kiss strangers in dark gardens," he chuckled.

Her cheeks flamed.

"I do not make a habit of doing that, if you must know!"

"Even if you did, you should know that it makes no difference to me. We all have a past, and things we would rather we had not done."

"I certainly do not."

"Is that to say you are pleased that you kissed me?"

"No— yes! I do not know. I cannot believe that I did it even now, if I am honest. I have never done anything like it before, and I do not plan to repeat such terrible actions."

"That is quite a shame."

If her cheeks were pink before, they were certainly now scarlet. It was improper to engage in such conversation, she knew that much, but she was uncertain of just how terrible it was. They were not married as yet, but they soon would be, and what difference did a few simple weeks make? It was not as though she would know him any better by the time their wedding came, and so where was the harm now that would not exist then?

"Very well," she grinned. "What sort of past do you have?"

"One similar to your own, I believe. Some mistakes were made, but I have only ever done what I thought was best."

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"Might you be able to tell me about any of those mistakes?"

"One day, perhaps. I will tell you, though, that nobody knows some of the things I have done."

Given his stature, Dorothy thought, it could have been anything. She could not fathom him being a threatening and violent man, but that did not mean it was impossible. Once again, her fear came flooding back. It was quite apparent that the Duke could see that.

"It is nothing to fear," he chuckled. "It is only that I wish to keep such things private."

"Even from your wife?"

"No, but you are not my wife. I do not yet know if that is what you wish to be."

"I do."

"It is what your parents want for you," he corrected. "I do not care what they do or do not want. I care about what you want."

"Your Grace, I can assure you that I am quite capable of thinking for myself."

"And you will do so, I have no doubt about that, but I want to know that you have done so rather than saying what you think I wish to hear."

Dorothy, while pleased that he was allowing her to make the decision for herself,



wished that he would take her at her word. He must have known that she had no real say in the matter, and that she was doing what was expected of her. If that were the case, why was he so adamant?

They reached the park, and as she leaned down with her left hand to exit the carriage she noticed her ring. She had not truly admired it very much, simply acknowledging that it was on her finger and nothing more. Now that she was truly paying attention, however, she noted that it was exactly what she would have wanted in an engagement ring.

"If you do not like it, we can find you another," he said.

"Oh, no, that will not be necessary. This one is lovely."

"It is just as well that you said that as it was my mother's. She spent a lot of time marveling at it."

"Then it is unfortunate that she and I will never meet. I believe we would have had quite a lot in common."

The Duke smiled at that, and they began their walk.

"So," he commented as they reached a row of flowers, "given that you have a passion for these things, I must know: do you know the Latin names for plants, or only the English?"

"I know a few in Latin, but I must confess that I find the language quite difficult. The words can be very long."

"Do you not enjoy reading?"

"I do, but sometimes I see a word that is very complicated and I wonder quite what the use is. It is a word, what does it have to prove?"

He laughed at that, shaking his head.

"If you had attended university, you would have had to learn them."

"In which case, I gladly would have. I would have been able to learn, had I been taught."

"You still could, you know."

She turned to him with a furrowed brow.

"What?" he asked. "I am a duke, and I have my ways. Even if you are not permitted to attend university, I could arrange a tutor for you. That way, you would be taught by someone knowledgeable."

Dorothy's eyes sparkled.

"Do not suggest that if you do not mean it."

"I would never do that. Would you like a tutor? I do not mean to suggest you need one, of course."

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"No, I know. In truth, if I really tried, I could learn it all myself, but I will not pretend the thought of a tutor is not exciting."

"Then we shall arrange for it. If you are my wife, that is."

"Your Grace, why are you refusing to accept that I wish to be?"

"It is not a refusal. I simply– I do not want you to feel as though you are trapped in a marriage with a bear such as myself."

"I do not think you are a bear," she said softly, the pair of them standing still in the middle of the path. "And even if I did, you were wearing the face of one when we met, and that did not scare me away, did it?"

He chuckled, and she took his arm and they continued.

"Very well, then," he sighed. "You leave me with no other choice than to ask you to marry me."

She tapped her ring finger against his arm pointedly.

"I, on the other hand, have choices, but I shall accept your proposal regardless."

They continued on companionably, but eventually a dark cloud came over the Duke. Dorothy noticed it, but she hoped that it would disappear. In the same way that he did not want to force her hand, she did not want to force his. If he was going to be her husband, he would have to learn to speak to her if he felt he needed to.

And so, she began attempting to name flowers in Latin. She was surprised by how well she did, with the Duke only having to correct her a few times. She had never expected that she would do so well, and for the first time in her life she wondered just how far she could have come had she trusted herself more.

"And what might your favorite be?" the Duke asked after a while.

"I know this one in Latin. It is *Strelitzia Reginae*."

"Bird of paradise?" he asked. "I never would have guessed that. Why is that one your favorite?"

"I like that they have the appearance of birds. Have you ever seen one?"

"I have seen a picture, yes, but I did not see a bird."

"Then I will show you sometime. It is more than that, though. It is the colors. They are so beautiful."

He nodded along as she explained, and she enjoyed that. Even her friends had moments when they were not as invested in her passions as she would have liked, though she did not blame them for that. In any case, it was nice to have a companion that cared about what she had to say.

"What is your favorite?" she asked.

"*Lilium Lancifolium*," he replied. "Might you know what that is?"

"I believe so. A tiger lily, yes?"

He smiled, impressed with that.

"Do you have any?" she asked.

"I do not, although I would love to have a few. I have been thinking about having a greenhouse built, but I have yet to find the time."

"I would also like a greenhouse very much. We could grow all sorts of things that way."

"Then I shall see what can be done."

They continued on, and at last Dorothy found the courage to say what she had wanted to tell him.

"Would it be all right if I said something quite absurd?"

"I would not be averse to it."

"I believe we might actually be quite the match. I do not know why my father chose you, nor why you decided to agree to it, but I am pleased that you did."

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He smiled softly, patting the hand that was on his other arm.

"As am I, Lady Dorothy."

"I thought that we were going to drop the formalities?"

"You never did. You continue to use my title, and so I thought you were not ready."

"I suppose it is because it is strange. When it comes to my own name, though, just Dorothy is fine. Nobody else that I know calls me Lady Dorothy."

"Do you not know very many people?"

"Only my family and my three friends, although they are very good friends of mine. I assume we will be invited to dinners with them often, especially my friend Emma. She is a duchess, and the only other married friend of mine."

But the Duke had changed suddenly. It was as though his demeanor had changed entirely, and he did not wish to be there anymore.

"We ought to return soon," he muttered.

"Have I said something wrong?"

"No. I simply..."

He cleared his throat, and she waited.

"What is it?"

"I do not plan on ever leaving my household once we are married."

## CHAPTER 7

With one little comment, the Duke had made Dorothy question everything.

He was, indeed, the reclusive Duke that had been the subject of discussion at the ball, and Dorothy was to marry him. She did not know the extent to which her life would change, but even if he had no qualms about her leaving her new home she did not like that he would not be accompanying her. Though not very well versed in the ways of the ton, she knew what was said when one member of a marriage attended an event without the other.

They were seen as unfortunate, and assumptions were made that their marriage was miserable. Dorothy did not want that for herself, and so if it came to it she would not attend at all. It upset her greatly, as she had enjoyed events; they gave her time with her friends, and even if she was not successful in other endeavors it was at least something, and she would no longer have that.

She sighed, looking at herself in the mirror and adjusting her wedding gown.

A special license had been acquired at the Duke's request. He claimed there had been no need to wait, her father explained, and so the wedding day had been arranged for two weeks after the promenade. She had thought her parents would be proud of her for doing so well that he wished to marry her as quickly as possible, but they had said nothing, as though she had only done what they had expected and nothing more.

Her mother entered as she thought about that.

"How are you feeling?"

"Nervous."

"That is normal. Every bride feels like this on her wedding day, even the ones that adore their husbands."

"That makes me feel a little better, I suppose. Do I look all right?"

"You do. The modiste has worked wonders with this gown, has she not?"

She had, indeed. Dorothy was unsure of how she had done it, but she had made the gown in such a way that her flaws were hidden away from view. She turned in the mirror to look at herself from the side, and winced at the fact that her soft stomach poked through.

"Yes," her mother sighed, "the diet did not work as well as I had hoped. The modiste seemed to know that, though."

"It appears so. I am sorry, Mother."

"Do not be. It is not your fault that you look like this. I blame your sister."



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Eleanor seemed to be blamed for most things, but Dorothy tried not to mind that; it was better that her sister took it than her.

"Will there be many people in attendance today?"

"Your father has invited many members of the ton, but as far as I know there will be nobody from the Duke's family there."

"I see. Has he told you why?"

"No, although I can make my assumptions. Shame, I suppose,"

"Shame?"

"Of course. He is not marrying a prized jewel of a young lady, after all. He is marrying you."

Her tone had been so sweet that had Dorothy not been listening she would have thought her mother was complimenting her. Unfortunately, she had been listening and she had not been surprised by what she had heard. It did not matter what she did. She could have been marrying a prince, and her mother still would have been unable to say something kind to her. She had always been undeserving of her family's affection, and that would never change.

"Come along now," she continued. "We must leave for the church."

Dorothy nodded, biting her lip.

The carriage ride was endless. It continued on and on, and her parents watched her the entire way. She had fixed a smile on her face, an attempt to feign pleasure about what was to happen, but she knew it was not convincing. Fortunately, she also knew that her parents did not care how she was feeling. As long as she made it down the aisle and recited her vows, they would be content.

She could no longer see herself, save for her reflection in the window, but she became all too aware of how she looked. Her sleeves began to dig into her arms, stinging, and her corset had been fastened too tightly and caused her breathing to become shallow. She tapped her foot on the floor rapidly, trying to think of anything else but how dreadful she felt. She was not a beautiful lady worthy of a duke, even a recluse.

"Do not disappoint me today," her father said in a calm but firm voice. "I expect you to do this well. It is not difficult, only a few vows."

"Yes, Father."

"And walk properly. You are to stand as tall as you can, even if you are not..."

He trailed off, but Dorothy knew what he had meant.

"And smile, a nicer one than that. You are supposed to be filled with joy."

Yes, Dorothy thought, her wedding day was supposed to be joyous, and her smile was supposed to be genuine and warm. She was supposed to be in love with the gentleman that she was marrying, but she was not. It was expected that she would at least pretend to be, but she was not a good liar. It was not possible for her, no matter how hard she tried.

"Are you not happy?" her mother asked. "You ought to be. This is everything that a

young lady could possibly ask for."

"It is, I know. I am happy. It is all simply overwhelming. I have never been the center of attention like this, and I do not know what to do."

"You will do what is expected of you and nothing less. I have given too much to this match for you to ruin it, and so you will not."

Dorothy nodded, and decided that she would not disclose any other fears about what was to come, as they quite clearly did not care.

They reached the church, and her mother entered, leaving Dorothy with her father. She willed him not to say anything to her, and mercifully he did not. The wait continued, and she suddenly found herself quite eager to begin the ceremony so that it could be done with.

At last, the time came. She took her father's arm, and began the walk down the aisle. She could see the tall and broad man waiting for her at the altar, and she wondered what he was thinking. Was he trying not to recoil at the sight of her? Was he rehearsing his vows? Was he simply waiting for it all to be done with?

Thinking helped her reach the altar quicker. Once there, the ceremony began. The Vicar began speaking, but Dorothy was not listening. All that she could hear was her father's voice, instructing her to smile and remain silent unless spoken to. She looked up at the Duke, but he was not making such efforts. His face was stern, serious, in a way that she had never seen. She thought that he was regretting his decision, and that he would turn on his heel and run out of the church if given half a chance, but the ceremony continued and his feet remained planted there.

"Therefore," the Vicar proclaimed, "if any man can show any just cause, why they may not lawfully be joined together, let him now speak, or else hereafter for ever

hold his peace."

Dorothy could think of a reason or two, and she could see from the smirk forming on the Duke's face that he also could, but no objections were made. Dorothy wondered, for a moment, what would become of her if by chance someone had one. She would have likely been cast out of her home, a disappointment forever and always, and sent to the Highlands to be with her equally dreadful sister.

She wondered for a moment if that would have been such a terrible thing.

"Morgan Lockheart, wilt thou have this Woman to thy wedded Wife, to live together after God's ordinance in the holy estate of Matrimony? Wilt thou love her, comfort her, honor, and keep her in sickness and in health; and, forsaking all other, keep thee only unto her, so long as ye both shall live?"

It was time for the vows. All that they had to do was utter two simple words, and then it would all be done with, but Dorothy did not think she could do it. She could feel her throat closing and it was not even her turn to speak. She looked at her groom, and wondered if he would take this opportunity to change his mind after all. The Duke looked down at the Vicar, then to the guests, and then back to her.

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"I will," he said at last, and Dorothy swore she heard a sigh of relief.

"Dorothy Godwin, wilt thou have this Man to thy wedded Husband, to live together after God's ordinance in the holy estate of Matrimony? Wilt thou obey him, and serve him, love, honor, and keep him in sickness and in health; and, forsaking all other, keep thee only unto him, so long as ye both shall live?"

"I will," she replied, perhaps too quickly.

It was the only way she could have responded at all.

The second part came, the part they had had to memorize, and both said it at quite the pace. Dorothy was pleased that she was not the only one to have done so, though she knew it must have looked strange to those in attendance. Neither one of them were comfortable, and they quite clearly both wished to be anywhere else but there, but that could not have been a surprise to anyone.

Regardless, it did not matter, for the rings were then exchanged and the ceremony was over with and they were wed. She was a wife, a duchess, and now living the life that many young ladies would have done anything to lead.

She should have been grateful, and in many ways she was, but in some ways she wished she could have simply declared spinsterhood as Cecilia had done. She felt out of place among the congregation, the group of perfectly prim and proper guests.

"Congratulations!" Beatrice said brightly at the wedding breakfast, once they found one another. "You look so beautiful."

"I do not. I look like a strange statue, especially with how tense I felt."

"Even if you did, statues are beautiful. You must give yourself more appreciation. It is difficult being a bride."

"How would you know?" she laughed. "You are not yet married."

"Indeed, but I have been to many weddings. Nobody ever seems completely happy to be at the altar, even the most blissfully in love couples."

Dorothy smiled, trying to believe her friend. She had not known Beatrice for as long as she had known Emma and Cecilia, but she knew that they were the most like one another. Though she did not say it, she hoped that Beatrice would find a man that made her as happy as she deserved to be, one that would encourage her to bake even if it was an odd hobby to have.

"Oh!" Beatrice gasped. "Your husband approaches. I shall leave you both be."

Beatrice curtsied quickly to the Duke before leaving. Dorothy willed her to stay, so that conversation might have been easier, but she did not.

"That was all right, was it not?" she said in an attempt to make conversation.

"Yes, it was a perfectly fine wedding. Do you know any of the people that were in attendance?"

She wanted to say yes, that her friends were there, but after the way he had reacted to their existence she was reluctant to do so.

"A few of them."

"Is that to say the vast majority were for your father's sake?"

"It would seem so, yes. Did you know anybody?"

"I do not know many people, and I have no family to speak of. I had left your father in charge of inviting guests. I hope that he has found his endeavor successful."

"You truly do not like social climbers, do you?"

"I cannot stand them. Shall we go?"

"Now?"

"Yes. I would like to return to my— our household. There is much to be done."

"I thought that it was prudent for us to stay and thank our guests."

"And I thought that part of your vows was to obey me."

Dorothy took a step back, shocked by how he was speaking to her. This was not the gentleman that she had met in the garden, nor was he the man that had taken her on a promenade and enquired about her passions and promised her a tutor. He had, indeed, changed the moment they were married, and she hated it.

"I will leave with you in a moment," she nodded solemnly. "I wish to say goodbye to my friends, first, especially if I shall be forbidden from seeing them again."

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She quickly made her way to them, and tried with everything in her to keep her composure, though she knew that it was faltering.

"I knew that this would happen," Cecilia sighed. "Come now, you did so well."

"He hates me," she whimpered. "The Duke hates me."

"He does not," Emma assured her. "He is as nervous as you are, believe me. Levi was just the same. You mustn't let this overwhelm you. It is a long and difficult day, but it shall pass and the two of you shall grow to like one another, and—"

"I will not be seeing any of you," she interrupted. "Not for a while, at least. He is the recluse, the Duke that locks himself away that you were talking about. He refuses to attend events, and it is not as though I can go to them alone. I will be spending my days tending to my household and very little else, especially as I learn what to do. I will not be able to see you for a long time."

"Oh, Dot," Beatrice said gently, "that is not true. We can visit you whenever you please."

"He will not allow it," she whispered. "You did not see the look in his eye when he told me he dislikes most people. I do not know what I am going to do."

"Well, stay with us for a while, and we can talk about it."

"I cannot. I must leave with him. Now."



She turned to see him waiting for her expectantly.

"I have to go," she continued, straightening herself and wearing that same rehearsed smile. "I will write to you."

She sighed as she returned to her husband, wishing that she could do more.

## CHAPTER 8

"I do not like to be kept waiting," the Duke said gruffly as they boarded the carriage.

"I understand."

They traveled mostly in silence on the way to her new home. Dorothy tried to make sense of why he had become so different from the man that she had met. There was very little understanding in his voice, and he seemed rather eager to return. Dorothy knew that something happened on a wedding night, but she had not been told precisely what that was, and so she wondered if that was why he wanted to be home so much.

And yet, she did not dare ask him.

Fortunately, the journey was not too long. They arrived quickly at an enormous mansion, towering and intimidating with ivy crawling up the walls in tendrils. She knew that the ivy would slowly be destroying the bricks, but what confused her was that her husband must also have known, given that they shared in the passion for botany. For reasons unknown to her, he seemed quite content for the damage to be done.

She went to step inside, but he took her arm gently and pulled her back.

"Before we enter, I must tell you that I have expectations of my wife."

"I thought we had already discussed this?"

"Yes, but there is more. It is not much, only what is typically expected, but I need you to follow them. Tend to your duties, do not disturb me without reason, and whatever you do, do not overstep."

Eleanor blinked. She knew that she would have duties, and she did not need a reminder about them, and she did not plan to overstep. What struck her, however, was the fact that she could not disturb him. She did not plan to be a nuisance of any sort, but there would be times when she wished to speak to her husband and the knowledge that she would not be allowed to felt very strange indeed.

"Very well," she nodded reluctantly. "I can do that."

He exhaled, satisfied, and at last they began walking again.

"And there is something I must tell you," he continued carefully, "but it must wait for now. I would rather you become accustomed to your new home beforehand. In the meantime, you must not go into the west wing."

"Why not?"

"Because I forbid it," he snapped, and Dorothy fell silent.

She looked down, afraid of the anger she had just heard in his voice. He was a frightening man when he wished to be, and she did not understand why he so badly wished to intimidate her all of a sudden.

Upon their entry, Dorothy was greeted by three servants. The older woman, with a

hooked nose and gray hair, was her housekeeper Mrs. Herrington. The old man was Johnson, the butler, and the younger lady with long chestnut hair tied in a low bun was Francine. The quick introductions made, her husband left quickly, and Dorothy was in the hands of her servants.

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"It is so nice to meet you!" the maid said brightly. "I will be your lady's maid, as His Grace informed me that you would not be bringing your own."

"How did he know that?" Dorothy asked, without thinking.

"I do not know, for he did not explain, but in any case I shall take care of you. You are in capable hands, I assure you."

Her new housekeeper scoffed, and Dorothy turned to her in surprise. She did not expect to be worshipped by her staff, but she knew that there was a certain respect owed to her as Duchess.

"Francine is very young," Mrs. Herrington explained with a sigh. "She does not know very much at all, and so I shall be assisting her while she learns what to do."

Francine's face turned pink, and Dorothy pitied her greatly. She knew how it felt to be spoken so lowly of, and she hated that her staff seemed to have issues with one another. Fortunately, she knew that with time she would be able to show them how to communicate with one another, for they would have to show her respect in time.

"I thank you for that," she replied gently. "I shall not pretend that I am prepared for what life as a duchess shall bring, but I am more than willing to learn. We can all learn together."

Again, Mrs. Herrington looked at her strangely.

"I am uncertain of what I might learn from a young lady forty years younger than

me," she smirked. "But if you think of anything, do tell me."

The butler did not say a word. He simply watched the three ladies, and Dorothy was unsettled by that. She wanted him to say something, so that she might at least understand who he was and what he thought of her, but he did not give her anything.

After their brief interaction, she was taken to her room. The butler disappeared, and so it was only the three ladies that remained. When they arrived, Mrs. Herrington wordlessly disappeared. Fortunately, Francine remained with her and they entered her bedchambers together. Dorothy looked around her room, the walls papered in a pale yellow, and sighed. She could not seem to escape the wretched color.

"If you do not like it," Francine explained quickly, "I am certain that His Grace will allow you to change it. It was how the late Duchess had it, and it has never been changed."

"I do not know if he will like that. I do not know if he wants to see me at all. Actually, yes I do, for he does not want to. If he did, he would not have left me alone so soon."

"His Grace can behave strangely at times, but believe me when I tell you that he is not a bad man. I believe he is simply wary of the fact that you are here now, for he has not been prepared for it at all."

Dorothy raised an eyebrow, and took a seat in one of the armchairs, motioning for Francine to take the other one.

"What do you mean by that?" she asked. "He has proposed and we have had a very brief courtship. He knew that I would arrive after our wedding."

"Yes, but that does not mean that he is ready. He has only taken a wife because it is

his duty. He needs an heir, after all."

Dorothy crumbled, and Francine knew at once that she had misspoken.

"He did tell you this, did he not?"

"He... well, yes, he did. I simply thought that I might have changed his mind. I thought that he liked me."

"He may well do! It is as Mrs. Herrington said, I do not know very much. That is why she shall be helping you for the first while and I will be more of a friend. I apologize for that, as I wish I could be of more assistance than this, but it is my hope that we will learn together."

Dorothy looked at her lady's maid and could not help but smile in spite of everything. She had been concerned about losing her friends, and she had already begun to miss their advice, but at least she had someone that seemed to like her.

They remained in her bedchambers for a while, and then Dorothy decided that she no longer wished to look at the stark yellow that the room was bathed in and so they left to explore.

"Mrs. Herrington shall be furious, I suppose," Dorothy noted as they wandered. "She seems to prefer doing things correctly, and it is proper that she gives me the tour."

"And yet, you are following me still," Francine joked. "Besides, I cannot give you a real tour, as I am only just becoming accustomed to the place myself. Mrs. Herrington can show you everything properly in the coming days."

Dorothy enjoyed wandering the household, but as they continued on she felt a sense of dread rising within her. It was the largest house she had ever seen, larger even than

'Emma's, which she had stayed in the year before during the party. It seemed endless, and she did not know how she would ever be able to navigate it, which would hinder her ability to do her duty, which was something her husband had pressed was of the utmost importance.

The mansion was well-kept and clean, likely thanks to her housekeeper being so knowledgeable, and the walls were thick and sturdy, but she could not help but notice how dark and gloomy it was in spite of how well-lit it had been made.

It did not make any sense at all. Dorothy had thought that she had met a man that was willing to bend the rules of society, who wanted to enjoy his life and would therefore lead to her feeling much the same. It had been her expectation that she would be happy there, even if it had not been the match that she had dreamed of.

Instead, she was alone.

Francine dressed her for dinner, a beautiful green gown, and she steadied herself as she looked in the mirror. She turned to the side, frowning at her figure, and then left the room.

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"Do you suppose he is disappointed?" she asked Francine as they made their way to the dining room.

"The Duke?" she asked. "No, I would not have said so. He would not have married you if he did not want to, after all."

But Dorothy knew better. He had to marry her after what they had done, as there was always the chance that they had been seen in the gardens. It had been his duty to take her as his wife, even if he had not already agreed to. Even so, she smiled gratefully at her lady's maid and entered the dining room, taking her place at the table.

It was a formal place setting, and her husband would be at the other end of a very long table. Dorothy tried not to mind; they would be able to speak, at least.

But then a servant began serving her meal.

"Stop!" she gasped, and the servant froze.

"Do you not enjoy tomatoes, Your Grace?" he asked, confusion etched in his brow.

"I do, but should my husband not be here?"

The servant shifted from one foot to the other, not quite able to meet her eye. She knew at once what he was about to say.

"He will not be coming," he explained. "He prefers to eat alone."



Dorothy nodded, her lips pressed into a thin line. She motioned for him to continue to serve her, and tried not to think about anything at all. Each time she thought of something, it led back to the Duke, and how he had clearly changed his mind. She had to have done something to deserve it, but she could not for the life of her think just what it was, unless it was how she looked. It had always been the thing that her parents had reminded her of, after all. Short and round, soft and plump, not the tall and slim beauties that a duke would usually have his pick of. Even if he had done his duty, that did not mean that he would ever want to see her. If she were him, she knew that she would not.

The following day, after very little sleep, Francine dressed her and she went to breakfast. Once more, she ate alone, and then she went to find Mrs. Herrington, as it was time for her tour. The housekeeper did not seem best pleased to see her, but Dorothy was determined not to let that concern her. If this was her life, then she would do the best that she could with it.

"I am aware that you and your maid have already seen the household, yes?" she asked.

"Indeed, though I will say that I did not ask her any questions. I assumed that she would not have known the answers, not like you shall at least."

"Yes, that would be correct."

They continued through each room, and the most that Dorothy received from Mrs. Herrington was a brief history of the family and which type each room was. There was very little enthusiasm, as though she did not care about her role, and Dorothy almost felt pity for her.

They, of course, missed the west wing.

"When do you suppose that the Duke will tell me about that wing?" she asked as they passed it.

"In his own time. It is where he spends most of his time, but for the time being you are forbidden from going to it, as you know."

"Of course. Are you permitted to see it?"

"Of course I am. It is vital that I go there, several times a day in fact."

Dorothy knew better than to ask her why that was.

"And this," she said as they left the household, "Is the garden. His Grace is very passionate about it, and so I doubt that you will be trusted to spend very much time here."

"Oh, no, I am very much capable of tending to the gardens. It is something that the Duke and I have in common, you see. I am rather knowledgeable about botany, and I will not trample anything."

"Make sure that you do not."

It was beginning to frustrate Dorothy that she was being treated like a child. She was not an overly excited dog, and she knew how to walk in a garden. Yet, her own housekeeper seemed almost suspicious of her. It was as though Mrs. Herrington was waiting for her to trample the land and break every object in sight, and it upset Dorothy greatly.

She did not look like what she thought a duchess should, but she at least hoped that she would appear to act as one. With a sigh, she continued to follow Mrs. Herrington.

The second night, she ate alone again. Fortunately, she found that she was at least hungry that time. She ate in silence, and then left for the library. She found a botany book, and read that before going to her room and having another fitful night's sleep.

When her third day passed in the same way, and she was alone throughout it without even a glimpse of her husband, she resigned to her fate. She would not be happy in her marriage, and that was perfectly acceptable; many ladies were unhappy with their arranged marriages, but they were secure with a stable future and that was precisely what she had. She wanted to be grateful for what she was given, and she tried so hard to be all the time that she spent by herself in the library.

When she was asleep, however, she was no longer able to conceal her true emotion. She wept into her pillow until she fell asleep, and by then she was so exhausted that she did not wake up until late the following morning.

She did not wish to leave her bed.

### CHAPTER 9

"Why can I not meet her yet?"

Morgan groaned. Catherine had asked for him to come to her room, as she always did, but that day she was armed with questions that he did not wish to answer.

"It is too soon, Catherine. I have already told you this."

"I know, but you are married now. I am to be her daughter, so it is only fair that I meet her."

"You will not be her daughter," Mrs. Herrington reminded her. "As far as she is concerned, you are my granddaughter and that is all she needs to know."

"Well, if I am your granddaughter, why can she not see me?"

Morgan exchanged glances with his housekeeper. It had been a recent idea of Mrs. Herrington to claim that Catherine was her granddaughter, and though he was not completely happy with it he had no other ideas and so he had to go along with it. He wanted to tell his wife the truth, but he did not know where he would begin if he did so. It would mean telling her about his brother, and all that had come to pass leading to his niece coming to him, and though he knew Dorothy was a kind lady he could not be certain that she would take the news well.

"You can meet her soon," Morgan promised her. "I simply would like her to settle into her new life beforehand. You know how vast the manor is."

Catherine nodded at that, though she did not seem satisfied.

"Can I go outside today?"

"You already know what I will say to that, Catherine. We cannot have you seen by my wife."

"You cannot have me seen by anyone," she grumbled.

Morgan sighed, and at last Mrs. Herrington steered the conversation to safer territory. They remained there for the morning, and then Morgan had to leave for his study. He took his lunch with Catherine and then left the room. His housekeeper followed after him.

"You cannot hide her away forever, Your Grace," she said gently. "You have nothing to be ashamed of her for."

"I am not ashamed of her. I am trying to wait for a better time to introduce her into society, but it never seems to arrive."

"And it never will. A child born out of wedlock shall never be accepted, but the sooner you do it, the less she will notice that."

"Mrs. Herrington, I do not wish to discuss this right now. I do, however, require a word with you. Might we leave Catherine with her nanny for a while?"

Mrs. Herrington looked back to the door in thought. Morgan knew that she treasured the young girl, but she had grown far too attached. Should she have to leave

Catherine, she grew unsettled, and he could not allow that with all that she had to do as a housekeeper.

"Very well," she nodded, and they left for the study.

He offered her a seat, and sent for a tea. It was the way he preferred to spend time with the lady who had known him since he was a boy, for though she was his servant he respected her a great deal. It was precisely why he valued her advice about his niece, and why he allowed her to speak to him in a way that was perhaps seen as otherwise unacceptable.

"So, how is she?" he asked once the tea had arrived.

"Catherine is very well. She seems not to have recovered completely, but she has been spending time by the window and the sun is helping a good deal."

"I was asking about my wife. You saw her two days ago for her tour. How was she?"

She circled a fingertip around her teacup.

"She is very quiet."

"Indeed, but she is good in conversation when encouraged. What did she think of the household?"

"She seemed frightened, if anything. I could see that she was overwhelmed by all of the work that she will need to do. Is she not prepared in that way?"

"I do not believe so, no. Her family likely did not expect her to marry someone with my status."

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"Is that because she is lacking?" Mrs. Herrington asked.

"Of course not," Morgan said firmly. "She is a very capable lady. She simply needs time, which we will be giving her. She will also need help, which I expect you to give her."

"I do not have time for that."

"Then you shall have to spend less time with my niece. You know perfectly well that your duty is to the Duchess, not to my late brother's daughter."

She frowned at that, but it had to be said. The household ran well even with her frequent absences, but she would no longer have the time to spend hours in Catherine's wing of the household. He simply hoped that Mrs. Herrington did not blame Dorothy for that, as it was no fault of hers.

"Very well," she nodded reluctantly. "Will you be seeing her soon yourself?"

"I will, when I have the time."

"I could return to my duties right now if you wish," she offered. "That way, you can see your wife instead."

"I think it would be best if you saw her for now. She needs to understand the running of the household, and you are the one to do that."

She sighed, standing to leave.

"If you insist," she nodded, "but you must know that I do not trust this girl. She does not seem to me like a capable lady that will seamlessly run a household. She does not strike me as a duchess."

She left, and Morgan considered ensuring that she did indeed go to his wife rather than returning to Catherine, but he trusted her. He sat back at his desk, and as had happened every time he was sat quietly his thoughts turned to his wife. He did not know what she had been doing since their arrival, but he hoped that she was finding something enjoyable to do. He had not wanted to be too close to her, as he knew he could not spend very much time with her for the time being.

If he spent too much time with her, he risked mentioning his niece, and that would force him to reveal things to her that he thought were better unsaid. He was not trying to hurt her, but it was necessary while she came to understand her new life. Once that was settled, he would find her a tutor and she would have days filled with experiences and she would forgive him for how their marriage had begun.

That was what he hoped would happen, at least.

That evening, he decided that he would see her. He knew that she would be in her wing of the household, and so he thought that he would join her there and discuss the changes to her life. He also hoped to ask her what had transpired between herself and Mrs. Herrington, as he did not want her to feel as though she was lesser than her own housekeeper, even if she was inexperienced.

As he passed, however, he heard two voices.

"I cannot believe this," a voice that he recognized as Dorothy's sighed.

"You must give him time," Francine replied. "This is a change for the both of you, after all."



"I know, but you would think that he would at least try to comfort me through all of this. I do not know the first thing about being a duchess, and all I have is Mrs. Herrington treating me as though I am useless."

"Well, you are anything but useless."

"No, I am. I do not know the first thing about what it is I am supposed to do, and it is not as though I will learn anytime soon."

"I do not know why she is doing this to you," Francine said gently. "She is kind to the staff, and she cares for the Duke as if he were her own son."

"Whatever her reason, it is not fair. She speaks to me as though I am diseased."

Morgan paused. He knew that his housekeeper had high standards for his wife, whoever he chose, but that did not give her the right to be unkind to Dorothy. Not only that, but Mrs. Herrington was, as Francine had said, a kind woman. She treated everyone well, and so for her to have made an exception for the one lady that she was to serve made Morgan very uncomfortable indeed.

"Perhaps you should tell the Duke?" Francine suggested. "He will be able to tell her to stop."

"The Duke wants nothing to do with me. He has made that perfectly clear."

"Your Grace, I—"

"No. I know that you are trying to see the best in him, but this is my fourth day here and I am yet to see him. He does not want to see me, and I can only assume that is because he does not care."

Morgan scolded himself for making her believe that, especially when he had not done it for the reason she thought. Yes, he had been avoiding her, but it had not been because he did not care. On the contrary, he did it because he did care for her, and he did not want her to face any stress because of his presence, or if the worst happened and he told her about Catherine before he thought she was ready.

If company was what she wanted, however, he would try. It was only fair that he gave her a chance, especially with all that she had given up for him.

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"You are to be kinder to her," he instructed his housekeeper that evening.

Mrs. Herrington looked at him with narrowed eyes.

"Are you accusing me of being otherwise?"

"I am telling you that you are to be good to my wife. Your duty is to her, and nobody else. Do you understand that?"

"And what of her?" she asked in a hushed but frustrated voice. "What do you plan to do with that?"

"She is fine. She has a nanny, and I shall see her frequently. You are to do as I tell you. Have I made myself quite clear?"

Mrs. Herrington nodded begrudgingly before walking away. Morgan pitied her; he knew that she had a bond with his niece and he did not want to jeopardize that in any way, but it had to be done. He needed his wife to be shown respect, and if that was achieved through force then so be it.

He returned to Catherine's room before she went to bed. When he entered, she was standing by the window looking at the moon.

"Am I truly to pretend that I am her granddaughter?" she asked.

"No," he said with a half-smile. "Not if you do not want to."

"I want to be honest. It is wrong to lie."

"I know, but—"

"No, Uncle. If anyone should have been lied to, it was me. I would have been perfectly happy to have been told that you were my father."

"Would you?" he asked, and she thought about it for a moment.

"If it were true, yes. That is precisely why we must be honest with your wife. Mrs. Herrington says that she will not be like a mother to me, but perhaps she might be an aunt of sorts?"

"Eventually, that is precisely what she will be, but not yet."

"Why not?" she asked.

"Please Catherine, ask me anything but that."

"Very well. Who was my mother?"

He did not know which question was worse, and so he refused completely.

## CHAPTER 10

Dorothy was reluctant to go down to breakfast that morning, even though Cook made excellent meals.

"Come now," Francine said gently, dressing her. "You must not give in. This will pass, and the sooner you try to fix this the sooner it will be done."

"But how can I fix something when I do not know what is broken?"

"I do not know, but I am certain that you will find a way. I believe in you."

She admired her lady's maid's confidence, but she was not so certain. She did not know how to speak to her husband when he was never there, and so she would have to wait until he dared to come out of his rooms and go to her himself.

She had not expected to see him in the dining room waiting for her.

"Your Grace!" she gasped. "I— Good morning."

"Good morning," he smiled. "And I insist that you call me Morgan now that we are married."

"Very well," she nodded, taking her seat. "That means you will call me Dorothy, yes?"

"Indeed."

"All right. Why are you here this morning? It is lovely, but unexpected."

"I had some time, and so I thought to join you. I had never planned to be absent at all times, you know."

"Oh! Well, I had hoped that would be the case, but..."

"But my recent actions have suggested otherwise. I know, and I apologize for that. I simply have a lot to do, and with our brief courtship and the wedding I let a lot of work pile. I have to regain control over it all, and then it should be back to normal."

It was, she decided, a reasonable excuse. She wanted to believe him, too, as this was much more similar to the man that she had met. He was able to say more than a few words to her, and already it was more than she had received from him in days.

"I was hoping to ask you something," he continued. "Should you not want to discuss it, then we need not do so."

"No, it is perfectly fine."

"Very well. I have heard rumors that yourself and the housekeeper are having... difficulties."

"Well, I shall not pretend that I am a friend to her," she said, laughing nervously. "She seems to dislike me, and I have this feeling that she is wary that I will destroy

the entire household. I assure you that I have no such intentions, of course."

"I can believe that. Why exactly do you believe that she dislikes you?"

Dorothy considered changing her mind, and telling him that all was well; she did not want to upset him, nor did she want to add to the things he had to do. It was nothing that she could not handle herself, after all, and she knew that with time Mrs. Herrington would come to trust her. Then again, she did not want to lie.

"She believes I am incapable of running a household, which I suppose is true. I never thought that I would have such a vast household to care for, and so the lessons my mother arranged for me were not something I spent a lot of time trying to understand.. I should have tried harder, I know, and so I do not blame her for being uncertain of me."

"Even so, she could not know that. I noticed that she already seemed different when we returned home."

"In any case, there is no need for you to say anything. I assure you, it is all perfectly fine with me. I am not going to expect any special treatment, and the truth is that it will take me a while to understand what it is I must do here. That will anger Mrs. Herrington, and so it is my duty to learn. That is what you expect of me, is it not?"

He was quiet for a moment, looking at her. She wondered why he was doing that, and if he had any reason to at all. She had been honest with him, and that was all that she could do.

"If you are certain, then I shall leave the matter here, but I will tell you that I have already spoken to her. She should give you no further trouble."

Dorothy panicked greatly at that. She hoped that he had not made it seem as though

she had been the one to tell him about it, as that would only serve to upset her housekeeper further and make her unwilling to help her even more than she already seemed.

"I never mentioned you," he added. "She does not know that I planned to ask you about it, either. Fear not."

"Is it that evident when I am afraid?"

"Indeed. You cannot hide it at all."

She smiled, in spite of herself. He did the same, and at last she felt comfortable in his presence.

"I would like to see the gardens," she said softly. "In spite of what is perhaps expected of me, I plan to care for them while I am there."

"I do not doubt that. In fact, our gardener has recently left to see his ailing mother, and so I was hoping you might be able to find another one for me? I would do it myself, but I have not yet found the time and already it is growing unruly."

"I could tend to it," she suggested.

"That is not the role of a duchess."

"Perhaps not, but while we find a gardener it might be for the best. Believe me, I know what to do. I was allowed to tend to a small piece of land my family owns, and I do not like to seem as though I have a high opinion of myself but I took care of them well."

He looked at her thoughtfully for a moment. She knew that he would do what he had



to do as a duke and tell her that it is forbidden, and so she was not to do it and instead to find a gardener quickly, but she had to try.

"Are you certain that you can do it?" he asked.

"I truly am."

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"Very well then. We are in a very secluded place, and so nobody outside of the household shall see you. If it will make you happy, then you have my permission. I shall inform the staff of this."

She could hardly contain her excitement. She ate her breakfast quickly, already eager to go outside and begin her work. Mrs. Herrington could keep some distance from her for a while too, which Dorothy assumed she would appreciate. When she finished, she left for her room and found the most dreadful gown she owned. It was a hideous shade of orange, one of her sister's choices, and one that she did not mind staining. Francine dressed her, remarking how drastic the change in her was. Dorothy agreed, explaining her deal with the Duke.

"Mrs. Herrington will be furious," Francine noted, though she was grinning.

"She cannot be. His Grace shall see to that."

"Are you not concerned that she will see you as a rival?"

"Of course not. I am not her rival, I am a duchess. She shall have to accept me eventually."

When she was out in the garden alone, however, she was not so certain of that. Regardless, nothing relieved her of stress quitelike a scythe carving through grass. She enjoyed the metallic sound of it, and with how vast the landscapes were, she would be able to hear it for a very long time.

After a while, she came to a rose garden and placed the scythe down. She sat on the

ground in front of them, and looked them over. They were, in spite of the lack of gardener, growing very well and were the perfect shade of pink. Taking the time to look at the other flowers, she noticed that they were all exceptionally well taken care of. At last, she felt truly happy to be at home, as the bright gardens were a far cry from the dark hallways she had been walking since her arrival. The sun was warm, and she tilted her head back to let it shine onto her.

After a moment, she continued on her way, swinging the scythe until she was pleased with her progress. There was a pond on the grounds, and she wandered over to it. She planned only to look at the ripples in the water, but the sun had begun to truly make her feel hot. It was not uncomfortable, but she knew that what she truly wanted was to dive into the cool blue in front of her. It was highly improper, but her husband's words echoed in her mind.

They were in a secluded place, and nobody would see her.

In a moment of weakness, she removed her shoes and stockings, feeling the grass beneath her feet. Tentatively, she dipped a toe into the water. It was cold, which was frighteningly tempting. She continued going into it, until one foot was completely submerged. She laughed gently at the sensation, before peering around to ensure she was not being watched. When she saw that she was safe, she lifted her skirts to just below her knee, and stepped all the way in. She felt rebellious, scandalous, and wicked for the second time in her life. She kicked gently, splashing water up as if she were a child, and then stood still, feeling the difference between the heat on her shoulders and the cold on her ankles. It was perfect.

"What on Earth are you doing?" a voice bellowed.

Dorothy stumbled, and unable to hold onto anything for support she stumbled in entirely. Her gown was soaked through, but she did not care. She was more than happy to have it thrown away entirely.

When she looked up, she saw Mrs. Herrington scowling at her. She almost groaned over the interruption, but she stopped herself.

"His Grace said that I could spend some time in the gardens. He told me that he would make you aware of that."

"He has, which is precisely why I have come here. He has not told you that you can go into the pond."

"It is only water, Mrs. Herrington. It does not hurt."

She saw how her anger left for a brief moment before returning in full force.

"That does not signify! If the Duke sees you like this he will be furious. Come, we must bring you inside to dry."

"If I may, I would suggest that I shall dry much sooner outside. The sun is very warm."

It was also more pleasant than it was inside.

With a scoff, the housekeeper waved her away and turned on her heel.

"As you wish, Your Grace."

She left, and Dorothy watched her go. Her heart was racing, but she was pleased to have spoken for herself rather than cowering. She was afraid of Mrs. Herrington, but that could not continue. She was the lady of the household, and she wanted to be respected as such.

And so, she lay in the sun for a while. It did wonders for her spirits, and as she traced

her fingers in the grass she contemplated never pulling herself to her feet. Sadly, the sun began to dip down from the sky and as she had been dry for a long time she thought it best to return to the manor for dinner. Should her husband be there, she decidedly did not wish to be seen in such an awful gown.

She took the scythe and made her way to the shed. When she had put it away, she turned to the house and truly looked at it. It was large and looming, and the sight of it alone gave her a great sense of unease, but she tried to ignore it. She was only afraid because it was new to her, and soon enough she would grow accustomed to it and be happy with where she was. There was nothing to be scared of, she thought.

Then she saw the ghostly figure in an upstairs window. The face was pale and her hair was long and blonde, hanging limply over her in ringlets. There was hardly any expression on her face at all.

But she was watching her intently.

## CHAPTER 11

"She is trouble, I am telling you!"

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Morgan was already growing weary of Mrs. Herrington telling him all of the ways in which his new wife was failing. Each time he went to see Catherine, she stopped him to tell him something else his wife had done. She had knocked into an expensive vase, which had not then fallen or smashed, but it was something to be wary of regardless. She had created the menu for the week without consulting her, even though she did not know what Morgan liked to eat.

He had ignored every complaint, as he knew what it was about. His housekeeper was being replaced, and after a lifetime of being the most important servant in the household, and therefore the one that they all needed, she did not wish to lose the authority she had gained.

"Dorothy is harmless," he sighed. "I have given her work to do for herself so that she is out of your way. What could she possibly have done to vex you so?"

"She walked directly into the lake, Your Grace."

In very few words, his blood had run cold.

He hated the lake, and the memories that came to him every time he saw it, but he had never once considered having it removed. It was only for his sake, and it was an expensive endeavor (one that Catherine would undoubtedly notice and question), and not one worth making when he could just as easily pretend that nothing had ever happened, and that the lake simply was not there.

Except, it was, and his wife had gone wandering into it. He shuddered at the thought of it.

"Why were you in the garden?" he asked. "You are supposed to be inside."

"I knew that she would be doing something wrong, and I was correct about it. You should be thanking me for telling you."

"Mrs. Herrington, all that I ask of you is that you do your duty. I understand that you feel a little lost without Catherine to tend to at all hours, but I can assure you that there is enough to do elsewhere. You need not watch the Duchess constantly."

"It appears that I do. Are you not going to admonish her for this?"

"No, but should you continue to burst into my study each and every time you have a qualm with her, I may have to admonish you. Am I clear?"

She fell silent and left the room in a quiet fury.

Morgan sat back, sighing. He hated that there was a tension between himself and his housekeeper, but he did what had to be done. She could not continue to be unfair to his wife, even if she felt that she was imperfect.

He clicked his tongue, thinking about how he was being unfair in a similar manner. He had not yet told his niece the truth about the circumstances surrounding her birth, and he felt that the time had come. The lake had been a frightening thing for him to contend with, and he knew that one day Catherine would discover the truth and have that same fear. He had kept it from her so that she would not have to face it, to protect her, but he had been thinking for some time that he was only truly protecting himself from how she might react.

Tentatively, he approached her room.

She was wide awake and standing by the window, reading a book rather than resting.

She coughed gently as she looked up.

"How are you feeling today?" he asked.

"Better," she said meekly. "I hope to recover completely soon, so that I may go outside."

"Catherine, you know how I feel about that."

"That it is dangerous, yes, but I would have you. I would be safe."

He grimaced, wishing he could tell her the truth; that she was not going to be accepted by society and therefore could not venture out into it at all. They were in a household that hardly anyone ever passed, but if someone did and saw a small child there, questions would arise that he did not wish to answer.

"Catherine, there is something that I have been meaning to tell you. I should have told you long ago, but I wanted to wait until you were ready."

She looked at him with curiosity, closing her book and sitting on the edge of her bed. He joined her, placing an arm around her and trying to think of the best way to explain it.

"What do you remember about your mother?"

"She was nice. I do not remember much, as I was so small, but I remember that she was nice to me. She was a good mother."

"And did you know that she was unwell?"

"Like me?"



"No, not exactly. She... well, she was afraid of a lot of things, you see. She did not have a father for you."

"But I do have a father. I have you."

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"Yes, but I am your uncle."

"Very well, then your brother was my father. I still have one."

He wished that she was a quieter child, so that she would make it easier for him to talk, but he was pleased all the same that she used her voice.

"Yes, but he was not with your mother. He preferred to do other things than raise a family."

"I see. Was I not good?"

"On the contrary, you have always been wonderful. I have no qualms about you at all, even if you eat all of my chocolates when you think that I am not looking."

She laughed softly, but then her face fell again. He did not want her to think that she had ever been a burden. Yes, the circumstances surrounding her birth had not been ideal, but that was no fault of hers. It had been his brother doing ridiculous things and charming young ladies that did not know any better.

He wondered if Catherine's mother thought that Thomas loved her, and that the two of them would leave for Gretna Green and marry and live as a family. He hoped that she did not, as it would have saved her so much heartache, but he knew what became of her. He knew that she was hopelessly and foolishly in love, and when that had not been reciprocated...

"Your mother loved you very much, but she was alone. She did not know me, and did

not know that I would have helped her. Instead, she took matters into her own hands."

"What do you mean?"

There it was, the question that would lead to him saying something that he could never take back. He did not know how she would react, if she would even understand, and he did not know quite how to comfort her.

"Your mother was frightened, Catherine, and so she did what she thought was best. She— she took your hand, and went for a swim."

"Swimming? I thought I came to you in the Winter."

"You did. The water was freezing, and when someone found the two of you they pulled you out of the water. Your mother, on the other hand, well, she refused to come out."

He could see her thinking, trying to piece everything together in a way that she understood. He hated that he had left it so long, as then she might have been able to talk about it, but he had kept it from her thinking that she would never understand.

"So she died, and it was her own fault?"

"No!" He said quickly. "No, she was unwell, like I told you. She was in a lot of pain, and she did something she thought would help."

"Like when I stand by the window?" she asked.

"In a sense, yes, though you do something that is safe."

He had not told her the entire truth, that her mother had planned to take Catherine

with her entirely, but it was enough for a child of her age. All that she had known was that her mother had died of an illness and nothing more, but Morgan knew that it was time he told her pieces of the truth so that she might one day understand.

"So she abandoned me," she whispered.

"No."

"But she did."

She looked up at him, and her eyes were filled with tears.

"She left me behind," she whimpered. "She decided that she would rather swim in freezing water than care for me. Am I truly that despicable?"

"Not at all. Catherine, you shall never know what joy you bring to all of us. Your mother loved you very much, but she did not know what else to do. She wanted you to be happy."

"I would have been happy with her!"

"Yes, but she did not think that. It is difficult to understand even for me, and so if you cannot comprehend it then it is perfectly fine, but know that she loved you. You will see that one day."

She was trembling under his arm, and he held her tightly. She rested her head against him and sighed deeply before escaping his grasp and going to her feet.

"So you only have me out of duty."

"Not at all."

"Yes, you do. My father did not want me and disappeared, my mother did not want me so she died, and you had to have me because nobody else would."

"Catherine, you know perfectly well that that is untrue. I took you in because the moment I saw you I knew you would be happy with me, and that I would love nothing more than a companion. That is what happened to us, is it not?"

She softened, the anger in her face leaving her. She was a child, and she was frightened and confused but Morgan loved her and he knew that would be enough to keep her happy.

"You are a good friend," she nodded slowly, "and a very good uncle."

"Then we are perfectly fine the way we are, yes?"

"I suppose," she said softly.

She remained still for a moment. Morgan wanted to reach out to her, but he did not want to distract her from whatever she was thinking. He hoped that, when she was ready, she would speak her mind.

"Is my mother buried?" she asked at last.

"Of course. As is your father."

"Where?"

Morgan had to think back as to what had become of her mother. Thomas had been buried with the rest of his family, but her mother... To his recollection, she had been cast out by her family and forced to live elsewhere in one of their old and abandoned estates. He did not know where that was, but he was quite certain that he could find out.

"I know of your father's resting place, but your mother's escapes me. I will find it, though."

"All right. When you do, may I visit them?"

"Catherine, you know how I feel about you going outside."

"That it is forbidden, but this is important. I have to see them."

Her voice was rising again, and Morgan thought about how sound echoed in his household. He could not allow Dorothy to hear her.

"Very well," he said quickly, "I shall take you to see them once I learn where your mother is."

At last, she seemed content, and embraced him tightly before sitting beside him again.

"I am pleased that I am good enough for you," she said gently, "though I do wish that I was not so unwell."

"You will recover. You have come so far."

"It has been five years since I came to you. I should be better by now. When you have a cold, it lasts only a week."

"Yes, but you were only very small when you had yours. It might take a long time to rid yourself of it."

She huffed, but she was half-smiling. They had had the very same conversation many times, and she was always annoyed that she would not recover quickly but pleased that she could do most things.

They remained together until it was time for her to sleep, and when he went to leave, he heard her bedding rustle as she sat up.

"You will not leave me, will you?"

"Never," he promised, "although I must leave for a week if I am to find your mother."

"Very well. I suppose that a week will be all right."

He chuckled, leaving the room.

It had been a difficult conversation, but she had taken it well. He had always been proud of how adaptable she was, but he had never thought that it would go as far as it did. He hoped that she had believed him when he said her mother loved her, because he had never doubted that. When she had walked into the lake, it was because she thought that she was saving herself and Catherin from a difficult, almost impossible life, and even though she was wrong he could not deny that he pitied the woman greatly.

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He had missed having dinner with Dorothy again, but he tried not to think about it too much. He had been scarce since the beginning, and so in spite of their few meetings, she would not expect to see him often. That was what he hoped, at least.

As he left for his own bedchambers, however, he noticed the open balcony doors. They were only opened by a small amount, but he knew how his household was supposed to be, and that door was always firmly closed. He opened it, stepping out into the night air.

And there she was, looking at the moonlight. He cleared his throat, and she turned to him sharply, her face pale.

"What are you doing here?" she asked.

## CHAPTER 12

It had been a foolish thing for Dorothy to ask, given that it was his home, but that did not signify.

"I noticed that the door was open," Morgan explained, gesturing to it.

"Yes, well, I did not want it to be locked behind me. This is very high in the air, and I do not believe that I could climb down the ivy if I needed to."

He laughed gently at her, then joined her at the balcony wall. He was much taller than her, and had to bend forward to lean down onto it, where she simply had to rest against it and place her hands at the height of her waist.



"And why are you out here?" he asked.

That had been a little more difficult to explain. In truth, she had gone there because she did not know where else to go. Her room was unsettling her with how yellow it was, and if she ventured out into the hallway she risked seeing her housekeeper, and she certainly did not want that.

She could not tell her husband such things. He was kind to her, and telling him that his mother had awful taste in wallpaper and his housekeeper was possibly evil was not a kind thing to do in response.

"I needed air," she said simply. "The view from here is also beautiful. I can see for miles."

"Yes, my mother liked to come here, or so I am told. She liked to look at the—"

Dorothy wondered why he had stopped himself, but then she followed his eyeline and saw that he was looking at the lake. She sighed, knowing that Mrs. Herrington had told him what she had done.

"I know that it was wrong of me," she explained. "But it was so warm out and the water was cool."

"Do not worry about that. I have told Mrs. Herrington that she is not to bother you anymore, nor do I wish to hear about what you do with your own time from her. This is your home, and you may do as you please."

"Except enter the west wing," she joked.

"Yes, except that."

A silence settled between them, but it was a comfortable one. The night was pleasant and the sky was clear, revealing thousands of stars. Dorothy looked for constellations, something Beatrice had taught her to do, but she was not as good as her friend was.

She was not as good as any of her friends.

"Are you all right?" he asked suddenly.

"Yes, of course. I was simply thinking about my friends. They are lovely, and I hope that they are doing well."

"Have you written to them?"

"Yes, and two of them have replied, but my friend who is a duchess has not. I understand that, for she is doubtlessly busy with her own duties, as well as her child. It must all be quite exhausting."

"It will be your life one day, perhaps. Are you— do you still want that?"

She turned to him, looking up at him with wide eyes and a furrowed brow. She had married him, had she not? What more proof did he need?

"Do you regret this marriage, I mean," he corrected himself. "I know that I have not made it particularly easy for you, and I have only myself to blame for that. I simply do not know how to be a husband."

"You have never been one before, so that is to be expected. I should know, having never been a wife."

"Is that to say you do not regret this?"

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"I shall not pretend it is easy. I miss my friends, and I miss the freedom of being unmarried, but there is good in it. I am secure, I have so many opportunities, and my future is better than that of most ladies in the town. Not only that, but my parents do not have any control over me anymore. I can finally do what I want, within reason, and be free. I never thought that I would feel like this."

He seemed satisfied, but she had one more thing to mention.

"I also love the garden."

"As do I. You may have noticed, but I have at least tried to care for the flowers. The grass is tedious work to keep track of, but the flowers are worth the work for me."

"You have cared for them brilliantly. I was wondering if you might like to have a few more things done, while I am helping with it?"

"I may well. What did you have in mind?"

"The glasshouse. It is large and beautiful, but I noticed that it needs some rejuvenation. The glass is old, and it has clouded a little which means not as much light will reach the plants. It will also not be as warm."

He nodded as she explained, and she knew that he agreed with her. For anyone not knowledgeable about them, they would assume it was enough light and warmth and that all was fine, but she knew better. As it appeared, did he.

"If you wish to do anything to the garden, you have my permission. I know that you

have a good knowledge of botany, and I trust that you will do the right thing. Do as you please with it."

"Oh, Morgan, thank you! I shall make it beautiful, I assure you. It is something I am rather good at. It is possibly the only thing that I am good at."

She had said the last part quietly, but he had heard her. She did not like how he was looking at her, caring and sweet as though he wanted to change her mind. He was not enamored by her, and she would never assume the contrary. He was giving her a new life, and a good one at that, and she was his duchess and possibly one day they might have children. It had been a deal, an arrangement, and nothing more, and so there wasn't any need for him to be looking at her the way that he was.

"Do you always speak so lowly of yourself?" he asked.

"It is the truth. I am not like the beautiful and elegant ladies of theton. I am a simple and plain young lady, and I need not pretend otherwise."

"If you wish only to see yourself in that way, then that is perfectly fine, but you must remember that you are a duchess now. Theton expects us to be exceptional."

"Yes, well, if that is what you were hoping for then you were very wrong to choose me as your wife. I have never expected to have such high standards, and I have never planned to meet them."

"I know. That is why I chose you."

She paused, eyeing him carefully.

"What do you mean by that?"

"Come now, Dorothy. Did you honestly believe that I would act the way I did with you at the ball if I did not plan for anything to come of it?"

"Did you— did you recognize me?"

"Of course I did. Your father told me that you would be a mouse, and there was only one mouse there. Everyone else had chosen something ferocious or beautiful, but you—"

"Yes, I dressed as myself. Something quiet and unassuming."

"I wish that you could see yourself properly. You should know that you are far more than you believe yourself to be."

"I am assuredly not."

"Then, if you are not daring, why did you step into a lake? Why are you out here so late at night? Why did you kiss a stranger?"

"Do you want to know why?" she asked sharply. "Do you want to know why I am suddenly acting this way? It is because I am frightened. I do not do these things because I am daring and interesting. I do it because I never know what else to do. I kissed you because I had assumed my life was over, and that I would be tied to some monster my father had deemed me worthy of. I stepped into the lake because the thought of going inside to those dark hallways was too much to bear. I am out here because—"

She stopped herself, but it was too late. He was already looking at her with both surprise and curiosity, for she had never spoken to him in such a manner. She struggled to think of a time when she had ever done so at all.

"It is nothing," she said. "Ignore me, I am tired, and I do not know what I am saying."

"No, continue, please," he encouraged. "I like this part of you. I can appreciate that you are meek and mild, but if you are able to speak so freely, then do so. I shall not be angry with you for it."

"Are you quite certain of that?"

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"Yes, quite. Now, why are you out here?"

"I am out here because I hate my room."

He laughed gently at her, then louder. She joined him, in spite of everything. It was a ridiculous reason to hide outside at such a late hour, but it was the truth, and he accepted it willingly.

"Yes, my mother could not stand it. She had not been the one to choose it, but my father insisted that we had happier colors in her rooms. Everywhere else was dark, and he wanted her to have her own bright and pleasant space. Unfortunately, she enjoyed the darkness, and so it was the one part of the house that she loathed."

It helped to know that she was not the exception in her dislike of it. When he composed himself, however, he seemed to consider all of what she had said.

"But if you do not like the darkness of the manor, nor do you like the brightness of your rooms, what do you like?"

"Oh, the other rooms are perfectly fine, though not entirely to my tastes. It is only my bedchambers, for they are yellow."

"That is a pleasant color, is it not?"

"Not when you have been forced to wear it all your life, in some vain attempt to make you look brighter and happier. All that it did was make me look like a citrus fruit."

She had thought that he might laugh at her again, but he did not. Instead, there was that sincerity again, the one that made her feel strange even though she could not quite explain why that was. All that she knew was that it was the same way she had felt when they were alone in the gardens at that ball.

"I can arrange for you to have new gowns," he said gently. "You may see the modiste whenever you please, and you may choose whatever makes you happy."

"What makes me happy is plain shades, not the exquisite colors that I ought to prefer."

"You may dress in brown for all that I care. Truly, Dorothy, you need not try to bend yourself here. I do not care whether you are the very picture of the ton's expectations, for I am well aware that I am not either. I want you to be happy, so whatever it is that does that is what you should do."

"Very well, if you insist, though I shall also have a few in the expected colors, in the event that we attend a ball or some such thing."

He nodded, but Dorothy knew that he had no intentions of attending social events.

"May I ask you something?" she asked after a moment.

"You may."

"Why did you kiss me?"

He remained still for a moment, as if uncertain of what to say. They were standing close to one another, tantalizingly so, and Dorothy looked up at him with the same thoughts that she had the night they met. She waited for him to answer her, or at least to come even closer.



Instead, he stepped away, his gaze sliding from hers.

"It is late," he said, looking away. "We ought to retire to bed."

"Morgan, I—"

"If you dislike your room, you may choose another. They are all prepared, and likely more to your taste."

He left her standing on the balcony, her heart in her stomach. She wanted to follow him, to demand answers, but she could not. Her feet remained where they were, and she stood in place as if that would do anything at all to help her.

She slept in her own room that night.

## CHAPTER 13

"Francine, do you believe in ghosts?"

It had been a difficult night's sleep once more. After her encounter with Morgan, Dorothy had hoped to sleep well and wake late in the morning, but she was out of bed just after dawn. Francine had arrived to prepare her for the day, but Dorothy could not think of much other than the dream she had had.

The house was groaning, a girl's voice echoing through the halls. It called out to Dorothy, begging her to help her and growing more and more desperate. Dorothy ran through the household trying to rescue her, trying to follow her pleas, but each time she saw the slight figure and reached out, she could not quite get to her. At last, the girl turned to her, but her face contorted a hundred different ways, and then she screamed.

It had been the reason why Dorothy was awake so early. She was covered in sweat and breathing heavily, and she wanted to change her clothes so that she could forget about it.

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"What an odd question," Francine noted, brushing Dorothy's hair. "Why do you ask?"

"Curiosity, I suppose."

"Well, no, I do not. My aunt did, though. She was positive that she saw something in the garden once, but my uncle says it was him."

"I see," she replied, dejected.

She had been hoping that her lady's maid believed in them, so that she could tell her what she saw in the west wing of the household when she was out in the garden. It had been a strange situation, but she tried to forget about it. It had been the heat and nothing more, she was positive. Ghosts were not real, and she knew that.

"Do you believe in them, Your Grace?"

"Of course not. Well... Suppose I did think I saw one. Would I be sent away to Bedlam?"

"Not by me, no. Why, did you see one?"

"I may have. It must have been my mind playing tricks on me, though. It was when I was out in the garden. I thought I saw a little girl."

"There are no little girls here."

"No, which is why I believe I made it up. I must have been tired, and hot, and not

thinking properly. I ought to take better care of myself."

Francine looked at her as if in thought, and Dorothy wondered what she was thinking. She pictured an older woman that looked like her, positive that phantoms were real and that she had truly seen one. She tried to think back to what she had seen, but she could not picture the little girl a second time other than her perfect golden curls.

"It has been a difficult time," Francine reasoned. "A lot has changed, and it is no surprise that you are so tired. Perhaps you should rest a while?"

"I should, but there is far too much to do. I wish to see the garden, as His Grace has told me I can change some things, and I must try and help Mrs. Herrington. Against all odds, I will make her accept me."

Francine bit her lip, uncertain of that. Dorothy felt quite the same, but she wanted to try. If there was any chance that she could mend things with Mrs. Herrington, she would have to make the effort to become the right sort of duchess, and in spite of what her husband had promised her she wanted to be good enough.

When she was ready, she went down to breakfast. Morgan was not there, which seemed odd to her but as it had been a late night she tried not to think about it. There was a chance he was still asleep, as he had no reason to have nightmares and awaken too soon. It was strange to eat in silence again, but she did not mind it. It gave her time to think of all of the ways she could be better as a duchess, so that she would please her housekeeper.

After breakfast, she found Mrs. Herrington in the linen room, making strange huffing noises. She joined her, and at once saw what the issue was. The linens were strewn about, which struck her as very bizarre indeed.

"What has happened?" she asked.

"Johnson brought the new supplies in," she grunted. "He did not pile them correctly, and they have fallen."

"Oh! Allow me to help you."

"Absolutely not," she snapped. "That is not for you to do."

"Perhaps not, but the sooner this is fixed the sooner we can tackle something else."

She heard her make a few noises in objection, but she ignored them. Instead, she took a tablecloth that had fallen and folded it neatly, placing it in the correct part. She then took a bed linen and did the same thing. Mrs. Herrington watched her do so with wide eyes.

"Where did you learn to do this?" she asked. "A duchess should not know how to fold like that."

"I was clumsy as a girl. I dropped no end of things, so I learned how to fix them afterward. I also spent some time with the servants in my parents' house, as when my sister left I did not have anyone to speak to."

The housekeeper did not respond, instead shrugging and taking another linen and folding it. They both continued until all of it was done, and then Mrs Herrington turned to leave without her. Dorothy followed behind.

"Your Grace, there is no need for you to assist me. I know what I am doing."

"I know, and that is precisely why I wish to follow you. I want to learn, and I want to be helpful."

"It would be most helpful if you left me alone."

"Mrs. Herrington, I know that you do not like me, and that you are suspicious of my intentions, but I promise you that I only want what is best for the family. I intend to be a good duchess, and I would like more than anything for you to help me with that. I know it is a lot to ask, but you would have my gratitude for it."

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She tutted, but she then gestured for Dorothy to follow her.

"Come along, then. We must order supplies."

They met with the steward in the servants' quarters, and Mrs. Herrington pulled a list out of a pocket and handed it to him. He read it over and then looked to Dorothy.

"Is there anything else you would like to add?" he asked. "His Grace informed me that you wished to make some changes to your room."

"Oh! Well, I— I shall need to think about that first. Is that all right?"

"Of course. It is entirely your own choice, you know."

He was smiling at her, and Dorothy could not help but do the same. It was as Morgan had promised her; they would be patient with her, and she had time to learn everything.

When they were done with the steward, they went to the drawing room and Mrs. Herrington looked at her with curiosity.

"I was not made aware that you wished to make changes."

"It has only just been decided. I was going to tell you myself, but I do not even know what it is that I wish to do as yet."

"Well, what do you wish to change?"

All of it, she thought, though she did not wish to say it that way.

"I would like it to be brighter," she explained. "For the most part. When it comes to my own rooms, I would prefer the colors to be a little less bright."

"I see. I have often thought that it was quite dark here, but it was what the late Duke wanted, and so nobody questioned him. When His Grace did not change it, I assumed that I was simply wrong."

"No, you were correct, as you are about most things. The Duke agrees, too, but he has not thought to change it. I do not think we need to change very much, only the walls and some of the furniture. What do you think?"

Mrs. Herrington nodded, and they agreed to take a look at some of the rooms and discuss what needed to change.

It was a pleasant encounter, Dorothy thought, and her housekeeper was nicer than ever to her. It was good to be treated like someone she respected, rather than someone she wanted to be rid of. As time passed, she realized that they actually agreed on more things than she had expected. Eventually, they came to her room, and when they entered, she saw Mrs. Herrington's grimace.

"This is... the late Duchess certainly had particular tastes."

Dorothy laughed gently.

"His Grace told me that it had not been her decision. The late Duke wanted to have her rooms be bright, but she never felt the same."

"Nor would I have. What would you like to have instead?"



"Green. A light green, with perhaps some floral wallpaper?"

"Yes, that would be much nicer. His Grace's father tried to be good to his family, but sometimes there was just no changing his mind. Fortunately, his son is more inclined to accept other opinions."

"I am pleased about that. I do understand and appreciate tradition, but sometimes they have to be broken."

"Is that to say that you break other rules?"

Dorothy looked at her kindly, not wanting to ruin the good time that they had had together but also not wanting to pretend that some things had not taken place.

"Mrs. Herrington, I know that you have been telling the Duke all of the things you dislike about me, including my pitfalls."

She reddened slightly, and Dorothy pitied her.

"I want you to know," she continued, "that I understand. I know that you have been doing extraordinarily well with the household, and that my arrival was sudden and possibly unplanned for you."

"It certainly was. I knew that he would one day take a wife, but I had at least thought that I would have time to prepare. It is not your fault, Your Grace, and I must apologize for my behavior. I have been the only one running the household for years, as there has not been a lady in the household since the death of the late Duchess."

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"I understand. I know that you like being in charge of all of this, and I cannot say that I blame you for being angry that I have such little knowledge, but I would so like to be good at this, so that I might be a help to you, rather than a hindrance."

The housekeeper smiled, which Dorothy could hardly believe, and then nodded.

"This household is all that I have. I never had children, or a home of my own, and so this has always been the one thing that I could take care of. I was like you, and I wanted to do it perfectly."

"And you do. I want to learn everything you know, so that I can be as good as you one day."

At last, it truly felt like they had come to an understanding. It felt good to be needed, even better to be useful, and Dorothy knew that it was only the beginning, and that they would do a lot of good together, which would begin with the changes she wished to make to the decorations.

"I ought to speak with my husband about all of the work I plan to do," she considered. "Might you know where he is? I have not seen him all day."

Mrs. Herrington looked away, biting her lip.

"The Duke will be away for a short while," she explained. "He has to go to London."

Dorothy furrowed her brow, remembering what he had told her. When they were married, he never planned on leaving the household. They would not attend events,

and she had accepted that, but if that was what he wanted then why had he been so quick to leave?

"It is for business purposes," Mrs. Herrington continued. "I thought he had told you."

"He did not. I do not understand."

"It has nothing to do with you, I assure you. He is not avoiding you, if that is what you are thinking."

"No, it is not that. He told me that we would not be leaving the manor, and I had assumed that would be the case for both of us."

"It typically is, believe me, but this has been unavoidable. If he did not have to be away, he would not be."

But there was something in her eye, and Dorothy saw it. She was hiding something, and Dorothy knew that no matter what she said, she would not find out what that was.

"Very well," she replied softly, "I understand."

It was a lie, but she had to protect the bond that she had made. It was upsetting to know that she was not truly considered part of the household, but that was something she would have to be used to.

In the meantime, as she would not be able to leave and see her friends, there was no reason why she could not bring her friends to her. She left for her room, and sat at her desk with her stationery scattered around her. She wrote three identical letters, and had them sent off with a request that the recipients had them as quickly as possible. She had plans for the household, and she needed all of the help that she could get, even if one of the three ladies she had invited could not do very much in the condition

that she was in.

Having done all that she could for the moment in terms of finding support, she made a list of all of the things she would need. It was long, and extensive, and there was every chance that time would be needed to find all of the necessary things.

Fortunately, with her husband's absence, she would have the time for that.

## CHAPTER 14

Morgan knew that he should have told his wife where he was going, but he could not face her.

He had been the one to tell her that they would be staying where they were, as that had been his intention, but he had made a promise to his niece and he had to keep it.

The guilt that he felt about hiding so much from Dorothy was immeasurable, but he had to continue doing so for a short while longer. One day, he would explain everything and hopefully she would understand, but that time had not yet come and he doubted that it would for a long time.

He hated London. He hated how many people were there, and how everyone recognized him. It also did not help him in his search, as all that he had to go on was that her name had been Elizabeth, and even then she could well have lied about that out of shame. He did not know where to begin, other than looking for the names of ladies that had died when Catherine was five years old, three years ago.

His first idea was to look at the parish records in London, as if the lady had met Thomas there, it was likely that that was where she had lived. It was not the only place, but it was where he hoped to find her.

The parish priest, Mister Granville, seemed surprised to see him on a Thursday afternoon.

"Good afternoon, Your Grace," he greeted. "Can I help you with anything?"

"I wish to see the parish records. I am searching for the name of a lady that passed away three years ago. Might you be able to assist me?"

"Certainly. Might I enquire as to why you are searching for this information?"

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"I would prefer to keep that to myself, if that is all right with you."

The parish priest, thankfully, did not question him further.

"There is a lot to read, Your Grace. Might you have a name, so that I can search for it for you?"

"All I have is the name Elizabeth. She died around December seventeenth, three years ago."

The parish priest searched in a large book of records, finding the date and looking around it.

"There is one Elizabeth here," he explained. "A baroness. She died at the age of four-and-sixty. Could that be her?"

Morgan shook his head. It was highly unlikely that a woman of that age would have a child, but even if that had happened it was known to him that the lady he was looking for wished to marry Thomas. Therefore, it was impossible that she had been married to another man.

"That is all that I can find," he explained. "Might you know where she lived?"

"No, though that would have made all of this much easier," he sighed. "Perhaps I will have to explain this to you after all. You see, this is all because of... of a friend of mine. He had a child out of wedlock, and he has since passed away, and I am trying to find the mother of his child. I know that she has passed, but the child is asking

about her."

"I see," he replied, in thought. "That shall be no small feat, Your Grace, given that you do not even know if she has been honest about who she was."

"I know, which is why I was hoping that I would be able to find her here. Are there any young ladies at all written here?"

"Not that I saw, no. Given the circumstances, it is highly likely that her family refused to have her listed. It is not unheard of, after all."

It was yet another difficulty to overcome; there might have been no proof of her existence at all.

"I understand," he sighed. "Thank you for your time, Mister Granville."

"You are most welcome. I must also congratulate you on your wedding. I hope that your marriage is a very happy one indeed."

It could be, he considered, once he stopped lying to her.

There were very few members of the ton that he could stomach, and Theodore Alanson was one of them. He was a second son, one that was most pleased to be one as it meant that he could shirk all of the responsibility. They used to have that in common, but they no longer did. Fortunately, on the odd occasion that he was in London, they continued to enjoy one another's company.

When they met at White's that night, he hoped that some time with a companion of his would help him think about something other than his situation, but he also knew that he needed help.

"It all sounds difficult," Alanson said after Morgan had explained everything. "I certainly do not envy you. Your brother must have decided to curse you even in death."

"It appears that way," Morgan huffed. "He seems to have always intended to destroy the family name."

"And yet, you have not allowed it. This is simply something to overcome, and then that will be the end of it, will it not?"

"I hope that is the case, but knowing Thomas there will be more to come. It never seems to end with him."

"Ulverston, it is perhaps time to forgive your brother and let him rest. I know that he has done many things that you have not agreed with, but he has been gone for three years now. It is not going to help you if you always think of him as a petulant child that did as he pleased."

"That was precisely who he was. He never felt the need to be responsible, and he was reckless until the day he died. I forgave him long ago for the way that he was, but that does not mean I can forget it, not when the effects of it are still present."

He drank his brandy and slammed the glass down perhaps a little harder than he planned.

"You have not yet found that girl, have you?" he asked.

Morgan had not told his friend the extent of the trouble Thomas had caused, but he had given him a brief explanation when Thomas had died. All he had said was that it was an affair of honor, and it had been because of a young lady. Morgan had planned to find her, so that he could at least try to make amends with her family, but he faced a



single issue and then he never tried again.

At least, not until Catherine had asked him.

"No, and I do not know how I ever will. There is no proof that she was ever even named Elizabeth. What is one supposed to do with that?"

"Well, have you considered finding the man that brought Catherine to you? He seemed to know your brother."

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"He also believed her name was Elizabeth."

"Precisely. Should that be the case, you can ask him if he ever knew more about her. He could have been lying for the sake of your brother, but now that you are enquiring directly, he may be swayed."

Morgan considered this greatly. He remembered the man that had brought Catherine to him well, and he had in truth planned to pay him a visit eventually or even invite him to stay for dinner one night so that he could meet her. Again, he had left it so long that he no longer felt it was right to do it.

"This is all so preposterous," he grumbled. "I have forgiven my brother, but I wish he had at least caused less chaos before leaving it for me to fix."

"Yes, well, brothers tend to do that."

His friend was grinning wickedly, and Morgan envied him greatly. He wished that he could have been the carefree second son that he was meant to be, and left everything for Thomas instead, but that had never been his role. It was for the best that he was now the Duke of Ulverston, as awful as he felt to think that, but he never should have had to shoulder such burdens.

"Does your brother loathe you?" he asked.

"Not at all. Well, at least I do not believe he does. Then again, I am not half as dreadful as your late brother. The worst that I have done is frequented a brothel or two."

"I would have said it was the visit to the eccentric that you met. The one that enjoyed painting scantily clad women."

"There is nothing wrong with painting. He actually said he liked what I made, believe it or not."

"Ah, yes, and then he hung it in his gallery."

"Actually, it was put away never to see the light of day again, but you already knew that."

Morgan laughed, in spite of how concerned he was about the task at hand. He later returned to his lodgings and set to make a plan as to what he would do next. He would visit Mister Smythe in the morning, and try to trace the elusive lady that had seemingly disappeared into nothing. It was almost as if she never existed at all, and had it not been for Catherine he might have believed that.

Fortunately, it was far easier to find Mister Smythe as he had not changed his office. All that Morgan had to do was ask a single person if they had heard of him, and he was directed the entire way. He braced himself before knocking, hoping that something would come of his visit but knowing that he would not be so fortunate as that.

"Your Grace!" Mister Smythe gasped, not expecting him. "Welcome. To what do I owe the pleasure?"

"Might you have a moment? I require a word."

The man nodded, welcoming him in. Morgan looked around at the small space that he had entered, hoping that somewhere there was a letter that Thomas had sent him, something that explained what had happened beyond him having a child with a lady

he had no intentions of marrying.

"What can I help you with?" Mister Smythe asked as they sat at his desk.

"It is about my brother, and the lady he... knew."

"I did wonder when you would have more questions."

"I never thought to ask anything. I wanted to care for the little girl, first."

"Ah yes, little Catherine. How is she?"

"She is coming along well. She is a funny little girl, and so intelligent, but that sickness never left her."

"That is no surprise to me. She will likely have that cold for the rest of her life, given what happened to her. It is a miracle that we have her with us at all."

Morgan had visions of what might have happened if they were not seen, and shuddered.

"You are a good man," Mister Smythe continued. "Not every man would take in his niece, let alone one born under such circumstances."

"It is what was right, and I have never once regretted it. She is a lovely girl, and I would rather have her with me than in some orphanage somewhere."

"And with a new wife, too. How does she feel about it?"

"She— she does not yet know about her. Catherine remains in her own wing of the household, and my wife does not visit that part of it."

Mister Smythe narrowed his eyes slightly.

"Do you plan to tell her at all?"

"Eventually, yes, but for the moment there is too much to do. That is precisely why I have come to see you. Catherine is growing up, and she has started to have questions about her mother. When she asks about my brother, I find it easy to tell her about him, but I do not want to lie to her and I do not know the first thing about Miss Elizabeth. I was hoping that you might."

"I... Your Grace, I know only what your late brother told me. He must have thought that he would survive his duel and continue to send them money and then you never would have known a thing, and so he did not think to tell me more."

"I am not asking for much, only whether or not Elizabeth was truly her name."

Mister Smythe looked around for a moment, and Morgan knew that he was hiding something from him. He did not know what it was, nor how big of a secret it was, but it had to be something.

"Your Grace, know that what I did was for my client, your brother."

"What was it, Smythe? I shall not blame you for whatever it was."

"He claims that he left a letter for you. It was in your household, and I assumed you might have found it by now. Now that I am thinking about it again, however, I am realizing that he had hidden it somewhere. I do not know where, but it is my hope that you will be able to find it upon your return."

Morgan felt his mouth fall open. For three years, he could have had the answers he wanted, but the letter containing them had never been seen. After so much time had passed, it could have been anywhere. Had it been stored improperly, it might even have begun to fade, but Morgan at least knew that it had to have been hidden away in darkness, as he would otherwise have seen it by that point.

"Why did you not tell me of this?"

"I thought you would have seen it for yourself. With all of your staff, I assumed your home would be cleaned entirely so often that someone would see it. I do not know where he must have left it."

Morgan sighed, exasperated. Everything he wanted to know may well have been contained in a single page, but he had no way of knowing where it was.

"I do apologize, Your Grace," he continued. "I would never have done anything to make your search more difficult."

"There is no need to apologize. You would have assumed that my brother was intelligent enough not to do anything that might cause trouble for me, but you did not know my brother as well as I did. I shall have to return home, and continue my search there."

He left soon after, and on his journey back to his lodgings he thought to search those too. There was every chance that it had been sent there, if Thomas wished to leave it somewhere that he could take it away should he have won the duel. He sighed as he entered the building, and began his search.

He remained there three more days, turning everything there upside down in hopes of finding what he was searching for. There was nothing, and he felt his frustration growing the more he looked. He would have to return to his niece knowing nothing

further than he had when he left for London. He did not want to disappoint her, and so he continued on even though he knew he would not find anything.

He, of course, did not find it there. He boarded his carriage to return home and throughout the journey he tried to think of places that might not have been seen in so long. There had to be somewhere, he knew that, but he did not know just what it was.

Suddenly, he froze in place, his heart pounding. Before he had left, he had told his wife that she could change the household to her liking.

She could not find the letter before he did.

## CHAPTER 15

"He has not abandoned you, I assure you," Emma promised Dorothy, as they took tea before beginning their work.

"He vanished yesterday, and has not told me personally where he has gone. What else could he possibly have wanted to do?"

"Why are you upset about that?" Cecilia asked. "You knew that this marriage would not be a love match. He has left you well taken care of and with complete control over what becomes of the household. If you ask me, that is quite the perfect situation."

"Perhaps it is for you, but I would rather see my husband than not know where he is and how long he will be away for."

"Dorothy, you must not think like this," Beatrice said gently. "I know that this is not something that you expected, but it could have been urgent."



But Dorothy knew better. They had enjoyed each other's company, and she had thought that they were coming closer to one another, but he had pulled away at the last moment and left her behind. She knew that marriages would have difficulties, especially ones formed in the way that hers had, but she thought that they understood one another, and the fact that he clearly did not think the same upset her greatly.

"So," Emma said, trying to brighten things, "you have asked us here to redecorate?"

"You cannot in your condition, I forbid it, but yes. I plan to change everything about this place, as I wish to make it a home that I wish to live in."

"It is the right thing to do," Emma nodded. "It is awfully dark."

"The late Duke liked it this way, but I cannot stand it. I would like to make it more to my tastes, even if they are not fashionable by any means."

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"So the three of us shall be doing it?" Beatrice asked. "We are not exactly the best for this."

"I can help," Emma protested, but that was quickly stopped by the three of them.

She would soon give birth, and as it was she walked with difficulty. Dorothy planned to have her seated with them as they worked, as she did not want her to feel excluded. Not only that, but she would help greatly with advice as someone that had already changed her own household in a few ways.

"Well then, there is no need to dawdle," Cecilia said brightly, jumping to her feet and then helping Emma. "Come, let us make this a beautiful home worthy of a duchess!"

The servants, including Mrs. Herrington, were also set to work. Dorothy expected the work to be completed in two days, and it was to be intense. Thankfully, her friends enjoyed a challenge, and by the end of the first day there was no longer any paper on the walls. Already, more light entered into the rooms and made everything look even bigger than it already was.

Paints and papers had been placed in the correct rooms, and as they ensured that it had been completed, Dorothy gave them a tour of the household. When they came to the dreaded west wing, Cecilia began walking toward it and Dorothy called out to her to stop.

"What is it?" she asked. "Are you hiding gifts for us in there or something?"

"We cannot go there. It is forbidden."

The ladies looked at one another for a moment, and then back to her.

"It is your home," Beatrice said, confused. "There should not be anywhere in your home that is forbidden."

"I know, but it is what my husband has told me and I do not want to disobey him. Whether I like it or not, it was in our vows that I would obey him in every way, and so I will."

"That is absurd," Cecilia argued. "Besides, he told you not to go, but he never said such a thing to me. Nor Emma or Beatrice, for that matter."

"Cecilia, please. I know that it is strange, and that you do not like it, but it would make me feel so much better if you listened to me. It is all well and good that you wish to see it, but you will not be left with the consequences of it."

At last, Cecilia seemed to reconsider what she was doing. She nodded slightly, though concern was still clearly etched in her features.

"You should not be afraid of your husband," she whispered, as they walked slightly ahead of Emma and Beatrice. "You should wish to please him, I will not tell you not to do that, but you should not fear consequences with him."

"It is not out of fear, but respect. He has given me a good life here, I assure you. I have my freedom, for the most part, and he allows me to do whatever I please with the garden, and when we do talk he is very kind to me. I have very little to dislike, even if the few things that I am unhappy about are important."

"Then when your husband returns, you are to tell him this. You must not cower, especially if you have no reason to fear him."

"I do not cower."

Cecilia raised an eyebrow at her, and Dorothy did not try to push what she had said. The truth was that she did, to anyone that told her what to do. Even Cecilia, someone she had known for a long time and was a friend to, only had to look at her and she lost all ability to argue. She wanted to be fearless and bold like her friend, but it was not who she was. She was gentle and soft, and though that gave her strengths she could not deny the inherent weakness in it.

"In any case," she continued, "I will speak with him. I would at least like to know where he has been. My housekeeper tells me that he is in London, for business purposes, but I had seen him the night before and he did not mention it. Surely business does not require emergency visits?"

"They may well, and from what I have heard he is still trying to fix what his brother broke."

Dorothy paused. She was not aware that he had a brother.

"Has he not told you anything?" she asked. "Truly, wonders never cease."

"Perhaps he believes that my father has already told me about him?"

"Or perhaps there is something shameful that he is keeping from you? I would wager that it has something to do with that wing."

"Then it is just as well that ladies do not wager. Cecilia, you are a wonderful friend to me, but I do not want to hear about any of this. I simply want to fix my household, and I would very much like to begin with my hideous room."

"It is not so hideous anymore," Beatrice noted. "You have removed that yellow now,

so it is already looking much nicer."

"It will be perfect when it is green. I cannot believe that I shall at last be rid of this dreadful color for the rest of my life."

"But what if you have a child that likes it?" Emma quipped. "Surely you will not say no to such a precious little thing?"

"I most certainly will! I shall enforce a strict rule on what colors they are permitted to wear. Pink, green, blue and purple will be the only ones allowed, if not brown or grey or white."

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The ladies all laughed together and then began the work. It was not perfect, but when it was done Dorothy stood back and breathed a sigh of relief. It was calm at last, and precisely what she wanted.

"We have done a lot in such a short time," she said to nobody in particular. "It is not finished, but it is a start."

"The staff will have it ready," Beatrice assured her.

"Good, then in the meantime we have something else to do."

They left for the glasshouse, and the ladies gasped at it. It was enormous, Dorothy knew that, but it would have been quite a shock to those not accustomed to seeing them. The only other one that they would have seen was that of the Duke of Pridefield, whom they had stayed with the year before. He had an orangery, and Dorothy had so loved the fruit in there. She hoped to grow the same thing in her own, but for that to happen they would have to have it changed greatly.

"Do you honestly plan to rejuvenate this yourself?" Emma asked.

"No, I have requested a specialist for it. He should arrive later today. I would have liked to do it alone, but it is too great a risk. My husband adores plants like I do, and so it is for the best that we have the best possible glasshouse for our garden."

"Then I cannot wait to see it. You know, your husband might not be what you envisioned, but I am so pleased that he shares in your passion."

"As am I," Beatrice agreed. "I do not believe that I shall be so fortunate, as I could not tell you a single man that enjoys baking."

"No," Dorothy quipped, "but there are many gentlemen that would highly appreciate the goods that come from it."

"Oh, yes! I almost forgot that I brought something for us all. Your housekeeper took it to the kitchens."

Having shown them the gardens, Dorothy took them back to her favorite drawing room, one that they had made a pale blue. The treats arrived, several small cakes covered in pink icing.

"Is this your way of telling me you believe that I am to have a little girl?" Emma asked, smiling into her cake as she bit it.

"No, in truth I believe that you will have a boy. I simply like pink."

"As do I," Dorothy agreed, lying back and looking at the new room.

Everything in her household had changed entirely. It was unrecognizable from the dark and dreary manor that it had been two mere days before. Her time with her friends was coming to an end, as she did not want them to be there when her husband returned but she did not know when that would be.

It was not that she was afraid of them meeting the Duke, but rather she knew the conversation that the two of them would have when he returned, and she wished to have it sooner rather than later. There was so much that she wished to know, and so much that she knew he was hiding, and she did not know that she wanted her friends to be there when she learned of it all.

When the time came for them to leave, they each embraced her tightly. Cecilia's was the tightest of all, as it always was. She was an opinionated lady, but she cared fiercely for everyone she knew and Dorothy had always been especially important to her. She had had gowns made for her, defended her in times of need, and been the one to push her to do what was right, rather than what would lead to the least conflict. Dorothy wished that she would one day find happiness with a husband, but she had decided it was her life's path to be a bluestocking, and there was no changing her mind there.

Beatrice was hoping to marry, and Emma was happier than ever with her own husband, and Dorothy wished that she could feel that way; excited and content. She would tell Morgan that when he returned.

It just so happened that that was the following day. She went to see him, briefly ignoring all of the things she wished to say to him.

"You are home!" she greeted warmly. "How have you been?"

But he was looking around the household, his gaze distant.

"Dorothy," he said quietly, "what have you done?"

## CHAPTER 16

Morgan did not return to his home.

Instead, he found himself entering a strange place that was completely unrecognizable from the place he had lived in all of his life. The darkness that he had always seen was lifted into sugary pale shades, just like any other household in the town.



It was precisely what he had given his wife permission to do, but that had been before he discovered that there was a letter to uncover. He saw just how different his household was and felt great suspicion that the very thing he wanted to find had already been seen by someone else, and that terrified him.

"What have you done?" he repeated, at last looking at his wife.

He could see the confusion in her face, and he could not blame her for that. Dorothy seemed to have no reason to understand why he was acting like he was, which meant that she could not have found the letter. It was a start, but that did not mean there was not another person that had seen it.

"I have redecorated," she said gently. "It is precisely what I told you that I wanted to do."

"Did you go to the west wing?"

"Morgan, I—"

"Did you go to the west wing?" he bellowed.

He regretted it the moment he saw the fear in her eyes.

"No," she whispered. "Of course not."

His shoulders lowered, and he unset his jaw. He felt guilt rising within him in an instant; he had nobody to blame for his behavior but himself, as he had been the one to keep so much from her. He needed to tell her what was happening, and why she had been kept from the west wing, but he could not bring himself to explain it.

"Dorothy, I—"

"No, it is quite all right. I was going to ask you if you liked what I have done, but I can see how you feel already. I shall leave you be."

She left the household, and he remained standing where he was. He was torn, knowing that he had to find the letter but also wanting to follow after his wife and apologize. He heard footsteps approaching, and looked up to see Mrs. Herrington.

"As far as greetings go," she said in surprise, "that was not the best."

"Enough, Mrs. Herrington," he sighed. "I do not need your pity."

"I was not expressing it for you. I was expressing it for your wife."

He looked at her in confusion. When he had left for London, his housekeeper hated his wife, but suddenly she was defending her.

"I shall show you what your wife has done," she continued, and he followed after her.

Everything, with the exception of the west wing, had changed completely. Light traveled easily through the hallways and made it far more comforting than it had ever been. Morgan could not believe that his home had always had so much potential, and that it had been done by his wife.

"She had friends with her," Mrs. Herrington continued. "There were three of them, one with child. She was a duchess, I believe."

"Yes, I have heard about her. My wife said she expected us to receive an invitation to dinner, but I refused. I said it was because I do not leave the household."

"I see, and how soon after that did you leave for London?"

"Too soon, I know. I plan to speak to her, to apologize, but I wanted to give her a moment. I also must tell you something, but you cannot tell anyone about it, not even the staff. Thomas left me a letter, and it is somewhere in this household."

"A letter?" Mrs. Herrington asked, eyes narrowed. "He never wrote letters."

"No, but he had one hidden away here for me. It contains the truth about Catherine, and it simply must be found. Please tell me that you have seen it before, and that it has been in my study all this time and I missed it."

"Your Grace, I apologize, but I have never seen anything hidden away. Your study is

always immaculate, and so beyond rummaging around in there, there is not very much that I can do if it is there."

"Very well, then, you have my permission to look everywhere else. It must be found if I am to tell Catherine the truth about herself."

"And when do you plan to tell Her Grace about her?"

"Soon. I am waiting for the right time, and— what happened between the two of you?"

His housekeeper smiled sheepishly.

"I misjudged her," she said with a smile. "I thought that she was some young thing that was excited to be a duchess and live a life of leisure. I suppose that I also did not want to lose the power that I have to someone that had not, as far as I thought, earned it. I see now that I was wrong, and I should have given her a chance. She and I have truly seen eye to eye of late."

"That is wonderful. I had hoped that you would see her the way I do."

"I do, and that is why I am going to tell you this: go to her, and apologize. Even if you are not yet ready to tell her everything, she deserves an explanation."

He agreed, and so bid her farewell and left for the garden. He found her in the glasshouse, which was also very different though not complete. He stepped inside, and she bristled at once.

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"I have nothing to say to you," she said coldly, looking away.

"Very well, then I shall do all of the talking. I would like to apologize for what I have done."

She did not say anything, keeping her back to him and looking at the plants.

"The changes are wonderful. It is precisely what I have always wanted the household to look like, and I cannot believe that you have achieved it in such a short space of time. You have a talent for it, you know."

Still, she was silent.

"I should have told you that I was leaving for a while, I know, but I could not. I promise you that it will make sense one day, but for now it must be kept from you."

She laughed emptily, and he sighed.

"Please, Dorothy, say something."

"You do not want to hear what I have to say," she snapped, turning to face him. "You do not want me to tell you that you have made me feel so lonely while I have been here, and that you had finally make me feel like a friend to you only to leave me without telling me why. You still will not, and I will never understand why. I have done nothing to make you distrust me, and yet you never tell me anything."

"It has nothing to do with you."

"Then why can you not tell me what is happening? You will not tell me where you have been, you will not tell me why the westwing is forbidden, you will not tell me why you refuse to join my friends but are willing to leave for other things. Why are you doing this?"

"Because you would not understand. I want to tell you everything, but it is not as simple as that. I have tried so hard to make you happy, and done what I could to make you feel less alone, but as a duke I must sometimes do difficult things."

"Then do the difficult thing and tell me the truth. Until then, you should know that I do not wish to see you. I do not want a husband that refuses to speak to me when it is not easy."

She left, pushing past him. He chased after her, but she refused to stop. He knew that he had made a mistake, and that she had worked so hard only for him to trample over it, but he wanted her to understand that he had not hurt her deliberately. He would never have done that to her.

She did not come down to dinner, and he had expected that. He considered leaving her be for a while, until she came to him, but he knew that she had meant what she said. Until he told her everything, she would not see him. If he wanted to have his wife back, he would have to tell her the truth. Instead of going for a drink after dinner, he decided to see Catherine. She had been so desperate to meet his wife, and if he had to reveal her to Dorothy then it would at least be a pleasant first conversation to have.

When he entered her room, she was lying on her side, facing away from the window. It was a strange way for her to be, and when he perched on the foot of her bed she looked at him with sadness in her eyes.

"This is all my fault," she whispered.

"Nothing is your fault. What is it?"

"I heard everything," she explained, sitting up. "I was by the window when you and your wife were in the glasshouse. I heard what she said. I never wanted to be a problem."

"Oh, Catherine, that is not your fault. She is angry, yes, but not because of you. It is because of me, as I have never told her about you and told her that she cannot come here. It is my own fault that that happened."

"But if I were not here, it would not be something that you had to say."

"And you are not here because of anything you did, either. I know that this has been unfair, and I apologize for that. I am going to tell her about you, and then you may meet her. Would that make you happy?"

She smiled, but it faded.

"I would so like to, but if she does not want me here then everything will be worse than before."

"Yes, which is precisely why I have not yet said anything, but that must stop. She will love you, I am certain of it."

She was not completely confident, but she seemed to be eased by it at least. Though intelligent and well-spoken, she was still a young girl and very willing to believe that the best would happen.

All that was left to do was speak to Dorothy, and that was where the difficulty was. She was kind and understanding, but every person had a limit, and a secret niece could well have been hers. He braced himself as he stood at her bedchambers. He

knocked, and thankfully she opened the door.

"Your Grace," she sighed, "I have already told you that I do not wish to see you."

"Until I tell you the truth, yes. I have been a fool, and it is time that I tell you everything. I can do it now, or we can wait until morning. What would you prefer?"

She looked at him with uncertainty for a moment.



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"If I ask you something," she said quietly, "will you promise not to laugh at me?"

"Of course. I would never laugh at you."

She opened the door fully, and he entered. She sat in one of her armchairs and took a deep breath.

"The day I spent time in the garden," she began, "I saw a figure at the window. I have spent so much time since then wondering if all of this has happened because there was a phantom of some sort here. I suppose what I wish to ask you is this: is this house haunted?"

Morgan sighed. His home was indeed haunted, but not by a phantom.

"There are no ghosts here," he promised her, "but I can indeed explain why you saw that figure."

## CHAPTER 17

Dorothy had expected Morgan to mock her for believing that she had seen a ghost. She had not expected him to take her to see it.

As they neared the west wing, she was positive that their house was haunted. She began to tremble, wishing she had never asked about it. She had heard the creaking floors there from time to time, and whispered voices, but she had thought it was her imagination.

They arrived at a door, and Morgan went to knock before pausing.

"All I ask," he said gently, "is that you do not hate me for keeping this from you."

"I do not hate you, and I will not. Come, let us see what this is."

With a deep breath, he knocked and then opened the door, walking inside.

Dorothy followed after him, and her breath was taken away. Inside the room was a pale girl, blonde hair in ringlets, who was looking at her with wide but sunken eyes.

"Hello," Dorothy said clumsily. "Who might you be?"

She did not know what else to say, but it seemed to work. The little girl smiled, and at once she seemed to be in better health.

"I am Catherine," she explained. "I am the Duke's niece. I am eight years of age and I like to play the pianoforte."

Dorothy turned to Morgan, who was looking at his niece with pride.

"It is lovely to meet you," Dorothy said gently, bending down to her height. "My name is Dorothy. Would you like to call me that?"

"I thought I might call you Aunt Dorothy, if that is all right."

"You may call me Aunt Dottie if it pleases you."

The small girl laughed softly at that.

"I like that a lot. I shall call you that, then."

Morgan sent for a tea, and they sat on a settee together. Dorothy could not take her eyes from the girl, but what struck her was how familiar she looked. She was a very pretty little girl, but something in her face was undeniably similar to a face that she had seen before.

"You may ask any questions that you have," Morgan said gently. "She knows everything that I do, and I no longer keep secrets from her."

"Then I should like to know everything. This is... It is a lot to see at once, especially with no explanation."

"Would you like to tell her, Catherine?"

The little girl nodded, and the tea arrived.

"My father is dead," she said bluntly, reaching for a sandwich. "My mother is, too. She drowned."

Dorothy thought back to her time in the lake, and that Catherine must have seen her do it, and shuddered. It was no wonder that Mrs. Herrington had been so furious; she could have been frightened.

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"She went into a lake with me," Catherine continued. "That is why I am unwell, and why I am so small. It is quite all right, though, for I am very happy here."

"You are so well spoken. It is very impressive."

"I like to read. I have so many books, and so I have a big vocabulary from them."

"I love to read, too. Which books are your favorite?"

"All of them. I enjoy learning. It is all that I can do, really."

Dorothy looked in confusion at Morgan, who cleared his throat.

"You see," he explained, "I do not think it is wise for her to be out in society. I fear that, given the circumstances surrounding her birth, she will be rejected. Not that it is her fault, of course."

"No, it most certainly is not."

"It is all right," Catherine said meekly. "I know that it is for my protection. I understand."

But Dorothy's heart broke for the girl. She was such a wonderful little girl, intelligent and well-spoken and very pretty, and she would flourish socially if she was allowed to go outside.

"Perhaps one day that will change," Dorothy suggested, and Catherine's eyes sparkled

while Morgan grimaced.

Suddenly, Mrs. Herrington entered. Her mouth fell open at the sight of the three of them.

"It is time, then?" she asked.

"Indeed," Morgan nodded. "It is time for all of us to know precisely what is happening here. That is why I am going to tell all of you that I will soon know the name of Catherine's mother, and then we will be able to visit her resting place."

Instantly, Catherine threw her arms around her uncle. Dorothy smiled at that, but then her face fell into one of confusion.

"Do we not know her mother?"

"We do not," Mrs. Herrington explained. "His Grace tried to find her, but it is likely that the name we were given was not her real name, and now we are quite lost."

"But if we find that letter," Morgan explained, "the one my brother left me, then we will know for certain who she was, and it shall be easier then."

After a while, they left Catherine to rest. It had been a meeting that the little girl had yearned for, as Dorothy came to know, but it had needed a lot of her energy, and she was very tired.

"Did you happen to find anything while redecorating?" Morgan asked her when they were alone.

"I did not. Then again, I did not touch your study, or the west wing. Could he have hidden the letter there?"

"I have searched my study, but there was nothing. I should look again, but I wish to investigate the west wing first."

"We can search for it together, if you wish. I would be more than happy to help you find it, especially for Catherine's sake."

"You... you took that news very well. You did not seem very surprised at all, nor angry with me when truly you had the right to be."

"I suppose it is because I understand. I have secrets of my own, after all."

He looked at her in surprise, and she took a deep breath.

"You wouldn't happen to know anything about my sister, would you?"

"I do not. Your father never mentioned her."

"Well, she was perfect. She was everything that I could never quite be. She was beautiful and intelligent and a favorite among the ton. She could have had her pick of any gentleman, but she ran away with a man with no title."

His eyes widened.

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"That is why my father insisted that I marry well. We had to improve my family's reputation. I have not spoken with my sister for a very long time, and the only contact I have had at all is the letters she sent our parents, explaining the current fashions and telling them how to dress me."

"That explains the yellow and orange."

"Do not remind me. I much prefer these new gowns. In any case, I understand that families have their secrets. My only question is why you wish to keep her as one? It is rare to care for your late brother's child, but not unheard of. We might as well have it be known."

"Under normal circumstances, yes, but my brother and the lady were unmarried. He had refused her, and when he died she realized that she was not going to ever have his support and so she took matters into her own hands. Little did she know that I would have everything explained to me. I could have provided for her, and I feel a terrible amount of guilt about that."

"You did nothing wrong. Once you learned of it all, you took the little girl in, yes? That means that you have done all that you could. In the meantime, we must decide what is to be done about the girl, and finding her mother."

"And might I suggest you meet your sister again?"

Her shoulders slumped. She had wanted to see her sister for years, but it had never happened. Eleanor had made her choice, and she had never come back for Dorothy.

Then again, neither knew precisely what had happened. Their parents had told Dorothy their truth, but she wondered if Eleanor had another point of view entirely.

"I could try," she considered. "I do miss her, but she has made her choice. She likes her new life, I am certain of it."

"Even so, it would be nice for her to know you are well, and to see you again."

"Then I will write to her. I must locate her first, but at least we know her name. It shall be easier to find her than it will be to find Catherine's mother."

He nodded, and they began their search. They each took a room, and looked inside every book and in every drawer. Dorothy tried with everything in her to find it, and she willed it to appear somehow. She knew what it was like to have no answers about someone, and she did not wish that upon anyone, especially not someone so sweet as the child.

Giving in with one room, she moved along to the next. She repeated the process, gently turning everything inside of it in the hopes of finding something, but there was nothing. She sighed, sitting in a chair. She could hear Morgan searching in a more erratic manner than she had been, and she wished there was something that she could do to ease his concerns. It seemed quite hopeless, and when they had searched every room of the west wing, and Morgan had searched his study again, they both sat in the parlor room, defeated.

"I do not know what to do," he said quietly. "I must find her, for Catherine's sake, but I do not know what to do. I know nothing about her, only that she had a dalliance with my brother and he refused her when the consequences arose. I could give you a hundred other times where that happened. This, to him, was just another mistake that he could leave for me to fix."



"He did this a lot, then?"

"Never to this extent, and granted this one was the death of him, but it is something that I cannot fix. I cannot will a woman into existence, no matter how much I might like it to be so."

"But we will find her. It might be almost impossible, but we will do all that we can. The letter is here somewhere, and when we find that we can find her. We will do this."

Morgan nodded, but he seemed lost. Dorothy wished that there was more that she could do. She had never known his late brother, but she could see that he was a difficult man to handle. If he had left something for Morgan to find, he could have done absolutely anything.

"Might I be able to look at your study?" she asked suddenly, an idea coming to her.

"Of course. What do you plan to do? I have already looked everywhere, twice."

"Your brother, how did he die?"

"In a duel."

"Then I know precisely where to look."

She went into his study, and he followed behind her. She found a small set of drawers on his desk, and opened each one. They were filled with papers, but none of them contained anything of interest. However, as she searched them, she noticed that one drawer was shallower than the others. Morgan had torn each room apart, and in his frenzy he would not have thought to carefully check if something had be properly hidden. She lifted the drawers, and the bottom of the drawer gave way.

A small slot fell out, revealing that it had been a false bottom. Alongside it, to her astonishment, fell a letter.

"My God," Morgan gasped.

Dorothy picked it up and handed it to him. He scrambled to open it, and he read it quickly. As she watched him, she saw that the more he read the more concerned he became. When he had finished, his arms fell by his sides.

"Morgan?" she asked. "What is it?"

"It is nothing."

"Is it not the letter?"

"It is, but it... I need a moment."

He left the room, leaving her abandoned in the study. Her heart pounded as she tried to work out just what had happened. This was precisely what he had wanted, but the contents had devastated him.

She left the study, closing the door behind her. She considered going to see Catherine, but she wished to give her time. Morgan would have to see her first, and explain whatever was enclosed in the letter.

She went out into the gardens, instead, and hid away in the glasshouse. Work had begun, and it was already completely different. She sat on the ground, leaning back so that the sun was on her face.

After a while, she felt a presence come toward her. She opened her eyes, expecting to see Mrs. Herrington, but was greeted by her husband. He sat beside her on the ground, and she leaned against him.

"If you do not wish to tell me what is written," she said gently, "I shall not force you."

"I do want to tell you, truly I do, but it is a long story and it is something that I never planned to talk to you about."

"Well, there has been a lot that neither of us ever expected to say, and yet here we are. It is for the best, I think, that we are honest with one another now."

"If that is what you want, then that is what we shall do."

He sighed, sitting back.

"All of this began a very long time ago, and it is a time that I wish to forget."

"I understand. Truly, if it is too painful then there is no need to—"

"No, I must. It is not shameful for me, not anymore, but it is something that happened that I wish had not. It would have, it appears, saved an awful lot of heartache."

He sat in thought for a moment before opening his mouth again.

"You see, Dorothy," he explained, "I have been engaged before."

## CHAPTER 18

Morgan knew that, if his brother had no interest in taking a wife, then he would have to do so.

He was not the most eligible; his brother was, but the second son of a duke was nothing to scoff at for the hopeful young ladies of the ton. It would be easy enough to find someone willing, he thought, and once he had settled that matter he could possibly prove to Thomas that he had to become a man too.

Embarrassment was, after all, the only thing that made him change.

And so, he found a nice girl and courted her. She was pleasant enough, and pretty, and that was all he required. He was hardly a man himself in those respects. Fortunately, Lady Annabelle was a good match for him that way.

"Do you truly think he makes a worthy duke?" she asked him during tea one day. "I understand that he is the oldest, but...well, he is not exactly what one pictures when

they think of the nobility."

"Perhaps not, but that is not for us to question. It is the way things are."

"Indeed, but at least when we are married and he decides this is not the life he wants, we shall have the matter settled for us."

"You certainly have high expectations."

"I always have. Being one of seven children gives one a desire to stand out. I am more than happy with what you have, but to be a duchess, well, there is no comparison."

She was a social climber, and Morgan knew that, but he did not mind that so much. She was a pretty lady, with striking blonde hair and green eyes, and she came from a good family. That was all that he needed for the marriage he was seeking.

"You know, my brother may never give up his title."

"Perhaps it will be stripped from him then, as you and I both know he needs to do better."

"And if all goes to plan, he will. Fear not, my family name is respected and we are very fortunate. Duchess or not, you shall be very well taken care of."

But she hated his hesitancy, and Morgan could sense it. She wanted to be more than the wife of a second born son, and it was the one thing that he did not see changing.

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Even so, he never would have expected her betrayal.

He had not wanted to attend the ball that evening. He did not want to go into society with his father recently dead, nor did he want to hear a thousand fake apologies. He did not want to listen to the ingenuine sympathy that was bound to come his way. It was for the best that he did not go at all, and mourned in peace.

"Brother, I shall not hear any of that," Thomas groaned when Morgan told him as much. "You refuse to frequent our club with me, but you will not refuse a societal event. I am the Duke now, and I do not think I am able to do it alone."

"I do not want to hear anything more about our loss."

"It shall be worse for me in any case. They will look at me as though I am happy about it."

Morgan had to accept that. With newly titled nobility, there was always the assumption that they were more pleased to have a title bestowed upon them than they were upset at their father's loss. He knew there would be many whispers of that about Thomas, as all he had done since gaining the dukedom was go to White's and drink.

"Very well, I will go, but you are not to leave me at any point during the night. We will be there for one another, yes?"

"Of course. I promise."

But Thomas' promise meant as much as any other one he made. It had only been five

minutes when he vanished, and Morgan rolled his eyes and allowed the tont to begin.

Except, to his surprise, there was no word of their loss. All that anyone cared to discuss was how awful Thomas would be as duke. The worst of it was that, though he tended to agree with the mutterings, he wanted to defend his brother. He could not, however, as it would have been viewed as an outburst and only worsen the rumors.

He stepped outside, and he considered leaving altogether, but the gardens were lovely and he decided instead to marvel at them until the evening had drawn to a close. Then, he would take Thomas sharply by the arm and leave, giving him yet another lecture that he would not listen to the following morning.

"Oh, My Lord, it is dreadful. Can you imagine it?"

He bristled. He would have recognized that voice anywhere, as it was none other than that of his betrothed. He remained still, waiting for her to pass by so that he could see who she was with, but they never did. They remained behind him, and so he turned around to look at them.

It was indeed Lady Annabelle, accompanied by a gentleman that Morgan recognized. It was David Beaufort, a Frenchman that had recently returned to accept the title of Viscount of Fremton after a relative had passed. The Fremtons were known to be incredibly wealthy, according to Thomas, and as a titled man he was precisely what Lady Annabelle had been searching for.

"I cannot fathom why you ever agreed to an engagement," Fremton laughed. "You should never have lowered yourself to that man."

"To that bear, you mean," she giggled, her fan swept across her in a way that made Morgan nauseous. "If only I had another gentleman willing to protect me from him."

"Perhaps you might soon find one."

"Perhaps I already have."

She was pressed against him, and if anyone were to see them in such a situation they would have been forced to marry one another regardless. Morgan did not love her, but he had respected her a great deal and all of that fell away at that moment. When they kissed, he felt his heart fall. Without thinking, he stepped out from hiding and strode toward them.

"Your Grace!" Lady Annabelle gasped. "This is a misunderstanding, I—"

"I have already heard everything," he sighed. "Let us not do all of this. I shall take back the ring, and the two of you may do as you please."

"But—"

"Enjoy your life together," he nodded to Fremton. "I hope that your new wife learns to speak French, as her talent as it stands is nothing to be too pleased with."

He took Lady Annabelle's hand, removed the ring from her finger, and walked away.

He never thought about her again. Mercifully, with how many escapades Thomas had, Morgan was too preoccupied to give a moment to the lady he had proposed to. She faded from memory, and then he married Dorothy, and it had all ended there.

"Morgan,

If you are reading this, then you shall be more furious with me than ever. Fortunately, I will not be around to see any of it.



I should have told you long ago that I was spending time with a lady, but I knew you would force me to marry her. I do not want to marry her, and now I must do what is necessary to avoid that.

She has a daughter. We have one, I should say. I am not prepared for that, and I have done enough to this family without adding an illegitimate child to all of it. This is the only way to fix all of this. I know that you will never forgive me, but I do not know what else to do.

When I am gone, I shall need you to provide for the lady. I know that it is yet another burden for you to take care of, but you may consider it my final unruly action. It is also the final thing that I shall ever ask of you. I must also tell you, of course, who she is, but that is where you will truly loathe me. I should have told you, and I apologize for that.

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The evening your engagement came to an end, I had left you alone. I was with the lady then, and I have been with her many times since. She was in love with me, but nothing could be done about it. You see, she was Lady Annabelle's sister, Elizabeth Blackwood. When the two of you were betrothed, we knew that we could never marry. When the engagement was cancelled, she and I considered marriage, but then the child came. I abandoned her. I should not have, but I did.

I have been sending funds to her, but she wants more than that. She expects me to marry her, but I cannot. I could never do that to you. You have been stoic about Lady Annabelle, and you do not deserve to spend your life reminded of it because of a selfish decision that Lady Elizabeth and I made.

Forgive me, Morgan. I know you may never do so, but I know that you will at least care for these girls in a way that I never did.

Yours sincerely,

Thomas Lockheart

The Duke of Ulverston"

His hands trembled. It had been the ultimate betrayal, and it had taken three years for Morgan to learn of it.

Thomas could not have known that Lady Elizabeth would not be taken care of, and that she would take matters into her own hands. He would have assumed that Morgan would find the letter and then the lady and do what had to be done, but that was not

what had taken place. Instead, the lady was left abandoned and was left with what she felt was no other choice. His skin began to crawl.

He looked up at Dorothy, who was looking at him expectantly. He had told her everything about Lady Annabelle, but he had not yet given her the letter to read. He was too busy doing so over and over, hoping that if he did so it might begin to make more sense.

"What is it?" she asked.

"Are you not angry with me?"

"Do I have reason to be?"

"I never told you that I had been engaged."

"I never asked. Believe me, I do not care. Under the circumstances, our marriage being arranged that is, there was no reason for me to know. That is not what I care about. I want to know why you look so... so angry."

He blinked. Was he angry? He had every right to be, but he did not seem to have it in him.

"I spent years trying to help my brother," he said quietly. "I thought that If I helped him when he found himself in situations that he could not control, eventually he would have to see things differently. Instead, he decided I would always be there."

"That is not your fault. You did all that you could."

"But it was not enough. I was not able to prevent this."

He handed her the letter, and she read it quickly. As she reached what he imagined was the lady's name, she looked up at him with confusion in her eyes.

"My word," she gasped, "you could never have guessed that he would do something like that to you."

"No, which is likely why I never thought of her."

"Do you still plan to tell Catherine about her?"

"I shall have to. What other choice do I have? I promised her that I would tell her who her mother was, and that she could visit her resting place. What happened to me is of no consequence. The only thing that matters is that she finds her answers, and that among everything that has happened to her she can find peace."

Dorothy looked at him with sympathy, but he did not hate it. If anything, it was precisely what he needed. He felt foolish for thinking about the past, as he should have moved past it, but to see someone supporting him meant more than he ever would have expected.

"Would you like to tell her alone, or would you like me to be there?"

He did not know the answer to that.

"Would you like to be there?"

"I believe I would, yes. I should very much like to be there for you, and if I am there then you will not need to tell me about it afterward."

He sighed, nodding and walking to the door, with her following behind.

"Very well then. Let us go and tell her."

### CHAPTER 19

Dorothy did not know what to say, other than to try and help her husband.

She was pleased that Catherine would have answers, and that she would know who her mother was, but she felt for Morgan immensely. His brother had tried to stop their family uniting with the Blackwoods after what had happened, and now Morgan was going to always know that the little girl he so loved was undeniable proof that their families were once tied.

"What is it?" Catherine asked when they entered. "You are both looking at me strangely."

"We have found her," Morgan explained, and at once she came to life.

"Oh! Oh, how wonderful. Who was she? Can we go to her?"

Dorothy hated the pained expression in his face, but it had to be done. The little girl knowing the truth was more important than their comfort.

"We can, but not yet. I have to have things in order first."

"But you will take me?"

"Of course. Her name was, indeed, Elizabeth, and her last name was Blackwood."

"I like that name. I love mine, though. Will I have to change it?"

"Of course not," he smiled.

In spite of it all, Dorothy noted, her husband could not find it in him to be sad when in the company of his niece.

"Will you come, Dorothy?" she asked. "When we can go, of course."

"I—" she stammered, looking at Morgan who nodded at her, "I will, if that is what you want."

"Of course! You are my friend."

It was odd to have a small child proclaim that she was her friend, but Dorothy liked it. It was easier than being a mother or anaunt, especially when she had only just met her. She would be a good friend to her, the very best that she could be.

"That was easier than expected," she commented as they left for the gardens. "Then again, I suppose she has been waiting a long time for these answers."

"Indeed. I do not know why I expected it to be difficult."

"Because her aunt is the same lady you were engaged to," she suggested. "That will be painful no matter how much time has passed. It was a betrayal on your brother's part, and it is no surprise to me that you are reluctant to forgive him."

"But I should not care. She is not my wife. She was hardly my fiancée, and— this is not the sort of discussion one should have with his wife, is it?"

Dorothy laughed softly, and leaned against his shoulder.

"Morgan, you had a life before me, one that I was never privy to. It does not matter to

me that you were engaged before, or if you loved her, or—"

"For what it is worth, I did not."

She pulled away, looking at him curiously. He looked at her in return with sincerity.

"I was never going to love her," he explained. "She was the sort of lady that would make a decent duchess, and she expected it. I thought that was the best thing to do."

"I suppose it was, or it would have been had she not met that other gentleman. Do you know if she ever did marry him?"

"I do not. Once the engagement was called off, I had very little interest in her. It sounds callous, but after what she had done it was easier for the two of us to never cross paths. She blamed me entirely for it, and I accepted that. It was better, after all, that I faced scandal as a gentleman than she did as an unmarried lady."

Dorothy considered that, and she knew that he had done a noble thing in accepting blame that was not his, but she wished it had not been so. With what had followed, it was of no surprise to her that he was seen as some beastly thing, a bear just as Lady Blackwood had claimed.

"You must not look so concerned," he chuckled. "Our reputation is perfectly fine, and wherever she is, she causes us no harm. She likely found some wealthy and well-to-do man and left for his stately manor. She is nothing to us."



"I suppose."

But there was a strange feeling inside of her. Lady Blackwood, from what she knew, was not a kind lady. She had debuted long before Dorothy, but there had been whispers about the Blackwoods, ones that she had always ignored but now wished she had not. She wished she knew more about them, but she had never cared for vicious gossip about other ladies.

"Dorothy," he said gently, taking a hand in his, "I know that this has been a lot, and perhaps difficult to hear, but you and I are married. I am yours in every way that matters. That will not change."

Suddenly, that strange feeling was replaced by another. Her heart fluttered at his words, his promise that they were what mattered to him. She did not want to feel so strongly about it, as she so badly wanted their marriage to be simple, but she was complicating it and it felt good to. She thought back to the kiss they had shared again, and how it had been her first act of defiance.

"Why did you kiss me?" she asked again, hoping that he would now explain himself.

"What do you mean?"

"The night we met, why did you kiss me?"

"Because you wanted me to. You did want me to, did you not?"

She felt rather disappointed with that.

"Well, of course I did, but I had hoped that you were not simply doing it for my sake."

"Oh, that was certainly not the case either. Why would you think that?"

She wanted to say that it was because she had never seen herself as anything close to desirable. She was short and soft and round, nothing like the beautiful ladies that he could have taken. There had never been a moment in her life where she had felt like someone that could be wanted and loved until that moment. It was not love, she was not that foolish, but it could have been. It could have been more than friendship, eventually, had he thought she was beautiful, but he did not.

"I suppose I thought you pitied me."

"Certainly not. I thought you were interesting, if anything, because not many ladies dare to rebel the way that you did. I had hoped to see you for who you truly were, rather than the perfect little lady I assumed your father would have you play the part of when I visited. I wanted to see who you truly were."

"And what did you think of me?"

He was looking at her strangely, as though he did not quite know what to say. She knew why that was; he thought she was unassuming and unremarkable the same way every member of the ton did. She was nothing special, and even as a duchess she would not be seen any differently.

"Do not look like that," he huffed. "You do remember that I hardly saw you that night, do you not? It was dark out, and either your mask was on or my eyes were closed for the most part. One does not tend to keep them open when kissing, you know."

"Even so, you saw... you saw me; my— oh, it does not matter."

"It seems to bother you, so I would argue the contrary."

She willed herself to tell him. She tried to force the words to come, to explain that she had spent her life surrounded by young ladies that were better than her, and that she had never been able to compete. She told herself that if she could just get it out, he would understand, possibly even refute her claims.

"I have just never seen myself as worthy of you. That is all."

"A kind and gentle lady such as yourself is absolutely worthy of me. Besides, who am I, exactly?"

"A duke."

"Come now, surely after our time together you know me better than that, yes?"

She did, of course. She knew the way the sunlight reflected in his hair, and how he had two freckles on his left cheek. She knew that he was slow to anger, and wonderful with children. He was a good man, and a patient one, and far better than she had ever hoped to find in a husband.

"You are kind," was all that she could manage.

It burned her not to be able to tell him the truth, that he inhabited her thoughts far more than she would have liked, but it would have been a foolish thing to say. She knew what her marriage was, and so did he, and if she had to act as though that was all she felt then that was what would be done.

She enjoyed her new life far too much to jeopardize it.

"Scared," he said suddenly.

"What?"

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"You seemed scared. You asked me what I thought of you when we first met, and it was exactly that. You seemed terrified."

"I suppose I was," she laughed. "I knew that life as I knew it would soon change, and though it was never perfect it was at least mine. It was known and predictable. A husband was not."

"It was more than that. You seemed frightened of making a mistake, even though it was what you wanted."

"It was the only time that I have ever done something like that. I thought that if I was going to be chained to a gentleman of my father's choosing for the rest of my life, I ought to do something for myself first. I do not regret it."

"Could you have said the same if it were not me in the gardens?"

She thought for a moment.

"Morgan, I do not think I would have done what I did if it were not you in the garden. I do not think I could have made myself do it."

"Then, if I may ask, why me?"

"Another excellent question," she sighed, "one that I do not know the answer to myself. You were charming, I know that much. You also listened to me, and other than my friends nobody has ever done that before. I suppose I knew that, if I was going to disgrace myself, it had to be with a gentleman that I would not mind being

forced into marriage with."

"That is to say you do not mind being forced into this one?"

"I believe you know my answer to that."

"Perhaps, but I should very much like to hear you tell me."

He was standing close to her, and she was uncertain of when that happened. She was looking up at him, and she tried to conceal the hunger in her eyes. He was a wonderful man, and excellent with Catherine, and after everything that had happened he was trying to be a good husband. She could not have asked for more.

"I was never forced into this marriage," she reminded him. "You gave me the choice to walk away, and I chose not to. I wanted this marriage, and I still do."

"As do I. You know, I never expected you to be so lovely when we met."

The word echoed. Lovely, lovely, lovely. She had been called many names before, sometimes by her father and sometimes by the ladies in the town, but never anything as nice as that. She was always nice and kind, if she was called something good at least. Morgan, however, thought that she was lovely, even if he seemed uncomfortable with the fact that he had said it.

"I have an idea," he said suddenly. "Do you ride horses?"

"I have before, but I was never any good at it."

"Tomorrow, we shall do that. We have vast lands, and we might as well make use of them. I shall have two prepared for us in the morning."

"That sounds wonderful, though again I must say that I am not a skilled rider."

"You do not need to be. So long as you do not come flying off of it, it will be sufficient."

He laughed as he said it, but Dorothy was not as certain.

Regardless, morning came and as promised there were two horses that Dorothy could see from the window of her bedchambers. The work had been completed in the household and at last her room was a place that brought her peace. She adored it, and had she not been so eager to please her husband she might have remained there a few minutes more.

Stepping out into the gardens, she saw her husband preparing them. She thought it was strange, as the stablehands were nowhere to be seen, but only for a moment because she then looked at him properly.

He was skilled, guiding them to where they needed to be, and neither one objected in any way. He had large hands, but he was gentle with them. Dorothy froze in place as she watched, unable to take her eyes from him.

"Are you going to join me?" he called over, and she turned scarlet.

She had every right to look at her husband, yet it made her feel things that she did not wish to acknowledge. She did not want to think he was attractive, not when she knew that he could never feel such things for her.

"Of course," she called back, steadying herself.

She made her way to him, growing more and more timid as she saw how large the horses were. They were stallions, and it was clear to her that they had been expensive,

and while not threatening they were certainly intimidating. They towered over her.

"I brought the smallest one I had for you," he explained, "but even so he is..."



"Large," she nodded.

"Dorothy, if you are not comfortable—"

"No, no it is perfectly fine. I will be fine."

She hooked her foot in and hauled herself up. Morgan helped to lift her, and she expected him to make some kind of noise to signify that it required a good deal of his strength, but he did not. It was effortless for him. When she was at last sitting on the horse, she could not stop smiling.

She was not skilled, not by any means, but she could hold her own. She had not wanted Morgan to expect too much from her, but if she were being honest she loved horseback riding and she would thoroughly enjoy her morning.

"Does Catherine not ride?" she asked as they made their way across the grounds.

"No, she is far too unwell for that. Should she recover, I will consider it."

"Should she?" she echoed. "Do you not believe that she will?"

"It is difficult to say. Her doctor believes it is from the coldness of the water all those years ago, and it simply does not seem to be leaving her."

"That is to be expected," she nodded, "for she was so small."

Dorothy turned back to the window, only to faintly see Catherine watching from her

windows. Her heart ached to see her that way.

"She continues to be," Morgan agreed, "which is why I must protect her, at any cost."

## CHAPTER 20

Ever since Dorothy had met Catherine, she had wanted to know more about her, and now she was asking when she would leave the household.

It was not that Morgan was ashamed of her, and he never had been, but this was treacherous waters. If she was allowed out into the gardens, then soon she would ask to go even further afield, and then what would happen?

It risked judgment, and it was a judgment that she did not deserve.

He focused on the ride instead of mentioning this, however. He had wanted a pleasant morning, as he had found himself enjoying the company of his wife more and more with each passing day. He liked being in her presence, and it made him feel good when she was near him.

"Do you wish for us to go anywhere in particular?" she asked, her eyes curious.

"No, I had not thought of that. I thought we might wander for a while."

He was also not afraid to admit that she was a beautiful lady.

He wished that she could see it, that she was a refreshingly different sort of beauty. He had seen a hundred ladies in society, and each looked the same. Some were more angular, with sharper features, and some were softer, but Dorothy did not look like any of them. She was the sort of lady that enjoyed a meal, and that preferred to read a book than to promenade, and though that was perhaps not looked on kindly by polite

society it was precisely what he also enjoyed.

"You have done marvelous work with these gardens," he commented. "I do not know how you find the time."

"It is easy, truly. The hardest part is the grass, as it takes the longest, but with how the weather has been of late it is at least growing slowly. Other than that, I need only tend to the flowers, which I enjoy."

"Even so, it is a great deal of work. I can find a gardener if you need."

"If you wish to do so, I will not argue, so long as I can continue to cultivate the flowers. I do so like doing it, as I can see the goodness that is done."

"That can be arranged," he agreed.

They continued on in silence, and Morgan watched her as they rode. He could tell that she was concentrating, not completely at ease, but she was doing far better than she had led him to believe. It was not unlike her; she never seemed to entirely believe in herself and her abilities, but she was yet to be incapable of anything. He wished that she had more faith in herself, but it would take time.

Meanwhile, he did want to know what had caused it.

"Why are you never certain of yourself?"

She looked at him with wide eyes.

"What do you mean?"

"You never seem to believe in yourself. When we do things, you seem scared to fail, even if you cannot. You never do anything wrong, yet it seems to be all that you wait for."

She looked ahead again, as though unable to meet his eye. He hoped that he had not done anything to cause her offence.

"I want to say that it was theton," she sighed, "but it was more than that."

"Surely it had an effect, though?"

"Of course. I have always been compared to my sister. When we were younger, she was complimented on her looks and her talents, while I was put on reducing diet after reducing diet and given harsher and harsher tutors. Nothing that I did was good enough. My father told me that if I was exceptional in other areas, people would be forgiving of my unfortunate... stature."

"I do not see anything unfortunate about your stature."

She pulled her horse to a stop, blushing profusely.

"It is true!" he pressed. "In all honesty, I cannot understand why ladies think so much about that sort of thing, nor why your father would have cared so much. I think you look wonderful."

She quite evidently did not want to accept what he was saying. Then again, Morgan wondered if she had ever heard nice things about her from those other than her three friends.

"The tondid not help," she continued, not acknowledging him. "The ladies were the worst. They would mock me incessantly, saying that I looked like a farmer's daughter, and that I was unfit for the nobility. It did not help that I love botany. I looked ridiculous, dirt under my nails from being in the gardens and grass stains on my skirts. It is no surprise to me that I was not well-liked."

"You must not say that about yourself. You have a passion, which makes you far more interesting than any of those other ladies. They can use a fan, and that is about it. I cannot believe that you would heed anything that such people have to say about you."

"It is strange, yes, but it is all that I ever heard. I was not thin enough, not beautiful enough, and nothing that I did ever seemed to change that. I wish that it did."

"I am very pleased that it did not."

She smiled, and he hoped that she believed him. It was, after all, the truth. He may well not have looked upon her a second time if she looked the same as every other lady. He would have married her, but he never would have been as captivated by her as he found himself to be.

"How does the ton perceive you?" she asked. "You are the Duke now, but you were once a second son."

"They saw me as precisely that. The second son and the spare. I was never the important one, as I told you with that lady I was engaged to. I was not Thomas, and there was no changing that. I did not care too much, as it meant I had more time to fix

what he would break."

"Second-borns also have more freedoms, do they not?"

"Under normal circumstances, yes, but I never had the time to enjoy them. I was always doing the work of a duke without the title. Even before the death of my father, I was following after my brother and trying to mend things. The duel that was the end of him was not the first that he was challenged to. It was actually the seventh."

She gasped, and though it was nothing that shocked him anymore, when he thought about the things his brother had done he realized just how shameful it was.

"You were a good brother," she replied. "The best, I would say."

"I wish I had been able to do more. I wish I had been able to keep him out of trouble, and that he had learned how to be. It was always strange when people assumed that I was the older brother, and I always longed to be the younger one. I never wanted the title, I simply wanted to be myself. I wanted to attend university and study botany and do whatever pleased me."

"If it is any consolation, you are a very good duke. The staff often tell me that you take care of them, and from what they have told me you have a very happy town."

"I do feel consoled by that. I try to make everyone happy, but sometimes... well, it concerns me that I cannot make a mistake. A single lapse in judgment could ruin everything, and that means that I cannot afford to make any."

"I do not know about that. I think that—"

She screamed, but it was cut off.

He turned sharply, only to see her horse throwing her off. The horse bucked and neighed and Morgan froze, pleading that she would not be hurt. She landed on the ground, and remained laying there for a moment. He dove from his own horse and quickly soothed hers. When it was calm once more, he ran to her. She was on the ground, unmoving, and his blood ran cold.

She could not be hurt. He could not bear the thought of it.

"Dorothy?" he asked gently before his voice filled with urgency. "Dorothy, are you all right?"

Miraculously, she groaned quietly, pushing herself up from the heap she had landed in.

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"Are you hurt?" he asked.

"No, not really. I— oh!"

She grabbed her hip. It would undoubtedly bruise terribly, given the height she had fallen from. She tried to pull herself to her feet, but he stopped her.

"We do not know how hurt you are yet," he explained gently, going down to the ground by her side. "We ought to wait a moment."

"I am perfectly fine, honestly. I have hurt my hip, but I am capable of walking."

"I wish to be certain of that. I cannot stand the thought of something having happened to you and it becoming worse."

She looked at him curiously, as if astounded that he cared for her. He did, for she was his wife. There was also, of course, the innate need to protect her and to be near her at all times, but he told himself that was simply because they were married.

Even if he was becoming aware that that was not the case.

He had instinctively positioned himself so that she was resting her head against his chest, and he tried to control his heartbeat. He wanted to be steady, so that she would relax after the ordeal, but he knew it was pounding. The accident had frightened him, and he hated the possibility of something bad happening to her.

She giggled.



"What is it?"

"Well, this proves my point perfectly."

"What point?"

"The one I was trying to make when I was thrown down here," she laughed softly. "I was trying to say that mistakes can be made, and that it is not the end of everything. It all continues, and we carry on."

"That is a very good way to look at things," he nodded. "I wish that I could do the same."

"Then do so. It may take time, but it is entirely possible. We can always correct our mistakes. It is one of the most important things that we can do."

He considered that for a short while. He was not a man that made mistakes, and he never had been. If anything, he had always refused to make them as he had to compensate for his brother. There had to be a good son, and it was not going to be Thomas and so someone had to save the family name and that was Morgan.

"I suppose I still live in his shadow," he sighed. "The helpful younger brother to the daring and bold one. I never did anything for myself. Everything I did depended on him and what was needed because of his actions."

"I know, and it is rather morbid perhaps, but he is gone now. You have the rest of your life to be your own self, rather than a brother. That does not mean that you will forget him, of course, but it means that you will be able to be yourself."

Morgan nodded. He knew that she was right, and that he would one day have to stop blaming Thomas for what had happened, but it was not going to be easy. He had

spent his entire life trying to appease him, and it had been that way even after his death.

"Perhaps you might help me to my feet?" she suggested after a while.

He took her hands in his and gently pulled her upward. She stumbled a little, falling into his arms, but she pulled away again and stood straight. She winced a little, and Morgan did not dare think of how dreadful the bruising would be, but she nodded with determination and they began their return to the household.

She simply had not expected her return to be made in his arms.

## CHAPTER 21

Dorothy had to wear long sleeves for the rest of the week.

Her fall had been incredibly painful, and it had resulted in a nasty purple hue that spread down her hip and thigh as well as another bruise down her right forearm. She was fortunate that nothing more had happened, but that did not make the pain she was in any more manageable.

"They shall be green soon," Francine said encouragingly. "You prefer that color, at least."

Dorothy laughed softly. It had been an odd week. The household had been easy enough to run, but there was something that nobody could ignore.

Catherine had grown withdrawn.

She did not wish to speak to anyone, not even Morgan or her governess or Mrs. Herrington. She had shut herself in her room and only left to eat, which she did in

silence. The governess had assured Dorothy that it had happened before, and that she would return to normal eventually, but Dorothy did not like it. She was a friendly little girl, and the idea of her being anything but placid seemed wrong.

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And so, that afternoon after they had lunch, she went to Catherine's room. She knocked, but there was no response.

"Can I come in?" she called.

"I wish to be alone," the little girl's voice came from the other side of the door.

"I shall only be a moment," she promised. "I am concerned for you."

"You should not be," she said sharply. "You are not my mother."

She was rather taken aback by Catherine's words. They all understood who Dorothy was to her, and nobody had suggested that change. Puzzled, she took a breath to steady herself.

"I know," she replied. "But I am your friend. I am not here to demand anything from you, only that I see you for a moment."

There was silence, and then the door creaked open.

"Come in," Catherine said quietly.

Dorothy entered, and when she looked upon the little girl all she could do was gasp. She was a sickly child, but she looked worse than ever. Her skin was almost gray, and her eyes were sunken. She had to fight herself not to immediately send for the doctor.

"My word," she whispered. "Catherine, what has happened? Do I need to send for

your uncle?"

"No!" she yelled. "Please, I cannot face him right now."

As if instinctively, she ran to the corner and crouched to the floor, burying her face in her knees.

"Catherine, nobody is angry with you if that is what you are worried about. We all want to help you."

"I do not deserve help. I am a horrid little girl and I should be sent away."

She began to cry, and Dorothy was frozen in alarm. This was not the sweet-natured child that she had met. Something had to have happened, and she needed to know what, but Catherine was hysterical. Not knowing what else to do, Dorothy reached out and took the girl in an embrace. The little girl gasped, the crying stopped, and then she clung on hard.

"You are not horrid," she promised. "We all care for you so much, and we do not want you to feel this way. Please let us help you."

"I have done something bad," she whispered. "Very, very bad."

"You do not have that in you."

"I do."

Catherine pulled away, and Dorothy gently cleaned her face with a handkerchief.

"If it truly is so terrible, then you ought to tell me."

"You will all learn of it soon enough."

As if on cue, they suddenly heard an almighty battle downstairs. Dorothy had turned to look out at it, and when she turned back to Catherine her eyes were wide and her mouth was open.

"Catherine," Dorothy asked in a startled tone, "what have you done, exactly?"

"I thought it was a good idea," she whimpered. "It was only when it was done that I realized how wrong I was."

Knowing that she would not receive an explanation, Dorothy had to think quickly. She took Catherine's hand and lifted her to her feet.

"I know you are frightened," she explained, "but we can fix this, whatever you have done. To do that, however, you must admit what you did."

"Please do not take me to my uncle," she pleaded. "I cannot look at him, not after I—oh, Dorothy, please."

"Your uncle will not be angry with you. Even if he is, he will forgive you. He adores you, Catherine. Come, we will have this settled before you know it."

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The child pulled back again, but she seemed to realize that the result of whatever she had done was there, and she had to face it whether she liked it or not.

They quickly made their way to the stairs, but then Dorothy stopped, pulling Catherine back. There, at the bottom of the stairs, stood a lady that bore a remarkable resemblance to Catherine. She walked the hallway as if she had been there a hundred times before, and the staff seemed to recognize her even if they did not seem too pleased that she was there.

"There she is," Catherine whispered, smiling in spite of everything. "My aunt."

Dorothy turned her attentions back to the lady, her heart pounding.

"Catherine, what did you do?"

But the little girl was already running to the lady, her fear replaced by an innate joy.

"Aunt Annabelle!" She beamed, leaping into her arms.

"Oh, my beautiful niece," Lady Annabelle said softly. "How wonderful to finally see you!"

Dorothy remained at the top of the stairs, unable to move. She did not dare follow after Catherine and greet the lady, not when she knew so much about her.

"I told you, Lady Annabelle," Morgan stormed as he entered the room, "I do not know what brought you here, but you are not welcome."

"Our niece did," she snapped. "She wrote to me, telling me how desperately she wished to meet her mother's family. I know how you feel about me, but surely you can set that aside for the girl's sake?"

"If I am, as you proclaimed, a bear, then I would do no such thing."

"Oh, Morgan," she said, softening and placing a hand on his arm, "that was so long ago now. I am not the young lady you met, especially after my sister's loss."

Dorothy listened from afar, but more than anything she watched Lady Annabelle. She was beautiful, and of similar age to Morgan. She truly did look exactly like Catherine, and when the three of them stood together they looked like a family. There was a strange feeling in her stomach, one that made her feel quite unwell.

Morgan, however, did not soften even at the mention of Catherine.

"You," he said bluntly to the girl, "I will speak to later. Go to your governess."

"But, Uncle Morgan, I—"

"Now, please, Catherine. I am not angry with you, but this must be settled without you."

The child left reluctantly, her smile gone. As she and her governess reached the stairs, however, they all noticed Dorothy standing there. She wished to hide, but there was no doing that.

"Dorothy, you may join us," Morgan called. "If anything, that is my preference."

She nodded, descending the staircase. She cowered under Lady Annabelle's gaze, knowing perfectly well that a single word from her would be enough to make her



crumble.

"This is my wife, the Duchess of Ulverston" he said pointedly, which Dorothy had to admit helped.

"It is a pleasure, Your Grace," Lady Annabelle greeted with a sickeningly sweet smile. "I am so pleased that His Grace has found someone so... pleasant to be his wife."

Her tone was pointed, but Dorothy tried to ignore it; Lady Annabelle had a history with her husband, and though she did not like it there was nothing that she could do about it. The best thing for her to do was to remain polite until she left, which she hoped would be soon.

"Your Grace," she continued, turning back to Morgan, "I did not come here in search of trouble. All that I wish to do is see my niece. I have as much right to her as you, after all."

"Be that as it may, my wife and I have her here with us because it is her home. She is happy here, and though she has apparently asked to see you I will not have you here if you cannot abide by my rules about her."

"I have no intention of overstepping. I only wish to spend time with her. When I lost my sister, I... my apologies, but I would prefer to discuss this with you in private."

She looked pointedly at Dorothy, which made her feel ill at ease. She did not want to leave her husband with a lady he knew so personally, but she was intimidated by her. She was tall and slim with pointed features and she looked down at Dorothy as though she were Catherine's age.

"That will not be happening," Morgan explained bluntly. "Anything that you tell me

can also be heard by my wife. I shall only tell her myself, in any case."

She grumbled, but Dorothy hardly noticed. Instead, she felt a great deal of admiration for her husband. She had not expected Morgan to defend her, given that he wished to have his answers.

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"Very well," Lady Annabelle sighed. "When I lost my sister, I was forced into a life that I could not even begin to explain. It is something you can only explain to those who have suffered such loss, which of course you have with your brother. I have been searching for a way to continue her memory, and I had almost given up hope when I received our niece's letter. This is precisely what I have longed for for years, and in spite of how you feel about me I know that it is what you want, too."

Morgan was quiet, and Dorothy truly did not know what he would say. He looked as though he wanted to send her away, but Dorothy knew that he could not do that to Catherine. He was yet to discuss the matter with the girl, and ask what she had done, but he did not punish her. It was not in his nature to upset his niece, and Dorothy knew that that remained unchanged.

"You may see her for the afternoon," he said quietly, "but nothing more. I also expect you to allow the governess to stay with you. I shall speak to her first, too."

"Oh, Your Grace, thank you!" she sighed happily, throwing her arms around him in a most unbecoming manner.

Dorothy hated the way she felt about it.

"I almost forgot," she said brightly, handing Dorothy a letter. "This is what Catherine wrote. You may find it of interest."

She turned from Dorothy again and returned to embracing Morgan, who quickly pushed her back and kept his distance. Unsettled, Dorothy unraveled the letter.

"Dear Lady Annabelle,

I do not know how to begin this. You do not know who I am, and until yesterday I did not know you either. You might not want to read this at all, but I hope that you do.

My name is Catherine Lockheart, and I am your niece. I am eight years of age and the daughter of your sister. I live with my uncle, the Duke of Ulverston, and it is my hope that you may visit me sometime soon.

I will not keep you. You may come and see me anytime, and I hope that we can know one another well, and that you have stories to tell me about my mother.

Sincerely,

Catherine Lockheart"

Dorothy's heart ached.

## CHAPTER 22

Morgan could have fallen to the floor when he saw Lady Annabelle enter his home.

He had been aware that Catherine was out of sorts, and he tried to wait until she felt better, but it was unlike her other outbursts. As a child, she was prone to moments when she was difficult, but she never hid herself away from him entirely. Each time he approached, he heard her hide in her room. Something was very wrong, but there was nothing that he could do when she refused to see him.

Sitting in her room with her, he was quite aware that she wanted him to leave, but she was not angry with him. She was afraid, if anything, which he supposed that he

understood.

"Forgive me," she whispered.

"Catherine, I am not angry. I only want to know why you did this. I want to know how you did it."

"I found the letter in your study. I wanted to know what had happened, and I wanted to find my family. I saw Lady Annabelle's name, and then I continued looking. I found an address scribbled in a drawer with her name, and I wrote a letter."

He frowned, but fixed it. She was not allowed in his study, and she knew that perfectly well, but it was not the time to punish her.

"You are too clever for your own good, sometimes," he sighed. "Catherine, I am not angry with you. I wish you had told me that you planned to do this, or even that you had done it. That is all."

"I wanted to tell you. That is why I have been hiding. I have been ashamed of myself, and I could not look at you."

"You must not be ashamed of yourself. You did what you thought was best, I only wish I knew why."

"It was because I have so little family," she said quickly, taking him by surprise. "I only have you, Aunt Dorothy, and the staff here. I am happy here, truly I am, but knowing that there is an entire side of my family that I could meet... It got the best of me."

Morgan took her in his arms and soothed her gently. He was angry that a lady who hurt him so terribly had appeared, but he did not hold that against his niece. She had

never been a selfish little girl, so he had to allow her one moment of it.

"She will be coming to speak to you," he explained. "Your governess shall be with you, and you must not be alone with her."

"Why not?"

"Because," he grimaced, "because we do not know her. I know that she is your aunt, but that is all that we know."

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"I thought that you knew her very well."

"I thought the same, but it was not the case."

"Do you hate her, Uncle?"

It was an odd question to answer. Morgan did not like her, but hatred was perhaps too strong a word.

"I do not hate anyone," he promised her. "She is not my favorite person, but you are right. She is your aunt, and we must accept that."

She still seemed uncertain, but Morgan was as content as he could be. He had his answers, and that was all that he could hope for in that moment. He had to keep to his promise, and that meant leaving Lady Annabelle with her.

He returned to the hallway, and saw that they were not there. He looked to his butler, who seemed quite uncertain.

"They are in the drawing room, Your Grace," he explained.

"Has she done anything?"

"No, quite the opposite. She has been very cordial with your wife, from what I heard."

"That is good, at least."

He went to the drawing room, and as he entered both ladies looked up at him.

"Hello again, Your Grace," Lady Annabelle greeted. "Is it time for me to meet my niece properly?"

"Indeed, but should you say one thing that I deem unfair you shall be sent away again."

"I have no intentions of that, and so all is well."

She left for the west wing, the place she had been on previous visits, and Morgan took a seat beside Dorothy. She placed her tea onto the table, and Morgan leaned forward to touch her teacup.

"It is cold," he muttered. "Did you not touch it?"

"I did not much feel like it. I do not mean to be difficult, as her visit has nothing to do with me, but it feels strange to have her here with us."

"It will not be for long. I do not want her here any more than you do, but Catherine deserves to see her aunt."

"Precisely, which is why I will smile and be pleased about it. I will say, though, that she is not the loveliest lady."

"Then it is just as well that you are my wife and she is not," he chuckled, taking her hand as he had after her fall.

She winced as he moved her arm, and he placed his fingers on the buttons of her cuff. He looked to her for permission to unbutton it, and she nodded gently. He unbuttoned it and pulled back her sleeve, grimacing at the mottled colors that struck across it.



"That looks dreadful. Does it hurt?"

"Yes, but it is better than it was. Francine believes it will be gone within the week."

"Yes, but even so, I feel terrible. I should have protected you."

She laughed softly, and Morgan knew why that was; he had no control over the horse bucking, and it was not possible for him to catch her or any such thing, but he still felt immense guilt. He had asked her to ride with him, even though she was not skilled.

"Believe me, I felt very safe. You came to me in an instant, and you helped me to my feet. It was frightening, but I am well. I survived."

"If you are certain. I do want you to feel safe here, Dorothy. I know that this is not ideal, but my priority is the happiness of yourself and Catherine."

"My priority is also yourself and Catherine. That is why I am perfectly happy to have our visitor here. My only concern pertains to you. Are you happy for her to be here?"

"It is necessary, but it will be done with soon enough. She will only be here for the afternoon, and then—"

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"Uncle Morgan!" Catherine exclaimed as she burst into the room. "Aunt Annabelle has said we can have a picnic in the gardens. Can we?"

Lady Annabelle had entered behind her, smiling sweetly. Morgan hesitated, his eye falling to Dorothy's bruised arm, which she quickly covered with her sleeve again.

"I do not think that is such a good idea."

"Please?" she asked. "We have not had a picnic in so long, and I would so love one."

"It will not be too long," Lady Annabelle assured him. "She was telling me about the cakes your Cook makes, and I was hoping I might be able to try some."

He turned to Dorothy, who was not comfortable with it, but it was as she had said. Their priority was the little girl, and if this made her happy then it was what would be done.

"Very well, but then you are to return home."

"Can she visit again?" Catherine asked.

"Eventually, yes, when it is arranged properly rather than by a rushed letter."

Her smile faded, but only slightly. She took Lady Annabelle's hand, and they disappeared.

"She seems to care for Catherine," Dorothy said helpfully. "At least there is that."

"Yes, but that does not mean I am pleased that she is here."

"Are you truly going to have her back again?"

"I would rather that than go there. Perhaps we could invite your friends at the same time, so that she is not led to believe she may come and go as she pleases?"

Her eyes sparkled.

"I should like that very much. I have not seen them in a while now. You are also yet to meet them."

"Indeed, and from what I am told you have a friend that is rather frightening. That may well be of use to us."

"Cecilia is harmless," she giggled. "She simply does not like it when gentlemen swarm her. She has no intentions of marrying, you see, but as a beautiful lady she receives many offers."

"She sounds very interesting, indeed. Very well, then, it is settled. We shall arrange for another visit with Lady Annabelle, and you may invite your friends too."

It was enough to calm her, and it made Morgan feel better too. He did not like it when he did not have control, as it never ended well, but at least that way he could feel as though it had been his own idea.

He left for his study later that afternoon, and he watched as the sky turned dark. It had to mean that Lady Annabelle had left, of that he was certain, and so he decided that he could leave the room and go to dinner.

As she rose to his feet, however, the door swung open.

Lady Annabelle had clearly been crying, and though his instinct was to instruct her to leave that instant, he pitied her.

"Lady Annabelle, I—"

"Please, I only ask that you listen to me for a moment, and if you still wish to be rid of me then I shall go."

With a sigh, he motioned for her to speak.

"Today has been wonderful. I had not known about Catherine. Elizabeth disappeared after our engagement was cancelled. We could not find her, but you know how my family was. My father refused to accept any help in finding her, and so they crafted a story that she had gone to live in the country with a cousin to practice as a governess for a while. It satisfied them, and nobody questioned her whereabouts."

"Is that to say that she had vanished completely?"

"Indeed. I only knew of her passing because those that found her informed my father. He paid them handsomely to never breathe a word of it. I never thought that my sister would do something like that, so drastic. She never told us that she was with child, especially with your brother's. My father would have pushed for the marriage had he known."

"And your sister would have been ruined. It is a shame that she fell in love with him, but there was no changing his mind. He met the business end of a shotgun to avoid it."

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"All the same," she sobbed, "I wish I had known the truth. We all deserved that much."

Though he disliked her, Morgan had to feel sympathy for her. He knew the torment that had followed when his brother died, but at least he knew almost everything that had happened. Lady Annabelle had had nothing, and had it not been for Catherine then she may never have.

"What do you want from me?" Morgan asked. "You are here to see Catherine, but she has gone to bed. You should have left by now."

"I know, but I could not bring myself to. You do not know what it is like to live in my household, Morgan."

"Do not call me that," he instructed. "You do not have the right to such informalities."

"My apologies. I had grown used to it."

"Yes, many years ago. I no longer have any interest in following that path again. I have a wife now, and she is the only one that may call me by my given name."

"Yes, your wife... regardless, I have truly come to ask a favor of you."

"I suspected as much. What do you want?"

"I was hoping you might allow me to stay here for a while?"

"No."

"Morga— Your Grace, you do not understand. It has truly been so awful in my household. I never found a husband, and my father hates me. He says that I am an even greater disappointment than Elizabeth was, for at least she had done away with herself. I cannot be there anymore. I do not know what else to do."

"You should find a husband. You cannot stay here. Go find that viscount that you so liked the company of."

She looked at him sheepishly.

"He never truly liked me," she admitted. "I never saw him again after that night, and I have always regretted what I did to you. I should have apologized, but I was too ashamed of myself. I was a girl, Your Grace, and now I am a woman. I do not ask for your forgiveness, only some mercy. Please do not send me back to my father."

In spite of everything, Morgan pitied her. He knew what had been expected of her, and for her to have been such a failure would have been too much for her father to allow. He dreaded to think of what had happened to her since they had parted ways, even if he did not like her at all.

"Very well," he sighed. "You may stay for the week, but you are not to be alone with Catherine."

"Why not? She is as much my niece as she is yours."

"She has lived here since she was a small child. You will not walk into her home and make her believe that you are someone you are not, the same way you did to me."

That seemed to silence her.

"A week then," she smiled. "I am so grateful, Your Grace."

She turned and left, and Morgan found a maid to prepare a room for her. Suddenly, he was quite aware that Dorothy would not be happy with what he had done. He had not asked her how she felt about it, and had simply invited a lady she was not fond of to stay with them.

Fortunately, at dinner, Lady Annabelle held her tongue. He explained everything to Dorothy and Catherine, to which Catherine could not stop smiling, and Dorothy nodded quietly. He would make it up to her, but he was unsure quite how to do that.

Then, he remembered something.

## CHAPTER 23

"Who on Earth does he think he is?" Cecilia asked upon her arrival, two days after that of Lady Annabelle.

Dorothy had sent invitations to her friends, which Morgan had agreed with, and it was a miracle that the quill did not snap in her hand as she wrote them. They had only just agreed that Lady Annabelle would leave, but that was not what had happened. She felt for her, truly she did, but she wanted her gone for a while so that they could agree on certain things.

"He is trying to be kind," Dorothy explained. "She has an awful family, and this is an escape for her."

"She can escape elsewhere," she argued. "There is no need for her to invite herself to the home of a man that she was once engaged to, one that is now married I shall add."

"She was invited by Catherine, for what it is worth."

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"And if I receive a letter from Emma's little one when it is here, shall I simply appear?"

"You would be more than welcome," Emma interjected. "I understand what His Grace has done. We should all be pleased that Dorothy is married to a man that cares about others."

"So much so that he has private conversations with unmarried ladies?" Cecilia asked.

Emma nudged her sharply.

"I thought that I was going mad," Dorothy sighed. "He must have done that, mustn't he?"

"We do not know for certain," Beatrice said brightly, "and even if that is the case, nothing untoward would have happened. From what you have said, he cannot stand her."

"I thought that was the case, but then he asked her to stay for a week."

"And how has she been with you thus far?"

"She has avoided me," Dorothy explained. "She only spends time with Catherine, and for the most part they remain in their rooms. I hoped that it was because she was embarrassed, but she seems rather too prideful for that."

"I remember her," Cecilia nodded. "She was out in society when I debuted. From



what I remember, she had actually grown rather desperate by then, but no gentlemen looked in her direction anymore. She was old, shelved."

"That reminds me of someone," Emma joked, and Cecilia laughed.

"That is my choice entirely," she reminded her. "But Lady Annabelle was willing to take any man she could, not that it ever worked. They simply did not want her. It was one thing when she was the most beautiful girl in London and from an affluent family, but when those two things were no longer there it was impossible to overlook the person she was."

"I did not think that she was so bad," Dorothy said. "She is not the nicest, but I would not have said she was worthy of being a spinster."

"You hardly know her, as you said. Believe me, the few meetings that I have had with her were enough for me to see that she was awful."

Dorothy did not want to hear that. She wanted to hear that it had all been a misunderstanding, and that she was a lovely lady that had been unfortunate after the loss of her sister, so that the thoughts that refused to leave her alone would go.

She was married to the man Lady Annabelle was once engaged to, and that made her a target no matter how much time had passed. She did not want to be a part of anything that Lady Annabelle had planned, if there were any plans to begin with.

"Perhaps she simply wishes to see her niece," Beatrice suggested. "I am not suggesting that you are an old maid, Cecilia, but your debut was years ago. She must have changed by now, if not by things that have happened then simply because time has passed. Who knows? Perhaps she truly does also wish to make amends with His Grace."

"If that is the case," Cecilia argued, "then His Grace should not accept it. He should simply tell her she is forgiven and send her on her way. I understand that she has had issues, but that is none of your concern."

"But it is," Dorothy protested. "Whether I like it or not, she is family to me now. It is for the best that I am friendly toward her, and I expect you all to do the same."

Cecilia raised an eyebrow at her before exhaling deeply.

"Very well, as it is only for a week, but if she says anything out of turn then I will not be so kind."

"That is all that I am asking of you," Dorothy replied gratefully.

"Where is she, by the way?" Emma asked. "And the Duke, for that matter. I was hoping to meet him soon."

"Lady Annabelle is with Catherine, and my husband is... I am not entirely certain of that."

Her friends looked at one another, and Dorothy knew what they were thinking. It was as though they did not believe that Morgan disliked Lady Annabelle.

"We can go and find him, I suppose," she suggested. "Or, perhaps, we could visit Catherine? She would appreciate the company, I am certain of it."

"Is she well enough for that?" Beatrice asked. "You told us she has an illness."

"She does, but she is more than capable of meeting you all. If anything, she is at her best when there are people to talk to."

With everyone in agreement, they left for Catherine's room. Dorothy had already discussed her friends meeting her with Morgan, who was more than happy to allow it if they did not say a word about her. That was something that Dorothy could promise, as they only truly spoke to one another.

When they entered, however, they saw that Morgan was there with Lady Annabelle and Catherine. Again, that feeling in Dorothy's stomach appeared. They truly did look like a family, especially with how alike Catherine and Lady Annabelle were. They were not doing anything much; Catherine was reading with Lady Annabelle while Morgan sat nearby, but it was enough. She cleared her throat, and they all turned to her.

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"Dorothy!" Morgan exclaimed. "I was wondering when you would come to join us."

"I was unaware that you were here," she replied.

She made the introductions, which Lady Annabelle joined, and watched as her friends forced smiles for him. They had already formed opinions of him during their first visit, and seeing this only made them worse.

"Aunt Dorothy," Catherine said brightly, "are these your friends?"

"Indeed we are," Cecilia grinned. "Which, I suppose, means that you are a friend of ours, too."

"Oh, really?" she asked excitedly. "That is wonderful! I love friends."

"That is good, because you have three more now," Beatrice smiled. "Which reminds me, we were going to spend some time in the glasshouse. Would you like to join us?"

"Yes please!" Catherine replied, before turning to her uncle. "Can I go?"

"Of course. These ladies shall take excellent care of you."

Dorothy liked that he trusted her friends, at least.

"You will be going with them, I assume?" Lady Annabelle asked Dorothy. "Since you know the plants so well, I mean."

"She will not," Cecilia replied. "We are going to be very selfish and steal this little one away for a while."

"Perhaps not selfishly," Emma interjected, "or at least, not entirely. We would like our good friend to have some time with her husband before the festivities truly begin. Alone."

Dorothy bit her lip to stop herself from smirking. Her friends were wicked, but she adored them.

"You may join us, if you wish," Beatrice suggested to Lady Annabelle, "so that you are not alone."

"I will not be alone. I shall have the Duke."

"You shall not," Morgan replied. "That would be lovely, ladies. Thank you."

Cecilia took Lady Annabelle's arm while Beatrice scooped Catherine into her arms, and they all left in a hurry. For a moment, it was silent in the room, and Dorothy did not know what to say.

"I have a feeling that they do not like me very much," Morgan said absent-mindedly.

"They will," she assured him. "My friends are protective of me, that is all."

"And I assume that did not look the best."

"It certainly did not."

Dorothy realized that she had folded her arms, and placed them by her sides again.

"You must know that I had not intended to be alone with her," he explained. "The governess was resting, and as you know I cannot have Lady Annabelle alone with Catherine."

"Where is Mrs. Herrington?"

"She is in town," he explained, taking her waist in his hands. "With how little preparation was made for this visit, she has had to make some last minute purchases. Truly, Dorothy, I have no intentions of being near that woman."

She smiled, running her hands up and down his arms. He was being sincere, and any unease she felt was not because of him. He was a good man and a good husband. She repeated it to herself, trying to believe it completely.

"She ought to be careful with what she says," Dorothy laughed softly. "My friends will not hesitate to straighten her up. Then again, they may not wish to say anything in front of Catherine. They all love children."

"I noticed. They all seemed so excited to meet her."

"Lady Annabelle did too, but then I suppose it is because they are family."

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"No, that was certainly strange too. Lady Annabelle never liked children. She said that she would—"

He stopped himself.

"It is all right," Dorothy assured him. "It was a long time ago, and it does not mean anything now. You were engaged to her, and now you are married to me."

He cleared his throat, nodding at her.

"She told me that we would sire an heir and then no more, and that even then she would not want to see the child itself."

"And if you had a girl?"

"Any children we had would be for their nanny to care for. She had very little interest."

"In which case, I wonder what changed."

"I believe it is because she now regrets that she has not had any. She has no husband and no children, and so she will be living quite a lonely life."

Dorothy would have pointed him to Cecilia, who was proudly unmarried, but it was not the time. It was true that Lady Annabelle had come to a sort of realization that she was alone, and perhaps that had made her change her mind. Regardless, she would have to find a husband if she wished to change that, and that was not something that

would be easily done by hiding away in another family's household.

"Is it wrong of me to say that I am pleased that she was awful to you?" she asked.

"I cannot say that I enjoyed it," he replied, laughing.

"No, but had she not done it, you would have married her instead of me. I cannot say that I am unhappy about that."

He embraced her, his fingertips nestled in her hair.

"Nor can I," he promised. "And in that respect, I would have to agree with you. She will not be alone with me again, I assure you. I should have told you, but I wanted you to enjoy your time with your friends."

"I can do that no matter where we are."

"Then might I suggest we join them?" he asked. "I believe it might be an idea that I improve their opinions of me."

"I would have to agree with you there," she giggled, "but truly, they will come around. They simply need to see that you are not a callous man that is holding me prisoner."

"Is that what they think of me?"

"No," she replied firmly. "They think you are strange, and perhaps a little off putting, but they will soon change their minds."

"Good, because I would hate to have to lock them in the dungeon."



They laughed together before leaving to join the others in the glasshouse. When they arrived, they saw all of the ladies sitting down, while Catherine explained what each plant was. Dorothy's heart swelled at the sight of her, especially when she began to look at her as she said the more difficult pronunciations.

What Dorothy especially appreciated was the way her friends acted as though they were truly interested in what the little girl had to say. She knew perfectly well that they did not care about plants, and that they only humored her when she told them about botany because she was their friend, but they were pretending nonetheless and it was making Catherine blossom.

She had changed so much in such a short time. From the day that Lady Annabelle had arrived to that moment, it was as though she had truly begun to recover from her illness. There was color in her face and she spoke excitedly, as if she were truly alive again. She wanted to enjoy it, but there was that sameness feeling that this happiness arrived when her new aunt did, and that when Lady Annabelle left it would all change back to how it was.

"Aunt Dorothy," Catherine asked, making her focus on where she was again. "What is this?"

Dorothy looked at the plant that Catherine was pointing at, and then blinked. It was the most beautiful thing that she had ever seen, the one thing that she had always wanted, and she could not believe that she had not noticed it before.

"Oh," Lady Annabelle remarked, "it appears the Duchess does not know."

"*Strelitzia Reginae*," she whispered, and all eyes turned to her. "A bird of paradise. Where did it come from?"

She turned to Morgan, who was grinning widely at her.

"I was hoping to show you it when we were alone," he explained. "I had it brought in."

"But— it must have been so expensive, and—"

"And look beside it."

Dorothy shifted her gaze to the flower sitting next to it. It was not the done thing to cry when in company, but in an instant she felt tears welling in her eyes. It was not what Morgan had planned, but it could not have been revealed in a better way. Her bird of paradise sat proudly next to a tiger lily.

Her favorite flower beside his.

### CHAPTER 24

Morgan had planned his surprise perfectly.

He would wait until their guests had retired to their bedchambers, and then he would find Dorothy and bring her to the glasshouse at night. The moonlight would shine onto the flowers he had purchased, and he would tell her what he had been trying to say for the last few days.

He was falling for her, and he had no intentions of stopping himself.

He did not know if she would feel the same, or if she would tell him that they had their arrangement and she wished to keep to it, but he had to tell her or else he would burst.

Unfortunately, his gift had slipped his mind entirely when he allowed the ladies and

Catherine to visit the glasshouse, and the surprise was ruined. That did not matter to him, however, as Dorothy was smiling and that was all that he cared about.

"I feel as though this would be more special if we knew their meanings," Lady Beatrice chuckled softly. "Dorothy, have you ever told us what these mean in flower language?"

"I have not," she replied, "but the bird of paradise is my favorite flower, and the tiger lily is His Grace's."

Morgan placed a hand on Catherine's shoulder gently.

"And when you are older," he explained, "you may choose your favorite, and we shall place it with them."

"Oh, Uncle, that would be lovely! My favorite is tulips now, but that is not nearly as interesting."

"I would disagree," Lady Cecilia said kindly. "Personally, I love tulips. They need not be exotic to be interesting."

"Yes, they are my favorite too," Lady Annabelle said, perhaps a little too quickly. "Especially the yellow ones."

Catherine wrinkled her nose.

"I do not like the yellow ones. The pink ones are nicer. Aunt Dorothy told me that they mean love and good wishes."

"Indeed," Dorothy said warmly, "although the yellow ones mean happiness which is just as lovely."

She was trying to keep the peace with Lady Annabelle, but their guest was quite clearly opposed to that. It was evident that Lady Annabelle had very little interest in being a friend to his wife, but as she was not doing anything outwardly hostile, he let it lie. Lady Annabelle had always expected that she would be successful, and she had been hit with the realization that she was not and it was normal for her to envy the Duchess that she could have been.

When the time came to leave the glasshouse, they did so in pairs. Dorothy walked beside him, Lady Beatrice with Lady Emma, and Catherine with Lady Cecilia, leaving Lady Annabelle alone. She clearly seemed disgruntled by Catherine not choosing to walk with her, but she soon shook that from her and walked with Morgan and Dorothy instead. It had only been a few short days, but he was already quite prepared for her to return to her own household and leave him be. He hated the reminder of all that had happened between them, and he hated that it clearly made Dorothy think of something that, while she had not shared it with him, bothered her a great deal.

"Might you grow a yellow tulip with the pink one?" she suggested to Dorothy.

"If that is what Catherine decides, although I do not believe that she will want a yellow one. She said herself that she dislikes them."

"Yes, but if it is to be a family garden, with each member of it having a flower, then you ought to add mine too. We are family, after all."

"I shall ask my husband," she replied politely.

Morgan knew that he would say no, of course.

"Uncle Morgan!" Catherine called suddenly. "Come and look at this!"

He turned to see that his niece and Cecilia were looking at something in the ground, and as he had always done he went to look at it with her. It was only as he reached them that he realized he had left Dorothy with Lady Annabelle, but he knew nothing would happen. The other two ladies were far too close, and Lady Annabelle knew not to jeopardize her position as a guest.

It was a ladybird, which was one of her favorite insects. She held out a finger, and it crawled across it before sitting itself in her palm.

"Is it not lovely?" she asked.

"Very much so. Do you still have the little home for them?"

"Yes! I had forgotten all about it. Wait here."

She skipped off with the ladybird, leaving Morgan with one of the ladies he knew disliked him greatly. He turned to look at her, and already she had her arms folded and was wearing a scowl.

"I do not know what you said to Dorothy to make her happy, but I know my friend. She does not like this guest of yours."

"Lady Cecilia, I know what you think of me, but I assure you that I only have the best intentions."

"Yes, for every gentleman with good intentions leaves his wife without warning, and then sits in a room alone with an unmarried lady that he once courted."

"That is fair, but it was not how it seemed. I will admit that my sudden absence was wrong, but it was for the child. I have been searching everywhere for her mother, and at the time I did not know how to tell Dorothy. She and I have discussed it, and I no longer have anything hidden from her."

"Be that as it may, you did not see how she changed when we entered that room."

"I was in there because I do not completely trust her, either. I simply had nobody else

to watch her with Catherine. It was foolish, I know, but again I have already discussed this with my wife."

"And what of those snide remarks that this lady continues to make? Do not pretend that you cannot hear them. I know that gossip between ladies is perhaps more insidious than how you gentlemen are, but you must have heard it."

"As far as I know, it is harmless, and if it is not, Dorothy knows to tell me."

"And if she does not?"

"She will," he snapped. "I understand that you are protecting her, but she is my wife. If something is making her unhappy, she is more than capable of saying as much. It is admirable of you to go to such lengths to care for her, but she is not a child."

"I did not say that."

"No, but you are implying that she does not know how to speak for herself."

"A lot of the time, she does not. I am not accusing you of anything, nor am I doing so to Dorothy. I am simply saying that she does not tend to make a fuss. She prefers to let things lie, and when it comes to an unmarried lady trying to stake her claim over Dorothy's home, I will say something if she cannot."

"Here it is!" Catherine said brightly as she returned, forcing him and Lady Cecilia to replace their smiles.

"That is so lovely," Lady Cecilia commented. "Shall we put the ladybird inside?"

Catherine nodded, shaking her hand gently until the ladybird flew inside. They rejoined the others, though they were in no rush, but when they returned Lady



Annabelle was missing.

"She has retired for the night," Lady Emma explained. "I may well have to do the same soon enough."

"That is no surprise to me," Dorothy smiled. "Your child shall soon be here. You must rest."

"If you need to sleep, you are more than welcome to," Morgan agreed. "I shall take no offence to it. Would you like your dinner brought to you?"

Lady Emma nodded gratefully, and Morgan had a maid accompany her to her room. He had not asked how soon the baby was to be born, but one look at her was enough to say that it was approaching time.

Mrs. Herrington took Catherine for her meal so that they could have some time as adults, and Dorothy breathed a sigh of relief when they reached the parlor room.

"I am so pleased that you are here," she sighed happily. "I hardly see you."

"That may change," Lady Beatrice suggested. "As it is not the Social Season, we are able to come and go as we please."

"Your father may have something to say about that."

"My father is aware that I am in the company of a duke. He is also of the belief that said duke knows other dukes and eligible bachelors that I may make acquaintances with. Therefore, he is more than happy for me to spend my time here."

Morgan could not help but smile at her. Dorothy's friends were indeed more outspoken than Dorothy herself, and he was pleased that, of the four of them, he had

married the most agreeable one at least. She was not a troublemaker like the others were, not that he minded them either. He liked that they made noise, and that with them in attendance the household felt livelier.

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"As for me, my father has all but given in," Lady Cecilia grinned. "He has at last accepted that I am destined to be a bluestocking spinster collecting dust. I rather like it that way."

"Are you not afraid that he will send you to the country?" Dorothy asked. "He has threatened to do so before."

"And yet, I remain with him. It is an empty threat, I assure you. Even if it were not, I believe I would quite like the country. I could be a governess, and truly do something good rather than simpering for a husband that I cannot stand. That is not meant as a comment to you, of course."

Morgan wondered whether or not he should have taken offence, but Dorothy laughed and so he assumed there was no need to. Lady Cecilia was biting, but Dorothy had assured him that there was no real harm in her. He hoped that was the case, for he wished to at least forge friendships with her friends. He could see how important they were to her, and so even if they disliked him he would do all that he could.

"You must not pay her any heed," Lady Beatrice explained. "She is the most determined of us all not to marry, which means that when she does it shall be all the more entertaining."

"That is assuming that I shall change my mind, which will not happen."

"I thought that, once," Morgan replied, and all three ladies looked at him.

"What do you mean?" Dorothy asked. "I thought that you always knew it was your

duty."

"I did, but that did not mean I was going to find a wife. I decided that I had no other choice when I saw the path that my brother was going to follow, but when I was younger I thought I would remain a bachelor, traveling the world and researching exotic plants."

"I had the same hopes for myself as a girl, though it was far less attainable for myself."

"Well, we could still do that," he suggested, and Dorothy looked at him with curiosity. "You and I never truly had a honeymoon. There is nothing stopping us from doing so."

"What about Catherine?"

"She can stay with Mrs. Herrington. It is what was done before we were married."

"But it is an awfully long time for her to be left alone. Perhaps it might wait until she is older? If we leave it long enough, she might even be able to join us?"

He loved how selfless she was. He would have said as much if they were alone, but he did not wish to say it in front of her friends for fear of seeming disingenuous.

He had never thought about taking Catherine outside of the home, given her condition but also the circumstances surrounding her birth. He liked that Dorothy wanted to take her with them, but that would have to wait a long time. In any case, it was a discussion that they would have when they were alone.

He saw that Lady Cecilia, however, was looking at him approvingly now. He had done something that had pleased her, and though that had not been his sole intention

he was pleased that he had done so.

Suddenly, the door flew open once more, and Lady Annabelle came bursting into the room in tears.

"What is it, Lady Annabelle?" Dorothy asked.

"Do not come near me," she snarled. "Not after what your supposed friend said to me."

Morgan looked at Dorothy quizzically, but she seemed just as uncertain as he was.

"Lady Emma," she continued, "mocked my sister."

## CHAPTER 25

Dorothy did not know what to say.

Lady Annabelle had made her accusation, but nobody knew what to do in response other than look at one another. Dorothy knew, as well as Cecilia and Beatrice, that their friend would never say something hurtful to anyone, let alone mock one's sister. Emma cared far too greatly for her own sister to ever think of doing such a thing.

But Morgan did not know her friends, and all that he had seen of them was their pointed remarks in his direction. He knew that they would do anything for her, and he also knew that Lady Annabelle made her feel ill at ease. If he believed Lady Annabelle, she could not say that she blamed him.

"What precisely did she say?" Morgan asked at last.

"It was awful. She said that she was pleased that Elizabeth had died, because it was

one less Blackwood to think about. She also said that my family deserved what happened to us, as we are all cut from the same cloth, and—"

"That is nonsense," Lady Cecilia interrupted, furious. "Emma would never say such things."

"She did, and I am aware that when one is with child they can say things that they do not mean, but that was beyond the pale."

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"It would have been, had she said it, but you and I both know it is untrue. Where did she even say this to you?"

"In the hallway. She had been waiting outside of her room for me."

"And why were you outside her room?" Beatrice asked. "If I recall correctly, you are on the other side of the manor. You had no need to be there."

"I may go where I please in this household!"

"You will be honest," Morgan said, glaring at her. "Do remember that she has a maid with her, and it is one that I trust. If she has said something, the maid will have heard and she will tell me. If you are lying, then she will not hesitate to disclose that to me either."

"Can we discuss this privately?" Lady Annabelle asked.

"No. You have made accusations to all of us, and so we shall all hear the truth. What is it?"

"I- I..."

Without an explanation, she tumbled to the floor. Again, nobody knew quite what to do except look at one another. Dorothy looked at her on the floor and wondered just what she was trying to do. She had no reason to lie about Emma; if she was trying to cause a rift between Dorothy and her husband, she should have made such accusations about Dorothy herself, but what she had said was vile and not something

that her friend would have ever said.

Emma had had her own difficult childhood and her family situation was far from ideal. It had been painful for her, but it had led to her being protective, and had made her the least judgmental person that Dorothy knew. Beyond that, of course, Emma had one priority and that was her unborn child. There was no reason why she would have had such an outburst, which could only have meant that Lady Annabelle was lying, but she could not work out why that was,

Morgan sent for a doctor, and had Lady Annabelle placed on a settee by his staff. He then took the ladies out of the room and into the drawing room, having a tea prepared and sent to them. Dorothy served it as they sat in silence.

"She has not truly fainted," Cecilia said gently to Beatrice. "She was caught in a lie and had to cover it. That is all."

"Even so," she shivered. "It was frightening to see. We were having such a lovely conversation, too."

"Jealousy is a rotten thing," Cecilia nodded, "but we do not possess such a thing. She will learn from this."

Morgan turned to Dorothy with a serious expression that she had only seen on his face when he was going to tell her about Catherine.

"I shall not be angry with you," he began, "nor your friend, for I know that Lady Annabelle is not the nicest lady. Do you believe that she could say such things?"

Dorothy shook her head firmly.

"She would never even think of the words, let alone put them together and say them.



It is not Emma's nature, and it has not been in all of the time that I have known her."

Morgan relaxed at once.

"Good. The matter is settled then. I was hoping that you would say that."

"Are you going to send her away again?" Cecilia asked, albeit clumsily.

"I do not know as yet. I cannot in good faith send her away now, in the condition that she is in—"

"That she may or may not be in."

"Yes. In any case, I shall have the doctor see to her, and then I shall speak with her in the morning. I at least want to know her motives before I send her back to her father."

That seemed to satisfy her friends, who then began to eat the food that had been brought.

Emma was devastated to learn of what had been said of her the following morning. She began to cry in an instant, apologizing profusely.

"Do forgive me," she whimpered, "but that is an awful thing to be accused of. I did not even know her sister. I do not know anything about the Blackwoods."

"I suspected as much," Cecilia said kindly, handing her a drink. "We believe you, Emma. You have never said an unkind thing in your life. Well, perhaps you have to your husband."

She laughed through her tears, then looked at Morgan.

"Where is she now?" she asked. "I will not go to her. If anything, I hope not to see her again, but I would like to know how she is."

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"The doctor left just now. He said that she is overly tired and needs time to rest."

"How long will that be?" Dorothy asked.

"I do not know. He said that when she is ready, she shall leave her room of her own accord."

"She ought to rest in her own room," Cecilia grumbled. "I do not see why you feel the need to burden yourself with her."

"Because she is the aunt of our niece," Dorothy explained gently. "It is not ideal, but Catherine has only just found her. She shall be devastated if she learns that her aunt was sent away."

"Yes," Emma nodded, "truly, there is no need to do anything on my behalf. I shall simply keep my distance, or perhaps stay with you, Dorothy. That way, no more accusations can be made."

"If she were smart," Cecilia smirked, "she would have said it about me. I would never be so cruel, but at least His Grace might have believed it."

"I do not believe you are cruel, Lady Cecilia," Morgan replied. "I would have been as inclined to believe that you said it as I was Lady Emma, which was not very much at all. My wife would not keep the company of someone so vile."

Dorothy, in spite of it all, was smiling. She had fallen very quickly for her husband, and though she did not dare tell him as much she hoped that he might one day come to

see her the same way. It was a dream, one that would not come true, but she had her hopes regardless.

There was a knock at the door, and Mrs. Herrington entered.

"I am terribly sorry, Your Grace, but Lady Annabelle wishes to see you."

Morgan bristled.

"I will not be doing that," he replied.

"Not you, Your Grace," she explained, turning to Dorothy. "She has asked to see you."

"Dorothy, no," Cecilia warned. "She is only trying to make you go so that she can say you were unkind to her. Do not be so foolish."

"I will certainly not be going alone," Dorothy agreed, "but I could take Catherine with me. I would wager that she had not seen her aunt since yesterday, is that correct?"

Mrs. Herrington nodded, and Dorothy knew in an instant what she wished to do. She went with her housekeeper to Catherine's room, and collected her before taking her to Lady Annabelle's room. She planned to watch Lady Annabelle brighten, and use that to prove that she was feeling better. At that point, she would send her husband in to speak with her.

When they entered, however, Lady Annabelle remained unchanged. She looked exhausted, and each movement seemed to almost pain her.

"Aunt Annabelle!" Catherine exclaimed. "What has happened to you?"

"It is nothing, Dear, only something that was said to me yesterday."

She gave a pointed look to Dorothy then, which Dorothy ignored. She did not believe any of it, but she had to admit that Lady Annabelle was very convincing. If she were only eight years of age like Catherine was, she was not so certain that she would have seen through it.

"Might I speak to my niece alone?" Lady Annabelle asked.

"You and I both know that is not allowed, Lady Annabelle. It is what the Duke wants, and I am not going to disobey him."

"I know," she whimpered, "but I am aware that I will be leaving soon, and I only wish to spend five mere minutes with my niece before I go. Surely you can turn a blind eye for that?"

"You are leaving?" Catherine asked, eyes wide. "Oh, Aunt Dorothy, please give me five minutes. I will not tell Uncle Morgan, I promise."

"That is not what concerns me, Catherine. Your Uncle has ensured that you have someone with you at all times."

"You all think that I am some filthy commoner, don't you?" Lady Annabelle snapped. "You think that I am unworthy of being here simply because of my family. I knew that you were all ashamed of me."

"We are not, Aunt Annabelle!"

"We most certainly are not, no. Come, Catherine, it is time to leave."

"But I want to stay with her! She has only just arrived, and now she is being sent

away, and it is not fair."

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"Catherine, please come with me. I shall send your uncle back with you, but you must come with me."

She tried to take the girl with her, but Catherine pulled away, forcing her heels into the ground.

"I am not going. You can send for my uncle, but I am staying here. Aunt Annabelle is unwell, like me, and I will not allow her to be sent away. You all care for me. Why is she different?"

Dorothy bit her lip. Morgan was nearby, and it would only take her a minute or so to reach him. It was not worth hurting Catherine over.

"I shall only be a moment," she said reluctantly, leaving for the drawing room once more.

Morgan left in an instant, giving her an uncertain look for leaving Catherine alone, but Dorothy did not know what more she could have done when there were no servants to assist her and Catherine refused to leave. The only other thing that she could have done was force her to leave by dragging her, which she could not have done in good faith.

When Morgan returned, however, he could not meet her eye.

"What is it?" she asked.

"You know perfectly well what it is."

Dorothy looked at him, puzzled, but he did not soften when he saw her confusion. If anything, it only made him appear to be angry.

"I will discuss it with you when the week is through," he said coldly.

"Morgan, I—"

"We will discuss it when the week is through."

He did not say anything more, and none of her friends had anything to say in response.

She would simply have to wait.

## CHAPTER 26

There were very things that could hurt Morgan.

With all that had happened to him, he had learned not to be affected by things that did not matter. It was why he was able to maintain his composure when Lady Annabelle had appeared, and why he had allowed her to stay long past his obligations.

What never failed to infuriate him, however, was the mistreatment of his family.

He knew that his wife was hurt by what had taken place, and that the smile she wore was not real, and he felt himself being driven mad. What Dorothy had been accused of was so unlike her that he did not want to believe it, but Catherine was not a liar. If she said something, Morgan was inclined to believe it.

The remainder of the week felt like torture, and on the last day he knew that he would also have to tell Lady Annabelle that she would also be leaving. He knew that she



would not want to, but it had to be done. She had met Catherine and bonded with her, and the time had come for her to return to her own home.

"But that is cruel!" she argued, as he had expected. "You cannot tear the poor girl away from her family like this."

"You may see her again soon, but as it stands I need time to speak with my wife, and I would rather do that without guests present."

"Yes, well, unlike those other awful ladies I am not a guest. I am family to both you and our niece. There is something far more important than marriage that binds us now, and it is the interests of that little girl."

He sighed, exhausted from what had passed of late and not willing to continue the argument further than he had to.

"It will only be for a week. I know that Catherine thinks a great deal of you, and I am not trying to stand in the way of that, but I have a family to take care of and I must do that before considering the wants of someone who has only just arrived."

Her eyes blazed, but he was not going to change his mind. He had to be rid of her, not only for his family but for himself, too. He did not like the person he became in her presence, and he wished to return to himself.

She stormed away from him, and after collecting himself he went to find Dorothy. Their guests had not yet left, but their belongings were being loaded into their carriages and he could not wait any longer. He found her in her bedchambers, sitting at her writing desk.

"What are you doing?" he asked. "Should you not be with your friends?"

"If I could face them, I would be. Do you not know how terrible this has been for me?"

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"I have had other things to think about, namely the strangers in my home."

"The very same ones that you invited here, yes I am aware."

"Dorothy, I—"

"No," she said firmly, turning to look at him. "You do not understand how these last few days have been for me. I have had to pretend to be happy in front of my friends, trying to convince them that in spite of what they have seen of you, you are a good husband. You have left me trying to understand what I could possibly have done to warrant such treatment, and you have given me no explanation while it was inconvenient for you."

"Do you want to know what is inconvenient?" he snapped. "My niece crying in my arms, saying that you plan to never allow her aunt to return, that Lady Annabelle is on her way to the poor house, and that she deserves it completely."

He expected a rebuttal. He expected her to refute the claims, and to protest her innocence, but she did not. Instead, she rose to her feet, her expression blank, and turned away from him, walking out the door.

"Dorothy," he called. "Dorothy, do not walk away from me."

"If that is what you want to believe, then do so. You and I both know that she was the sort of lady you wanted to marry, you simply could not have her. Fear not, I will not be another obstacle to overcome."

He chased after her in an instant, her words ringing in his ears. It did not make any sense; he had made his dislike of Lady Annabelle agonizingly clear, and he was angry that Catherine had heard it but his feelings towards her aunt remained unchanged.

"Dorothy, stop it. I want--"

"I do not care what you want. I am going to say my goodbyes to my friends, and then I am going to return to my room and you will leave me be. You have done quite enough as it is."

She left him standing in the hallway, his mouth agape. His wife had always been pleasant and easy to talk to, non-confrontational, but something had changed and it had been very sudden indeed.

"Let her go."

He bristled, turning to see Lady Annabelle behind him.

"I do not appreciate you eavesdropping."

"It was not my intention to. I was hoping to see your wife before my departure, so that I could apologize for what I did to her. I am uncertain as to why she is so angry with me, but I hope to make amends for Catherine's sake."

"You are the last person that she wishes to see right now, but I thank you for wanting to try."

"Then perhaps I might stay a short while longer? It will give her time to think on matters, and I know that Catherine will appreciate it. Besides, the both of you need to take time for yourselves, and Catherine would hate to lose the three of us at once."

His determination wavered. It was true that Catherine had been out of sorts since she had told him what Dorothy had said, and she had been desperately clinging to Lady Annabelle since then. Was it cruel to take the one lady she wished to see away from her?

"You have three more days," he sighed. "And that is only because it will benefit our niece."

"Of course, Your Grace. Thank you."

She left quickly, and Morgan went to look outside at the carriages. All of Dorothy's friends surrounded her, and he eyed Lady Emma closest of all. She was, after all, the first to have been accused of hostility. He did not see any malice in her, but after Catherine had accused Dorothy of the same thing it all made more sense.

The group of ladies saw Lady Annabelle as a threat, and it had been needless. He hardly liked the lady at all, and he thought they knew that. Regardless, it had all happened and it left him needing to speak with Dorothy and trying to understand it.

He gave her the rest of the day to calm herself, and then went to see her again that evening. He did not know what to say to her, except ask her why she had done it, but he hoped that the words would come to him once he saw her.

He knocked, and there was no response. He knocked again, and when there was still nothing he pushed the door open. Once more, she was sitting at her desk, but this time she was writing.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

She turned at once, glaring at him.

"I told you I do not wish to see you."

"It is not as simple as that, not when you and I have something to discuss."

"I have nothing more to say to you. I do not understand why you have been so cruel as to believe the worst of me, but it is not something I wish to know. What I do know is that I am undeserving of it, and I will not wait until you are happy to tell me why you no longer care what I have to say."

"This does not make me happy."

"Then at least we have both been miserable because of you," she laughed empty.

He had never seen such a side to her, and he was completely taken aback by it. In spite of everything that was happening, he thought that she was beautiful when she was passionate, even if such passion was targeted at him in a negative way.

"Dorothy, I want to tell you what has happened, not because it is now a good time but because we are alone."

"Are we? Is that why our houseguest has stayed while my friends have left? Mrs. Herrington says that she will be here for a further three days, even though we agreed to be rid of her by now."

"Yes, and I am well aware that you want her to leave."

"Do you not?" she asked. "Well, no, of course you do not. Why else would you have told her that she could stay without asking me?"

"It is for Catherine's sake."

"And yours," she nodded. "Which tells me precisely where I stand. You may think that I am inept, but believe me, I have seen everything. I see how she hangs on your every word, following you around so much that I do not want to be near you. I hoped that you had seen it, and that you would put the matter to rest, but instead you are encouraging it. Again, if that is what you want, then I will not stop you. I hope you

find happiness, Your Grace, because I clearly cannot give it to you."

She turned to her writing, and nothing that he said made her turn back to him. He wondered just what had happened that made everything go so wrong, but he knew what it truly was. The fault was his own, for he never should have allowed Lady Annabelle to stay the moment he saw her. He should have sent her away before Catherine could form an attachment to her. He should have put a stop to it before it began, but he had not and it had gone too far.

He knew what he had to do. He had to speak to his niece, learn more about what had taken place, so that he could truly fix what had been broken. He did not want to be hostile with his wife, but if she had hurt Catherine then steps would have to be taken.

He had seen the fear in the little girl's eyes. Something awful had been said to her, he knew that much.

The following morning, she was the only one to join him at breakfast. It had been a long time since he had broken his fast with only his niece, but given the circumstances it was quite pleasant. She picked at her food, but as none of it had chocolate in he was not too surprised.

"Uncle," she began suddenly, "can a lie ever be good?"

"That entirely depends. Why do you ask?"

"Well, for example, if one tells a lie for themselves, it is bad, but if it is for someone else, is it good? Say that I broke a vase. If I said I did not break it, and Mrs. Herrington did, that would be a bad lie, but if Mrs. Herrington lied and said she had broken it, is that also bad?"

"I would not have said so, no. I think it would be quite honorable, actually. Why,



have you broken a vase?"

She shook her head, but Morgan did notice that she ate more easily after that.

"I would like to walk in the garden with Aunt Annabelle today," she continued, and the matter was forgotten. "I was also wondering when we might buy those two tulips?"

"I am going to town within the week," Morgan explained, "so I shall consider it then. Where is your aunt, for that matter?"

"I do not know," she shrugged. "She told me last night that she was going to speak with Dorothy."

## CHAPTER 27

Bad wives abandon their families, Dorothy thought, but awful ones stay when they only make everything worse.

She was grateful to have learned of her sister's address, for she needed to escape for a while. She wanted to be anywhere but where she was, and a cottage in Scotland sounded perfect. It would give her the distance she needed, not to mention give her husband what he deserved.

She had planned it from the moment Morgan had begun to act strangely. She watched what followed, and how he was with Lady Annabelle more than he was with her, and how Catherine clung to her new aunt incessantly, and that told her everything that she needed to know. She was not needed in their family, and it was better that she was not there.

She had stayed, unwilling to give Lady Annabelle the satisfaction of seeing her give

over her control, but then she learned of what she had been accused of by Catherine and she knew she had to leave. Somehow, the girl had been made to believe that Dorothy could say such inexcusable and vile things, and nobody wanted to know why Catherine had thought it. They only wanted to know why Dorothy had said it, which she had not.

She wrote a letter, knowing that it would arrive before she did, to warn Eleanor that she would appear. As she went to send it, however, Lady Annabelle crossed her path, smirking.

"Good evening, Your Grace."

"Not now, Lady Annabelle."

"What's the matter? You have acted most strangely of late."

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"I do not wish to discuss it with you."

"No, I suppose that a wife never wishes to discuss her marital issues, especially not with her husband's mistress."

The word echoed, growing louder and louder until she felt unwell. She looked away, and she heard Lady Annabelle laugh coldly.

"You must have been aware," she continued. "Why else would he insist on keeping me here? Come now, Dorothy, you and I both know that if it came to the two of us, there would be no contest. If I did not leave, I would have been his wife instead of you, and that was not his choice. You cannot be surprised that, even after all this time, it is me that he wants."

"That isn't true," she protested, but there was hardly any strength in her voice. "He does not want you."

"Then why am I still here? We are both adults, Dorothy. We both know that I make a far better mother for Catherine. For one, she is truly my family, but it is more than that. The Duke and I appear to be a proper family, rather than a handsome gentleman and the wife he was ordered to take."

"I suggest that you stop this."

"Or what?" she asked. "His Grace has already made his choice, and it is not you. From the moment I arrived, he was all too happy to accommodate me. At my word, he turned against you. If anything, you would be better off yourself by doing

something about all of this. Annulments are not too difficult to seek, you know."

Before Dorothy could say anything, Lady Annabelle walked away, leaving her standing with her letter clasped in her fingers.

What she had been accused of was a lie, a despicable lie in an attempt to ruin her marriage, and it had worked. Dorothy did not want to lose her husband, but she did not want to remain married to a man that hated her, either. Catherine deserved a real mother, and Morgan deserved a good wife. She was, clearly, neither of those things.

And so she left that night.

"I will say," Eleanor smiled cautiously as she served her tea. "I did not expect you to arrive with a wedding ring."

Her sister was older than Dorothy remembered, but it was indeed her. A beautiful lady, a mother at that, in a beautiful home away from everything. She had gotten everything she wanted, and Dorothy envied her greatly for it.

"I should have invited you, I know," she nodded. "Father did not allow it. I thought he would have told you himself."

"He hardly ever talks to me. He accepted my advice, but nothing more. He is quite glad to be rid of me, I am certain of that."

"That is nonsense. He thought of you all the time, even after you left. He was angry, but he still loves you."

"I shall believe that when I see it. Anyway, what has brought you here so suddenly?"

With a sigh, Dorothy explained everything that had happened. It came out in a single

tirade with very few breaths taken. By the time she was done, she was in tears, her cheeks hot to the touch. Eleanor gave her a handkerchief, and then sat in silence for a moment.

"I cannot believe that you never stood up for yourself."

Dorothy looked at her, eyeing her carefully.

"Do not look at me like that," she continued. "How, at your age, are you incapable of speaking for yourself? You were always quiet when we were girls, but I thought that when you debuted that would change. Let me guess, you continued to wear those awful citrus shades?"

"Awful?" she echoed. "The ones you chose for me, do you mean?"

"Yes, in the hopes that you would at last rebel," Eleanor argued, laughing. "I thought that, eventually, you would refuse. I was trying to push you into doing something about it, and proving that you can defend yourself. Did you truly not do that?"

"Of course not. I never would have been allowed, not when you somehow convinced Father that it was in fashion."

"And yet, he saw ballrooms filled with young ladies, none of whom wore yellow."

"Yes, but... Well, it is as I said. He trusted your judgment. He claimed that it was a happy color, one that would make me seem brighter than I am."

Eleanor smiled, shaking her head, and handed her a slice of cake.

"You are allowed to defend yourself," she said gently. "I did it, and I have never been happier. I could have bowed down, and married the first gentleman that Father chose

for me, but then where would I be?"

"We do not know. You could have been very happy."

"Is that what you are? Are you happy with your marriage?"

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She had been, very much so, until everything had soured. She had felt attraction to Morgan since the moment she met him in the gardens, and that had blossomed into what she could only describe as love, but she had been foolish to allow that.

"I am happy enough," she replied.

"Then why are you here? You could have brought your husband, or invited me to visit you, but instead you are here alone. Why is that?"

"Because he does not love me," she said quickly. "I thought that he might, but I was wrong. I should have known better, for nobody could ever love someone like me, and so it is my own fault really. I should not have dreamed so much."

She felt firm hands on her shoulders, shaking her.

"Stop that this instant," Eleanor commanded. "I will not allow it. If anything, you should have allowed yourself to dream more. I do not understand why you are so insistent that you are this awful little toad, when the truth could not be further from that."

"Because, Eleanor, the moment I allowed myself to think I was something more, a beautiful lady came to my home and my husband is besotted with her. My niece is too, for that matter. They make a beautiful family in a way that I could not. It is unfair, but it is how it is."

"Or, perhaps, you are a jealous little girl that saw what she deemed a beautiful lady to be, and you did the damage yourself. If you thought your husband liked you, it is

because he did. You should have cared about that rather than anything this lady said or did."

Dorothy knew that was true, but there had not been much that she could do when Morgan had sided with Lady Annabelle in the end. She had allowed it to continue, but it had been Lady Annabelle that had delivered the final blow, and it had been enough to make her turn and run.

"You look like a coward, you know," Eleanor continued.

"How very kind of you. Truly, I am so pleased to have made this journey."

"I am not saying it to be unkind. I am saying it because it is what you need to hear, as is my duty as your sister. Dorothy, I may not know your husband, but I know you. I also know what you need to hear, and that is this. If you want something, you have to fight for it."

"I should not have to fight for my husband."

"Not your husband, your marriage. There has been a difficulty, and you have run away, when you should have stayed and found a way to prove your innocence. Then, of course, comes the time to make your husband grovel, and do everything in his power to make it up to you."

"I want to fight it, but there is nothing that I can say. He thinks I am guilty, and so that is how it is. I do not know what else to do. Even if Lady Annabelle is wrong, I cannot help but think an annulment is the right thing to do for all of us."

"Then you have nobody to blame for your misery but yourself."

Dorothy looked at her sister and saw only sincerity. Eleanor had not spoken unkindly,



but it had cut her to the core in a way only a sister could do. It was all true; Dorothy could have done more to protest her innocence, but she had done the easy thing and ran away. Even as she sat there, knowing she had not done the right thing, she could not bring herself to return.

"I can see that you are not ready," Eleanor said gently. "You are welcome to stay with us as long as you please. I can quite confidently say that you are better off here than with Father, at least."

"He would be furious with me," she agreed.

"Then stay with me. Collect yourself, and then go back to your husband and mend things."

"But what if she was telling me the truth, and that she is his mistress?"

"Think for yourself, Sister. Do you truly believe that he would do such a thing to you?"

Dorothy knew that he would not do anything to hurt her, but Lady Annabelle had said it with such conviction that it was impossible to ignore. She sighed, resting her head against the settee.

"Take all the time you need," Eleanor said gently, leaving her alone with her thoughts.

Uncertain of what to do with herself, Dorothy reached for a book. She ate the cakes before her, sipped tea, and read. It had been a while since she felt like herself, and she had begun to forget just who she truly was. She was not a coward, or at least that was not how she saw herself. In truth, she was a gentle soul, one that did the most she could for those around her. She had only ever tried to be good, even if she was never

satisfied with her efforts.

That night, Eleanor took her to her room. Eleanor's husband was away in London for business, and so it was the two of them and her children. With all that had happened, however, Dorothy was uncertain of spending time with them in case she did something to hurt them.

The children, however, did not allow that, and pounced on her the following morning.

"Aunt Dorothy!" the eldest yelled. "Can we go to the park?"

Dorothy smiled, knowing perfectly well that she could not refuse such a request.

## CHAPTER 28

*Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 11:55 pm*

Morgan did not know what happened to his wife, but he intended to find out.

She had vanished into the night, without even leaving him a note. None of the staff seemed to know where she was, with the exception of Mrs. Herrington who was not giving anything away at all. She had been acting strangely with him since his argument with Dorothy, but no matter how many times he asked why, she did not reveal anything.

"Catherine," he said gently, sitting with her in her room, "I know that yourself and Aunt Dorothy are... well, things have happened, but we have to find her. Do you know where she is?"

Catherine shook her head, but Morgan could tell that she was keeping something from him.

"Catherine, I know that a lot has happened of late, but we can fix it. I love you, and I want our family to be happy. I know that what Dorothy said was unkind to say the least, but we still must know that she is safe. If you know anything at all, you must tell me."

"Well," she said carefully, unable to meet his eye. "Aunt Annabelle told me that she has gone to stay with her family for a while. She said that Aunt Dorothy did not want to see her, and so she is going away for a while."

Morgan wished that were the case, for her family would have undoubtedly sent her back again if it were, but it was more than likely simply a white lie that Lady Annabelle had used to make her not worry so much. Catherine had been in a strange

state for the last few days, unable to talk and unwilling to see him. The only person that she wished to spend time with was Lady Annabelle, and already it was beginning to hurt him. He had been the one to take her into his home and care for her, not Lady Annabelle, but he could not remind such a small child of that. It would have been unfair for him to do, even if he truly was furious that it had been that easy for the lady that had once abandoned him.

"All right," he nodded. "Did she leave you anything?"

Catherine shook her head, and Morgan left her room. He knew that, in spite of how little she had given him, he would have to speak once again with his housekeeper. He knew that she was hiding something from him, but she was not letting up. He found her in the parlor room, and closed the door behind him when he entered.

"Mrs. Herrington, I shall only have this conversation with you a final time. Where is she?"

His housekeeper turned to him, furious.

"Even if I knew," she said firmly, "I would not tell you."

"You do not have a choice. You are my housekeeper."

"I am your wife's housekeeper," she corrected, "and because of you, she has vanished. Do you think I enjoy doing all of this work alone? You told me to come to like her company, and I did so. You cannot now ask me to be pleased that she is gone."

"I never once said that. Where on Earth would you get such an idea? I am searching for her."

"Yes, and you never would have had to had you not been so cruel."

He looked at her, taken aback.

"I heard you," she explained. "I heard the way you spoke to her, and how you accused her of things that you and I both know she would never do. You married a good lady, one that would not say such despicable things, especially in front of a child."

"Catherine is not a little girl that lies."

"Catherine is a little girl that does not want to lose anyone else. She is already without a mother, and now she is without her aunt."

"She has Lady Annabelle."

"Your Grace," she gasped, "can you hear yourself? This is the very same lady that slandered you, and you are believing her over your wife. What has compelled you to do this?"

Morgan hesitated, not knowing how to respond. He was aware that his actions had been odd, but that was because his own situation had been so bizarre. What other man in England had such a predicament, after all?

"If you want to find her," she said firmly, "go and ask your houseguest. I do not know where your wife is, but without her I am far too busy to help you see that you have been fooled."

Morgan hated how disrespectful she was being, but he did not have any anger left in him. In truth, without Dorothy he felt as though part of him was missing and he wanted her to come home. He had never wanted her to leave in the first place, but by doing what he had done he knew that he had given her no other choice.

He did not want to talk to Lady Annabelle. He had no interest in seeing her again

until she left, but she had made a habit of bringing him things. He would hide in his study, and she would arrive with tea. He would hide in the glasshouse and she would bring him a book. He did not want anything from her, by thatpoint, other than a swift departure, but he knew she would not do that of her own accord, and with Dorothy missing, he did not want Catherine to lose both of her aunts because of him.

He remained in the parlor room and, as expected, Lady Annabelle soon appeared holding something for him.

"I am not in the mood for this," he protested, but she did not listen.

"You will want to read this," she said, pressing a letter into his hand. "I found it in Catherine's room the night your wife left. I have been waiting for the right time, but I can see now that there will not be one. I do not know why she had given it to her, but I believe it is because she could not say it to you."

He opened the paper, and read it quickly.

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"My Dear Catherine,

I am writing this to tell you that you will not see me again. It is for the best, as I see now that I have only been standing in the way of your real family.

I am sorry for what happened. I wish that you had not seen it, for it must have been so frightening. It is for that reason that I have no choice but to leave. I do not like the person I was that night, and I do not want you to see more of it.

I will be seeking an annulment for the marriage, of course. Your uncle might not like it, but this is how it must be. I am not leaving you alone, however, for you have your Aunt Annabelle to take care of you. It is better this way, as she at least deserves you.

I will not see you again, but know that none of this was your fault. You have always been a wonderful niece, and I am always proud of you.

Yours sincerely,

Aunt Dorothy"

His hands trembled as he held the note.

"She has not seen it," Lady Annabelle explained. "I found it by chance, and kept it from her. I thought that you would appreciate making your own decision, rather than me doing something without your permission."

"Yes, that is most certainly appreciated. Thank you, Lady Annabelle."

"We are family now. Perhaps you might simply call me Annabelle?"

Morgan did not wish to speak to a lady other than his wife in such an affectionate manner, but she had a point. They were family, and he had to treat her that way whether he liked it or not. He nodded begrudgingly.

"I will say, though," she giggled, "that it is strange how she proposed that she seeks an annulment and you and I become Catherine's parents. It is kind of her to suggest it, but rather sudden."

It was at that moment that Morgan had passed over the word 'annulment' completely. He looked back, and his breath was knocked out of him. Dorothy had no intentions of returning, and as he did not know where to find her, there was nothing that he could do.

"I need to be alone for a while," he said firmly.

"Morgan, what you need is support," she replied gently, brushing her fingertips against his arm. "I am here to help you."

"I do not need your help. I need my wife."

"Your wife has left you. She has abandoned you and our niece because she was unhappy. Young ladies do that. I will not do that to you a second time, not now that I have grown so much."

"How clear must I be that I do not care for you?" he snapped. "I want my wife, and you are not her. You are only here because Catherine thinks highly of you, but when I look at my staff and see how miserable you have made them all, I want to change my mind about showing you kindness."



"That certainly is a strange way to talk to the sister of the lady your brother killed. Do you know what that did to my family? It destroyed us, and my father to this day refuses to believe it happened. He locked himself away all day, refusing to do anything but weep. We lost everything, and for years I continued on trying to help my family. We never knew why she had done it, and when I learned the truth I thought that we might at last be able to find a way through."

"And that is why you are here, yes? It has nothing to do with Catherine, and wanting to meet your niece. You only want a nice household to stay in, and to avoid going home."

"I have never truly lied about that. I am here for the sake of my family, and if that affects your own then so be it."

At last, there it was. He knew that the crueler side of Lady Annabelle still had to exist, but he had not expected her to give herself away, not after she had done so all those years before.

"I want you to leave," he instructed. "You may say goodbye to Catherine, and then you will return to your family. I have to rebuild what I have, and I cannot do that with you here."

"You are not being fair. The girl needs me. I am the closest thing she has to her mother. I know that you were happy to forget about her, but I am not. I never did."

"I did not forget about her. I did not know who she was. From the moment I found her, I planned to write to your family, but Catherine did so first. If you wish to call me responsible for what my brother did, then I will not stop you, but you ought to remember your own part in it."

"I had no part in it. I had nothing to do with you."

"No, but you cannot help but imagine what sort of family would make a young lady so frightened to tell the truth about her pregnancy that it was easier to run away entirely."

"How dare you," she snapped. "Would you say that to Catherine, if she were here right now?"

"That your family did not care for her mother? She already knows as much."

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At last, she was silenced. She glared at him, and he met her gaze. She was the first to look away, flustered and scarlet. Morgan looked at her with almost sympathy, but then he looked back on everything that had happened. Everything had been peaceful until her arrival. Dorothy and Catherine loved the company of one another, the staff adored his wife, he adored his wife. Then Lady Annabelle came, and Dorothy began to speak lowly of herself again. The staff were not as happy, and then the accusations started.

The Duchess, who had never seemed to him like someone that could be unkind, and his own wife, who he had not believed simply because of who had accused her.

It had never occurred to him that his niece had been alone with Lady Annabelle before he arrived that day.

He left Lady Annabelle standing there, and went to Catherine's room. He found her standing at the window again, shaking.

"What has happened?" he asked.

She turned to him, her cheeks stained pink with tears streaming down them.

"Uncle Morgan, you are going to hate me."

"Catherine, I could never hate you. You know this. What is it?"

He made his way to her, reaching out to take her in his arms. She fought against him for a moment, thrashing in his arms, but then she gave in. She went limp, crying

loudly against him. He stroked her hair and soothed her for a while, waiting for her to exhaust herself.

When she did so, he placed her on a chair and crouched in front of her, looking at her with gentle eyes.

"Whatever you have done, we can fix it. I know that things have been difficult, but there is nothing that you could break that I could not mend. I certainly could not hate you for anything, either."

She nodded, looking at her lap.

"It is my fault that Dorothy has gone."

"No, it is not. The fault is mine, for I should have listened to her before she—"

"No, Uncle. That is the problem. She did not say anything to me like that. I lied to you. I lied, and you will never forgive me for that. I have kept so much from you."

She began to cry again, and though he was in shock from her confession he did the only thing that he knew to do, which was to console her. When she was calm once more, he left quickly to fetch her some water. She took it shakily, and began to drink it.

"Oh, Catherine, this has not made me hate you. It has not made me angry, either, only confused. I do not understand; why would you say such things about her?"

"Because," she whispered, "Aunt Annabelle told me that, if I did, she could stay with us longer. She said that you wanted to make her leave and never come back, and that if I said bad things about Dorothy, she could stay."

If Catherine were not there, he would have lost his temper entirely. He would have charged through the hallway, grabbed Lady Annabelle by the shoulders, and forced her out then and there.

But Catherine was there, and so he could not. He was also aware that Lady Annabelle could well make good on her threat and ruin them, which he could not have. Thetondid not know of Catherine's existence, and the scandal that would erupt was not something that he could overcome.

He needed to find his wife, and he could not leave his niece alone again.

"Come," he said quickly, "we are going away for a while."

"What about Aunt Annabelle?"

"She will stay here. It is only for a few days."

She nodded, and immediately followed him out to a carriage.

"Where are we going?" she asked, as they pulled away.

He did not know how to answer her.

## CHAPTER 29

Dorothy quickly adapted to life in Scotland.

Those around her spoke very differently, calling Lords 'Lairds' and mothers their 'maithers', but it was a nice change. Eleanor did the same thing as the others, her voice changing when around Scottish people.

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"I prefer it this way," she explained. "I do not like to explain why I left London, you see."

"I suppose, but you have nothing to be ashamed of. Surely you must know that?"

"Oh, I am not ashamed of my actions at all. I am simply aware that I am very different to the people here, and I prefer not to have that pointed out."

They had spent their first few days visiting different taverns in the area, and after hiding herself away the first few times for fear of being seen there, Dorothy began to enjoy herself. Nobody recognized her there, and it was wonderful. She could simply be Dorothy, and that was enough, rather than the Duchess of Ulverston that was not quite as good as expected.

Their days were spent with Eleanor's children, and Dorothy preferred that part. She liked to be around her nieces and nephews, though her heart ached to see Catherine again. There had to have been a reason, she thought, for Catherine accusing her of such awful things, because she did not hate her enough to lie of her own accord.

"Are you questioning yourself again?" Eleanor asked as Dorothy looked at the table in silence. "You should also know that you have no reason to feel shame. They gave you no choice but to leave."

"I know, but I still do not understand. I did not say what I was accused of, and yet he did not believe me."

"Then he is a fool, as I have already told you. Now, do you plan to return to him and

grovel or would you rather enjoy yourself here with me?"

It was not as easy as she wished it was. She was enjoying her time with her sister, and she had missed her so much, but she still longed to be home with her husband and niece. They would have to mend a lot of things, but she still wanted it. It had been the first time that she truly felt like part of a family, and she did not want to give that up, especially because of something that did not happen.

"Did you feel loved by our parents?" she asked suddenly, and Eleanor faltered.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, as a girl I was always compared to you. I had every part of me picked at and scrutinized. I was not as tall as you, my hair and eyes were different, I was... less slim."

"I know, and I have always envied you for that."

Dorothy looked at her, confusion etched in her brow.

"That is impossible. You were always so perfect!"

"Indeed, and it was awful. I know that things were difficult for you when we were children, but I suppose that made me feel even worse. I had to be perfect, as I had always been. I had to do everything that I could to be the very same lady that theonadored, never making a mistake. You, on the other hand, seemed able to do as you pleased."

"Which, I might add, I never did. I was always trying to reach you, to be as liked as you were. It was exhausting."

"It was no easier for me, especially when I had to watch you struggle alongside me. I knew that comparisons were made, and my heart ached to see you so saddened by them, but I did not know what else to do. I had to keep the facade going."

"Until you stopped."

"Yes," she smiled, looking at her oldest child sitting beside her. "Until I stopped."

"I am not so fortunate. I married a duke, and so I shall always be scrutinized."

"Or, perhaps, you could come to Scotland?" she suggested. "If you ever tire of the town, you will always have a place here. As will your husband and niece, of course. Little Catherine would likely benefit greatly from being near other children, as from what you told me, it has never happened."

"No, she was always too unwell. I do not believe that will change, either, as my husband is ardently against her being seen. He says there will be too much judgment, and that he wants to protect her from it."

"Then I hope that he knows he cannot," she laughed, sipping her tea. "Whether he likes it or not, the girl will grow. She will one day be a lady with her own thoughts and her own desires and she will chase after them, no matter how much he tries to stop her. If she ever wishes to be seen, then she will be."

"Is that what happened to you?"

"Of course. Father told me that I could not marry the man that I loved, as he was not worthy of me, and that I would be marrying some wealthy man twice my age, and I ran. You are no different; your husband told you he was unhappy and you did not like it, and so you ran."



"That is not— I did not do that."

Her hands clenched, her jaw tightening. She loved that her sister was the sort of person to talk about her feelings directly, but sometimes that bluntness was not what she liked.

Perhaps, however, it was what she needed.

"You did. If you had wanted to stay, and to make it known that you were innocent, then you would have. Instead, you thought it would be easier to run all the way to Scotland to hide from it. Is that not true?"

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She wanted to tell her that she was wrong, but she did not want to lie. She could have stayed. She could have forced those around her to be honest about what had happened, but that was not who she was. It was, indeed, easier to leave and be done with everything. Morgan was happier with Lady Annabelle, and as far as Dorothy was concerned she could not compete with her.

She belonged in Scotland with the plump barmaids and the farm girls.

"I do not know what more I can do," she sighed. "I tried everything in my power to be a good wife, and I failed. Perhaps Lady Annabelle was right, and I should request an annulment and be done with it all. I was able to play the part of a duchess for a while, and I should be content with that. It is far more than I deserved."

"You are doing it again," Eleanor snapped. "Dorothy, do you understand how difficult it is to make one see sense when they are so blinded by their own self-hatred? You talk about yourself as though you are some loathsome little toad, when in reality you are a beautiful and intelligent lady that has passions and interests of her own. That is why you have friends, and why the Duke agreed to marry you in the first place."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that he is a man. If he did not want to marry you, then he would have changed his mind and not had the ton hear about your match. It is what they do. He did not, and so you can assume that he married you because he wanted to."

"It was his duty. He did not want to leave me with Mother and Father."

"Then why did he spend so much time with you? Truly, Dorothy, I know that you are unhappy, but that does not mean that you can be impossible to reason with. Come now, you know as well as I do that he is happy with you. If he was not, then you would have arrived here long ago."

"Then why—"

"Stop asking why! Sometimes, things simply are. Regardless of his reasoning, he cares for you. You have come to a difficulty, yes, but that does not mean he hates you. You may stay here as long as you need, but eventually you shall need to face him."

Dorothy went to protest that she did not want to, but she could not make the words come. The truth was that she did want to see him, for she missed him terribly. She wanted nothing more than to return home and find him in the drawing room and sit beside him and talk as though nothing had happened. It was the one thing that she wanted more than anything, and yet she could not bring herself to do it.

"I do not mean to be a burden," she whispered, and her sister put an arm around her gently.

"You are not, and you have never been. Nobody says that marriage is easy, especially when there are children involved, but that is when it becomes all the more vital to do what is right."

"But I do not know what that is. Perhaps it is right that little Catherine has a real family, related by blood rather than a marriage of convenience. I know what I want, which is to go to my husband and mend everything and go back to how we were, but what if that is not what is best for the child?"

"The fact that you are already considering how she feels proves that you are what is

best for her. Children do not invent such awful things themselves, Dorothy. Someone had to have influenced her to make such accusations."

"You do not understand. She is a very bright girl. If she wanted Lady Annabelle rather than me, she would have known what to do and say to make it happen."

"Yes, but is she cruel enough?"

Dorothy paused. Catherine was not a cruel child, far from it. She was a kind little girl, though tempestuous at times, and though she had a very smart tongue she was never wicked. Something had caused her to accuse Dorothy of terrible things, but Eleanor was right; she would never have done it of her own accord.

"What do I do?" Dorothy asked. "I have to fix all of this, but I do not know how."

"You will stay here for the night and collect your thoughts," Eleanor explained, "and then in the morning, I shall force you into that carriage and you will go home. You will find the truth of what happened, and you will come to your own conclusion. If you do not like it, then you may ask for an annulment. If everything is explained, and you are happy, then I shall be even happier for you."

It was precisely what she needed to hear. There could be no more hiding, not when she knew what she wanted. Her marriage was not perfect, but it was hers, and she would do everything in her power to protect it.

Even if it meant going home to it.

## CHAPTER 30

Not knowing where else to turn, Morgan went to the one place he never intended to see.

It was the stately manor of the Duke and Duchess of Lupton, and it was vast. Catherine held his hand tightly as they approached it, and he instinctively took her in his arms as they reached the door.

The butler answered, and looked him up and down.

"Can I help you?" he asked.

"Yes, I believe so. I am the Duke of Ulverston, and this is Catherine Lockheart, my niece. I was wondering if my wife was here?"

"The Duchess has guests today, but the Duchess of Ulverston is not one of them. May I help you with anything else?"

Morgan knew, of course, who the other guests would be.

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"May I speak with Her Grace?"

"I believe they are busy. I can ask her for you."

"That would be brilliant. Thank you so much."

He waited with Catherine for a moment, wondering just what she would say. She had no reason to welcome him into her home after everything that he had done, but he hoped that she truly was as good as Dorothy had said she was.

The butler reappeared, his expression blank.

"She has refused. Good day."

The door was closed in an instant, and Morgan's mouth fell open. Nobody had ever treated him so harshly; even Thomas had at least spoken to him with a sort of brotherly goodness. He remained frozen there until at last Catherine turned to face him, shifting so that he placed her back on her feet.

"His guests are the other ladies, I assume?" she asked.

"I would say so."

"Very well. Let us find them, then."

"Catherine, the butler has said that we cannot enter."

"No, he said that you cannot enter. I, on the other hand, am more than capable."

Morgan wondered where on Earth she had gotten such an idea as espionage, but he had greater issues at hand in that moment.

"You will not enter a home without permission!"

"But it is an adventure, Uncle. I have spent my entire life in the same few rooms, and I cannot do it anymore. I want to do something daring."

"There is daring, and there is against the law. Come now, we must—"

But she had already run away, and around the side of the household. He gave chase, but when he turned the corner she was gone.

"Catherine?" he hissed. "Catherine, we have to go. We cannot stay here or else we will get into trouble."

Suddenly, he heard the faint bump of stone against glass. He turned to see his niece standing at a window, throwing small pebbles at it. He ran to her in an instant, covering her hand with his own and taking her in his arms again.

"Stop that this instant. What has gotten into you?"

"This is my mistake to mend," she protested, trying to pull herself free. "I did this to Aunt Dorothy, and now I have to fix it."

When he did not let her go, she did something that she had never done before, even when she arrived with him as a small child.

She screamed.

It was an awful, ear piercing sound, and he almost dropped her out of instinct. In an instant, the window that she had been throwing stones at flew open, and the girl stopped, her eyes wide at those looking back at her.

It was Lady Emma, along with Lady Beatrice and Lady Cecilia. They did not look pleased to see him at all, though nobody was as angry as Lady Cecilia.

"We have already said that we do not wish to talk to you," she thundered.

"Could you talk to me, then?" Catherine asked desperately. "Please, Lady Cecilia, my aunt is missing and it is all my fault."

The three ladies looked at one another, and part of Morgan felt the faintest slither of ease wash over him. They did not seem afraid that Dorothy was missing, which meant that they had to know something. She was safe; she had to be.

The window was closed, and Morgan watched as they all left the room. He panicked, thinking that they had simply gone to another room, but then he heard the front door open. He took Catherine to it, and they were all there, studying the two of them.

"Come in," Lady Emma said gently. "I would have refused, but I want to know what has happened."



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He entered, thanking them profusely, and they returned to her drawing room. There were some cakes and sandwiches on the table, but Lady Emma glanced over Catherine and asked for more to be prepared.

"You look unwell, dear," she said softly, gesturing for her to sit next to her. "You must be feeling dreadful."

"I am, and you should not show me any kindness because of it. I am evil and wicked."

Morgan's heart ached to see his niece so furious with herself, and for the first time in his life he knew what true hatred felt like because he completely hated Lady Annabelle for what she had done.

"You are not evil," Lady Beatrice soothed. "You are only very little, and if you have done something wrong then we can fix it."

"It was Aunt Annabelle," she sighed, almost in tears again. "She told me that my uncle wished to send her away, and that it was all Aunt Dorothy's fault. She said that if I did as she told me, then she could stay, and that my uncle would never be cruel to Aunt Dorothy."

"Even she seemed to know that," Lady Cecilia nodded, casting a faint smile his way.

"I should apologize to you first, Your Grace," Catherine continued, looking up at Lady Emma. "I knew that my aunt was not telling the truth, and I should have said so, but I did not want her to leave. She was going to do the same thing to all three of you,

so that it would be just me and her and Aunt Dorothy again, but it did not work and so she stopped."

"That is not your fault," Lady Emma smiled. "You could not have known what would happen, and I suppose you were very frightened of what would happen if you spoke, yes?"

Catherine nodded, and Morgan wondered just how his wife had made such loyal and understanding friends.

"Do you know where Aunt Dorothy is?" Catherine asked finally. "She is missing, and I really need to find her so that I can say how sorry I am. She probably hates me, now."

"She most certainly does not," Lady Cecilia replied firmly. "And yes, we do know where she is, although we are not supposed to tell you. I will, however, because I would like the three of you to be a family once more. Heaven knows she deserves that. She is in Scotland with her sister. I can give you the address, but promise me that you will go there this instant."

"Of course we will," Morgan replied, and Lady Cecilia gestured to Lady Emma, who disappeared and returned with a letter.

It was from Dorothy, explaining exactly where she would be and why she had left. Morgan did not dare read it, as he could not bear the thought of knowing just how much he had hurt her, but he did note the address.

"I will find her," he assured them, "and I will bring her home."

"That is good," Lady Beatrice nodded, "because we shall soon need her. Emma will soon have her child, and we cannot have that happen without her."

"That is true," Emma nodded, "but do not rush yourselves. I understand that you will need time after all that has happened."

"And that time can be spent once the baby is here," Cecilia replied. "Go, Your Grace, and return with your wife."

They made the journey to Scotland then and there, without any further preparation. Clothes had been prepared for Catherine, and the ladies had packed food for them for the first while. It was clear to Morgan that Catherine's conscience had begun to clear, as she was at least eating. Though he had been saddened by what had taken place, and was furious with himself for allowing it to happen, he was also concerned for his niece, not to mention his wife, who he could not reach quickly enough.

When, at last, they did reach the household that he had been given, he noticed that Catherine was trembling. She had never been outside of her own home before, and now she was in another country entirely. She was bound to be afraid, but that did not make seeing it any easier.

"It will be all right," he promised her.

"What if Aunt Dorothy never wants to see me again?"

"That will not happen. You will see that for yourself."

This time, when he knocked, he received a far warmer welcome. He was greeted by a lady that looked very much like Dorothy, and she was smiling brightly at him.

"I shall assume that you are my sister's husband?"

"Indeed," he replied, and she let him in.

If she still wanted him to be, that was.

He was led into the parlor room, and sitting before him was Dorothy. She seemed brighter than she had been when he last saw her, and she had a small child sitting beside her. In an instant, Catherine ran to her, which startled the child.

"Oh, Dorothy," she cried, throwing herself at her, "I am truly so sorry for what I did. I should have told the truth, but I did not, and now you must hate me. I will never forgive myself, and— and—"

"Hush now," Dorothy said gently, stroking her hair. "I do not hate you. I could never hate a child. Whatever has happened, we will mend it."

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"Do you promise?" she sniffed.

"You came all the way to Scotland to find me. I believe that we can find a way through this. In the meantime, might you like to play with your cousins?"

Catherine nodded enthusiastically, taking the small boy's hand in hers and leaving with him.

"Is this her first time with other children?" she asked.

"Indeed," Morgan nodded, and she patted the seat beside her.

He took it, and neither one spoke. Morgan had prepared an entire speech, filled with wallowing and groveling and despair, but the sight of his wife had made him forget all of it.

"You must think me a villain," she said suddenly.

"I could never. Dorothy, I know now what has happened, and I have never felt like such a fool. I should have known, I should have seen it, but I missed it."

"You had a lot to contend with. I understand."

"You should not. You should be furious, and you should be shouting at me and expecting grand gestures and making threats."

"Perhaps, but I am not so inclined as to do that. All I want to know is what truly

happened."

She smiled gently at him, and the words came easily. He told her about Lady Annabelle's plan, and how terrified he had been when she disappeared, only to be crushed when he learned that she was seeking an annulment.

"An annulment?" she echoed. "I did not tell her that. She told me that I ought to, and I did consider it, but I never told her that."

The fact that she truly had thought to end their marriage killed him, but he had to press on.

"She showed me a letter. She claimed you had left it for Catherine."

"I would never say such things to a child, though I suppose that has been called into question enough of late."

"Do you mean to say that you did not write it?"

"I believe our houseguest has been the cause of more discord than we know," she nodded. "In any case, I have had a long time to think, and my conclusion is that I cannot do it anymore."

He froze.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that I cannot be this meek little thing anymore," she replied, and he softened. "All my life, I have been easily overlooked, someone that allowed the worst to be said and done to me if it meant avoiding difficulty. I thought that it would make my life easier, but all it has truly done is make me feel less capable. I refuse to do it any

longer. I am a duchess, and I plan to act accordingly."

He looked into his wife's eyes and saw the raw determination in them. She had made her decision, and he thanked the stars that she had chosen to remain his wife. They could return home, and mend everything that had been broken and go back to the way things were.

No, he reminded himself, it would be better. He would do anything she asked of him, and ensure at every turn that she was blissfully happy in the way that she deserved to be.

"This will not happen again," he promised. "I will never allow anyone to make you feel inferior again, nor will I ever believe anything but the best of you. Dorothy, I do not truly deserve this chance, but now that you are giving me it I will in turn give my all so that you do not regret it."

Without thinking, he kissed her. He feared that it might have been too soon, and that she would push him away and want to wait, but instead she only pulled him closer. For a brief moment, it was like the night they met, where he had met a strangely passionate young lady that acted willfully and had him entranced.

But she was so much more than that to him now. She was his wife, the one that had welcomed his niece with open arms no matter where she had come from, who wanted to be the very best for him that she could be and was willing to give him another chance to prove himself. He loved her, and nothing brought him greater pleasure than that.

"Shall we go home?" he asked.

"I would like that very much," she nodded, "although Catherine might object to that. She may wish to be with other children for a while."

"I can understand that," he agreed.

Catherine did, indeed, wish to spend time with other children. For the first time in her life, she was the oldest, and therefore the one in charge and she liked that a great deal. She came to life around them, and for a short while it was as though she had never been unwell at all.



"It is a miracle," Dorothy whispered as they watched them.

"Indeed," he replied. "The second miracle that has ever happened to me."

### CHAPTER 31

In the end, their time in Scotland had become more of a holiday, and it was one that Dorothy did not want to end.

A week passed, however, and they had to return home. Though sad that she would not see her sister again for some time, Dorothy was well aware that she had an important matter to tend to upon her return. Morgan had explained that Lady Annabelle had been staying there, partly as she had nowhere else to go and partly to conceal the truth of Catherine's identity. He also had not wanted gossip of their supposed annulment to spread throughout the town, which she agreed could not happen.

Even so, it did not make the thought of confronting her any easier. In spite of the way the inevitable conflict frightened her, however, she wanted to go through with it. She wanted to be the one to prove herself, rather than have her husband do it for her. Not only that, but she had an awful lot to say and she intended to say it.

"Do come and visit again," Eleanor said kindly as they were leaving.

"We most certainly plan to," Morgan nodded.

"And you must visit us!" Catherine added, looking directly at the children behind Eleanor. "We have plenty of room for you all."

The adults chuckled, and then went their separate ways. Catherine, pleased to have been forgiven, fell asleep almost as soon as they set off, her head on Dorothy's lap. She stroked the child's hair, pleased that there would be no need to mend anything between the two of them. What Lady Annabelle had done to the girl was cruel, and Catherine had not deserved any of it, but they would settle that upon their return. For the moment, she was simply happy to be sitting with her family, and going home.

"I rather like Scotland, you know," Morgan commented. "Perhaps we might find a home here? We could visit it in Summer, or at Christmas."

"I would very much like to see my sister at Christmas," she replied, eyes sparkling. "It would also allow Catherine to see her new friends."

"She was very different there, was she not?"

"Very much. It would seem her condition is at last improving."

She had, of course, meant it in a good way, but her husband's face fell. She placed a hand on his knee, smiling encouragingly.

"I blame myself," he said suddenly. "I have been the one that kept her hidden away for so long, terrified that she would be looked down upon, when really being seen is what she has needed all along. I cannot imagine how sad she has been all this time."

"She has always been a very happy little girl—"

"But she has always wanted more. She must have lived believing I was ashamed of her, and that I would keep her hidden away forever."

"Was that not your plan?"

"No, I was going to— well, I never had a plan to introduce her into society, but she would have been allowed to meet people. You and your friends, for example."

"But never any other children," she mused.

"That will change," he said firmly. "It has to. I simply do not know how to do it as yet. I cannot have her looked at the way the ton does illegitimate children. I do not care whether my brother was married or not, she is my niece."

"She is also mine," she agreed. "We will find a solution. In the meantime, we should prepare for what is to come."

One good thing about being away from London was the fact that Catherine could go wherever she pleased. They would not be recognized in local taverns and inns, not when the nobility was all in London for the social season. They stopped at an inn, and at once Catherine began to introduce herself and talk to any other children she could see. It was as though she had truly come to life, and Dorothy felt as though she truly was with her daughter, rather than her niece.

They continued their journey home, and the closer they got to the manor the tenser Dorothy grew. She could not stop thinking about the lady she would soon be facing, and she felt the anger burning inside of her. Lady Annabelle had done more than try to hurt her. She had made vicious lies about her friend, and had tried to destroy her family, and that was unforgivable. She would have to maintain a calm exterior, but underneath it was a storm that she knew would only grow.

They reached their home, and Catherine leaped out of the carriage, leaving Dorothy alone with her husband for a moment.

"Keep Catherine away for a while," she whispered to him. "Perhaps take her to the glasshouse, or to the stables, but she must not enter the household."

"Of course, though I must ask you why."

"Because I do not want Lady Annabelle to say anything to her that is unkind. We are going to protect her, and if that means not allowing her into her home for a short while then so be it."

Morgan was looking at her with pride, and that made what she was about to do less frightening. She watched as he whisked Catherine away, and then she marched through the front door.

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"Your Grace," Mrs. Herrington said brightly. "Thank goodness you have returned!"

"There is nowhere that I would rather be."

"I am so pleased to hear that. I must warn you, though, that I have found something very troubling in your guest's room."

They went to Lady Annabelle's room, and Dorothy at last looked around it. Gowns were strewn throughout, and letters were scattered on her desk. They were all addressed to her father, scribbles about how she was doing all that she could.

"These are... very odd."

"It is worse than that," Mrs. Herrington sighed, opening a drawer. "I found these. I am unsure of what they might be, but I know you love botany in the same way the Duke does. Might you recognize them?"

Dorothy looked and saw a pile of nightshade berries. They were highly poisonous, and she could only imagine what Lady Annabelle had planned, but she did not want to concern her housekeeper any more than she already appeared to be.

"It is nothing," she assured her. "Perhaps she simply thought they looked delicious and wished to hide them away for later?"

Her housekeeper seemed satisfied with that, but Dorothy was shaken by it. One thing was for certain, however; she would have her answers, and Lady Annabelle would be dealt with.

She found Lady Annabelle in the drawing room, admiring some flowers that Dorothy had never placed there. When she saw Dorothy, she looked startled for a moment, and then she grinned at her.

"I do not suppose that you expected to see me here," Dorothy said coldly.

"No, no I certainly did not. Have you come to collect your things?"

"No, I have told you to collect yours, lest you want them thrown into the fireplace."

"Oh, Dear, you are very troubled indeed. I must say, I never thought that my plan would work so beautifully, but I am very pleased with it indeed."

"So you admit that it was all your doing?"

"Of course. It is no secret that my family has been struggling for a long time, since the death of my beloved sister, and it is only fair that I received some good from the family that caused it."

"We did not cause anything. The two people that had any real blame in this have both passed away, and though unfortunate, it is not as though anything can be done about that. We simply have to move forward, and that includes you."

"Which is precisely why I plan to be Duchess in your place. It is my way of moving forward."

"You shall have to find another plan, as the title is mine. This life is mine, and you will not take it from me."

"I believe that your husband shall have the last say in that."

"Indeed. Do you not know where he has been this past while?"

"Arranging the annulment. He told me himself that he would be doing so. It is a shame that the two of you never consummated the marriage, for you at least."

It would have been a powerful accusation, had Dorothy not known the truth. She had never once believed Lady Annabelle's lies, and that was not going to change simply because what she said was hurtful.

"I think it might be best for you to refrain from speaking about my marriage, given that it is none of your business. If I were you, I would return to your family and try to mend what is broken."

"My family is wonderful. I was one of the most well-liked debutantes."

"You were, but that is no longer the case. That is why you are here. You planned all of this, so that you could take my life from me, but I will not be giving it to you. You shall have to find another gentleman that is willing to take you as his wife, because my husband will not."

"I believe the Duke should have the last word about that."

"Very well," she nodded, "let us go to him."

She left to find them, and they were in the glasshouse. Her breath caught in her throat at the sight of the three flowers that had been planted together. Hers and Morgan's, and then just in front was a bright yellow tulip.

"Look at it, Aunt Dorothy!" Catherine smiled brightly. "I have one too now, just like you and my uncle."

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"It is beautiful. Catherine, might you go and play outside for a moment?"

"No, she can hear this," Lady Annabelle insisted. "She can hear how you have once again made awful comments about my family. Tell her, Your Grace."

"Did you, now?" Morgan asked, one corner of his mouth twitching upward.

"This time, I did," she confessed. "I told her to leave my family alone, and to go and fix her own."

"Except that I do not have to leave, do I?" Lady Annabelle asked Morgan. "Because you have sought an annulment."

Catherine looked up at him, alarmed, but Dorothy placed a comforting hand on her shoulder.

"That is strange, Lady Annabelle," Morgan replied, "because you told me that it had been my wife that was trying to do that. You wrote it in this letter here, or shall I say that my wife did?"

Morgan pulled a letter out of his pocket, and at last, Lady Annabelle's facade broke. She ripped it from his hand, tearing it into pieces before throwing it to the ground, stamping on it.

"You fool," she spat. "Do you have any idea what you are doing? You could have had the very best wife, one that had been beloved all her life, and instead you have chosen this ugly little thing."



"That is enough," he commanded. "Leave now, before I have you thrown out."

"No. I have spent so much time trying to ignore all of your strange ways, but I cannot do so any longer, not if you will not show your gratitude to me. You truly are a bear, an animal. Do you honestly think that polite society will accept this— this bastard among them?"

She pointed at Catherine, and at once Dorothy felt rage unlike anything she had felt before. Morgan took the girl in his arms as she burst into tears.

"Take her away," Dorothy ordered. "I shall remedy this myself."

"You will do nothing," Lady Annabelle laughed. "Sweet little Dorothy, afraid of her own shadow. That is what everyone says of you, you know. You are nothing but a little mouse, unwilling to do anything for anyone. You are a coward, and the ton knows it. They shall never accept you."

"And you are a spinster, in a family that has nothing," Dorothy replied. "Do not think that, because I choose not to be unkind, I am incapable of being so. Perhaps you were once a liked member of the nobility, but all it would take is one rumor about the real whereabouts of your sister and you shall be ruined completely."

"Then I shall tell them first. I shall tell everyone about your strange little illegitimate niece, and how even your loving husband hid her away out of shame."

"And would you like her mother to be known?"

She fell silent.

"I am not ashamed of my niece, and I never have been. I did not have to pretend to like her simply because I wished to marry her uncle. I pity you, you know. You do

not know love, nor happiness. You only know spite, and it shows in you. You are going to live a very miserable life, Lady Annabelle, and no amount of memories of a time when you were pretty can make up for that. If you wish for this to all turn ugly, then that can be arranged, but I would not suggest it. I believe it would be best if you go back from where you came, and you leave us be."

"Oh? And what will you do if I do not?"

"I shall have you removed, and tell anyone who listens that you planned to poison me."

She staggered back.

"You have no proof!"

"No, but I do have several berries growing here that could do the job quite easily, and given that Mrs. Herrington saw some in your drawer upstairs, one could quite easily connect the two things."

A tense silence fell between them, and Dorothy held her gaze. She was not afraid of her anymore, not knowing that her husband would protect her from anything.

"I was never going to poison you."

"Then what were you going to do? Take enough to make you unwell and claim I had done it?"

Lady Annabelle glared at her furiously, and then turned away, leaving the estate without collecting any of her belongings. Dorothy trembled, not knowing what would come next. Lady Annabelle was a dangerous person, and she could do anything she pleased, but Dorothy tried not to think about it. Her threat was made, and seemingly

heeded. She returned to her home, looking for her family.

They were, after all, the only thing she truly cared about at that moment.

## CHAPTER 32

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Catherine was hysterical, and Morgan knew that no matter what happened to him, he would have justice for her.

"I'm so sorry," she wept. "She is right, I am so awful."

"Do not say that, Catherine. She does not know what she is saying."

"But it is true. That is why you have truly kept me away for so long, is it not?"

"No, it was because of your illness."

"Then let us go out now," she replied. "Take me to the park this instant, for I am no longer unwell."

Morgan shifted uncomfortably, knowing that she had at last realized the true reason for her being kept away.

"Catherine, it is not as simple as that."

"Yes it is. If you are not ashamed of me, and you do not think that I am a burden, then why can I not go outside?"

"Because, I— look, Catherine, I am not ashamed of you. I love you as if you were my own daughter, but it is dangerous for you to enter society. You will meet more people like Lady Annabelle, and they will say unkind things to and about you. Think about how you feel right now. You will feel that way each and every time you step outside. I have kept you away from it all, not because I do not want them to know you but

because I want to protect you."

She sat quietly for a minute, sniffing, and Morgan wished that there was more he could say. All that he could truly give her was the truth, and it was not the sort of thing that she deserved to hear.

"Thank you, Uncle Morgan," she said gently. "I do not thank you enough."

"You do not need to."

"Yes I do. You did not have to keep me. You could have sent me away to a children's home. Lady Annabelle told me that."

"What else has she told you?"

"That Aunt Dorothy wanted to send me to one, but I did not believe that. Aunt Dorothy likes me. She is my friend."

"She adores you," he agreed. "Lady Annabelle was lying to you, for she never would have done that."

"I am pleased to hear that, because I really like living here. I wish that I was your daughter, then I could have been like all the other little girls."

"You are like them," he protested. "There is nothing about you that makes you any different to the other children in London. Catherine, I am not going to hide you here for the rest of your life. I only want to be certain that, when you do go out into society, you are ready for what may come your way."

She softened, leaning against him. Morgan did not want any more harm to come to her, as she had already been through more than most adults. He wished that he could

shield her from every bad thing that existed.

But he could not, and he had to accept that.

After a while, Dorothy entered. She held herself upright for a while, but then she tumbled onto a chaise, collapsing into a heap.

"Aunt Dorothy?" Catherine asked in shock. "What has happened? Are you all right?"

"I am fine," she replied, unmoving. "That was simply a very long and difficult conversation."

"Where is she?" Morgan asked, and she pulled herself into a sitting position.

"She... well, she will not be bothering us again."

Morgan blinked. She was speaking as though threats had been made, and that she had scared Lady Annabelle away from them altogether, but that was not the lady he knew. Dorothy was not the sort of lady that made such threats as the ones that would have been necessary to make someone as determined as Lady Annabelle leave.

"Is she collecting her belongings?" he asked.

"It would not appear so. I thought you might like to decide what happened with them, for if it were up to me they would all be sold, or perhaps thrown into a fireplace."

He looked at his wife, exhausted from whatever had taken place between herself and Lady Annabelle, and felt a rush of love toward her. He had sworn to protect his family, at any cost, and it was clear that she had done the same. He moved over to her, taking her in his arms.

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"Is what happened not for small ears?" he asked, and she nodded. "Very well. Catherine, might you go and see Mrs. Herrington for a while? She has most certainly missed you this last while."

Catherine continued to look at Dorothy warily, as if something was very wrong with her.

"I am fine," Dorothy promised. "Your uncle and I simply need to discuss a few things. I will come and read with you in a while, if you like?"

The little girl nodded, and went to find Mrs. Herrington. As soon as she left, Dorothy sighed and put her head in her hands.

"Dorothy, what have you done exactly?"

"I will tell you, but know that I am not proud of it."

He looked at her uncertainly, but he trusted her. He was also aware that she was a very sensitive lady, one that would more than likely be concerned for Lady Annabelle, in spite of everything that had happened.

She explained everything to him, and as she did so he was more and more surprised. He never would have expected her to say such things, and when she finished she looked at him as though she expected him to chastise her, to be ashamed of her for the way she had acted.

"Dorothy," he said gently. "Dorothy, I think you are the most marvelous woman."

She froze, her eyes wide as she looked at him.

"But I was so unkind to her!"

"Yes, and I will not pretend that she was undeserving of it. After everything that she has done to you, you should have shown her true cruelty. Instead, you carried yourself perfectly. If you are expecting me to be upset about what you have done, then you are very much mistaken."

She exhaled heavily, leaning forward with her eyes closed. He wrapped his arms around her, holding her tightly. She had done everything to protect their family, and he was prepared to do anything to protect her in return.

"How is Catherine?" she asked after a while. "It must have been awful to hear something so vile said about you."

"She is fine, though it has certainly given me a lot to think about. I do not want to hide her away anymore."

Dorothy pulled away, sitting up straight and looking at him with determination.

"Very well," she agreed. "I have an idea, but you shall have to trust me."

"I do, more than anyone."

"Good, because it involves a visit to my parents."

He grimaced, not wanting to do that but knowing that his wife would have her reasons.

They took a day to be a family, and it was precisely what they needed. They enjoyed



a picnic in the garden, and laid in the sun for a while. In spite of what Catherine had been called, she was coping well and had quickly returned to the little girl she had been before. Morgan marveled at her resilience, and wondered just how she was so grown up. She had changed so much since he married Dorothy, and he had not noticed until that moment.

"Catherine," Dorothy began gently, "I was wondering if you might like to visit my mother and father tomorrow?"

"I would love to!" she beamed. "Do they... do they know about me?"

"They do not yet, but they shall love you. I have not seen them in a while, and I was hoping that you might like to join us on our visit, as our daughter."

"Your daughter?" she asked, eyes wide. "But they will not believe that."

"I believe that they will, actually. We will see them tomorrow, and then you will see it for yourself."

Morgan trusted his wife, but he was uncertain of what was to come. He had not liked Dorothy's father, and he could not fathom why her mother had never said anything in her defense either. He would have to keep a civil tongue in front of Catherine, but he did not know how he would do that.

Dorothy kept a brave face, but she was deeply concerned about seeing her family again.

A lot had changed since her wedding day, but more than anything she had changed. She was no longer the meek little thing that she once was, but a fierce and loving wife. She feared that, when she saw them, she would go back to the person she was before.

They arrived at her childhood home, and she shivered at the sight of it. She had not suffered as a child, not truly, but it was strange to see it again. She set her shoulders back and approached the door, Morgan and Catherine close behind her. The butler welcomed them in, and led them to the drawing room.

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Her parents rose to their feet immediately, having not been expecting them.

"Good morning, Your Grace," her mother said quickly. "Hello, Dorothy. What a pleasant surprise."

"Good morning, Mother, Father. I should have written to you, but I did not think to do so. It is a rather impromptu visit, I will say. I have some news, you see, and I am hoping that you will be pleased about it."

Both of her parents looked at her expectantly for a moment, and then their eyes fell upon Catherine.

"This is Catherine," she explained. "We have adopted her, and she is our daughter now."

Both parents were in shock, that was evident, but they did not seem angry at all. Her mother was the first to move, walking toward the child and smiling gently at her.

"It is a pleasure to meet you," she said gently. "I am so pleased to be your grandmother."

Dorothy stopped herself from breathing a sigh of relief. She looked at her father expectantly, for she was not as certain that he would look upon her as kindly as her mother had. He was a proud man, and given all that had happened with Eleanor she knew that he was stricter than he had once been.

He studied the little girl, and then he knelt down in front of her.

"Do you like to read?" he asked, and she nodded.

"I also enjoy playing music, and speaking different languages. I particularly enjoy French."

"A talented little girl," he nodded. "Well, it is a pleasure to meet you. Would you like to join us for tea?"

They had tea together, and Dorothy watched as her parents spent time with her newly-titled daughter. There was an apprehension about them, as though they were uncertain of what to do with her, but it was a start. Morgan squeezed her hand gently, smiling at her. It had been a risk to introduce Catherine as their daughter, but it was the right thing to do. She had always been treated as their daughter, and so there was no reason to call her anything else.

They left Catherine with her new grandparents for a while, so that she could show them her skills with the pianoforte, and wandered the gardens for a while.

"I do not know how you coped with this," he joked. "There is hardly anything out here."

"Why do you think I enjoyed learning about plants so much? It was not as though I could look at any of them myself."

"No, I suppose that makes sense. You know, I was considering finding you a tutor, if you wish to have one?"

Dorothy smiled up at him warmly, grateful that he was the sort of gentleman to encourage her, rather than convince her to hide her passions away.

"I would love that," she nodded. "I do not believe that I will ever be satisfied with my

knowledge, though."

"Then we shall have a tutor for a long time," he chuckled, turning to her with her hands in his. "I must admit, I was wary about your idea, but you were right. This is exactly what we need to do."

"You need not say that for my sake."

"I am not. There will be people that look upon her differently, and perhaps rumors will stem from her looking like me, but we can overcome that. No matter what anyone says, she is our daughter, and she shall be the most loved little girl in all of England."

He took her in an embrace, and she rested her head against his chest.

"I never could have imagined having such a wonderful marriage," she mumbled against him. "When my father told me he had found a husband for me, I thought the worst. I expected you to be a cruel and frightening beast of a man."

"I have disappointed you in that respect, I hope," he chuckled.

"Indeed you have, for there was nothing I wanted more than to loathe my husband entirely."

"Is that to say that you like me?"

"I would not say that," she replied, and he raised an eyebrow at her.

"Then just how do you feel about me?" he asked.

"You ask me as if you do not know."

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"I would like you to humor me," he said gently into her ear. "You are yet to say the words, and I wish to hear them."

"And what words might those be? I have certainly not heard them from you, and so I could not possibly fathom what they are."

He grinned at her devilishly, and then lifted her up into the air. She shrieked, telling him to put her down, but he simply laughed at her, spinning her around.

"I love my wife," he proclaimed loudly. "My wife is Dorothy Lockheart, and I wholeheartedly adore her!"

"Morgan, stop," she giggled, and at last he relented, placing her back on her feet.

She was dizzy, partly from the spinning and partly from what he had said, but he steadied her, looking deeply into her eyes.

"There," he smiled. "Now it is your turn."

"Very well," she nodded, "though I cannot proclaim it as loudly as you."

"I do not want you to. I want to you to say however you feel, and to do so as it pleases you."

"Good, because I do not want you to think that I feel any less for you than you do for me. I love you, Morgan. I have for a long time now. I love that you protect those you care about, I love that you have rescued me from more than you could ever know, and

I love that you would do anything to make me happy. I love you Morgan, more than all the flowers on Earth."

"All the flowers on Earth?" he asked, an eyebrow raised. "Do not say things that are not true. It is very unbecoming, and—"

She cut him off with a kiss, deep and passionate. His hands fell against her waist, and he returned her kiss with even more enthusiasm.

They left for home that evening, Catherine ecstatic to have even more family than she thought. Dorothy, meanwhile, rested against her husband and thought about how truly fortunate she was to have a family that loved her so much.

As well as one that she loved in equal measure.

## EPILOGUE

"Do you suppose that we will ever have a moment's peace?" Morgan asked as they boarded the carriage, though he did not mean it.

Dorothy hoped that he did not, at least, especially as he was well aware of what was to come, and so it could not truly been seen as a surprise of any sort.

What had been a surprise, however, was how quickly everything had happened. They received word that Emma had at last gone into labor, and by the time they arrived everything was over with. The baby had been taken away to be cleaned and checked over, and Emma was lying on her bed, exhausted. Cecilia and Beatrice looked on in amazement, telling her how wonderful she had been, and Dorothy did not know what to say.

"I am sorry," she said gently, making her way toward the ladies. "I should have

arrived sooner."

"You could not have known," Emma sighed warmly, her breathing returning to normal. "Cecilia and Beatrice happened to be here, but if they were not then they would have missed it too."

Dorothy accepted it, but she felt guilty even so. She had arrived when everything was good, and missed all of the difficulty, and she did not feel like a good friend at all.

"Dot," Beatrice said gently, "truly, there was nothing that you could have done. It is vital that you and your family take some time to simply be together after all that has happened."

"And, given what we know now, it is quite right that you take all of the time you need," Cecilia agreed.

"What you know now?" Dorothy echoed. "What precisely do you know?"

The ladies looked to Emma, who nodded softly.

"It is quite all right. I would like to rest for a while. Although you must tell me how Dorothy feels about all of it when I awaken."

They left for the drawing room, and a tea arrived. Dorothy was not hungry, and her two friends white as sheets and did not seem to have much of an appetite either, but they sipped their tea politely.

"The entiretonknows about this," Cecilia began. "It is a wonder that you have not heard about it. Lady Annabelle was ousted!"

"Ousted? What do you mean?"



"Cecilia has gotten ahead of herself," Beatrice chuckled. "You see, her family has been struggling since her sister's disappearance. Her father pretended that she had gone to live in the country with a relative, but suspicions have been mounting for a very long time that it was not the case."

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"And at last," Cecilia continued, "thet on has its answer. It might not be the news that one likes to hear, but at least it is a mystery solved."

"Yes, and after that all that was left to do was decide what happened to the family. It could have been accepted as a grieving family, and had that been the case then perhaps they would have been forgiven for lying."

"Except that word has spread among staff that Lady Annabelle has been scheming all this time, trying to damage marriages in any way that she could so that she would no longer be on the shelf."

Dorothy blinked.

"Do you mean to say that I was not the first?"

"You were the third," Beatrice explained. "Unfortunately, in a moment of desperation, she attempted to entrap a married man out in the gardens at a ball two nights ago. They were not seen, which was perhaps what she had intended, but the gentleman told his wife. She is ruined now, completely."

"I do not see what is unfortunate about that," Cecilia smirked. "I would say that it is precisely what she deserves."

"As would I," Dorothy agreed, "but I still have some pity for her. I suppose she wishes that she had not spurned Morgan's affections all those years ago."

"Well, she did, and now she is the child that has been sent away. She will be in the

country for a very long time."

Dorothy knew that she was supposed to feel a sense of satisfaction that the lady that had caused her so much pain would be gone from her life permanently, but she did not. Her first thought was Catherine, and how it would have to be explained that she could no longer see her aunt.

She and Morgan had agreed that, in spite of everything, if Catherine ever wished to see her aunt again then they would not stop her. They would, however, be present at all times and never leave the two of them alone together. Now, however, that could not happen.

"This is a good thing," Beatrice promised, squeezing Dorothy's arm. "You may live now, with no need to wonder whether or not you are being watched."

"And, with all that has happened to that family," Cecilia added, "the news of you and your husband adopting Catherine has fallen by the wayside. It has been accepted by theton, is that not brilliant?"

"It truly is. We were going to take her out soon, but I think we might wait until Emma has made an appearance or two with her new little one. Has the baby been given a name yet?"

"He is called Rupert," Beatrice smiled. "He is a lovely little baby, too. I cannot wait for you to see him."

"Nor can I," Dorothy replied. "We have yet to discuss having children of our own, and we have Catherine, and I do not believe Morgan has a particular desire to sire an heir."

"You never know," Cecilia said. "He could well change his mind upon speaking with

Levi. Then again, the poor man seemed terrified by his prospects when we saw him. He was not allowed in the room with his wife, and he was furious about it."

"That is awful," Dorothy gasped. "I did not know that it had to be that way."

"Well, there is a certain strength required, one that only we women possess."

Dorothy thought of all the pain that Emma must have been in, and she wondered if she truly did possess such strength herself.

"I do not know what I am supposed to do. I am not supposed to be a father!"

Morgan had never met the man pacing the room, but he wished to befriend his wife's friends' husbands as they met, and Levi Hunter, the Duke of Lupton, was to be the first. He seemed to be a kind man, but in that moment he could not seem to collect himself at all. He could not sit still, and had to walk from one end of his study to the other as he uttered nonsense.

"She is well, Your Grace," Morgan tried. "As is your baby, your son."

"I know, but I should have been there. It was humiliating to be shut out of a room in my own household, unable to support my wife."

"Your wife was supported, and she is in good health now. I know that all of this is scary, but believe me it becomes easier with time."

"Have you had a baby, Your Grace?"

Morgan hesitated for a moment.

"Not exactly. Not in the way that you have, at least, but I do have a daughter, for all

intents and purposes. I have raised my nieces since she was a small child, and there have been difficulties but there have been more rewards than anything. I assure you, even if you do not think you are prepared, you can do this."

"Is it wrong to wish he was a girl?" he laughed sadly. "We are supposed to want heirs, but if Rupert were a girl then it would not be my responsibility to teach him everything. I am supposed to show him how to be a duke one day, but I could not even tell you the first thing about it. I simply do it."

"And that is all that you need to do. If you act as a good duke, and a good man, then he shall follow suit. Believe me, it will come to you almost instinctively."

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It seemed to help his new friend, and at last he collapsed into a seat. Morgan took a deep breath, and leaned forward.

"When I first received Catherine," he explained, "I was alone. I did not know the first thing about children, and I did not have a wife to make it enjoyable in and of itself. It took time, but from the moment I looked at her I knew that I would do anything in my power to take care of her. It will be the same for you, once you are allowed to see him."

As if on cue, the butler arrived, and told them it was time to visit the Duchess. They followed him to the Duchess' room, and she welcomed them both in. The other ladies were already there, and Dorothy was holding the child. Morgan fell in love with her all over again the moment he saw her, the boy cradled in her arms as she spoke gently to him. She looked up at him, and in an instant he knew what he wanted to do.

She handed the baby to the Duke, and Morgan watched as the man's fears left him and came back in waves. He was soothed by his son's presence, yet terrified of it. It was precisely how Morgan had felt when he first met his niece, and it brought him comfort to know that he had never been alone in his feelings.

"He is perfect," he said quietly. "Rupert Hunter, the most perfect son I could have asked for."

He gave his wife a kiss on the cheek, and their visitors took that as a sign to give them some time alone. They left the room and were welcomed into another for drinks, but Dorothy gave Morgan a quick look to say that she was ready to return home.

"We ought to leave," Morgan explained. "After all that has happened, Catherine does not like to be alone for too long."

"Of course," Lady Beatrice agreed. "We understand, and the Duke and Duchess will too. Oh! Also, my parents will be hosting a ball next week, and we were wondering if you might like to attend? I was supposed to ask you sooner, but with everything that had been happening... I understand if you cannot, as Catherine needs you."

"We will be there," he promised, and Dorothy squeezed his hand.

"If you are not occupied elsewhere," Cecilia joked, and Dorothy nudged her sharply.

"We will be there," she repeated, and then they slipped away.

"What might your friend have meant by that?" he asked jokingly on their return home, and he laughed as his wife turned scarlet.

"I— I do not know."

"Ah, of course you do not."

"Cecilia knows me very well," she sighed, smiling. "She seems to know what I am thinking even before I do, sometimes."

"You are very easy to read. I have found myself knowing what you want of late."

"Oh? What do you mean?"

"Well, for a start, I know that you wish to attend Lady Beatrice's ball, but you are concerned about Catherine."

"I simply do not like to be away from her."

"Which is why we shall attend for a short while, and then leave. I also may or may not have noticed that you looked at me a certain way when you were holding the baby."

She looked at him with her beautiful wide eyes, and he knew that he was right.

"I was going to ask you, but I know we have a lot to do with Catherine for the moment," she explained. "But you are right. When I held that little boy in my arms, and I looked at you, I realized that it was precisely what I wanted. We shall have to ask Catherine first, of course, but—"

He cut her off with a kiss. He knew that Catherine would be more than happy to have another little one to care for, but he also wanted his wife to truly do something for herself. When they pulled apart at last, she laughed softly, leaning against him.

"Does that mean we can?" she asked.

"It means that I would love nothing more."