



Her Seven Nights with the Duke

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Category: Erotic, Romance, Adult, Historical

Description: "For the next seven nights you are mine..."

Desperate to escape her vicious step-father, Nora is willing to do anything. So when she witnesses The Duke of Bancroft's scandalous tryst, she knows what she must do...

Duke Samuel never thought he would be intrigued by Nora's efforts to threaten him. Yet instead of retaliating, he makes an offer: seven nights with him in exchange for her freedom...

But the moment Nora feels his sinful touches, she knows she made a mistake. For a rake like him could never give her what she yearns for. And it's not just seven nights...

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

Total Pages (Source): 68

CHAPTER ONE

“I hope I tied this on properly.”

Nora Wilson struggled to set her mask properly on her nose to cover her face. She traced the knot on the back, loosening it so she could tie it again. The last thing she wanted was for her mask to come undone in a masquerade ball.

She dropped her hands to her sides, satisfied with the result as she looked around her. The ballroom was decorated to match the theme of the ball. It was adorned with red and gold draperies, with elaborate chandeliers hanging from them and the soft glow of candlelight glancing off the silk fabrics covering the walls.

Men in well-tailored suits and women in pretty dresses milled around excitedly, chattering amongst themselves, their elaborate masks creating a charged atmosphere.

Nora heaved a deep sigh as she stared at the large crowd of guests socializing and flirting discreetly. Her dress was blue, with its intricate lace detail that circled her waist, creating an illusion of a smaller waist. Her mask, much like the blue of her dress was made of silk fabric.

Nora scanned the ballroom once again. She was at the masquerade ball of the Duke and Duchess of Thorne. It was the most important ball of the Season, even more so for her.

Everyone who was of importance was at the ball, and those who weren't invited were often filled with envy.

“You better not mess this up.”

Timothy Swinton, the Viscount of Worlington, walked up to his stepdaughter. The black mask that covered half of his face, much like hers did, wasn't enough to hide the unmistakable sneer on his lips.

She refrained from speaking and suppressed the urge to roll her eyes. His lips opened, and his legs spread, signifying that he was nowhere near done speaking with her and making sure that she knew where she stood—not that she could ever forget it.

“Your reputation is in shambles, and this is your last?—”

She frowned, looking around to make sure that no one was listening in.

“Fix your face, girl. There's already so little you have to offer, I will not allow you to go around and act like a fool, chasing off whatever man might find you interesting enough to choose as a wife.”

Nora hid her balled fists behind her full skirt. It would only be reason for him to chastise her more.

“My sister was right. Perhaps I have been so terribly lenient with you. I should've been more strict. Then you would not bring such shame upon my name.”

Nora held back the scoff that threatened to escape her lips. She surreptitiously glanced at her mother before quickly looking away. Timothy had been nothing but strict with her ever since he married her mother.

She had only met his sister once, and yet her first words to her had been jarring. She'd looked Nora up and down, her lips curled into what Nora would soon realize was a permanent sneer. downward tilt.

“Hmm... this one will bring you shame. You must not let that happen, Timothy. Punishment is the only way to ensure that a girl grows up disciplined, and she does not seem to have much of either.”

Nora pursed her lips now. “I will try my best, but I cannot help my reputation.”

“Your best hasn’t been good enough until now.” He barked out a short bark that made her jump. There was nothing humorous about it. “Moreover, you should have thought about your reputation before you ended in such ruin. It cannot be so difficult to do so if many ladies have been able to manage that task.”

“Maybe if they were in my position, they would do the same.”

“What, girl?” he asked. She hadn’t realized that she had spoken out loud. “Don’t just stand there with your eyes wide. Open your mouth and speak.”

She remained silent. There was no way she could say something like that to him. He would kill her.

She stumbled backwards, but his hand tightened around her arm, stopping her retreat. He gave a nasty smile and leaned in, whispering in her ears for her alone to hear.

“You do not want to provoke me, do you, Nora? I was certain that we had established all that could happen if you do.” did.”

His hand squeezed harder as she blinked, the only sign of her pain. She struggled to keep her face straight and her body steady. He would not let anyone see the monster that he was.

He stepped away from her and smiled, straightening the lapels of his coat. “I’m sure we have reached an understanding.”

She allowed herself to relax as his cold eyes finally turned away from her. But she had relaxed too soon.

“Just so you know what’s at stake, you will go live with Mathilda if you don’t find yourself a husband.”

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“What? No, please, I can’t—” She stopped her desperate plea to not be parted from her mother. He would only use that against her. Besides, he was not the sort of man one pleaded with.

It’d been weeks since he uttered the threat of sending her to live with his sister, a threat he knew was often effective, by the look she usually had on her face.

“I always knew you would bring me shame. Mathilda said that much the first time you met. Still, I thought to train you right, but you have spat on my generosity and proven her right.”

He affected an air of deep grievance she knew he did not feel. “Now that you’ve been labeled a loose woman, there are only a handful of men who could want you. I do not care what choice you make. Simply choose one, or I will make the choice for you.”

“Remember what will happen if you don’t,” he warned.said.

Lady Mathilda had a ghoulish behavior, a scowl forever present on her thin lips and a growl ever ready to escape those lips whenever she didn’t get her way. She did not like Nora and doubted there would ever be a scenario that would make that happen. The feeling was mutual.

Yet, despite Lady Mathilda’s antics, Nora would rather live with her than be married to a man like her stepfather. The onlything stopping her was the fear of leaving her mother with this monster.

She shook her head. She couldn’t leave. Not yet, anyway. “I understand, Lord

Worlington.”Swinton.”

He grunted, his lips curling inwards. She held her breath as he walked away, only allowing herself to breathe when he had disappeared from sight.

She adjusted her mask once again and pressed her back to the wall. In the days since her reputation was ruined, she had become somewhat of a wallflower, in a bid to avoid the stares she constantly got.

With members of the ton thinking that she was a woman of easy virtue, the only men who did not go out of their way to avoid her were those who wished to have her as a mistress. Nora wasn't particularly bothered about it, as she had premeditated all of it.

She turned when she felt eyes on her and struggled to hide her smile as a group of women who had been near her when her stepfather spoke hurriedly averted their gazes.

That was something else that she had needed to get used to—the looks she received whenever she arrived at an event or went out in public, and the conversations that started up, sometimes in hushed tones and other times in barely contained whispers whenever they wished to make her as uncomfortable as her presence made them.

Nora would gladly subject herself to the ton's reproach if it meant she did not have to be married to a man like her stepfather. Now, she no longer had to worry about having to marry anyone, much to her stepfather's displeasure.

She slunk out of the hall, careful to avoid being seen, not that there were any eyes on her. Ever since her reputation was tarnished, she found it easier to avoid people's watchful glances. It helped that people did not know who she was beneath the mask.

She breathed a sigh of relief as she walked down the dark and empty halls of Thorne

House, glad to not have to put up with the whispers and stares whenever people realized who she was. With light steps, she looked around as her eyes slowly began to adjust to the dim lighting.

Nora paused, startled, and turned around quickly. Her brow furrowed when she was met with the sight of the empty hall.

“What was that?” she whispered to herself.

She squinted to see beyond just a few feet in front of her. Perhaps there was something that she had missed because she wasn’t paying attention to her surroundings, lost in her thoughts.

The sound came again, this time louder and raspier. It was a woman’s voice, although it sounded different from anything she had ever heard.

Is she hurt? Has someone harmed her?

The sounds spilling from the woman’s lips were lewd. Nora’s steps quickened as a sense of urgency gripped her, pulling her towards the darkness, when another voice reached her ears, stronger and more controlled.

Her heels ground to a halt, and her eyes widened in shock. Although Nora did not consider herself worldly, she was not so innocent that she did not know what it meant when a man and a woman were dallying in the dark like this with no chance of being found.

She rounded the corner slowly, peeking in from behind a pillar at the pair. She hid between the wall and the pillar, careful to remain concealed in case they suddenly chose to put an end to their meeting and she did not have enough time to get away.

She was greeted with the outline of a man and a woman. Their bodies were pressed together in a pose that signified intimacy.

The candlelight above their heads made it possible for her to see them despite the darkness that otherwise shrouded the hallway. She could not make out the woman's face, not that she cared much about that. She only wished to confirm that she was indeed not hurt, and now that she had done so, she could care less what they did.

Unlike the woman, who was facing away from her, the man was facing her. All Nora could see was dark hair. Her eyes flicked from the woman's frame to the man's face, and her breath caught in her throat. The light shone brightly on his face, making his features as clear as day for her to see.

Nora gasped as she saw who it was pressed against the woman. It was Samuel Gale, the Duke of Bancroft. She frowned. It was shocking seeing him in such a position, as the Duke was supposed to be someone who was never involved in anything like this.

Although the men did not face a scandal like the one she was currently embroiled in, the Duke had managed to keep a spotless reputation all over the ton when it involved women, yet here he was, dallying with a woman who was clearly not his wife in the dark, since she knew he did not have one.

Despite his spotless reputation when it came to women, Nora was aware of his reputation as a cruel man. She'd never been curious enough to investigate the Duke. However, her new status as a wallflower provided her with the means to listen in on the rumors said about him, however unfounded they were.

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Nora had heard that he never stayed with a woman for long and that it was never for emotional attachment. He only sought out women as mistresses and nothing more.

She had also heard that he had a hot temper, much like his father before him, and that it was the reason he refused to seek a wife. He did not wish to continue his bloodline.

None of that seemed to matter now as she stared at him. Nora didn't know what to do as her face heated up.

I should turn away from them and continue my walk like I saw nothing.

“How perverted are they to do such a thing outside?” she said, her eyes widening when she realized she had voiced her thoughts out loud.

Her eyes lowered to his hand, and she blushed when it disappeared up the lady's skirt. She quickly looked back up to his face, only to be met with dark blue eyes that stared straight at her. Her blush deepened, her skin heating up as she struggled to look away from him. His eyelids lowered, taking those eyes off her for a moment, before they were back on her again, this time more intense.

‘Look away.

She was unsure whether she was speaking to herself or him. His eyes roamed down the length of her body even as his hand trailed up the side of the strange woman's neck, pulling up her long, black hair to expose her nape.

Nora's breath caught in her throat, her neck tingling in the same spot he touched the

woman.

What is this?

Something primal zinged through her.

Her eyes were glued to his face. She had never met a man as handsome as him. Something about him called to her, rooted her to the spot, beckoning her to stay and watch.

She panicked, tearing her eyes away from him to look around. She did not want to be caught, and certainly not by him. She did not think he would take too kindly to having his private moment watched like this, not even if she had happened upon them by accident.

His lips lifted from the lady's and parted as he whispered something Nora wished she could hear in her ear. The woman groaned, pressing against him even further, her hands tightening on his as she moved with him, blissfully unaware of the audience they were performing for.

Run away.

Nora was desperate. The Duke had seen her, there was no doubt about that, but she could still forget all about this and continue on like she had seen nothing if she could just get her legs to cooperate with her.

Yet, despite everything, her legs remained rooted to the spot, and her eyes stayed fixed on him like he was the most important thing in the world and she couldn't bear to look away for a moment.

"Do you like that?"

His voice carried on to her this time, a raspy, rich timbre that rushed through her like cool water on a hot summer afternoon. Her eyes closed, soothed by his voice. She hadn't realized how much she needed to hear his voice until she finally did.

"Yes..." the lady said, her words mixing with her moans and coming out in a shaky breath.

"Good... Open your eyes," he said and Nora's eyes snapped open.

She gasped quietly. Although the mystery lady had been the one to answer him, she couldn't shake off the feeling that she was the one he was speaking to.

Snap out of it, Nora. There's no way he's speaking to you.

Her eyes remained on him as he chuckled.

"Do you like what you see?"

"Yes, Your Grace. You have always been a very handsome man. I'm awed that you chose me."

Nora gasped once again. She hadn't been certain the first time he spoke, but now she knew it was her he spoke to. His eyes remained on hers, saying nothing to his companion even as his hands moved expertly across the woman's body, pleasuring her in ways Nora couldn't dare to imagine.

A war was raging within her. This man whom she knew of but had never had the pleasure of having an encounter with until this very moment, if she could even call whatever situation they were locked in that.

She wished to be far away from there, that she had remained in the ballroom and been

the recipient of so many awkward looks instead of being subjected to what she was seeing, and yet a part of her couldn't bear not having his eyes fixed on her in that way that made it seem like she was the one he was ravishing.

She shook her head, shocked by the direction of her thoughts.

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What has gotten into me? Perhaps it was a terrible idea to ruin my reputation. I have begun to have wanton thoughts as well.

The Duke cooed, pulling her out of her thoughts once again and shutting off whatever voice of reason she'd begun to develop.

"You are a very naughty girl."

"Yes, Your Grace," the lady moaned. "But only for you."

They paid her no mind, stuck in a weird dance Nora couldn't break free from.

His voice teased her, a glint in his eyes showing that he was once again speaking to her and not to the lady he was with.

She blushed heavily. Had he figured out what it was she was thinking about? Were her thoughts very obvious on her face?

She'd been told she had a very expressive face when she did not have her guard up, and if there was one thing that was very clear in the situation in which she had found herself, it was that she didn't have her guard up. The Duke had managed to disarm her without her knowing about it.

Nora frowned. He was trying to make her blush and burn with shame for watching them in such an intimate position, when it should be the other way around. Although she had caught them, he had not reacted as one would when caught fooling around with a woman who wasn't his wife. If there was anyone who should feel shame, it

should be him and not her.

She turned away, finally managing to get her body to cooperate with her, her face burning with shame. She rushed off as quietly as she had come, careful not to startle the woman, who remained unaware of what had been going on around her, wrapped up in the Duke's embrace.

Don't turn around...cheeks burned bright red as she rushed off, but despite her chants, Nora turned around and watched the knowing smirk on his face, as though he could read her thoughts and knew the turmoil he had wrought on her mind.

Nora seethed as she made her way back to the ballroom, welcoming the darkness of the barely lit hallways as she struggled to calm her mind and put up the walls that he had brought down with a few words and actions she wasn't meant to see.

She paused just before she entered the ballroom. Perhaps this could work in her favor. Her mind went over the information that had been thrust upon her. Perhaps there was a way that she could use this to her advantage, after all.

Nora grinned, satisfied. She walked into the ballroom and, much like before, stood behind the guests, her back pressed against the wall as she allowed the music to wash over her and soothe her while the wheels began spinning in her mind.

CHAPTER TWO

The little rabbit ended up running away, after all.

Samuel Gale pulled his hand out from under his lover's skirt. She was still delirious, holding onto the front of his coat and breathing heavily while she tried to compose herself. He pulled his handkerchief out of his coat pocket, wiping her essence off his fingertips, his mind still stuck on the lady who had just run off.

He remained in his position, with his lover's body resting against his, keeping her upright, although all he wanted was to go back into the ballroom in search of the mystery lady. He was certain he would find her if he went in.

Samuel chuckled at the direction of his thought. He was not some young boy just out from under his father's thumb, eager to wet his length with the first woman he found interesting, nor was he some schoolboy who had developed a crush that he should be so eager to go find her. She was fascinating, but that was all that was.

He slid the handkerchief down the bodice of the woman's dress, his fingers grazing the softness of her breasts, pushed up in her dress. She looked down at it for a moment and back up at him, her sleepy brown eyes blinking continuously. She smiled, still not down from the high of her release.

"You are so gifted at that," she said in a breathy tone.

Samuel chuckled at her compliment, running his fingers up and down the sides of her face in a gentle caress.

"And you are so beautiful. As beautiful as the first time I met you, and I knew I had to know you," he said, stilling his hand as he pinched her cheeks affectionately.

"Simply knowing?" she asked, her voice flirty and teasing.

Samuel chuckled once again. "How bold you have become. You never would have been able to say things like this when we first met."

"And you like me for it," she said, wrapping her dainty fingers around his huge ones as she stared up at him with eyes filled with so much adoration.

"As you like me when I bring you pleasure," he said with a wiggle of his eyebrows.

She giggled, adjusting her dress and fiddling with her hair to ensure that she looked proper.

He looked back at the spot where the lady had been standing only moments ago as she watched them. He had thought that this was a safe place for a tryst and had not expected that someone would catch him there.

He had been confident, since he had never been caught whenever he carried out little escapades like this, which was why it had come as a shock to him that someone caught him. He had managed to mask the surprise when he noticed her standing there, her lips parted and her eyes fully focused on him as his lips and hands moved expertly on his lover's body.

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Despite his flirtation, he'd made certain that she didn't see his lover's face, painfully aware of her every move.

It baffled him that it was a lady who had caught them. Despite his actions, it made no sense that a lady would come so far out without a chaperone, considering it could cost her her reputation.

Samuel had not seen her face, since she was wearing a mask, and he could not tell who she was. However, despite that, he had known her every reaction as she watched them. Her lips had parted as she watched him.

All Samuel had been able to make out was her wide green eyes and the faint blush on her cheeks, which had rapidly turned a deeper shade of red the more she watched them. He laughed, unable to stop himself. He could only hope that she was not prone to gossip, which was also the reason he had to finish up things with his lover quickly before they were missed.

"We should return to the ballroom," he said abruptly.

She pouted, her long lashes lowering over large hazel eyes, the features that had drawn him to her in the first place.

"Can we not tarry a while?" she asked, allowing her lips to flatten into a smile.

Samuel shook his head. "I'm afraid not, My Lady. We've been gone quite sometime now."

He held his hand out to her as her face fell. “Come on. It’s for the best if we go in now. We cannot risk anyone noticing your absence.”

She didn’t need to know how close they had come to having her reputation ruined. Things might have turned out differently if it had been someone else who walked in on them, or even a group of self-righteous and overzealous mamas.

Samuel had always been protective of his lovers despite not truly caring about them. The last thing he could ever be accused of was being careless with their reputations.

He didn’t think that the masked lady saw Lady Priscilla’s face, so she should be fine. However, there was a tiny part of him that was worried. She was the first person he’d been in a situation like this with, which was terrible, considering it was his last day with her.

Lady Priscilla was beautiful. Her black hair and big hazel eyes, coupled with a face of innocence, meant that she would be popular among the men and would have lots of suitors lined up at her door no matter what. The only thing that could ruin that was a scandal, and he would not allow it.

“Come along, Lady Priscilla,” he said, not giving her the chance to argue. dispute.

She followed after him, her footsteps hurrying to match his pace.

They arrived close to the entrance of the hall, right before they turned the corner, and he stopped, his action causing her to stop as well as she stared up at him. She sighed, knowing what was about to happen.

“Very well, Lady Priscilla. I’m afraid we must say goodbye,” he said abruptly.

She nodded, slipping her hand out of his. “I really wish we didn’t have to.”

He stepped away from her, leveling her with a steely gaze. There was no point in delaying the inevitable any further. His time with her was up.

“Very well, Your Grace. I suppose I had begun to expect more than was agreed upon,” she said as the last bit of hope disappeared from her gaze.

Samuel watched her as she made her way into the ballroom, the pep in her steps that had been quite evident when she came out to meet him gone now.

He had never broken his rule, no matter how many people he had been with and how great they were at conversations or how pliant they were when it came to his requests. He knew he seemed like a cad, but that was just as well.

The moment the seven nights were over, no matter how long or how short it spanned out, they went their separate ways and no longer had anything to do with each other, although he was certain that some of them would have been happy to be more than just a number of nights.

It was time for him to move on to someone new.

Samuel adjusted his coat and ran a hand through his hair to make sure nothing was out of place. He waited for some minutes to pass, not bothering to tie his mask into place. The dratted thing had been a bother to him several times during the night anyway.

As he walked into the ballroom, people scurried out of his way in a hurry, some bowing to him as he passed. Samuel had always known he had an intimidating presence. It was not something that could be helped, considering that he towered over most people, had piercing blue eyes, and did not much care to smile freely at people.

It did not help that he had a reputation for being a cruel man. He could see that exact

thought behind the eyes of some masked faces, their lips parted in slight gasps as though they had not expected to see him. He did not much frequent these events.

Samuel nodded in the direction of a group of men as he walked towards them. There was a hint of fear in their gazes but also respect as they watched him. He was not a man whose bad side they wished to be on.

“Your Grace,” the Viscount of Silvermere greeted him.

Samuel turned to the Viscount. He had known him for years, and although they did not run in the same circles, they were often civil towards each other and indulged in business discussions whenever they met at the club, as gentlemen were wont to do.

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“Lord Silvermere, how do you do?” Samuel asked as he surveyed the crowd. The woman he had seen earlier remained on his mind still.

“Splendid, Your Grace. It has been quite some time since we saw you at the gentlemen’s club. We understand that you are a very busy man, but perhaps you could spare us an afternoon someday. Our conversations have been quite dull without you. We haven’t been able to talk about important things since you stayed away,” Lord Silvermere said.

Samuel

He watched the Viscount shrink when he frowned. He truly had been away for quite some time.

“Oh? I do apologize for my prolonged absence. I have been focused on some things involving my estate, but I am mostly done with the work and should be able to attend the next meeting.”

“Oh, that would be wonderful. I have a new deal I am quite excited to present, and I would love it if you were present. I believe it will be the next big venture for anyone who chooses to invest in it,” another man eagerly spoke from beside him.

Samuel stared at the Earl as he spoke.

Lord Malachi was known to be money-hungry, and Samuel never cared to do business with men like that. It only made them desperate, and desperate men were careless men. Still, he would listen to what the man was so excited to share during the

meeting.

“Certainly, Lord Malachi. We will listen to your presentation when we attend the meeting,” Samuel said, offering the man a smile that showed that he was ready to end the discussion.

“Perhaps I could just give you a small idea of what it is about so that you would have something to look forward to before we have to be there,” Lord Malachi said, completely undeterred.

Lord Silvermere stared at the Earl with an annoyed look and opened his mouth to speak, when Samuel interrupted.

“Lord Malachi, I am sure your business venture is ingenious. However, we are at a ball. What kind of guests would we be if we spat on the hosts’ generosity and discussed business instead of having fun like we are meant to? What kind of gentlemen would we be?”

He laughed, although his eyes held a warning, and the others laughed with him, albeit nervously. He was shrewd enough to know that none of them wished to offend him, and that included Lord Malachi, no matter how desperate he was to present his venture and garner investors.

He placed his hand on Lord Malachi’s shoulder, feeling a little amusement when the man flinched. Samuel did not much mind the fear. If anything, it worked in his favor. No one wanted to cross him. It also helped to maintain the solitary lifestyle that he loved, without the prying eyes of the members of the ton.

The men dispersed, each going their own way with promises of being at the next meeting.

Samuel scanned the crowd, sighing in relief when he saw a familiar face.

Benedict Pratt, the Duke of Ravenwood, was Samuel's best friend. The two of them were a sight when they stood together. Benedict, with his blond hair and blue eyes, stood almost as tall as Samuel. They were an unlikely pair if there had ever been one.

Benedict was charismatic, and his looks always served to make women swoon. He was quick to flash a charming smile in their direction no matter who they were, and he often had a lot of ladies vying for his attention.

Unfortunately, his rakish tendencies warred with his romantic heart, making it difficult for him to settle.

"Ah, there's my favorite cad," he said slowly with a smile as he approached Samuel, two drinks in hand. He handed a glass to him as he stood by his side.

Samuel smiled as he accepted the glass from his friend. Benedict was the only one who could get him to relax and simply be himself. He was free to show him the man he truly was and not the version of him that people feared and respected so much.

"You should be careful with your words, my friend. Lest your tongue end up cut out permanently from your mouth," he warned in jest.

Benedict laughed. "You know you don't scare me like you do with the others. I know you better than they do. Besides, I can take you on in a fight."

Samuel shook his head at his friend. Benedict was well trained in sword fighting, much like he was. They often sparred together in their free time, and their matches never had a constant winner.

"I suppose we shall have to see about that, won't we?" he asked, grinning at Samuel.

“So, how did this week’s lover take it? Did she go graciously, or did she try to fight?”

Samuel raised an eyebrow. Benedict was the only one who knew anything about his crazy rule for keeping a mistress. His friend had found it so fascinating that now, whenever he had a new mistress, he was completely invested in it, sometimes to an unhealthy amount.

Samuel did not much care. He could trust Benedict. That had been established long ago. It helped that there was someone he could talk to about anything he desired, although the one rule he kept with all of this was that he never told Benedict who his lovers were.

When he first began, he had made a promise to his first lover that he would hide her identity. Whatever happened to harm her reputation would come through no fault of his. He had kept that promise and had continued to carry on with it. He trusted Benedict not to do something to harm their reputations, but it did not change the fact that his finding out was too risky.many.

“She went quite graciously if I do say so myself. I have had less desirable endings than I did with her. She took it in her stride. I do believe she was one of the calmer ones when it came to ending things,” Samuel said.

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He had been utterly impressed with how Lady Priscilla managed to control her emotions, even though it was clear to him that she had hoped for more.

“So, nothing like your third mistress then.” Benedict chuckled.

Samuel glowered. “Certainly nothing like that. It was a mistake to bed her. I should’ve realized that, considering she sought me out.”

Benedict laughed. “Even the most shrewd men have been known to make mistakes. I suppose you’re no exception, no matter how infallible you appear.”

“Perhaps. Still, it shouldn’t have taken me until the fifth night to notice my mistake.”

“What was it again? She showed up at your home unannounced?” Benedict asked.

“That and she watched me on days when I didn’t send for her. She approached me during balls to request dances, never relenting, no matter how much I chastised her. I’ve never known anyone to be so possessive.”

“Her marriage must have been of great relief to you, then. It’s always surprised me how she suddenly fell in love and stopped pursuing you.”

Samuel rubbed his chin. “And with a man who loves her no less. I suppose it shouldn’t be so shocking, considering how actively he pursued her.”

He chuckled suddenly. “She does still glare at me every time she sees me.”

Benedict laughed. “A small price to pay.” He scratched his chin.

“I do not know why they expect more when you are usually so clear with them about the rules. I suppose I cannot blame them. You make them feel special.” ,” Benedict said, scratching his chin.

Samuel remained silent, taking a sip of his drink.

CHAPTER THREE

Nora sipped a cup of tea, her mind filled with thoughts of the ball. Her mother was beside her, speaking quietly with a guest. The host of the ball had graciously extended an invite for them to stay back and enjoy some extra activities before they had to return back home.

Some had declined, choosing to go home to their families. However, there were many who had chosen to remain. Nora and her family were part of those who stayed behind, a decision she dreaded but could do nothing about.

She knew this was her stepfather’s way of getting her to socialize in hopes that she would find a husband, now that there were no eyes on her as there usually were at the balls they attended.

It was the second day. Most had left this morning, halving the number of people who stayed behind. There were those who had chosen to remain in a bid to have more time for romance with those they were interested in, and others who stayed because they were hoping to begin a courtship themselves.

Nora had done as he bid on the first day, taking walks in the gardens and by the lake at the side of the house. There had been a few men, mostly older men who cared not for her virtue and simply wished to marry a younger wife who would keep them

company or bear them children in their old age.

Nora had quickly retired back to her room, done with respecting her stepfather's wishes. The only reason she had agreed to do any of this was because her stepfather's threat remained fresh in her mind. She did not want to be sent away to live with his sister, not when there was still work to be done.

However, the thought of being married off to an old man who would treat her like she was only a trophy to be won was enough to send her retreating to her room, not caring whether her stepfather would see her or not. She had done as he wanted, and that would, hopefully, be enough to keep him off her for a moment.

Nora allowed herself to be pulled into the gossip with the ladies at tea. Although she hadn't spoken with any of the ladies present, there had so far been no whispers or eyes staring in her direction.

She turned when she saw a blur from the corner of her eye. Nora's cheeks burned, turning a shade of red as she remembered the night before and the performance he had put on for her. She retrieved her fan, hiding her face behind it as she followed his huge frame with her eyes. He moved with a confidence that couldn't be rivaled, like he wasn't merely a guest but instead the host of the ball.

Nora was pulled out of her thoughts as murmurs swept across the room. She turned in confusion when she saw the ladies blushing like she had been only moments ago.

"Oh, how handsome the Duke looks." Lady Mildred giggled, fanning herself with her hand as she watched with desire in her eyes.

"Yes. He is so handsome and confident. I only wish I could speak with him once," the blond beside her, whose name Nora did not know, added.

“Oh, but he is quite scary,” Lady Betsy said, shivering slightly.

“Yes, he is,” Lady Mildred agreed, swooning still as she watched him speak to another man. “But a man should be a little scary, shouldn’t he?”

The ladies giggled, and Nora joined in, although she did not see what was so amusing about what had been said.

“I hear he has such a good head for business. Whoever he marries will not have to worry about ever going into debt or needing to cut down on trips to the seamstress,” a beautiful brunette said, her eyes fixed on him as she spoke.

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Nora eyed her with a mix of something else. She did not know the kind of man the Duke was, other than the rumors she had heard about him. However, if what she had seen was any indication, he did not care for women like those sitting here with her.

She looked around the group of women. All of them seemed to be interested in him, their eyes focused solely on him and paying no mind to the men he spoke with.

How do I even figure out who his mistress is, with all of them gushing over him? I didn't even see the face of the woman.

There were so many dark-haired women in the room that it was impossible to know which of them was the woman he was with, especially since they all were red-faced and swooning over him.

Could it possibly be a married woman already?

Nora fanned herself, heated from the direction of her thoughts.

How scandalous!

"Perhaps the Duke has a good head for business, but he is not so handsome to warrant such attention from us," she said before she could stop herself.

They eyed her with looks of shock and disbelief, but she carried on. The Duke was a rake and a scoundrel and would only hurt any of these women if they ever managed to get his attention.

“His, um, eyes are too widely spaced apart, and I don’t believe I have ever seen the man smile,” she said, although she could tell she was losing them. “Surely, we would all prefer men who have brighter countenances.”

“Ah, but wouldn’t it be all the more fulfilling if he only ever smiled at the woman he married,” Lady Mildred said, swooning once again.

“How romantic that would be. To be the only one he is ever his true self with.”

Nora grimaced as the ladies giggled among themselves, her words forgotten so soon.

“Oh, but you do know the darker rumors about him, don’t you?” Lady Mariam asked.

Nora watched in fascination as the room turned silent. Her brow furrowed as she looked at them.

What rumors?

“What darker rumors?” Lady Betsy asked, leaning in.

Nora leaned in as well, careful to not seem too interested in the conversation, or the man for that matter.

In the time since he came into view, she had tried to keep her eyes off him as much as she could, although that was proving to be a hard task. The last thing she wanted was to be called out for her interest in him or for more rumors to reach her stepfather’s ears, especially since she couldn’t exactly reveal what she had seen the night before.

The Duke hadn’t noticed her yet. She couldn’t tell if it was because half of her face was hidden behind her fan or because he didn’t know who she was.

There's no way he can know who I am, right?

She panicked slightly. Her face had been hidden by the mask she wore the whole night. However, her hair had been quite visible, and it didn't help that she was quite tall for a lady.

No, he couldn't have figured it out. Besides, there was no way he could see me clearly enough to know that I was the one.

"Oh, does anyone truly know? There are rumors that he is not who he appears to be and that he keeps a mistress," Lady Mariam said.

"Hmm... I suppose you are right. I have heard it said by so many that he has his father's temperament."

What? His father's temperament?

People were so quick to believe rumors without even trying to find out whether they was true or not. She supposed it was a good thing, since it worked so well in her favor.

Does that mean the rumors about him aren't true?

She stared at him much like the other women, who seemed to assess his every move to determine whether to believe the rumors or not. One thing was certain, however—there would be one here who would decide that they cared not for the rumors and were willing to be married to him if he would simply look in their direction. After all, he had all that they would ever need.

"I heard the previous Duke was much scarier than he could ever be," another lady said.

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“Well, they do say that violence in a man never falls far from his son,” Lady Mariam said once again, her eyes flicking over to the ladies in a look of conspiratorial solidarity.

Nora stared at her with a curious glance. She appeared to suddenly be the leader of the pack. She looked down at her hair, black much like the lady from the night before.

Is she doing this to keep the other women away from the Duke?

Nora’s eyes widened. By spreading these rumors, if she was his mistress, she could dissuade the other women from ever wishing to be with the Duke. That way, she could have him all to herself.

SheNora shook her head.

Come on, Nora. Don’t get so ahead of yourself like that.

There was no proof that Lady Mariam was the Duke’s mistress, and thinking that would only hurt the lady’s reputation if word ever got out. Not that Nora ever intended to utter a word of this to anyone. Not even to Thalia and Selina.

“We shouldn’t speak so loudly about it. It could only hurt us. I have heard the rumors also, and my mother seems to think there is some truth to it. She knew his father, after all, and has confirmed that he was a violent man,” a brunette who hadn’t said a word since the conversation started chimed in suddenly.

Everyone turned to her with loud gasps as their eyes widened.

“Did she really say that?” the ladies asked, their eyes fixed on her.

The Nora’s mouth fell open.

Not only is he a cad, keeping a mistress when they aren’t married, but he also happens to be a violent man? No wonder he was eager to put on a performance for her. He cared not for whoever the poor woman he had ravaged was..

Nora pitied whoever it was. She hoped it truly wasn’t Lady Mariam or any of the women present. They would feel terrible having to listen to any of this, especially knowing that she could end up in a violent situation.

She watched him again, and her face turned red. This time, not because she was embarrassed or shy but because she was angry. Her stomach roiled in disgust, her lips curling in distaste, all of which she was careful to hide behind her fan from the watchful eyes of the ladies, although they were more focused on him than on anyone else.

He was exactly like Timothy. Like the type of men who made a life of whispers and stares seem better than a life of marital security and family.

Will my plan work?

Nora had been thinking about this all through the night and into the morning, but she had decided against it. However, now it seemed like the only thing to do.

I am going to blackmail him. Maybe I can get enough money to run away.

Nora silently shut the door behind her, careful to not make a sound. She adjusted the

shawl around her head and slipped into the cover of the night.

All through the day, Nora had been paying attention, trying to find where he was, and she had managed to catch a hint of where he was staying. She walked down the stairs, her steps light as she headed in the direction of his room.

What if he's with his mistress?

She paused. There was a possibility that his mistress had snuck in to see him just as she had, and she could find her there as well. She turned to go back but steeled herself. This was her last chance before they headed home, and she did not know when next she would be able to do something like this again, or if she would have the confidence to do so.

She had planned out exactly what she was going to say after she made up her mind to go through with her plans to blackmail him—not that there was much to say. It was clear that he valued his reputation, and she intended to use that against him. The Duke would pay her the amount she needed to make sure that all of this went away, and he would never have to hear from her ever again.

Perhaps she should have felt guilty about what she was about to do, but the Duke deserved every bit of it. Men like her stepfather did not need to be pitied, instead they needed to be taught a lesson on how to act.

Nora walked with boldness in the direction of his room. If the mistress was there as well, she would simply blackmail them both. She was desperate as it was, and there was no way she would lose this opportunity.

Nora knocked quietly on the door, looking sideways to make sure that there was no one to catch her in the act and misinterpret what she was doing. She held her cloak tighter to herself, covering her face until the only part of her that was exposed were

her eyes.

She raised a hand to knock once again when the door opened a tad bit. Nora took her chance and slipped in through the crack before he could figure out that she wasn't his mistress and shut the door in her face.

She dropped her shawl, allowing it to fall on her neck. Her eyes adjusted to the dimly lit room, the only source of light being the small candle that he kept on the bedside table. She looked around the room that was slightly bigger than hers but held no noticeable difference.

"You are not who I thought you would be," he said, his voice washing over her as he stood with his back to the door.

It was the first time she had heard him speak. His voice was exactly how she had expected it to be. Deep and soothing, capable of luring young ladies into his bed with honey-coated words and fake promises that he had no intention of honoring.

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She shook off its effect, steeling herself as he came round to face her.

“I took a huge risk coming here,” she said.

His brow furrowed as he stared at her intently. “I don’t understand. I don’t even know who you are.”

“I know your secret,” she said, not bothering to tell him who she was.

“Oh?” His voice deepened with amusement and a touch of mockery that grated on her nerves.

We’ll see who will be amused in a moment.

“I saw you,” she said bluntly, “with your lover.”

His eyes lit up, and she hurried to hide her surprise. That wasn’t the expression she had expected when she said that.

“Ah, you were the little rabbit that escaped.”

His lips turned up in a barely noticeable smile. Nora frowned. Things were not going the way that she had expected them to, and how dare he call her a rabbit?

She stood for a moment, watching him.

Is he putting up a show?

She knew she wouldn't be so quick to admit defeat if someone were trying to blackmail her, so was that what he was doing?

All of this confused her, she couldn't deny that. However, she couldn't give up. Not when this was the only way she could see at the moment that would take care of her problem.

"Everybody is going to find out that you are not as gentlemanly as you claim you are."

Samuel's

Samuel's lips turned up in a small smile when the lady finally spoke. He had been so confused about who she was when she walked into his room. When he heard the knock on the door, Samuel had thought it was Lady Priscilla coming to renegotiate the terms of their agreement now that their time together had come to an end.

He knew she had developed feelings for him, although he had warned her against that before their arrangement began. However, that did not stop the sense of responsibility he felt towards her. She had known nothing about the pleasure he could offer her before any of this happened, and now that she knew, it was a given that she would misunderstand the thrill she felt from the pleasure that he gave her as love.

He had been ready to chastise her for her recklessness by coming to his room when she could've been seen by anyone, before he realized that it couldn't possibly be her at the door. Lady Priscilla wasn't as tall as the lady before him. Still, he let her inside, confused as to what she wanted and whether she was in the right place or not.

Samuel had not expected the lady he had spent all of last night thinking about to suddenly come up to him, especially in the darkness of night. In fact, he had expected the exact opposite. She had been intrigued by what she watched, but she was also a

lady, and much like most ladies, she would scurry away whenever she saw him, hoping he did not figure out that she was the one who happened upon him. At least, that was what he had expected, until she came up to him.

Samuel stared at her excitedly, although his excitement was masked by the stoic mask he always wore, save for a small smile that played on the corners of his lips.

She was beautiful. More beautiful than he could have imagined her to be under that dratted mask that had stopped him from seeing her face and expressions the night before. Her long, curly auburn hair fell around her face in bouncy waves, giving her a sultry look. She was a seductress if he'd ever seen one, but it was obvious to him that she knew nothing of the power that she possessed.

"I have requests, and I will reveal everything I saw if they are not fulfilled," she said.

He could hear the quiver in her voice although her green eyes stared deep into his soul like she would not cower if he approached her.

Samuel was intrigued. He had never encountered someone like her. He had begun to find the rest of his stay here boring. However, now that she was here, he was glad that he had stayed back.

"Oh, really? And what requests might those be?" he asked her, leveling her with his most damning stare to test her will.

How low would she go to blackmail him? Would she scurry off if he didn't seem intimidated by her?

She lifted her chin, folding her hands behind her back in a way that pushed up her breasts. Samuel's eyes strayed down, but he quickly looked up at her. She was tempting. However, he was a gentleman, until he did not need to be.

Samuel folded his arms over his chest, utterly amused by her efforts to threaten him. He did not know why she thought this was a good idea. He was a duke, and if she thought his reputation wasn't as clean as he pretended it was, then she should be more afraid of him instead of coming into his room to threaten him. It put her more at risk than it did him, in more ways than one.

Still, this was the most entertained he had been in a while, and he wasn't about to put an end to it by telling her the truth that nobody would believe her over him, and even if they did, the only person the rumors would affect would be Lady Priscilla, whose face she hadn't seen. His reputation would not take a hit because of this rumor, even if it came out.

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“There is only one, really,” she said, looking away.

Her cheeks turned red, as if she were ashamed to have to say it or hadn't truly thought out her plan on how to state her demand. Samuel was not sure which, but he had a feeling it could be both.

“I see. Can you tell me what this request is, then?” he asked. “I would like to know the price for your discretion.”seriousness.”

He took a step in her direction, forcing her to take another step back, but instead of advancing towards her, he sat down on the bed, watching her. He gestured to the chair behind her, and she stared at it like it was something foreign.

“I would rather stand if you don't mind,” she said in a snarky tone.

Samuel shrugged.

“It is rather simple, what I want. I want you to give me money.” Her voice faded out on the last bit, but he was able to make out what she said.

He stared at her curiously. It was clear to him that she wouldn't be doing so if she did not need to. Perhaps he should be irritated by her blackmail attempt, but instead, he was simply curious to know what exactly had caused her to be so desperate that she would resort to this.

“Would you mind telling me what you want the money for?” he asked curiously.

She stared at him, her mouth opening and closing over and over again, although no words came out of it. She looked away for a moment, her jaw clenching.

What is your secret, little rabbit?

Samuel leaned in as her lips parted. “I don’t believe that it is any of your business what I wish to do with it. You need only worry about your own reputation, Your Grace.”

Samuel leaned back in disappointment. He had hoped that this would be done the easier way as opposed to having to force the answer out of her, but he was intrigued by her, and there was no way he would allow her to go without answering his question. Nor would he be giving her any money.

“It is very much my business if you intend to blackmail me for it. I have no intention of giving you any money if you don’t tell me exactly what it is that you intend to use it for,” he said.

“You cannot do that.” She bristled. “I will tell everyone about the?—”

“Yes, you will tell everyone you saw me with a woman. Perhaps you will tell them exactly how much time you spent there, watching me.” He stood up, slowly walking towards her.

He chuckled as she took a step back from him. “I must admit, My Lady, it is quite bold of you to venture into my room so late into the night to try to blackmail me. I cannot decide if I’m more irritated or impressed.”

He turned away from her. “Go back to your room before anyone finds you here.”

“Wh-what?” She balked.

He could hear the tiny note of desperation that seeped into her voice.

How fascinating.

“Did it excite you to watch what I was doing with her? I did ask you if you liked what you saw. Perhaps you can tell me now. Did you?” he asked, encroaching on her personal space until there was nowhere else for her to go.

Her eyes held shock and confusion from the sudden change of topic. This was not what she had thought would happen.

“I did not mean to watch you,” she said in a small voice.

“Ah, but you did. You could have run away and returned with people if you truly were interested in doing what was right, but you did not. Instead, you stayed and watched. You must have enjoyed it. Did you wish to be in her place?”

“I beg your pardon, Your Grace, but it is not as you say,” she said, affronted.

“But who will believe that you didn’t enjoy it? You say that you wish to blackmail me, but it is your word against mine. I could implicate you in this, and you will never be able to face any member of the ton as well,” he said.

“Your reputation is as bad as people say,” she said, her eyes blinking rapidly.

“You would do well to remember that before you choose to refuse my request once again,” he said, batting off her snide remark.

She nodded, looking away from him. “I wish to run away.”

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Her voice was small, and Samuel had to strain his ears to hear her. His eyebrows rose. There were not many women who tried to run away, no matter how terrible their situations were. He looked her over. She did not look like she was suffering. However, he knew from experience that not every punishment could be seen.

He sighed, moving away from her, his ears detecting her sharp exhale of breath.

There was no way that she could ever destroy his reputation, no matter what she said to whoever. As unfair as things were, the truth was that he was a man, and a powerful one at that. Hewould escape unscathed and could make her life a living hell if he wished to. Still, when he had imagined her, this was not how he had pictured things to go.

His eyes snapped towards her as an idea occurred to him. He could use the situation to his advantage. They would both get what they wanted, no matter how much of a cad that would make him.

His seven nights with Lady Priscilla had come to an end, which meant that he was in need of a new lover. It had crossed his mind to have the little rabbit, although the situation had proved impossible, since he did not know who she was, but things were different now. Perhaps she was desperate enough to accept his offer.

“I will give you the money,” he said, watching the slight movement of her hands, the only sign that she was excited.

He smiled. She truly was magnificent.

“However, you must do something for me in return.”

She blinked, waiting quietly for him to continue.say what he wanted.

“In return for the money I give you, I will have seven nights with you.”

With his request laid bare, Samuel watched as the lady pondered on it. She slowly lowered herself onto the seat he had offered moments ago, staring at her hands like they held the answer that she needed.

She looked up at him, and Samuel sighed when he saw the uncertainty in her eyes. It was obvious that she had no choice.

“I don’t think I can do that,” she said. “I’ve heard the rumors, and I don’t know if I can...”

“There is something that you must know,” Samuel said. “You never had any chance of ruining my reputation. This is the only way you can get the money that you need from me. I will not pretend to know the reason why you wish to run away, and I will not ask either. However, this is your only chance of getting money from me.”

He waited patiently as she thought about it. He could see the wheels turning in her head as she weighed her choice. She did not seem like the type to blackmail a person no matter what she had heard about his reputation, which led him to believe that she was desperate for the money.

He was confident that she would agree to whatever he wanted. That much he could see from the fact that she was still here with him.

“Does- does that mean that you want me in the position I saw you in during the ball?” she asked as her cheeks burned.

Samuel frowned. She was more innocent than he had thought she would be after how long she watched them.

Perhaps I need to be more patient with her. She's certainly not like the other ladies I've been with.

"I usually prefer my ladies with a little more experience." He frowned. "However, whatever position we get up to completely depends on what you want. You do not have to end up doing what you saw last night."with the other lady."

She was jumpy. Telling her otherwise would only send her out the door without giving any consideration to his proposal.

She nodded slowly. "I have heard so many things about you."

"Oh? What have you heard?"

She looked away as a slight blush crept up her cheeks. "I have heard that you're a dangerous man, and I have seen the way people act around you. They fear you."

Samuel chuckled. "Then you should've been scared as well and stayed as far away from me as possible."

She blushed, biting her lip as she looked away. "I need the money."

Samuel remained silent as she considered his proposal. The conflict in her eyes was clear for him to see.

"I accept," she said through a shaky breath.

"Splendid." Samuel grinned. "Before we move further, how about we start with you

telling me your name, little rabbit.”

CHAPTER FOUR

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A few days had passed since they returned home, and Nora still hadn't heard anything from the Duke.

Has he changed his mind? Did I seem too desperate? Too accepting of his offer?

Her mind was constantly plagued with thoughts of him as she struggled to find the answers to her questions, and with so many unanswered questions, her mood slowly plunged, sinking deeper into the desperation she thought she had finally begun to crawl out of now that she had found a solution to her problems.

Nora sighed as the carriage rolled to a stop at the entrance of the garden party they had been invited to. She wished she could stay home and mourn what seemed to be the loss of another way out of her oddly depressing life. However, she couldn't stay home.

Her stepfather had raged at the idea of her staying home when she could be out salvaging what was left of the tiny shred of reputation she held onto by finding a husband.

She had quickly gotten dressed, choosing instead to face the loud and pretentious crowd instead of remaining at home.

She alighted from the carriage, her eyes scanning the crowd for the only people she could count on to make all of this worthwhile.

"I certainly hope you can do better at finding a husband here than you did at the masquerade ball and the days that followed. Heavens know I can no longer stand to

see you come back to the house like you do not care that soon you will be on the shelf, an old maid, forever alone,” her stepfather grumbled, his eyes burning into hers as he grumbled.

Nora sighed, paying him no mind. She wouldn't lose hope in the Duke just yet if only to assure herself that very soon she wouldn't be there to listen to him moan and grumble about how much of a disappointment she was to him.

“I will try my best, Lord Worlington,” she said calmly.

Timothy scoffed, eyeing her with disgust. “Perhaps it is time you do much more than your best. It doesn't seem to be good enough.”

“I do recall telling you that the ball was your last chance to find a husband. Seeing as you have failed to do so despite the numerous opportunities given to you, I have sent a letter to my sister. She will be the one to deal with you from now on. Prepare to join her the moment she sends a response.”

“Perhaps we do not have to do that, Timothy. She might meet someone today and not have to be sent off to live with your sister,” her mother said.

Timothy let out a short bark of laughter. “Look at her, Julia. Do you truly believe that she is searching for a husband? We are more worried about her future than she is.”

Nora held back a snort. The last thing he could be described as was worried about her future. The only thing he cared about was getting rid of her and possibly using her for financial gain.

The man had made it clear that he cared nothing for her. There was no point in him acting like he cared, and yet he constantly put on a charade as though he could not stomach being thought of as exactly the kind of man he was.

He walked off before she could say anything to him in return—not that she had anything to say. If there was anything that she had learned in the time that she'd come to know him, it was that responding only ever fueled his anger. It was better to wait him out until he had talked as much as he wished to and then went off.

She was glad that they were in a public gathering, as he spoke shorter than he normally would if they had been at home.

Soon, they would be out of here, and she and her mother would never have to deal with him again. Her mother took her hand in hers, smiling guiltily at her.

“It is quite all right, Mother,” Nora said, although she did not know whether she meant that. Still, the last thing she wanted was for her mother to feel terrible about what was happening.

She hadn't told her mother about her plans yet, but soon, when she was ready, she would take her away from all of this.

Nora stood to the side with her friends. For the past hour, they had walked along the lake, enjoying the serenity of it. Nora tried to remain in the moment. She would miss her friends when she left.

Leaving was certain. The only thing that wasn't was how she would be leaving—under her terms or Timothy's.

“Nora, have you been listening to what we were saying?” Selina asked, her eyes boring into Nora's.

SheNora shook her head, clearing the gloomy thoughts. “I do apologize, my dear friends. It appears I am not the best company today. There seems to be a lot on my mind, and I do not know how best to fix all of it.”

“Is anything bothering you?” Thalia asked.

“Lord Worlington plans to send me away to live with his sister, since I have not been able to find a husband,” Nora said. “He has already sent a letter to her but is yet to receive a response.”

Selina gasped. “Oh, no, Nora. We have been so insensitive, carrying on with such nonsense when you are in such a dilemma.”

“No...” Nora murmured. “I am glad to hear it. I admit I have been lost in thought, but I truly would rather listen to you speak, no matter how inconsequential it is.”

Thalia sniffled. “Oh, Nora. We will miss you if he sends you away.”

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“Yes, very much so,” Selina added. “Is there nothing to be done about this? What do you plan to do?”

Nora looked around her. She had been thinking about how best to tell the girls without them worrying too much about her decision or what that would mean for her.

“There is a second option,” she said, not as confident as she was mere days ago.

“A second option? What is it?” Selina asked excitedly, her eyes lighting up.

Nora sighed, exhaling deeply. “Well, I made a deal with the Duke of Bancroft. He’s going to save me.”

She watched as the girls stared at each other worriedly. She had known that they wouldn’t be as enthused by the idea as she was. However, she had no other option, and she did not want to be dragged off to live with Timothy’s sister while he did whatever he pleased with her mother.

“You heard the rumors about him, didn’t you?” Thalia asked her. “His father was not a good man, and his wife suffered at his hands.”

“Yes, Nora. Everyone is scared of the Duke because they believe that he has too much of his father in him. I do not think it is a good idea to risk that. It might be too dangerous.”

Nora’s steps faltered when she heard that.

“Yes, I had heard that, but surely it is only rumors. Perhaps he is not as they say he is.”

A silent look passed between her friends. “It’s true that he’s never done anything characteristic of his father’s actions. However, we cannot be certain of anything.”

“Yes. There aren’t many who would ever dare to utter it for fear of the Duke finding out. No one wants to find how hot his temper truly burns.”

“Oh, dear. Perhaps I have made a terrible decision, after all,” Nora said regrettably, her heart beating fast in her chest.

“Maybe it isn’t too late to end this. Whatever deal you might have made with the Duke, I’m certain he will forget all about it in mere moments if you do not try to speak with him first. There must be so many people trying to make deals with him anyway.” Selina looked to Thalia for confirmation, and Thalia nodded.

Nora hoped they were right. Perhaps that was why he hadn’t reached out to her yet. He had forgotten. She bit her lip, shaking off the disappointment that filled her at the thought.

It’s for the best.

She had learned so much about the Duke in the days since she saw him and his mistress. However, everything she learned seemed to warn her of the dangers of getting close to him. She couldn’t stand the idea of getting hurt and leaving her mother all alone with Timothy. Perhaps she should have been thinking about herself. However, her life was nothing if she couldn’t protect the person she loved most.

She was caught between two terrible ends and needed to choose the most preferable one.

As though she had summoned him with her thoughts—not that it had worked in all the other times she wished that she would see him already—Nora felt him before she saw him.

Her shoulders dropped, and she looked in his direction. The Duke stood with a group of gentlemen, his eyes fixed on her as they spoke. Her eyes widened as he began walking towards her. She willed her legs to move. However, much like the first time she saw him, her feet remained planted on the floor. Her breath caught in her throat as dark blue eyes raked the length of her form. It was both intrusive and exhilarating, neither of which she cared to understand at the moment.

Nora was shocked. She hadn't expected that he would approach her out in the open.

Shouldn't you be keeping yourself clean in public so no one can have anything to say about your reputation?

She wished she could scream at him to go elsewhere, far away from her, but she resigned herself as he reached her, planting his feet in front of her.

"Lady Nora," he greeted.

Nora gasped silently. It was the first time he had said her name since she revealed it to him. She loved the way it rolled off his tongue.

She blushed at the direction her thoughts had taken. .

"Your Grace," she greeted, curtsying slightly. "To what do I owe the pleasure?"

She sharpened her gaze, hoping he would understand and leave her alone, but he remained in front of her, that half-smile still on his face.

“Dance with me,” he said, his tone demanding and leaving no room for argument.refusal.

Nora looked behind her at the girls. Their eyes were wide with fear and surprise as they watched their interaction.

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She kept her hands at her sides, refusing to offer him her dance card. He could not order her around as he saw fit. They had a deal, and he would be paying her for it. However, she was not his servant to carry out his every bid.

“I cannot do so, Your Grace. The next dance has been reserved for someone else, and I don’t believe he will be pleased to see me dancing with another.”

She looked at the dancers, hoping he would take the hint and leave her alone, but his domineering form continued to tower over her.

Wordlessly, the Duke plucked her dance card off her wrist and hummed as he went through the names on it. He crossed off the name already written for the next dance and wrote his name in the suddenly blank space. Nora glared at him, but he did not seem to mind.

“There.” He lifted the card to her face. “You are available now.”

He took her hand in his and led her to the dancefloor before she could disagree with him, although she doubted there was anything she could say to change things.

Nora had never been afraid of a person before as much as she was afraid of the Duke. If only she had done more research before she thought it a good idea to blackmail him.

Beneath her fear lay excitement. Despite herself, a part of her was attracted to him. She hadn’t been able to get him out of her mind from the very first moment she saw him until then.

“I believe you wouldn’t trip over my legs if you focused on the dance,” he teased, his eyes filling with humor.

Nora stared at him sheepishly. She had thought she was doing a good job of keeping her nervousness at bay, but she was already tripping over him.

“I apologize, Your Grace,” she muttered softly.

For the rest of the dance, she remained painfully aware of every part of him that brushed against her.

Are people staring at us? Do they fear for my safety?

His breath on her neck jolted her back to the present. “Be at my estate at midnight for our first night.”

Nora stared at him dumbfounded. “What? How am I going to make it?”

“You are a resourceful lady. You found yourself in my room to blackmail me, so I’m certain you can find a way to meet me for our first night together,” he said with a smile once again.

Nora narrowed her eyes at him. He was enjoying seeing her like that. He escorted her to her friends, leaving immediately after.

As she watched him leave, only one thought raced through her mind.

How am I going to do this?

CHAPTER FIVE

Nora knocked on the door nervously, wrapping her cloak tighter around herself as she waited for someone to open the door. She looked around her worriedly, much like she had done from the moment she left her house.

She knew what the rumors would do to her if she were seen. With the already terrible rumors surrounding her, it would be so easy for her to end up completely ruined with no chance at redemption.

The door immediately opened, the sound startling her. She looked at the butler who opened the door, her eyes wide.

“This way, My Lady. His Grace awaits you,” he said, leading her inside.

None of the staff who walked around had stopped to stare at her in surprise. She scoffed inwardly. He had done this so many times that they had already come to expect it. She frowned at the jealousy she felt towards the women who came before her, surprised by her feelings.

It was the kind of man that he was. His entire household already knew that he was loose and had multiple women coming in at various times of the night to be with him. She had become one of those women.

It hadn't bothered her before now, knowing that there had been lovers before her and would be many more after, and it shouldn't bother her now, considering she was here only for a short time before she got what she needed and found a way out of it.

Focus, Nora. Remember why you're here.

She focused on the butler, following his quiet steps as he led her down the hallway, a torch burning bright in his hand.

She breathed in deeply, suddenly so nervous as she waited, uncertain of how to proceed. Nora looked behind her at the long, dimly lit hallway she had come through and shuddered. She had come so far already, doing things she would never do just so she could be there. She could not allow her heart to fail her now.

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Nora held her breath and raised her hand to knock on the door, wincing when the sound was amplified by the quietness of everything else. The doors opened before she could think much further on it, and she looked up to see Samuel staring down at her in amusement.

She shut off her expression, maintaining a stoic mask to hide the irritation she felt.

Why are you always so amused when you see me?

He made her feel like a silly schoolgirl as opposed to the lady of three-and-twenty that she was, long gone from the schoolrooms and the guidance of an overprotective mama.

“I had begun to wonder how long you planned to stand out here,” he said with a grin.

Nora blushed, partly in embarrassment and partly in awe. It was the first time she had seen anything other than his half-smile, and he was beautiful. His perfectly square jawline softened, and his cheekbones lifted, softening the harsh lines of his face that made him so scary. For once, she was standing before a man much her equal.

“How did you know I was there?” she asked.

She thought she had been quiet as she stood there. The butler had certainly been quiet, and he hadn’t knocked on the door, choosing instead to let her do so.

“The torch.” Samuel stood up and picked up a candle that sat on one of the tables, moving closer to her. Her breath caught in her throat as he stood in front of her.

Is it time for that already?

She steeled herself, although a part of her screamed at her to run. Nora was curious. She wanted to know what he tasted like. To feel what the woman felt as he touched her. To know what other places he would touch her, other than underneath her skirts.

Her eyes widened at the direction of her thoughts, and she stepped back, causing him to chuckle.

“You need not back away from me. I have—” He paused, staring at her outfit.

Nora stared at him in shock as he laughed, his body shaking from the force of it. She frowned, looking around the room and down at herself.

“Would you mind telling me what it is you find so amusing, Your Grace?”

He pointed at her, his hand gesturing up and down.

She stared down at herself in confusion. “I do apologize, Your Grace, but I simply cannot see what is so funny.”

“Your attire, Lady Nora. One would think you were a spy if they saw you,” he said when his laughter died down. He had finally calmed himself.

Nora rolled her eyes at him. She had expected something else, and yet here he was, laughing like a child.

“I suppose I cannot expect you to understand why I need to dress this way,” she said, still irritated.

“I apologize, Lady Nora. I was merely jesting. I assure you that I understand the risks

on your end. To be honest, I was surprised to see that you were not deterred and managed to make it here,” he said.

“Should I thank you?” she asked him, her voice dripping with sarcasm.

Samuel laughed in amusement, and she glared at him.

“Please, allow me to take your cloak,” he said, helping her remove it.

Her breath caught in her throat as he closed the distance between them. She bit her lip, relieved when he finally moved away, her cloak in his hand.

“You have a beautiful home,” she said as she looked around his dimly lit halls.

Samuel had taken her around. She had never seen a garden that rivaled his. It was lovely how a man who was known to be so cold and cruel could cultivate a garden so beautiful and inviting. They were the perfect contrast. The Duke was a very wealthy man and clearly wanted for nothing, as his home indicated.

“I believe the table must have been prepared for us. I certainly hope you have the appetite. It is your first time here, after all,” he said, offering her his hand.

Nora placed her hand in his, allowing him to lead her towards the room. She bit her lip as her heart pounded heavily in her chest and her neck tingled. thrummed.

Can he hear my heart beating?

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It was the first time she was alone with a man like this, and she was nervous. Was she safe with him? The rumors that surrounded him hadn't been dispelled quite yet, and she wasn't entirely sure that she thought him innocent.

Surely, there are certain truths to the rumors.this.

Nora choked in surprise when they arrived at the room. The table had been set with lots of wine and light foods for them to nibble on. She looked at Samuel, who was hanging up her cloak.

“You don't expect us to finish all of this, do you?”

“The wine or the food?” he asked her without turning to look at the table.

She squinted as she stared at him. “Both.”

“We don't have to. However, it is better to have too much than too little,

“We don't you think?” he asked.

She shrugged. She supposed he was right. He pulled out her chair for her and then sat opposite her, staring straight at her.

Nora sat uncomfortably as he stared at her. Her hands grew clammy underneath his gaze, and her eyes looked everywhere but at him. She had never been so blatantly stared at before, not even by the members of the ton who gossiped about her after the rumors about her began to surface.

“I propose we play a game,” he said finally.

“A game?” she asked, confused. She had not realized they would be playing games when she joined him.

“Yes. For us to be comfortable with each other, we will need to get to know one another first,” he explained. “I care about your comfort, Lady Nora.”

Nora was surprised. She did not know what she had been expecting, but it was certainly not any of this. Considering they only had seven nights, she thought he would prefer to get straight to the point of things.

“All right. What is this game you wish to play?” she asked, giving in.

Samuel perked up, his eyes brightening as he regarded her. “It’s quite simple. It’s a game of questions. We take turns to ask each other questions, but every time we don’t want to answer, the person who asks is allowed to touch the other.”

Nora grimaced. She had been too quick to think that he was being a gentleman. She was grateful that he was trying to get to know her. However, she wasn’t surprised at his method. It was exactly what she expected of him.

“What sort of game is that? These rules are more for your benefit than mine,” she said, affronted and taken aback by the rules of the game.

“I will not insult you by denying that it is indeed for my benefit. I suppose you will simply have to answer the question if you do not want to be touched.” He smiled at her.

“What if I do not wish to play this game?” She swallowed, maintaining her composure, although she wished to run all the way back home until she was within

the safety of her room.

“I suppose I cannot force you to play a game if you do not wish to,” he said, and her anxiety ebbed. Nora calmed.

“I certainly understand if you are scared, little rabbit. Not everyone has to play this game, after all.” He gave a mocking smile.

Nora bristled. She balled her hands into fists underneath the table.

Calm yourself, Nora. This is exactly the response he hopes to get from you. You cannot allow yourself to fall into his trap.

“I assure you, Your Grace, I am not scared,” she said, glaring at him.

As his smile turned victorious and his eyes glinted, Nora knew she had done exactly what she said she wouldn’t do. She had played into his hands and given him exactly what he wanted.

How wonderful.

“Lovely, Lady Nora. I was hoping that you wouldn’t be and we could have a civil game between two adults.”

“What is your question?” she snapped, already dreading the game before it even began.

“I suppose we should start simple. What is your favorite snack?”

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Her eyebrows rose at the question. Despite saying that he wanted them to start with simple questions, that was not what she had expected him to ask her.

“It would be a mighty surprise if you didn’t know the answer to that, My Lady.” He chuckled.

“Apple slices. My favorite snacks are apple slices,” she said quickly, worried that he would touch her if she did not answer sooner.

She blushed and looked away, making him laugh.

“If you do not wish to answer and would rather go straight to being touched, I could work with that.”

His voice lowered, and he stared at her with eyes that told her exactly what he meant to do if she simply agreed. Images of the mystery lady flashed in her mind once again. Her loud moans as he pleased her and the way that she clung to him like he was her lifeline.

Nora blushed. “N-no. I can answer your questions.”

He smiled again. “Very well then. I believe it’s your turn to ask a question.”

“What’s your favorite flower?” she asked him, feeling silly when he raised an eyebrow in amusement once again.

She hated that he made her feel silly. She looked at her cloak, which he’d hung up.

Perhaps it would be for the best if she ended things here before they even began and found her way back home before anyone found out where she had gone.

“No one has ever asked me that before,” he said, smiling.

Her lips clamped shut before she could retort. This time, his smile was genuine. She did not think she would ever see that.

“I don’t think I have a favorite flower. However, I have always liked foxgloves. They are very unforgiving flowers. Touching one can be so terrible for you. It’s like a person with so many defenses to protect itself from danger.”

Nora stared at him with her mouth open wide. She hadn’t expected an answer so profound and with reasons.

“Your turn,” she said simply, unsure how to respond to that.

“Hmmm... I have a good one. What is your favorite pastime?”

Nora’s lips turned up in a smile. It was the one topic she wouldn’t get tired of speaking about if she had the opportunity to do so.

“Horse riding. I have a horse named Mindy. I have had her since I was a little girl, and she is simply the most perfect horse. Taking her for a ride is always my favorite activity.”

“I would love to meet Mindy one day. It would be great to see this horse that makes you so excited,” he said. His eyes showed his sincerity.

As the game progressed, Nora relaxed into her chair. He had been right when he said that asking questions and getting to know one another was the best way to begin. She

felt better now that she had talked to him and found out certain things about him. It wasn't just about the answers he gave but how he reacted to her answers also.

"All right. I have one more question," he said, pouring each of them another glass of wine.

A buzzing sensation coursed through her, calming her as the drink settled in her belly.

"What's your question?"

"Have you ever been touched by a man before?"

Nora blinked slowly as she struggled to understand what he was asking her. Her lips slowly dropped. He had betrayed her. Of course, he had. She should have known that he would pull a mean trick like that.

Picking up her glass, Nora sipped from it slowly, allowing the taste to linger on her tongue.

No, what am I thinking? There's no way I am being too unreasonable.

She glared at him. He'd begun with simple questions she would have no problem answering. She should have known not to fall for the innocent act he had put on. She couldn't believe she had talked herself into thinking that he truly cared for the innocent answers.

He does not care that my horse is named Mindy.

"I haven't," she said, not looking at him. "How many women have you touched?"

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Samuel's short laugh caused her to look up. He had gone back to looking at her like she amused him.

"I'm afraid I cannot tell you that," he said.

"You cannot or just won't?"

Samuel swirled the wine in his glass, rubbing his jaw. "I suppose it is both. There are certain things a gentleman should never speak of, and that includes the number of women he has been with."

Nora stared at him in annoyance. She had answered his question, even though she did not wish to. "Are you a gentleman?"

Once again, he laughed.

She frowned. He had been doing more of that since they started to drink the wine, and yet she found it difficult to believe that he was drunk.

"I suppose I am whatever the lady wants me to be." He fixed her with his blue-eyed stare.

Nora's stomach twisted. Did he do that on purpose, knowing that it affected her?

She looked at the grape stalk on her plate just as his voice cut through her thoughts once again.

“I suppose you will have to touch me, since I am unable to answer your question.”

Nora’s hand froze on her lap. She tightened her fist around the skirt of her dress. There was no reason why his saying that had to affect her so much. She had touched him already before when she danced with him. This was not so much different from that.

She let out a breath and reached across the table, keeping her eyes below his chin. He watched her. She did not have to look up at him to know that, not when her body thrummed with tension.

Nora placed her hand on his cheek in a gentle caress, feeling his prickly stubble against her palm. She rubbed her hand across his cheek, fascinated by the feeling before she pulled away from him.

Samuel laughed once again. “I don’t believe I have ever been caressed on the cheek when there’s a possibility to do much more.”

She blushed. She wasn’t used to the idea of touching a man. It was her first time touching a man’s cheek, other than her father’s when she was younger.

“I guess it is my turn now. Have you ever touched yourself?”

Her eyes shot up to his before faltering just as quickly. She gulped down what was left of her wine to cover the blush rising to her cheeks.

“I-I cannot tell you that.”

Her answer was greeted with the loud scrape of a chair as Samuel got up. He walked towards her, his steps tentative and his eyes boring holes into her head.

“You do remember the penalty for not answering a question.”

He turned her chair towards him and knelt in front of her until his face was level with hers. His gaze lowered to her neck, and his hand followed, his thumb caressing her skin..

She gasped softly, her breath coming out in puffs. “I have.”

Samuel smiled at her quick response. “Where have you touched yourself?”?”

She shook her head. “It’s my turn to ask a question.”

“Ask me anything,” he said softly, his eyes focused on her lips.

Her mouth went dry. “I-I don’t know.”

“Then you can skip your turn,” he said. “Where have you touched yourself, little rabbit?”

She shook her head once again, her head light from the wine and his closeness.

“I get to touch you, then.” He lowered his lips to hers.

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Nora gasped as shock ran through her. She had never felt anything like this before. Her hands clenched in her skirts as she began to swoon. She pulled back, gasping as she stared back at him with wide eyes.

“I-I heard about it from one of my friends a-and I tried it once, but it felt so weird, so I never tried it again,” she said, her eyes lowering to her tightly clasped hands. She hoped he did not make her explain it in detail to him.

Samuel hummed. “Thank you for telling me.”

He took her hands in his, rubbing his thumb on her palm. His other hand returned to her neck, caressing her gently as her eyes remained fixed on his, unable to pull away. Nora’s eyes widened as his lips began to lower to hers once again. She wanted to taste his lips again and get lost in the feeling of his hands on her bare skin.

She gasped, standing up. She looked at him as her eyes filled with panic. She looked out the window and stifled a scream. She hadn’t realized how much time had passed since she was here. The sky had begun to lighten, and soon, the sun would be up. She couldn’t be caught outside by then. There was no excuse she could give to her stepfather if she was caught. Not when there were already rumors about her.

Her stepfather would send her off to his sister before even receiving a letter from her if he found out what she had done. Then there would be no hope for rescuing her mother.

“Are you all right, Lady Nora?” the Duke asked, pulling her out of her panic-induced thoughts.

Her head jerked in his direction, and she shook her head.

“I did not realize just how much time had gone by. I need to leave immediately, otherwise I will be found out. That cannot happen,” she said.

Samuel looked out the window and sighed. “I apologize for keeping you out so late. I hadn’t realized either.”

His brow furrowed as he stared at her, but then he walked off to retrieve her cloak and wrapped it around her until it covered her much like it had when she arrived.

His hands lingered on her neck where he’d just tied the knot. He ran a thumb across the throbbing vein in her neck, tracing all the way to the end of her collarbone and back.

Her breath caught in her throat, and she stared up at him with parted lips, her breath coming out in sharp pants.

“There, you are a spy again. I will have the coachman drop you off wherever you wish so that you can be home early enough,” he whispered before stepping away from her.

She let out a nervous laugh and cleared her throat noisily as Samuel rang for his butler.

“For our next meetingsmeeting, from now on, I will have a servant wedge a letter in the gate of your family estate, so you will have to check every day to make sure you do not miss it,” he teased, swallowing back a chuckle when she grunted in annoyance just as the butler walked into the room.

CHAPTER SIX

Samuel looked out the window as the carriage trundled down the cobbled road. His mind was plagued with thoughts of Lady Nora. She had been exactly how he had expected her to be from the moment she walked into his room to blackmail him, and he was glad he wasn't wrong about her.

It had been two days since she visited him in his home, and so far, he hadn't stopped replaying the moments they shared together in his mind. Her innocence and the manner in which she rebuffed him had been so adorable that he knew he had to have her.

Samuel did not often indulge in affairs with just anyone. The first night was often a test to see how the lady would fare and if their interests aligned, and Lady Nora had exceeded his expectations.

He'd never been so careless to allow a mistress to stay so late in his home. He had an impeccable reputation, and carelessness wouldn't just affect them but him also. He wouldn't risk being linked back to his mistresses.

His first night with Lady Nora had ended up with her very worried about how long she had stayed out late. Samuel had gotten carried away, not only by her beauty but also by her sweetness and innocence. He hadn't planned to kiss her just yet. The questions were supposed to be all that there was for the first night.

When he had touched her, he knew there was no way he could let her go without a kiss. He blamed his behavior on the dratted wine he had drunk.drunk.

Samuel chuckled. He was a disciplined man. Perhaps more disciplined than his peers as a result of how he grew up, but fighting against the temptations he had felt with her was more difficult than he had ever imagined.

"What has you smiling the way that you are?" Benedict asked, jolting him out of his

thoughts. "I must admit that it is a bit weird to see you like this."

Samuel chuckled lightly. His friend was right. He was not prone to random smiles. However, he had spent all of his time smiling during their night together. He had been unable to stop the smile that had suddenly taken up a permanent place on his face. Everything about her had been so amusing to him. It had been so long since he was entertained by a mistress.

Samuel had feared that having a mistress, albeit for seven nights only, had begun to lose its appeal, and he would soon have to find a new way to have fun. Now, things had proven different. He would make sure he had her.

He could tell that she was nervous about being his mistress, although she had agreed to it. He did not mind playing the long game, as long as he got her in the end.

"I have discovered an interesting pastime," he said plainly.

Benedict stared at him in shock. "Already? Your affair with the last lady only just ended."

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Samuel nodded. “My seven nights with her ended on the same night I found my new mistress. Or dare I say, she found me.”

He chuckled. It had been almost so easy how she had landed on his lap. If he didn’t know better, he would have thought that all of this had been planned.

“Judging from the smile on your face and the easy way you speak of her, I believe it is safe to assume that you like her,” Benedict said, smiling at him.

“I assure you, Benedict, while she is quite different from what you would expect a mistress to be, and is undoubtedly beautiful and amusing, there are no feelings there. She is exactly what she is—my mistress. And when the seven nights are over, she will be gone much like the others,” Samuel said, pushing away the idea.

“It sure doesn’t seem that way from my point of view,” Benedict said, his smile teasing.

Samuel rolled his eyes at him. “You know me, my friend. I need not have to explain any of this to you.”

“I suppose I do,” Benedict agreed. “I certainly wish I could meet this young lady.”

“You know the rules, Benedict. I can tell you about them only because you are so eager to know, but I cannot tell you who they are. Especially if they will not be fine with that—and I assure you, she will not be,” Samuel said, not bothering to look up at his friend.

Benedict had never been introduced to any of the ladies Samuel had his affairs with. He had hazarded a guess a few times, and on some occasions, he had been correct. However, Samuel had never denied or confirmed his guesses. Much like him, his ladies' reputations remained impeccable, even after their relationship was over.

Samuel and Benedict exited the carriage when it rolled to a stop in front of the gentlemen's clubs. Samuel often preferred to do his business at White's, often keeping it as impersonal as possible and leaving the moment the business was concluded. He was not one prone to conversations and fun with the men, which he supposed added to his mystery and also fueled the rumors about his cruelty.

He shrugged, walking into the room with Benedict by his side. He had been invited by the gentlemen he'd spoken to earlier at the masked ball, and he had agreed, surprising them.

"Your Grace, it is a pleasure to have you here with us," Lord Silvermere called out, standing up to greet him. "It is wonderful that you could make it."

"Lord Silvermere, thank you for the invite." Samuel sat down with Benedict in the chairs that had been vacated.

"Certainly, Your Grace," the smaller man said, scurrying to his side.

Samuel did not much care for the man. He had always considered him to be a little too much like a weasel for them to be more than just mere acquaintances—not that it would have changed if he was any different. He did not care to have a large group of friends.

"We wished you could have been present for the last meeting we had, there was much you could have provided your insight on, Your Grace," the Earl of Towbridge added.

Samuel grunted, not answering the man. He raised a hand for a glass of whiskey to be brought to him.

He

Samuel had never met a man so generous with compliments as the Earl. The Earl had tried to befriend him when he had just inherited his title after the death of his father. However, Samuel had been raised as a bit of a loner, with only the servants to interact with. He hadn't dared to speak with the servants except to make requests, as that would have only angered his father and led to punishments for everyone involved.

He had learned early on that he was better off staying away from everyone else, and that was exactly what he had done. As he grew from under his father's thumb, he realized just how much damage had been done. Benedict was his only friend, and he was honestly fine with that.

These men he saw only at balls or when he visited White's were not his friends. He only spoke to them when they met in places like these. He could see in their gazes that they disliked him for it and probably considered him to be proud. However, they also respected him for his business principles. He had never given them a piece of business advice that turned out to be wrong.

"So, Your Grace, we are all excited to know what businesses you are investing in," Lord Silvermere said, looking at the men surrounding them, who nodded, although their faces showed their wariness, as though they were uncertain how he would react.

"I suppose I could tell you all about it, but then it wouldn't matter if you have no interest in it. Investing in a business is more than just looking for profits. You need to want to know about it so that you will know the right venture to invest in. Otherwise, you run the risk of losing your money."

Samuel

He looked at the men, who stared at him with so much focus. “Think of investments like gambling. There are some gambles you know are worth the risk. But there are others whose risk-reward ratio you cannot ascertain. Studying the business and going into what you love will help you be in the first option. Do any of you have businesses you wish to invest in?”

“Yes, Your Grace. As you know, my father was into agriculture. However, in the later years of his life, he experienced a fire that ruined his fields. I have been looking into reviving the fields, but I fear that, much like him, I would suffer some severe loss.”

“Your father was careless, Lord Downey. He did not plan for such things, which is why he suffered such loss. There are ways to be sure that you never experience such losses, as your father did. Do your research before you begin. Otherwise, you might face the same fate.”

The young man looked affronted by his statement and grateful for the help.

“If you wish to know how best to proceed and are at a loss, then you could come with me to my fields. Perhaps you might find the solution you seek.”

“Thank you, Your Grace. I will take you up on your offer,” Lord Downey responded eagerly.

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“There is one venture I am yet to invest in, if any of you is willing,” Samuel said.

“What is it, Your Grace?” Lord Silvermere asked enthusiastically.

“Arts and collectibles. I admit I have always had a fascination for those, and it certainly helps that there is money to be made there.”

“How splendid, Your Grace. Thank you for your suggestion.”

Samuel nodded. He did not think the man risk-tolerant. Lord Silvermere had a weak heart when it came to money. But Samuel had no place for weakness in business.

“I have a business proposition,” Lord Malachi piped up.

Everyone turned to look at him as he rifled through his case.

“I am into the jewelry business. I have been importing pieces of jewelry made of solid gold from the finest artisans in all of France. Have a look at this. It is all the rave in France, and soon, it will be the same here. Anyone who joins me will make a lot of money from it.”

The men looked at the pieces of jewelry he placed on the table. Samuel could see they were interested. Gold had a good market value and would make whoever invested in it a lot of money.

Samuel reached for a piece, and he was handed a necklace. It was beautiful. Would have made the perfect gift for a lady if it was real. His mind flashed to Lady Nora, but

he put her out of his mind, focusing only on the topic at hand.

He observed the necklace closely. It was a perfect replica, almost good enough to pass for the real thing. Samuel, however, had been involved in the gold business for as long as he could remember and could spot a fake from a mile away. He could see the coating.

He took out his handkerchief and dipped it in his drink, then rubbed it against the center of the necklace. The men watched as the gold coating slowly dissolved, leaving a metal center behind.

Samuel flung the necklace on the table, looking at the men, whose mouths were hanging open as they stared at it. Lord Malachi's face had turned an ugly shade of puce as he stared from the necklace to the Duke.

"You have been swindled, Lord Malachi. I suspect you already knew about it but wished to sell it to the others so you can recover the loss you have accrued. You will not swindle anyone here," Samuel said coldly.

"There are reasons why you should never rush into a venture. Men like Lord Malachi go in without proper research or the right type of help and lose everything they have to swindlers. Do not play a fool's game," he said with no regard to Lord Malachi, who stood there, blustering and red in the face.

Lord Malachi picked up the necklaces and shoved them into his case before promptly exiting the club, his face as white as a sheet.

"It's a good thing you knew, Your Grace. Otherwise, we would have ended up as victims," Lord Silvermere said, staring at the Duke with newfound respect.

"Yes, Your Grace. We certainly hope you will be gracing us with your presence more

often.”

Samuel nodded silently as Benedict, who had watched on in silence, shook his head, knowing that it was only a matter of time before he couldn't take their praises anymore and would have to leave.

“There are many other ventures you can invest in that guarantee constant profits. Consider boxing rings, for example. I suggest you look into it if you have the heart for that.”

He stood up before anyone could ask him more questions. “If you will excuse me, there are other matters I need to attend to.”

Samuel walked out to shouts of thanks behind him. It had been such an exhausting task to sit here with them, considering he would much rather be on his own. However, he was glad to have helped. He simply would not be making this a regular occurrence.

Samuel leaned his head against the back of his seat as he headed home. Now that he was done with the business with the men, there was only one thought in his mind.

His new mistress, Lady Nora.

He wanted to see her again. He had wished to send a letter to her immediately after she left. However, he had rules, and he intended to keep to them, or else this would not work.

Samuel went straight to his study the minute he arrived home.

Meet me at the Park by midnight.

S.G.

Samuel smiled as he sent for a servant to deliver the letter to Lady Nora. He wished he could see her face as she read the letter and realized that they would not be meeting at his home, after all.

He sat back in his chair. This was going to be good.

CHAPTER SEVEN

“This is absurd. The Duke must be insane, and I’m no better for encouraging such behavior,” Nora muttered as she walked down the stairs to the gates.

It had been a few days since her first night with the Duke. She had thought that the letter would come immediately, eagerly running to the gate to retrieve it, but she’d been disappointed to see that it was empty.

She’d returned by noon, poking through, but much like in the morning, there was nothing to be found there. In the days that followed, she frequented the gate in hopes of finding out when her next visit would be, and every time, she returned to her quarters empty-handed and disappointed.

She’d become the subject of discussion among the servants. She’d heard them talk about how she liked to visit the gardens more. It had turned out to be the perfect ruse for her actions.

“All this because of some stupid letter I’m not certain I’ll ever receive,” she grumbled under her breath, her lips pulling down in a frown.

She paused just before her feet grazed the last step.

Has he lost interest in me? Would he rather go for someone much like the women he already had?

He had told her during their last meeting that she was more innocent than the types he

often went for, after all. It wouldn't be surprising to her if that was exactly what had happened.

Despite her thoughts, a part of her would be disappointed if that truly was the case. She'd finally been able to hope that he would be the solution to the problem she faced, but if he let her go now, she would need to find an alternative to getting the money she would require to escape her stepfather.

She arrived at the gates, never stopping to breathe in the fresh scent of the flowers. Not many people came around here except her and the servants, who often tended the garden, so she did not need to be cautious as though she was doing something wrong—although she was.

Nora pushed the thought away. Her excitement grew as she saw the letter filling up the space she'd grown accustomed to seeing every time she checked. She hurried towards it, chancing a glance behind her just to be certain that she was not being watched. It would do her no good to be caught now, after waiting for so long.

She slipped the letter between her skirts and hurried up to her room, eager to have privacy so she could read it.

Excited, she tore open the letter. Somehow, this felt even more scandalous than what she did to ruin her reputation. Her eyes scanned the letter, and she let out an unladylike scoff.

“The park? Of all places to meet, he chooses the park?”

She tried to ignore the worry, but it was impossible. Her stepfather would send her off for good if she gave him even more reason to do so. After his threat, she'd been careful to avoid doing anything that would only anger him.

“This is such a stupid idea.” Nora wrapped her cloak tightly around herself as she looked around her. She’d managed to sneak out of the house once again without getting caught by anyone.

She stopped at the place he’d designated for their meeting and looked around, searching for him. She frowned when she couldn’t find him.

“Why couldn’t we just meet at his place like last time?” she grumbled irritably, tightening her cloak around herself, this time to shield her skin from the stinging, cold night air against her skin.

Where is he? I am scared.

She She jumped at every noise, no matter how loud or soft it was.

She pressed her back against a tree just as a figure came out from behind it, shocking her. Her screams were cut off by his hand on her lips.

“Quiet, My Lady. Unless you desire to be caught,” he whispered in her ear.

Her eyes widened when she realized who it was. She struggled out of his grip and turned to face him when he let her go. In the cover of the night, she could still see the amused glint in his eyes as he watched the irritated expression she did not bother to hide.

“What are you doing? This is a public place,” she hissed, her eyes roaming around the park. “We can be caught.”

He shook his head. “You need not worry about that, My Lady. I have never been caught, and I intend to keep it that way.”

“Come along,” he said before she could say anything.

She frowned at his retreating back and hurried to catch up to him.

They arrived at a thick copse of trees that hid them out of sight of anyone who could be walking around at that time of night.

“You need not be nervous, My Lady. I assure you, I have everything covered, and we will not be found out.”

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His boldness should've calmed her, but it made her all the more nervous. Boldness often led to errors, no matter how smart one was, and she did not want to have to pay for his errors.

"I must confess, Your Grace, that I do not trust you," she said. She hastened to explain what she meant when his eyebrows rose. "I trust no one but myself and what I can do for myself."

The Duke hummed, regarding her quietly. She wrung her hands nervously as she waited for him to stop.

"You will have to trust me if we are to continue meeting like this, Lady Nora. That is the only way that this will work," he said finally, his tone leaving no room for argument.

"What are you doing?" she asked as her cheeks heated up.

The Duke grabbed his cravat, slipping it from around his neck and wrapping it around his hand.

"Should you wish to continue this meeting, turn around. Otherwise, you are free to walk away, and our agreement will come to an end."

Nora stood where she was. On the one hand, she didn't wish to continue taking any more of these risks, and trusting him seemed like such a far leap of faith, seeing as she hadn't known him for long. However, she was here for a reason, and at the moment, the Duke seemed like the only one who could get her what she wanted.

He'd paid her the money for the first night they spent together, and at the end of this night, he would pay her for this as well. She couldn't walk away from any of it now.

What other options do I have? I cannot give up my plan.

She let out a deep breath, and without a word, she turned around. Her breath caught in her throat as the Duke stood behind her until there was very little space between them.

Stay still, Nora. Trust him.

Her

She willed herself, her hands tightened into fists as she fought the urge to turn around and see what he was doing.

A gasp escaped her lips as the cold fabric of the black linen cravat touched her skin. He hummed once more as his hands tied the fabric behind her head. She lifted a hand to touch it, letting out a shuddery breath through parted lips as she struggled against the dark.

"Now, you don't have to worry about being seen by anyone," he whispered in her ear.

"But I can't see either. Shouldn't that make me worry more about my surroundings?" she asked honestly, biting her lip.

She'd never had a blindfold over her eyes before. She hadn't played much as a child, since she was an only child, and after her father died, her mother had withdrawn into herself until she met the Viscount.

She frowned as she remembered her stepfather.

I have to do this if I ever plan to escape his clutches.

She would put up with whatever strange requests the Duke had, as long as it guaranteed her a means of making some money so she could have a better life with her mother without worrying about how they would fare away from her stepfather's influence.

"You have to let me worry about that, Lady Nora," he said, chuckling. "No one will recognize you now, with half of your face covered as it is. Besides, we do have the advantage of the dark on our side. Moreover, anyone out by this time is likely up to more scandalous behavior and might seek to avoid us instead."

She nodded. He was right, of course. "I hadn't thought of it that way." Her voice was small, like a silent whisper that could easily be carried off by the cold night breeze.

Nora wrung her fingers, something that she noticed she did whenever she was around him. There was very little that made her nervous, save for her stepfather and thoughts of her future. The Duke, however, did not evoke the same feelings that her stepfather did whenever he was near her. It was a different kind of nervousness, one she wasn't certain what to label.

"I do hope you were not much disturbed by how long it took me to send you a letter for this meeting," the Duke said, taking her hand in his.

She allowed him to direct her, trusting him despite the deep urge to rip the blindfold off her face. She glowered at the question as she willed her feet to follow his directions.

His deep chuckle made it obvious that he'd noticed, and she bit her lip as her cheeks flushed. She listened in curiosity as she heard his footsteps moving around her.

What is he doing?

“I checked morning, afternoon, and night,” she said, her voice holding a note of chastisement.

Do I seem pathetic by telling him that?

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She rushed to explain before he would think that of her. “I was worried someone else would find the letter before I did, and it would be linked back to me... and you.”

“I see.” His voice held no remorse. “It’s good that you heeded my instructions and checked constantly.”

She bristled. She did not know what she had been expecting him to say, but it was certainly not that. An apology, perhaps? She scoffed at the thought. Men like him didn’t apologize for anything. He had told her what to do and obviously expected her to obey. After all, he was paying for her time.

She put her hand on her chest, suddenly feeling a little insecure. He’d told her she didn’t have to do anything she wasn’t comfortable with, but it didn’t change the fact that he had bought her time, and as such, he had right over her while she had nothing except the ability to walk away whenever she felt it was too much for her to bear.

“What did you do between our first meeting and now?” she asked him, annoyed by the direction of her thoughts and seeking a respite from it.

He remained silent for a moment but cleared his throat before speaking. “Why, Lady Nora? Do you ask because you miss me and wish to know more about how I spend my days?”

She could hear the smile in his voice, and it only seemed to anger her more.

She glared at him, despite him not being able to see it. “I merely wish to make conversation, Your Grace.”

Silence lingered between them as she stubbornly waited for him to answer. He could give her at least that much.

“I am not certain that you will enjoy my answer, but if you must know, I worked. I attended some meetings and saw to some other business matters, and now, here I am with you,” he said simply.

“Was that all you did? work?” she asked him, confused.

Nora had always imagined the kind of life she would have when she finally had her freedom. She’d imagined that she would work as a governess for a family while her mother stayed home and enjoyed herself in the gardens of their new home. Yet, the Duke had the kind of freedom she craved, coupled with the fact that he was a man, but he spent all of his time working.

“Certainly. Are there other things that you wish I had done?” he asked her.

She started at the closeness of his voice. She had been so lost in thought that she hadn’t realized just how close to her he was standing.

“I cannot claim to know what it is men do for fun,” she said simply, listening for his next move.

“Pray tell, what did you do while you waited for the letter?” he asked.

Nora’s face heated up. Much like him, she had done nothing fun, running to the gate every few hours to check for the arrival of the letter.

“Well, I?—”

His breath on her cheeks stopped her. His hands replaced his breath as he caressed the

side of her face softly.

She struggled to control her rapidly beating heart as her chest heaved. His hand trailed down her shoulder and her right arm, wrapping around her hand. His hot breath warmed her cold hand as he pressed it to his lips.

Nora resisted the urge to snatch her hand away. It had shocked her, but more than that, she had been pulled in by it. She frowned at the foreign feeling that pooled in the pit of her belly as he ran the back of his hand down the front of her dress. Everywhere he touched tingled..

“The rumors about you,” he began. She lifted her face at the sound of his voice, although she couldn’t see him through her blindfold. “Are they true?”

Nora frowned. She’d always thought that this was a secret she would carry with her forever, without any other soul finding out about it, save for her friends, who’d helped her with it.

But why do I want to tell him all about it?

“No, there is no truth to any of it. I spread the rumors myself,” she said as she waited for him to respond.

“I apologize. I believe I might have heard wrong, but did you say you spread the rumors yourself?” he asked.

It was the first time she’d heard any emotion in his voice other than amusement, boredom, and mere indifference. She hid her glee at succeeding at something she hadn’t realized bothered her. She had suspected there was not much that surprised the Duke.

“Yes, Your Grace. I spread them with the help of my friends. It was the only way I could ensure that my reputation was utterly ruined,” she explained.

Silence ensued between them for a moment before the Duke spoke again. “Why did you seek to ruin your reputation? Shouldn’t it be of utmost importance to you?”

Nora sighed. “Perhaps I should have. However, it was the only way to make sure I wouldn’t be married off.”

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“I see,” the Duke said. “Well, I believe you have succeeded in doing so. Although, none of this explains why you do not wish to marry.”

Nora hesitated to answer. “My father died when I was very young, and my mother was beside herself with grief.”

Nora She swallowed, shaking her head. “After some time, she married the Viscount—my stepfather. I hate him.”

Her hands tightened into fists as she swallowed the dryness in her throat, stopping herself before she could reveal more than she should to the Duke.

Her stepfather was a terrible man, but she didn’t know the Duke, so there was no reason for her to tell him everything.

She bit back the frustrated scream that wanted to escape her parted lips. “I’d much rather remain a spinster.”

She waited for him to disagree with her and convince her that women were better off married than spinsters. It would only be in line with what most believed, and she couldn’t fault him for that.

Hard lips pressed against hers, and Nora, shocked, parted her lips to welcome his. She had replayed their last kiss over and over in her mind, and now she welcomed this one like a dessert she’d been craving.

His hands came up to her neck, every graze of his fingertips burning her skin as he

pulled her closer. With a sharp intake of breath, she allowed herself to be consumed by the kiss.

She moved her lips against his, detecting the faint taste of alcohol on his tongue as she sucked greedily on it.

She did not know how long they had been kissing before the Duke pulled away. His thumb came up to her lips, rubbing off the traces of his lips on hers, the only evidence of their kiss being her tingling lips.

She blinked away the trance he had locked her in.

“There is one thing that I am entirely curious about,” the Duke said, and Nora listened in confusion, her head a jumbled mess after the kiss they’d just shared.

“How do you manage to get away and meet with me for our rendezvous?” he asked.

Nora smiled. “It is quite easy, truly. Although I have never had to sneak out before, I know the schedules of the servants and the watchmen. It was quite easy to go through the servants’ quarters and avoid the servants while doing so. I always wear a cloak so I can blend in with my environment on the chance that I happen upon a servant.”

She shook her head. “Perhaps it is merely luck on my side, but so far, I haven’t come across anyone yet, and I hope that it remains that way. It gets easier the moment I am able to step out of my home without anyone noticing me. There is the matter of getting a ride down here, but I have mastered the habit of dressing like a commoner or a servant myself.”

“I am quite intrigued by how well you have managed on your own so far. I will have to send you a carriage after this so that there will be minimal risk on your part, should you choose to continue with this after tonight. Remember that all of this is independent

on you, and you can put an end to it whenever you choose.”

Nora nodded, a part of her relieved. Although she didn't think she had a choice but to continue, it made her feel better that she was given the illusion of one.

Samuel pressed his lips to hers once again, pulling her lower lip into his mouth and enjoying the taste of her.

The Duke groaned against her lips as his thumb circled the base of her neck, pulling her closer to him.

He pulled his lips away from hers, chuckling when her lips followed his. She opened her eyes to glare at him, just before his hands slid around her neck.

His hand slid down the front of her dress, moving across her breasts, above the thick fabric. Nora bit back a gasp as he continued, his eyes fixed on her.

He moved lower to her waist and pulled up her dress, staring at her. Her brow furrowed. She knew not whether to stop him or let him continue, although her body craved his touch.

She gasped as the cool night breeze kissed her exposed legs. His fingers ran up her thighs, stopping at the heat of her core. He slid a hand up and down her center, stopping at the tiny nub of her sex.

Nora moaned as he rubbed her clit, gasping with her mouth wide open as she clutched his arm tightly.

Nora whimpered when Samuel suddenly pulled away, frowning at him.

“We can continue this in our next meeting,” he said, grinning at her.

CHAPTER EIGHT

“Ah, there you are, Samuel. I was wondering when you were going to come down.”

Samuel grimaced, looking up. He had gotten so lost in thought as he replayed the events of the night before that he hadn't been able to escape his mother's usual matchmaking attempts. Usually, Samuel always managed to find a way to escape the young ladies and their mamas. However, that was not the case this time.

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“Good morning, Mother,” he said, going over to kiss her on the cheek.

Their relationship had never been like a proper mother-and-son relationship. There had always been a strain that he’d noticed from the moment he could understand things. His mother had never been able to accept the reality of her arranged marriage, although she’d found a way to have a respectful relationship with the former Duke.

Samuel had suffered as a result of this forced marriage. He wasn’t close to either parent and had never known love from either of them—not that he had ever expected them to love him.

Although his mother hadn’t treated him like his father did, she had always preferred to pretend like he didn’t exist, putting a wall between them that a younger Samuel had tried on multiple occasions to scale through before he finally realized that she had chosen it herself and there was nothing he could do, unless she chose to let it down. Now, he was merely polite to her.

“Do you, by any chance, have plans today?” she asked him, her voice calm and commanding, as it usually was.

Samuel looked at the young lady. She was a tiny slip of a woman. Her blonde hair and blue eyes, coupled with her height, gave her an air of innocence. He was certain it was part of the reason his mother had chosen her. Or maybe it had more to do with the fact that he had escaped every single matchmaking attempt she’d tried and this was her next best option.

He could not deny that she was a beautiful woman. However, it was of no concern to

him. this was certainly another trap that he didn't intend to be lured into.

"Yes, I was supposed to spend some time with Benedict today. There is business we have to discuss," he said, hoping it would be enough to dissuade his mother from whatever notions she had set in her head.

"Oh, I would hate to disrupt your plans, but couldn't you suffer a few moments to spend with your old mother?" she asked him, her eyes fixed in his direction.

"I don't remember us ever doing something like that before," Samuel said in a matter-of-fact tone.

The Dowager Duchess's head reared backward, taken aback. She lookedstared at the lady beside her, who was doing her best to pretend she wasn't there and hadn't heard what was said.

Samuel held back a grimace as his mother's cheeks flushed in embarrassment. He hadn't meant to embarrass her. He merely spoke the truth. She was asking him to spend time with her now, but at the time it would have mattered more, when he was younger and in need of her time and affection, she had withheld it from him.

She had let his father do to him whatever he pleased, turning a blind eye to all of it.

He was neither vindictive nor angry at her for it. He merely couldn't fathom how the conversation between them would go if he decided to stay, and he was in no mood to sit in awkward silence.

"Well, we could start now." Her voice was small as she uttered her suggestion.

Samuel looked at her. This time, he was the one taken aback. Not even after his father's death had she tried to get to know him as a mother would her son. She only

ever sought him out when there was something she needed to be done.

She must be desperate to see me married.

His mother would never be so willing to suffer through this for any other cause. It amused him more than it bugged him, although there was the old sting that had remained with him as a child. The one weakness he tried to get rid of and yet hadn't been able to fully let go of.

"Mother, I really do not think now is a good time for this," he insisted, taking a step back as he prepared to leave the sunroom.

"Perhaps you could join us for some tea, Your Grace," the young lady said, daring to speak to him.

Samuel stared at her with raised eyebrows, It was the first time one of the ladies that his mother had tried to introduce to him had ever spoken up. The others had played coy, turning their gazes to the floor or merely batting their eyelashes at him whenever he looked in their direction.

Well, this one is quite brave.

"Apologies. I do not believe I have spoken to you," he said, staring straight into her eyes.

She blushed and looked away, setting her teacup on the table as her smile fell. She chanced a glance at him again. The light in her eyes had dulled, her face losing the air of innocence he'd first noticed about her.

How terrible.

“I’m sorry, Your Grace.” She stood up and curtsied. “My name is Lady Marina, Your Grace.”

Samuel grunted. “I see.”

His mother took a sip of her tea, her face stuck in a stoic expression. She would not interfere. Not after what he had said to her.

“As you are my mother’s guest, I will leave you to your tea,” he said, turning to leave once again when he was suddenly stopped by his mother. He truly hadn’t expected her to speak another word to him.

“Samuel, don’t be like this,” she said, in what appeared to be a pleading look.

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He held back a scoff. His mother never pleaded for anything. She only commanded and glowered until she got what she wanted, not that he had ever denied her much, save for the idea of finding himself a wife.

“Don’t be like what?” he asked her. He leaned in close, his voice low, for her ears only. “I have warned you before, Mother. Do not do such things. I have told you before that I have absolutely no interest in this marriage scheme that you are plotting. I will be as respectful as possible to not embarrass your guest, so I suggest that you do not push me further.”

He’d kept his tone low and his face blank for her benefit, so that he did not embarrass her in front of her guest.

She nodded, her eyes widening slightly.

He nodded courteously at Lady Marina, who blushed, unable to look up at him, much like she had done earlier.

Samuel exited the room, his mood slightly ruined. He went out to the carriage that had been brought around for him and climbed in, a bitter taste in his mouth. There was nothing more annoying than how his mother had been trying to match him with someone lately just to see him married.

While he had no intention of ever marrying, Samuel would’ve tried to oblige her if she’d ever tried to be a mother to him back then or even sought to be cordial with him now that he was older. Instead, the only time she ever sought to speak with him was in times like this.

His mind flashed back to a younger him, desperate for his mother. Samuel's abusive father was often in no rush to spare the rod, even on days when he'd done nothing wrong to deserve such wrath from the man who should've protected him.

Samuel walked up to his mother's art room, holding back a wince from the pain that shot through him with every step he took. He would not be able to sit down for some time, and he would only be able to lie on his stomach, otherwise his wounds would blister and peel.

He could still remember the last time he'd gone to bed after a beating and hadn't taken care to protect his hurting back from the sheets. He'd had to endure even more pain than he felt from the beating he received from his father.

He raised a hand to knock on the open door of his mother's art room, navigating through the various paintings and statues that she'd collected over the years. She never allowed him into the room, but he needed her and would take the risk. Moreover, now that he was already hurt, perhaps she would be more lenient.

She looked at him, her eyes scanning his form as he leaned over, a hand to his side. "Has your father acted up again?"

He nodded, swallowing as his eyes filled with tears. He closed his eyes to hold them back. She'd never cared for his tears and would only tell him to be a man or cry in the privacy of his quarters, where there would be no one to see him and consider him weak.

Her eyes went above his head just as he felt a presence behind him. His father towered over him, a blank stare on his face and his thin lips set into a straight line.

"Don't you think you're being too hard on the boy?" she asked, her expression not showing concern for him.

“You will not tell me how to raise my son,” the Duke growled, his hands clamping down on Samuel’s shoulder. “Come along, Samuel.”

“Of course, Your Grace,” the Duchess said, returning her gaze to her painting.

It was the last time the Duchess ever questioned the Duke when it came to how to raise Samuel. He’d been beaten by his father again in the evening for running to his mother for help instead of seeing what he had done wrong and making sure it never happened again.

“You’ll never be a man if you hide behind your mother’s skirt when you feel wronged,” his father had screamed at him as he brought the whip down on his back.

Despite his father’s words, Samuel had constantly sought solace with his mother after that day, but she’d completely distanced herself from him, often acting aloof whenever he went to her, her eyes just as cold as his father’s, except she never beat him.

His family had been dysfunctional even before he was born, but he’d always assumed it was normal. They rarely spent time together, especially since his mother was often never home and was usually sequestered away with her art on the days that she was.

His father, on the other hand, only sought him out when he thought he needed a lesson on being a duke or when Samuel had done something wrong to offend him.

Samuel frowned, rubbing his hands together as he shook off the memory. He always kept them locked away because whenever he remembered them, they always dampened his mood.

He never went out of his way to be mean to his mother. That wasn’t his intention in there. However, she made it very difficult for him. She had never been particularly

affectionate to him, and watching her act this way now, feigning a relationship they did not have made it even more difficult for him to come to terms with it.

Samuel rapped at the carriage door and closed his eyes as he left the estate. He couldn't wait to be away from there so he could clear his head of the negative emotions he felt.

CHAPTER NINE

Nora lay on her bed, staring blankly at the ceiling while her mind drifted back to her last night with Samuel. She covered her face with her hands, hiding the blush on her cheeks, although there wasn't anyone there to witness it but her.

She was unable to stop thinking about Samuel's hands on her as he expertly caressed her body. She had dreamed of him that night, feeling and grazing before he planted his lips on hers in a bruising kiss. He'd pulled away and declared his desire for her.

"Oh God," she groaned, pulling her sheets up to her chest as she blushed once more.

"Can I really let him have me like that?" she asked no one in particular.

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She wasn't so naïve that she didn't know exactly what it was he wished to do to her. A part of her mind rebelled against the idea but the other part of her wanted it. It'd been so long since she felt any form of excitement, and yet the Duke had managed to provide that for her in the two nights that they had met up.

Nora looked forward to the next night with him. She looked forward to what else he had planned for her and how they would spend their time once more.

A large bang sounded at her door, and she sat up with such speed that her head spun. She heard her mother on the other side, pleading and crying.

She got up from the bed and rushed to the door, her heart beating fast in a panic and her mouth open wide to ask her stepfather to stop.

Please, don't hit her.

She pleaded silently over and over again as she rushed outside, following the commotion. She skidded to a stop when she saw the sight in front of her, her blood boiling in anger and hate.

"Mother," she whispered, barely able to get the words past her tight throat.

Her mother lay there on the ground, a look of fear fixed on her face, her tears streaking her cheeks, as the Viscount tried to push her away.

Nora's

Her hands balled into fists as her mother looked up at him, her hands grabbing onto his shoes as she tried to stop him from walking away from her. She hated it so much, how her mother, despite the Viscount treating her with so much hostility, continued to love him with all of her heart even amidst her fears.

Why can't you see that he's a monster and he's no good for you?

Nora

She shook where she stood as the sight kept her rooted to the spot, unable to move as she regarded her mother with pity and the Viscount with so much hate. There was no one she'd ever hated as much as she hated him.

"Please don't," her mother begged, just as the Viscount raised a hand, slapping her hard across the face.

Her mother yelped in pain but continued holding onto him, her voice still pleading.

"Let go of me, woman, or you will regret it," he threatened, raising his fist and ready to come down hard on her.

"Mother, what's wrong?" Nora asked, finally regaining her voice. She burned with shame as her mother stared at her with a look of shock and desperation while the Viscount glared in her direction.

"You," he spat, his face turning sour the moment he locked gazes with her. He pointed a finger at her as he tried to move in her direction, grunting in anger when her mother continued to hold him back.

Nora took a step back in fear as the Viscount's hate and rage hit her where she stood.

“Begin to prepare yourself. You are leaving this estate,” he spat out angrily.

Nora’s knees buckled as the floor fell out from underneath her feet. She held herself up, managing a small “What?”

The Viscount snarled, his face turning red with barely controlled rage. “I gave you a simple instruction and time to carry it out. All you had to do was find a husband, but you’ve always been so useless, and you continue to be so even after all the chances I have given you.”

He advanced towards her, pulling her mother along with him. “I was generous to you, but you’ve spat in my face. Prepare to be out of this house as soon as possible, or I will toss you out myself. Believe me, it would be better if you do it yourself.”

Fear filled Nora at the Viscount’s threat. She knew well enough that he meant every word of what he was saying to her. He had never cared for her, after all.

Nora stared on helplessly at the Viscount and her mother, whose cries had grown louder with his statement. She knew her mother felt guilty, but it did not measure up to the guilt she felt herself. She had failed at the one task she should’ve been good at, which was protecting her mother.

“Mathilda and I have come to a decision, and you are going to leave sooner than I thought. So, prepare yourself and ensure that you’re packed up and ready to go.”

Nora shuddered as fear ripped through her.

I can’t go now, not yet. Not after I already found a way out of this.

“Please, Timothy. Please don’t send her away,” her mother pleaded once again, but the Viscount only stared at her with disgust.

“I suppose I have you to blame for how she has turned out. Look how you grovel at my feet for someone so undeserving of it. Even now, she doesn’t even try to plead for a few more days or promise to be better, and yet you beg for her. Pull yourself together, or else you’ll have yourself to blame for whatever happens,” the Viscount said angrily.

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Nora's jaw ticked wildly. She hated the way he talked to her mother, as if she were a child. There was nothing worse than seeing her mother reduced to this and at the mercy of a man who was undeserving of her love and her tears.

"She has three weeks to prepare herself, and then she'll be out of here and on her way to Mathilda. I suggest you prepare her for when that time comes. I will not take kindly to her being tardy and keeping Mathilda waiting."

If she left now, she wouldn't be able to find a way out of this for her mother. Three weeks was very little time for her to prepare and carry things out accordingly. She had hoped that she would have more time than that.

"Oh, God, what am I going to do now?" she murmured to herself as she wracked her brain for a solution.

"Perhaps you should have thought of that before you deliberately flouted my order. You never even tried to put in the effort to find a husband. Did you think I wasn't watching you? Standing by the wall like a plant and gossiping with those friends of yours, who are just as worse as you are?"

Nora's face burned with shame. The last thing she ever wanted to do was to be reduced to a servant before her stepfather. Her stomach churned as she came to terms with what she was about to do, however much it hurt her. She had to think of not only herself but also her mother. Her mother would likely be unable to survive without her if she left her alone at the mercy of the Viscount.

The look of surprise on the Viscount's face was enough to fill her with even more

shame. She lowered her eyes to the ground, before looking up at him as she lowered herself to the ground, ready to beg him. Her mother's cries had stopped as, much like the Viscount, she stared at Nora with shock.

In none of the times that her stepfather was merciless towards them had she been reduced to her knees before him as she begged for his mercy.

Her mother's eyes held happiness at the thought of her finally being cooperative, making it easy for her to stomach her pride as she pleaded with him.

"I will do whatever you want, just please don't send me away," Nora said, forcing the words that put her at his mercy out of her lips.

She watched as the Viscount grinned, enjoying the look of despair on her face.

"How touching that you would finally recognize your place and act right. Unfortunately, you chose to do the right thing too late. I will not be changing my mind on this, as I am not a man to go back on my word," he said, the amusement leaving his eyes as he once again stared at her with a look of hatred.

"You will go in there, and you will begin your preparation to leave this house, and that's final."

Nora remained on her knees, despondent as she watched him leave, her mother's cries drowning her thoughts as she pleaded for the Viscount to reconsider.

It's all over.

CHAPTER TEN

It was the third night of their meeting, and Samuel had not realized how happy he

would be to see Nora until she walked into his home. He had taken her fear of being caught into consideration and had chosen instead to have her in his home, much like during their first meeting.

It was the next night after his run-in with his mother, and so far, he hadn't been able to get it out of his mind. He hadn't realized how much her efforts to see him married annoyed and affected him so much. However, he had been looking forward to seeing Nora again. There was something about her that made him forget about everything that didn't exist in the space before them.

"My Lady, I'm glad you could make it," he said, just as she walked in behind the butler.

He watched her expression, frowning, as she settled into the room, taking off her cloak silently. It was the first time she had responded to him without enthusiasm or sassiness.

Something is wrong.

Samuel grimaced. He had hoped that having her over would be the solution to his sour mood. However, she seemed to be in an even worse mood than he was. He walked up to her and took the cloak from her hands, hanging it on the rack.

"Apologies, Your Grace. Thank you for having me," she said plainly, feigning a small smile for his benefit.

Samuel led her to a seat, pulling it out for her before he took the seat opposite her. He had planned their whole date out, with no time in between for him to think about what had happened with his mother. However, now, he was cautious, more tentative.

He tried to indulge her in some little conversations, saying things to draw her out of

her mood, but nothing had worked so far. He sighed, giving up. He had tried to give her privacy, choosing to ignore whatever had put her in a mood, but he couldn't ignore it anymore.

“Have you been well since we last saw each other, Lady Nora?” he asked her, leaning in closer to her as he waited for her answer.

She looked away from him. “I suppose it depends on what you consider to be well. Have you?”

Samuel laughed, thinking about the family drama. So much for not wanting to think about anything like that tonight.

“It depends on what you consider to be well.”

“Come along, Lady Nora,” he said, beckoning her to follow him as he led her into a room she hadn't been in before.

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The room was bare, only containing curtains, some chairs, and a lone pianoforte nestled in a corner.

Her eyes lit up as she stared at it, and he bit back his grin. “Do you play, Lady Nora?”

She walked further into the room before turning to stare at him where he remained by the entrance. “What sort of noble lady would I be if I did not?”

He chuckled at her response, sitting at the pianoforte. He tapped the seat beside him, beckoning her forward. “Will you play with me, Lady Nora?”

“Perhaps I shall,” she said, sitting beside him.

Samuel was curious about the reason for her dampened mood, although he wasn’t one to pry, content in giving people the same privacy he often required. It did not change the fact that he was curious about why she was annoyed, even though it might be a bit much to ask.

“So, do you want to discuss how bad our time together has been?” he asked her, noting how she withdrew into herself the moment he mentioned it.

“I will go first,” he added, not giving her the chance to argue or refuse his offer. “My mother has been hounding me to marry.”

She looked at him curiously. “Why don’t you?”

Samuel chuckled, regarding her with humor. “Do I seem like the type to marry?”

She cocked her head. "I cannot say for certain that you are the marrying kind, Your Grace. It isn't exactly written on your face."

Samuel laughed. She was beginning to sound like herself. "That much is true."

Samuel closed his eyes as he played a song on the pianoforte. The melody filled the room, easing his worries. It was a song he had never heard before.

He glanced at her through narrowed eyes. This wasn't how he had thought their day would go, and yet the peaceful look on her face was enough to make it all worth it.

Why do you care?

He discarded the thought before he had a chance to think about it. She was his mistress, of course he cared whether she was in a mood or not. After all, her ability to be lively affected his as well, otherwise there would be no point in spending the night if it would merely continue on a sour note.

"So, now that I have told you what ails me, perhaps you would like to share what ails you?" he asked.

She shook her head, letting out a small, humorless laugh. "It is nothing for you to worry about, Your Grace. Merely some family drama."

She continued playing the pianoforte, her eyes closed as her hands ran over the keys.

"I would love to know still if you do not mind sharing," he said.

Nora sighed and took her hands off the pianoforte, bringing the music to an abrupt end. "It appears that I will be leaving sooner than expected."

Samuel's eyes cut to her in surprise. They had talked about her leaving before, but he hadn't realized that it would be so soon. In truth, he hadn't thought about it since she told him, carried away by the fun he had when he was with her.

Now, it suddenly seemed more real.

"When are you set to leave?"

Her hands returned to the pianoforte as she shook her head at him, not giving him an answer. There was so much more he wanted to ask her, but he held back. He was not one to pry, especially when it wasn't welcomed.wanted.

Her eyes were glazed over. She was clearly upset. Samuel hated that there didn't seem to be anything he could do about it.

"Does that mean you need to pull forward your escape plans?" he asked her.

She shrugged. He massaged his temple. A strange feeling settled in his chest, one he didn't know how to explain. Samuel ignored it. Now was not the time for him to dwell on his feelings.

"You need not worry too much about it. Everything will be all right," he said.

Samuel wracked his brain for a solution, but there was none to be found. He did not know how to make things right, but he certainly hoped that would be the case for her sake.

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He turned to her, taking her face in his hands. “I hope you can believe that.”

Samuel swallowed the lump in his throat as she stared at him like she believed every single word he said. His eyes darted from her beautiful green eyes to the freckles that were scattered like stars across her nose, and then to her soft, plump lips.

He wanted to kiss every part of her face, devoting time to each freckle, one after the other until he had given each one special attention. He wanted to slide his lips between hers and suck on her tongue until he could taste her essence in his mouth and until she relaxed into him, giving herself over to him.

She bit her lip, her face heating up, as if she could read his thoughts. His gaze turned heated as she bit her lower lip, sucking it into her mouth nervously. Samuel ran his hand over her bottom lip, gently pulling it out of her mouth. He leaned into her and closed his lips around it, sucking on it just like he’d thought.

He kissed her deeply as he pulled her closer to him. She went to him without hesitation and wrapped her hands around his neck. Samuel angled her head to the side and kissed her once again. Kissing her like this was different. Something had changed. He wanted her now.

He tore his lips from hers and kissed her face like he’d wanted to, every single freckle receiving his attention. He kissed down to her nape, his tongue trailing down to her shoulder.

She moaned, throwing her head back. Samuel kissed her exposed neck, sucking on her milky skin. His hands moved to her back as he unlaced her bodice, freeing her of

its restraints.

She sucked in a breath as he caressed her bare skin, his hands running up and down the length of her body. He picked her up and sat her on his lap, with her back pressed against the keys.

She pressed herself against him in response, and he kissed her exposed mounds, her nipples covered only by an inch, the fabric threatening to slip off if she moved.

There was a desperation to their actions. One that Samuel couldn't necessarily explain. It wasn't just on his part but also on hers. He groaned against her skin, encouraged by her keenness to be with him.

Samuel picked her up, setting her on the chair as she stared at him in confusion. He lowered himself to his knees beside her as his hands slipped inside her large skirt.

Nora gasped, pressing her hands down on her skirts to keep herself covered. "What are you doing?"

Samuel chuckled, the sound strained from his desire. "You do not have to worry yourself about that. Just relax and enjoy it."

Nora heaved a shaky breath and did as he asked. His eyes remained fixed on hers as he lifted her skirt, pulling it up until she lay exposed to his eyes.

He laughed when her face turned red.

My

Innocent little rabbit.

He parted her legs until her center lay exposed, slowly lowering his head as he teased her. He licked up the length of her center, ending at her clit, which he sucked into his mouth.

He looked up at her. Her eyes were wide with shock, and her face was red, this time not from embarrassment.

He licked her once again, increasing his pace as she turned into a moaning mess. Her bottom arched off the chair as she tried to push into his mouth.

Samuel laughed and pulled her hips down. “Do relax yourself, and I’ll make sure to take care of you.”

Her face was one of confusion, but she allowed him to ease her back into the seat. His lips were on her before her bottom touched the seat. Samuel grinned against her clit, sending vibrations up her clit as he increased his pace.

“Samuel,” she moaned, her hips moving in time with his tongue as they settled into a rhythm.

His eyebrows rose. It was the first time she had called him by his given name. His length hardened painfully from the feelings that shot through him as she moaned his name over and over again.

Samuel looked up at her. Her face was one of a vixen given in to her passion. Her lips parted every few moments, letting out a gasp as she occasionally moaned his name.

She grabbed fistfuls of his hair, abandoning all reservations as she pressed him closer to her heat. Samuel grimaced as his length turned rock hard. She was more seductive than she could ever believe. Her boldness in the throes of her passion was a sight he forever wanted in his mind.

He flicked his tongue against her clit, slowly bringing her towards her release. She had earned it and perhaps even more.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Nora tossed her head to the side as she moaned. She hadn't noticed when the Duke's name first slipped out of her mouth in the throes of her passion, but it had so quickly escaped her that she'd paused to see how he would react.

Instead

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In place of the anger she'd been expecting, the Duke had flicked his tongue even harder against her clit, sucking it into his mouth. She had never known anything to be quite as good in all of her years.

After the time her friend had told her about touching herself and she'd tried it, Nora had felt so weird that she was quick to discard it as something she wasn't meant to enjoy.

Now, however, as the Duke's tongue slipped inside her, slowly moving inside her, and as she felt the heat and roughness of his tongue against her clit, she couldn't. Her perspective on things was forever changed.

The Duke's expert tongue moved against her clit, sucking it into his mouth once more. He groaned against it, sending vibrations up her body that caused her to shudder.

"Hmm... how absolutely delicious you taste," he said against her clit.

Nora's face flushed a deep shade of red, part in embarrassment and part in pleasure. She'd never expected him to say things like that to her, and yet his words made heat pool in her core.

She had never experienced something like this before. She gasped as pressure built inside her. Her hips rolled of their own accord. She had lost control of her body as she struggled to chase after this strange feeling that was shooting through her, elusive and yet carrying a promise of something wonderful.

“There you go. Let your body take control and do whatever you want. Nothing is wrong,” he urged.

The Duke laughed when she pressed his head against her clit, moving her clit against his mouth as she moaned his name over and over again, unable to stop herself from doing so.

“Oh... something is happening, Samuel,” she said, just as her body tensed and pleasure shot through her, the feeling like nothing she could describe.

His tongue continued to lap at her, prolonging the pleasurable waves that threatened to upend her insides.

Nora gasped when she finally came down from her pleasure wave. She looked at him through hooded eyes as he licked his lips, a wide smile on his face.

“I thoroughly enjoyed doing that to you. I don’t believe I have ever felt such pleasure at the prospect of giving another pleasure before,” he said.

Nora sighed deeply, coming down from her high, her body relaxed and free of all the tension she’d brought in with her as a result of all that had transpired in the past few days with her stepfather.

“It is my first time, so I cannot say with certainty that it is the best pleasure I will ever receive.” She blushed as she looked at him shyly. “But I can say it is the best thing I have ever experienced. I never knew there could be anything quite like this.”

He stood to his feet, the tent in his pants catching her eye. She gasped and looked away for a moment, unable to stop herself. Her cheeks turned red as she imagined what it would look like.

He looked down at his trousers and laughed. “Oh, this... You can’t blame me. It’s your fault, Lady Nora.”

He was about to pull away when she stopped him. “No, I want to see.”

She blushed when he regarded her in silence.

What am I doing?

“Are you certain?”

She nodded.

The Duke walked over to her, standing in front of her as he loosened the strings of his pants, letting them fall down his waist.

Nora reached out, touching him tentatively, her hands stroking up and down the length of his shaft.

The Duke jumped slightly, causing Nora to jerk her hand back while he stared at her in surprise. “I didn’t expect you to do that.”

“Oh... I want to touch you too,” she said shyly.

She reached her hand once again, touching him softly. She hadn’t done this before, and she hoped her lack of expertise wouldn’t be too obvious. His amused expression made it clear that he knew.

She flushed.

“I’ve never done this before,” she said.

“I know,” he responded. His hand wrapped around hers, bringing it back to his shaft.
“You’re a lot naughtier than you seem though... You’re doing a great job.”

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Her face heated up, and he chuckled lowly.

He stroked himself with her hand, swallowing down a groan at the softness of her palm and how nice it felt against his skin.

“There you go... all you need to do is wrap your hand tighter around it and stroke up and down.”

Nora continued as he had when he let go, her face set in concentration. “Am I doing this right?”

He pulled her hand up to the head. “You could focus your attention here. Just hold it and explore as you wish.”

Nora smiled as she played with the bulbous head. She pinched it between her thumb and forefinger, giggling as it jerked in her hand. She did it again and looked up to see him watching her with an amused smile on his face.

Her hands wrapped tighter around his shaft and stroked up and down the length of it, smiling when he groaned and threw his head back, stiffening further in her hand. She had worried she wouldn't be able to do it right, but now, seeing him with his headthrown back just as hers had been only moments ago filled her with relief and boldness.

She didn't know why she was being so proactive, but this felt a lot more intense than their previous sessions ever were.

Maybe it's because of your stepfather's ultimatum.

She discarded that thought, paying attention to what she was doing.

"I want to... can I try something?" she asked.

She wrapped her other hand around the base of his shaft and pulled slightly as her other hand continued to move up and down.

She couldn't claim to be an expert. However, his groans were like music to her ears.

His words came out as throaty gasps. "That was an understatement before... You're so good, Nora... This is incredible."".

Samuel's hips jerked, thrusting his shaft into her hands over and over again. He wrapped his hands around hers, tightening them even further as another groan escaped his lips.

"Don't stop, Nora," he said, using her Christian name just as she had used his.

Her eyes widened, and she smiled just as warm liquid coated her hands.

She pulled them back, staring at it curiously. She had never seen it before, although she'd heard about it since becoming a wallflower.

Nora smiled in satisfaction, glad that she was able to bring him pleasure just as he had given her.

The Duke sat down beside her, his chest heaving. He pulled his pants up and frowned as he looked at her fingers coated in his essence.

“Come. Let’s get you cleaned up,” he said, helping her with her dress before leading her towards the washroom.bathroom.

She washed her hands and took the towel he offered her, wiping her hands on it. Her mind replayed what had just transpired between them. It was beyond anything she could ever have imagined.

The Duke had managed to help her forget her worries. She glanced surreptitiously at him. His face was one of calm, losing the harsh lines that had been present when she came into the room.

It seemed she had managed to help him forget about his worries too. She muffled her joyous laugh, unable to explain why she was so giddy with excitement. The Duke smiled at her as well, washing his hands too.

“Thanks for showing me what to do,” she said. “Did you really like what I did?”

What am I saying?

She bit her lip as she waited for his answer.

He nodded.

“Yes, I did. Just as much as I enjoyed bringing you pleasure.”

Nora nodded, looking down at her hands.

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Was it better than all of your other lovers?

Her lips pursed as she swallowed back the question she wanted to ask. The last thing she wanted was to put the Duke off with questions like that.

Of course, he doesn't want to talk about such things with me.

She was new to all of this, but that did not guarantee that the other ladies were. She had heard many ladies speak among themselves when they thought no one was listening during balls. Moreover, the Duke had told her that he usually preferred ladies with a lot more experience than she had.

Forget about all of that, Nora. What does it even matter? Why do you even care?

The last thing she wished to do after such a wonderful night was to ruin things with questions she had no idea why she wanted to ask.

He led her out of the washroom and back into the music room.

"I will try to support you," he said suddenly, pulling her out of her thoughts.

"Make a plan and keep a watchful eye out for when you and your mother can escape."

Her eyes watered as she stared at him gratefully. "You truly wish to help me?"

Samuel nodded immediately. "Of course. I told you that I would. All you have to do

is let me know when you want to put your plan in motion, and I will take care of the rest.”

Nora sniffled, suddenly overwhelmed by her emotions. “Thank you.”

She’d been so caught up in her thoughts about what to do since her stepfather told her he would be sending her over to Lady Mathilda that she hadn’t had any moment of calm until she joined Samuel for another rendezvous.

“I’ll have the carriage prepared to take you back before daylight and before they start to wonder where you are.”

Nora sat still as the carriage took her out of the estate until she could no longer see the Duke. He had walked her out and stood there, waiting for the carriage to depart.

“Are there any truths to the rumors surrounding him?” she asked the empty carriage.

Contrary to all that had been said about him, the Duke had been so patient with her ever since they met. Not even after she had blackmailed him, threatening to expose him if he didn’t pay for her silence, had she felt wary of him.

Today was even more marvelous than any other time they had spent together. She giggled, stifling the sound so they did not hear her outside the vehicle, although she doubted they could hear her over the sound of the wheels on cobbled streets and the horses’ hooves.

The Duke had been so gentle with her. He made her feel things she’d never felt before. Her eyes closed as she remembered how his fingers and tongue had expertly worshipped her body until she couldn’t take it anymore. She had never thought she would ever experience anything like this in her life. She was glad that it was him she

felt it with and not anyone else.

She wanted to continue seeing him. At the beginning of their rendezvous, when she agreed to be his mistress for seven nights, she had agreed with the mind that seven nights wouldn't be such a long time and soon she could forget all about it and never have to mention it ever again. However, she couldn't imagine going on without seeing him ever again.

Even more, he had agreed to help her. Nora frowned. She was grateful that he wanted to help her, but she knew what that meant. It would likely be the last time she ever saw him again, other than during balls. She doubted she would be allowed to walk up to him for a conversation unless he spoke to her first. Somehow, walking up to him seemed like breaking an unspoken rule.

She heaved a sigh, suddenly feeling down. Nora tried to brush away the feeling, but she couldn't. She had been brazen today. However, with the threat of being sent away, it was doubtful that she would ever experience something like that ever again with any man, so why wouldn't she give in to the guilty pleasure?

Nora embraced the feeling of ecstasy at the thought of completely giving herself over to the Duke. She rubbed her hand up and down her chest to ease the pounding of her heart.chest.

Why is my heart beating so fast?

She rested her head on the window of the carriage and closed her eyes as her thoughts returned to Samuel.

CHAPTER TWELVE

“There is something quite different about you,” Benedict said as they climbed into the

carriage.

“Really? I hadn’t quite noticed.”

A few days had passed since their last meeting, and Samuel still hadn’t been able to stop thinking about Nora and the night that they spent together. She’d been a breath of fresh air, different from all the others he’d been with.

She was such a pleasant woman. He loved how she gave in to her pleasure, her eyes rolling to the back of her head as he pleased her. He loved the taste of her sopping center on his tongue and the sounds she made every time he sucked her clit into his mouth.

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He wanted to have her again in his arms, to touch her soft, milky skin, and even more, to be surprised by her boldness.

What other thing will she have in store for me the more we get to know each other?

He grinned, unable to imagine it. There was nothing more golden than a woman who was able to surprise him in a good way.

He wanted to see her again and continue their affair. He wanted more of this. It was the first time he'd been so intent on meeting someone again so close to when he last had her.

But you might not get to spend so much time with her.

Samuel groaned, rubbing a hand down his face. How could he have forgotten? She would be leaving soon, like she'd told him during their rendezvous together.

But how soon is soon?

Although he'd asked her that question, she'd been reluctant to give him an answer. At the time, he had thought not to push for one. It was not his way to pry or force out information when it was not given freely.

Samuel wished he had asked her again before she left. Not knowing irked him more than anything else. Although he wished to be with her again, he also didn't want to have the rest of their nights so close in between, because he didn't want their seven nights to end too soon.

Despite his desire to prolong their nights together, every single night, he tried to talk himself out of sending her a letter, requesting her presence in his home.

What is wrong with me?

Samuel had been having sleepless nights. Although he knew the reason why, he denied it to himself. Surely, it couldn't have anything to do with her. While she was a wonderful lady, she was just his mistress, much like every other lady he had been with in the past.

The thought of labeling her as merely a mistress left a sour taste in his mouth, one that he couldn't understand.

What is going on?

The other day, he'd had to stay his hand merely seconds before he grabbed his shaft and brought himself pleasure with memories of her in his mind, like some schoolboy only just having his first crush.

Samuel had been irritated by that. When did he revert back to being a young boy? And all because of one woman? It was so unlike him, since he had never been so invested in any of his lovers before.

What makes her so different from all the others?

Samuel looked out the window as the carriage rolled by. He looked at his friend, who was staring at him oddly.

"Is something the matter, Benedict?" he asked his friend, giving him his attention.

"Perhaps it is I who should be asking you that. I have been trying to get your attention

for some time now, but you appear to be lost in thought. You're never like this, Samuel. Has something happened?"

Samuel shrugged. "There's nothing wrong."

Benedict shook his head. "No. I know you, Samuel. Something is definitely wrong. Is your mother trying to set you up with a match again?"

Samuel frowned. He had completely forgotten about that ever since his night with Nora. That was how much power she seemed to have over him. His mind had been stuck on Nora lately.

"Don't even remind me of that," Samuel scoffed.

"Remind you?" Benedict questioned. "So, that means it's something else on your mind and not that."

Samuel groaned. He had let that slip. Benedict was right. This was very much unlike him.

"I would like very much if we did not talk about it. Besides, we're about to head into White's," he said, pointing in front of them.

Benedict's eyes remained on him for a moment until the carriage slowed to a stop. Samuel jumped down before his friend could have the chance to ask him any more questions, walking into the club to see that, much like last time, the other gentlemen were already seated, indulging in a few drinks and some light conversations as they waited.

Samuel looked at them. All the gentlemen from the previous meeting were present, except Lord Malachi, whose gold business he had exposed for being fraudulent.

“Ah, Your Grace.” Lord Silvermere got up, looking excited. He was the first one to see him. “We’re glad you could make it.”

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He turned to greet Benedict. The men parted, leading Samuel and Benedict to the seats that had been reserved for them.

“Your Grace, I knew you would be coming, so I made certain that we didn’t discuss anything important before you arrived,” Lord Towbridge, ever the suck-up, said, sitting on the next available seat close to Samuel.

Samuel did not like the man. Still, he gave him a smile, albeit plain. “Thank you, Lord Towbridge.”

“Yes, thank you, gentlemen, for having us,” Benedict said. He often preferred to remain silent during meetings like this. However, he always came along with Samuel whenever he attended.

He was quite content with sharing a few drinks with Samuel and entertaining the ladies, which was his true passion.

“I have an interest in a business that I wanted to bring up, Your Grace,” Lord Towbridge said. “I was thinking about importing tea. I believe it will be?—” —

I wonder what she’s doing right now.

Samuel’s mind drifted back to Nora. He was worried about her. Although their night together had ended on very high notes, there was one thing that worried him. That was the fact that, other than not knowing when she planned to leave, he also did not know why she had suddenly changed her mind and needed to leave quicker than she’d planned.

Had something happened to cause her to want to leave sooner? Even so, did she have to leave so soon?

Why am I suddenly so worried about her leaving? I should be happy to get my seven nights and be glad that we have an inevitable end. Why can't I stop thinking about you, Lady Nora?

Perhaps I should send her a letter and have her with me tonight.

Samuel frowned. There was something awfully odd about how he continued to entertain the idea of having her with him every time he thought of her.

"Your Grace?"

Samuel looked up, pulled out of his thoughts by a question he didn't hear. Everyone was staring at him, but the one gaze he did not care to see at that moment was that of Benedict, who was staring at him with raised eyebrows.brows.

Bollocks! I truly am a mess.

Samuel played it off, leveling the Earl with a stare. "I have not deemed fit to give a reply because it was not important enough for me."

Lord Towbridge balked, the light dimming in his eyes at Samuel's words.

"The tea business is already oversaturated. If you had wanted to join in, it would have been a good idea to do so last year when it was still a new market and there was more chance of it being a great investment. Now, doing so would only give you a small yield and likely be a bad investment."

Thankfully, he'd listened enough to know that the man's business idea was definitely

not worth it and there would be no chance for him to make it in the market if he chose to go that route.

The men continued to ask him for advice because he was good at it, reputable in the field. There was also the added fact that they saw him as the epitome of perfection and constantly wished to be near him.

That mask of perfection had, however, begun to slip, and it was only a matter of time before there was a crack and everyone saw a different side of him that he'd kept away.

For the rest of the meeting, Samuel listened to their business ideas, careful to pay full attention to what they had to say and trying his hardest to keep his mind from slipping back to Nora, no matter how much it continued to do so.

He would find a way to fix this no matter what.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

“What is this you were speaking of in the letter you sent to us?” Selina asked, sitting in the garden of their estate.

Nora was visiting the girls on their family's estate. It wasn't often that they visited each other at home, considering Lord Worlington was not totally welcoming towards guests, no matter how close they were to Nora.

Nora wished that for once, her mother wouldn't be so blinded by her love for an abusive man and would speak up for her, but she understood. Her mother was a victim of her love and marriage. A marriage that now seemed more like a trap than anything else.

Nora sighed as she sat beside her friends underneath the shade. She took a sip of her tea, closing her eyes for a moment.

“Lord Worlington wishes to have me sent over to his sister, Mathilda. It is my punishment for not heeding his warning to find a husband,” she said.

“Oh my,” Selina gasped, holding her hand to her mouth in shock. “Isn’t there something that can be done about it? Can’t he be convinced to give you some more time?”

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Thalia scoffed. “Lord Worlington has always been a terrible man—well beyond reason, Selina. There is no way a man like that can be convinced to do whatever he doesn’t wish to do.”

“I hate that I had to beg him, but even more, I hate that it amounted to nothing. He had a sadistic smile on his face as I fell to my knees. Like he had finally won.”

Nora shuddered in disgust. There truly was no one she hated more than her stepfather. He was the only one who had managed to evoke such feelings in her.

“If I cannot come up with a solution soon, I might have to leave my mother here at my stepfather’s mercy. I don’t think I would ever be able to live peacefully if that were to happen. Perhaps if I had been a son, none of this would have happened,” she bemoaned.

“Oh, you need not think like that Nora. It’s wonderful that you’re a woman.” Selina hugged Nora, running her fingers through her hair. “Perhaps things would be better and there would be no reason for you to worry about her. Maybe your stepfather would learn to treat her better, and after that, she could live as she did with him before. You did say he was kind to her once, did you not?”

“Oh, don’t be a fool, Selina,” Thalia said, shaking her head at her sister. “There is no way that she could possibly change him. Not if she hasn’t managed to do that in all the years that have passed. I assure you, it is better for her to find a solution that means taking her mother with her than for her to leave for Lady Mathilda’s without her.”

Thalia bent to Nora's eye level. "You know better than us how things are. You cannot delude yourself into thinking that things will be better, Nora. What are you going to do?"

Selina sighed. "How terribly ugly things have become. I can only hope to find a man who would treat me better than the Viscount treats your mother. Why can't we all just fall in love and be happy with each other?"

"I can only hope that your dreams of romance are not destroyed. I will make sure that you only marry when it's a man who will treat you like you are his world. However, I have seen the world for what it is, and I cannot have such designs. It is better for women to remain without husbands. That is the only way to be truly happy," Thalia said, smiling at her sister.

Selina pouted. "I suppose it doesn't truly matter what I think right now. All that matters is if we are able to find a way to save your mother from Lord Worlington's clutches. Surely, that cannot be an easy task in itself."

Nora shook her head. "No, it is not. If it were, we would've long been on our way, completely forgetting about him and living the life we were always meant to live before we were unfortunate enough to meet him."

"I have an idea," Selina said, waving her hands excitedly.

Thalia sighed, mock-glaring at her sister. "What have you thought of now?"

Selina rolled her eyes before speaking. "I was thinking that perhaps we could help you run away. You have already thought of it, and you have no means to make it happen, but what if we found a way to do so?"

Thalia balked, looking at her sister with her mouth wide open. "What? And what

exactly are we supposed to do, Selina?"

"There's still time for us to think it through. We'll be whatever she wants us to be—a distraction or perhaps involved in aiding her escape."

Nora sighed as she watched Selina. The younger lady was always so excited to be involved in things that would normally get her in trouble if she were found out. She was the exact opposite of Thalia, who was more sensible and would often think things through before she chose to be involved in them.it.

"Come on, Thalia. She's our friend, and she needs us. We cannot leave her to do this all on her own, not when it could turn out disastrous for her. Do you think you'll be able to forgive yourself if something went wrong because we weren't there for her to make sure that it all turned out smoothly?"smooth?"

Thalia sighed. "I can see what it is you're doing, Selina, but I suppose you're right. We should help her with it."

She turned to Nora and took her hand in hers. "We'll help you however you need. All you need to do is call on us, and we'll be there."

"Thank you both. I don't think I've ever been more lucky to have friends like you who care about me so much."

Despite all that had been discussed, there was one thing that remained on Nora's mind. Although it had been her idea to run away, now she didn't want to leave. She'd only begun to enjoy her time here. Her chest hurt at the thought of leaving.

"I will need to speak with my mother about my plans. None of this will happen if she doesn't agree to it," she said. "I cannot go if she will not leave with me."

For the rest of the day, Nora hung out with the girls. Her home hadn't felt the same ever since her stepfather's declaration. She'd felt guilty staying home and watching as her mother slowly slipped into a depressive state while the days she was forced to live with her aunt Mathilda loomed nearer.near.

As Nora returned home, her mind drifted to the Duke. She'd tried not to think of him as she hung out with the girls. Although that had been a difficult task, as he inhabited her every waking thought, she had managed it.

It helped that the girls had continued to speak to her and involve her in their conversation so that she didn't have to think too much about the Duke.

Nora had refrained from telling them about her night with the Duke. Although they knew of her arrangement with him, since she'd told them at the ball, she'd suddenly wished to hold all of the secret details closer to her heart.chest.

She smiled as the cool evening air brushed against her skin. The Duke was the only thing that made her dreary days much better.

She'd spent all of her time thinking of him and giggling like a schoolgirl. Her face turned red every time she remembered how she'd wrapped her hands around his hard member, bringing him pleasure.

Nora stifled her squeal against her pillow and closed her eyes, lost in her imagination. Even more appealing was how he had brought her pleasure with merely his hands and lips.

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I'm such a fool! But it's so exciting!

She had never been so attracted to anyone. She had been too ready to go further if he'd asked her to. She wanted to feel his expert hands on her skin again and his lips kissing every part of her.

Nora had heard women discuss their escapades, but she had never thought that it would be this wonderful.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

It was their fourth night together, almost a week after the last time that they had seen each other. Samuel had sent a letter for Nora to meet him at his estate, as they usually did. However, this time, he was waiting for her outside.

He'd helped her into the carriage, promptly joining her as the carriage drove them to the hunting lodge. The carriage rolled to a stop, and he offered her a hand, helping her down.

"So, My Lady, what do you think of the change of scenery?" he asked her after giving her the chance to look around.

The hunting lodge was at the back of his estate, located in a secluded location in the woods.

There were very few people who knew about it, and Samuel was often too busy to visit. He wasn't given to hunting either, and the hunting lodge had stayed empty after

his father's death, only hosting people whenever the servants came to clean it up.

Today was one of the days that he'd sent his servants to clean it up. Ever since the last time, he'd been thinking of having her in a secluded location where they could be themselves without any self-consciousness on her part.

"Come in, out of the cold," he said, offering her his hand as he escorted her into the lodge.

He took off his coat, holding out his hand for her cloak when she took it off. The fire burning in the hearth created warmth in the lodge, shedding away the cold outside from the cool night air.

"It's beautiful," she said, looking around. "I've never been in a hunting lodge before. I expected it to be slightly different."

"How different?" Samuel asked her.

"Well, there is no hunting equipment, for one. And there's no head of a moose hanging on the wall like I'd heard hunting lodges usually have," Nora said quietly.

Samuel chuckled. "Perhaps if you had known my father, you would have been satisfied with the look of the hunting lodge while he was still alive. While the weapons have always been hidden and are only ever brought out for polishing, he did have the head of a moose hanging on the wall.

"I only removed it after I took over. I am not given to hunting, and having it there had always seemed atrocious to me," he explained.

Spiting him had also played a major role in my actions.

Samuel kept the last bit to himself, although a part of him wished he'd told her about it.

"I had the servants lay out a table for us." He led her to the table in a bid to distract himself from the question that was bound to follow after his thought.

They sat in silence as they enjoyed their food, before Nora cleared her throat to get his attention.

"Might I ask you a question?" she asked.

Samuel nodded.

"There is something that I wondered about after you told me the reason for your sour mood on our last... rendezvous."

Samuel chuckled at her words and her reaction as her face flushed.

At least, I wasn't the only one affected by everything.

"What do you wish to know?"

She swallowed her last bite of food and leaned back, staring at him. "Why were you so against your mother's decision to find you a wife?"

Samuel looked away for a moment. He hadn't realized she would ask that. It was not a subject he liked to broach.

"I believe that marriage should only involve the two people who will be getting into the transaction—no one else needs to be involved," he said calmly.

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Nora had been nodding her head in agreement, but her eyes widened before he finished his sentence. “A transaction?”

“Yes, a transaction. It’s never anything more than that. People choose who they want to marry based on the benefits they can offer each other,” he said.

“That’s

“That not true,” Nora said, looking affronted.

He frowned at the shocked look on her face.

“Marriages should only happen when you are in love with someone. It isn’t transactional. There’s no happiness to come from a transactional relationship,” she said.

Samuel grunted. “Love is a fickle emotion. It can only last for so long. There is only so much it can do before it fades away and all that is left is resentment. However, an arrangement covers every area and grants both partners respect, which is what makes a good marriage.”

Nora frowned. “I’m afraid I’ll have to disagree with you on that. I have known people to be in love and happy. Only death could put an end to such a wonderful friendship. However, a relationship without love is most likely to end terribly.”

Samuel shook his head. “I suppose we will have to agree to disagree on that.”

Nora tossed a grape aside. “I never would have imagined that you were of the opinion that a marriage did not need love to be successful. I find it quite absurd, really.”

Samuel’s jaw ticked. He’d never been told that his opinion on the matter was absurd before. Not that he’d told so many people. The only person he had discussed that with was Benedict.

“Perhaps if you believed that, you wouldn’t be here instead of finding a husband who would love and adore you,” he said, regretting his words when she reared back, her eyes widening in shock.

She glared at him. “Maybe you should take your own advice. I don’t believe your mother would have to find you a wife if all you needed was mutual agreement.”

She looked down as shame filled her eyes. She looked back up at him, unable to hold his gaze. They had both been hurtful with their words, and they knew it.

Samuel leaned back. He had not realized how heated their conversation had gotten or how close they were to each other, their lips merely a hair’s breadth apart from each other.

“Perhaps a lesson is in order for how rude and mouthy you are being,” he said, leaning in to brush his lips against her ear. “It is one you will thoroughly enjoy. Don’t worry, you can stop it at any time, although you will be pleasing me if you obey me.”

He kissed her, running his tongue over her bottom lip to get her to open up, and slid his tongue between her lips.

“Do you wish to obey me, little rabbit?” he asked her, grinning as she nodded slowly.

“Good, come here.”

He looked into her green eyes, eyes that he could get lost in if he stared any longer than he already was. His eyes flicked down to her soft lips.

Samuel pressed his lips against hers, closing his eyes to savor the sensation. He leaned over with his hands on the side of her face, angling it slightly as he deepened the kiss.

Nora moaned into his mouth. She returned his kiss, sucking his lower lip into her mouth. He pulled her up until she was standing beside him and then sat her on his lap. His hands trailed down her sides, grazing the sides of her breasts until he stopped by her hipscupping her bottom in his hands.

He slapped her bottom, sending a jolt of shock through her as she stared at him with wide eyes. Samuel grinned up at her, massaging her bottom with his fingers. He pulled her back to him, his fingers fumbling with the bodice of her dress.

He unlaced it, allowing it to fall down her sides to expose her milky shoulders. His lips latched on her shoulder blades, nibbling until her skin turned red and bruised underneath his ministrations.

Samuel grinned as she shook. Unlike the first time, she didn't stop him when he tried to pull her skirts up to her waist. He pulled her into a standing position and placed her over his knees. He bunched her skirts up until she was bare from the waist down..

"So beautiful," Samuel said, groaning as he rubbed the moons of her ass. He raised his hand, allowing it to come down on her ass hard.

Samuel groaned as she mewled, the sound sending waves of pleasure all the way down his length. He rubbed the slowly reddening spot, taking away the sting.

"Is this all right?" he asked her and let out a shuddery breath when she nodded.

His hand came down on her ass once again, mirroring the exact spot on the other moon. She moaned once again, her hands tightening around her arm.

Samuel spanked her over and over again until she was reduced to a moaning mess. He rubbed his hands over the sting to soothe her, letting her calm down from her high.

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“There we go. You look so beautiful,” he said, staring at her as she stood up.

Her cheeks were red with exhaustion, and her hair hung around her face, falling out of her bun she usually placed it in.

Samuel blinked. She truly was beautiful.

“You’ve been so wonderful,” he cooed. “Come here.”

She went to him, lowering herself on the seat beside him. Samuel pulled down her chemise, taking a pebbled nipple into his mouth. He suckled, rolling the nipple between his teeth. Nora gasped at the sensation and arched her back, pushing her breast into his mouth.

With his other hand, he massaged her other breast, pinching her nipple. His hands trailed up her thighs to her heated center, his fingers parting the red curls as he prodded gently. He rubbed his thumb against her clit, his eyes fully focused on her, completely enamored by the pleasure on her face..

He slipped a finger inside her, shocking her. She jerked as her face pinched in pain. Samuel slowed down, rubbing her slick on his finger before trying again. He gently slid his finger inside her.

A strangled moan escaped her as he stroked her. Samuel knelt down and licked a long line up to her clit even as he continued to pleasure her with his finger.

“Samuel,” she groaned, putting a hand on his head.

Her legs tensed as his tongue pushed between her folds, teasing and tasting. He had truly missed the taste of her. Having her on his tongue now was like an addiction he did not want to give up.

He pulled back the hood of her clit, sucking it into his mouth as she buckled. Her moans were loud, like music to his ears. He coaxed her orgasm out of her, groaning as her center tightened around his finger, sucking him in. She gasped out the last of her release, breathing heavily as she struggled to catch her breath.

Samuel picked her up, carrying her to the chair behind them. He gently placed her in it and smiled at her. "You are ever so beautiful when you are like this."

He smiled when she ran her hand down her hair self-consciously. He gripped her hands and shook his head. "Leave it. You look perfect this way."

"I didn't do anything for you," she said, her hand going to the drawstrings that held up his pants.

Samuel gently pushed her hand away. "Perhaps you can give me some special attention next time. This was more for you than me. I love watching your face when you let go. It is a blissful sight."

Samuel hid a grimace as her face flushed red. He had never been a man to wax poetry, and yet here he was, doing just that.

What is wrong with me?

He'd asked himself that question for the past few days, and yet there didn't seem to be any answer coming his way.

"Come lie with me," she said, moving to the side.

Samuel indulged her. He lay beside her and wrapped his arms around her, pulling her into his arms affectionately. He kissed her hair and tightened his arms around her body.

“So, I know that I shouldn’t pry, but I’ve been curious to know. When will you be leaving?” he asked, his breath catching as he awaited for her answer.

She remained silent, not saying a word to him in response.

Her “Nora?”

His Christian name slipped from his mouth before he could stop it. He’d stopped thinking of her as Lady Nora, and now it made the slip more difficult to manage. He would need to put in effort to make sure he never called her that.

They’d only ever used their given names in the throes of passion, when neither of them could control themselves.

He heard a

A soft snore, and he looked down at her in shock. He hadn’t expected her to fall asleep at all. He laughed as another snore escaped her just as she stirred in his arms.

“I’m sorry to have woken you up,” he said. “You looked so peaceful in your sleep.”

Nora blushed. “I apologize. I didn’t realize I had fallen asleep. I must have been so tired.”

Samuel grinned in response. “It is nothing to be sorry for. One is often tired after their release. It does make you more relaxed. Like a massage of sorts.”

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Nora laughed, the sound like a soft morning bell. “I suppose you are right. I did feel quite relaxed afterwards, and being in your arms like this is so comforting.”

Samuel’s eyebrow rose in shock. She was more vocal now than she’d been during their first meeting.

He sighed. “When we spoke about marriage earlier, was there a reason why you were set on the idea of love?”

Nora remained silent for a moment, and he had begun to think she’d drifted off once again before she answered him.

“I know someone who was in love and happy. But now, they’re married to someone else who they believe they love, but it isn’t truly so, and it’s the worst union I’ve ever seen. I wish it would come to an end already.”

“Does it truly hurt so much to watch her lose herself?” he asked.

Her face contorted with pain, her eyes closing as if his question made her relive the moments again.

She nodded, her lips forming a shaky smile. “Yes. More than anything ever has.”

Samuel ran his hand up and down her bare arm. Her voice held sadness when she spoke, and she’d let out a shuddery breath afterwards. He wished he hadn’t pried and had any reason to bring her pain.

He sighed. Perhaps it was time he told her about his own experience. She was not alone in the way that she was feeling. He sighed as he prepared to speak about what he'd always held at bay.

“When I was younger, I was raised more strictly than others. For many years, I thought it was how everyone was raised, until I started to notice that it wasn't, but there was nothing I could do about it, except endure it.”

She placed her hand on his jaw as it ticked. It wasn't something he usually wished to talk about, but with her, it was easy to forget and completely open up until they had no secrets between them.

Samuel's hand paused, and his eyes widened slightly. He had never opened up to anyone before. He preferred to keep people at arm's length, and yet here he was, opening up to her.

“You should leave,” he said suddenly, pulling her hand off his face.

“What? Have I done something?” she asked, sitting up. “If I have, I would like to apologize for?—”-”

“Get dressed and leave. Now,” he said, his voice devoid of emotions.

She gasped as she looked at him in shock. Samuel held back from consoling her as tears welled up in her eyes.

She got up wordlessly and dressed herself, wrapping her cloak around her shoulders before disappearing into the night.

Samuel held his face in his hand, disgusted with himself.

I did the right thing.

Yet, why did he feel like he had made the biggest mistake?

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

How could I have been so dumb to be so taken with him?

Nora had never felt more stupid and depressed than she did at that moment. She had ignored all the signs that had been there even before she agreed to go to this unfortunate rendezvous with him.

Seeing him with a mistress that first night should've made it clear to her that she would never have anything serious with him. While the Duke knew how to make her feel safe and warm, none of that meant that he wanted more from her than what he'd offered. propositioned.

Seven nights. Why does it hurt so much if it's only meant to be seven nights?

She knew what she was getting into, and yet his cold tone as he sent her away had hurt more than it should have.

You knew what you were getting into before you started this. You cannot let yourself be so hurt.

She repeated the words over and over to herself. He'd had no reason to ask her to stay.

She'd gotten too used to his kindness and warmth. Nora pictured him in her head as she tried to be angry with him, but she couldn't muster up the energy to do that. He had been honest with her from the beginning. If anyone had been in denial, it was her.

She

A part of her had deluded herself into thinking that he would love her just like she was beginning to love him, but now it had become clear to her.

Too bad it took you this long and already giving your heart away for you to realize what you should've known from the very beginning.

Nora was even more angry with herself because of what happened to her mother. The Duke was nothing like her stepfather. However, she had promised herself that she would never allow herself to fall in love or marry unless it was to someone who loved her just as much, and yet here she was, falling for the first man who showed interest in her, albeit a different kind of interest.

How could you have thought this was something special? .

She'd never been the type to have weird expectations. It was very much unlike her.

Nora sighed as she breathed in the cool night air. She strolled around the estate, lost in thought and the misery of her situation. She turned a bend and headed to the gardens, when she heard a sound.

She frowned, leaning closer out of curiosity. Anger overtook her as her hands balled into fists. She watched her mother kneel in front of Lord Worlington, her head pressed against his hand as she pleaded with him to change his mind.

Nora

She turned away, as the sight was too much to bear, although her mother's cries reached her ears.

Her

Nora's mind was made up. Although she'd been eager to escape from him, the Duke had distracted her from her plan with the pleasure he brought her and the hope for something more than the deal they had made. However, now that her delusions had been cleared, there was nothing stopping her from putting her plans in motion.

Guilt ate at her. She hadn't even mentioned the plan to her mother yet.

Don't worry, Mother, I will save you from this life.

"Why do you have to go out? Why can't you just stay here with me? Just for tonight," Julia Swinton begged her husband, looking up at him with so much adoration that it choked Nora to see it from where she stood.

Why do you continue to love him?

Letting him go out, to be with whatever woman he wished to see today, was infinitely better than him being around to get angry at everything they did and beat her up even more.

Why can't you see that he should be gone than to be around here with you?

"Let go of me, woman. Why do I have to be here with you?" Lord Worlington asked, brushing her away. "Compose yourself, woman. You are a lady, and it's time you begin to act like one."

He kicked past her, heading out of the estate, all the while grumbling as he went.

Nora waited until he was gone and emerged from the shadows where she hid, watching everything that transpired.

“Mother, are you all right?” she asked, pulling her mother up from where she sat on the floor.

“Nora, I didn’t realize you were here.” Julia sniffled, looking away from Nora in shame. “I’m sorry you keep having to see me like this. This isn’t how I thought things would go.”

Nora shook her head. “You are not to blame for this, Mother. This is all Lord Worlington’s fault.”

“Oh, I wish you would stop calling him that,” Julia said.

Nora’s eyes narrowed. It was usually so easy for her to blame Lord Worlington, but her mother also had a part to play in all of this. Her heart clenched with guilt.

Her mother was a victim. However, Nora wished there were days when she would simply fight back or maintain a dignified indifference to Lord Worlington’s constant terrible behavior. It would save her a lot of trouble.

“Aren’t you tired? You’re in pain all the time,” Nora asked, angry at the situation.

“Yes, but it is my cup to bear,” the Viscountess said in a defeated tone.

Nora was aghast. “What do you mean it’s your cup to bear? None of this is because of you. It’s simply because of the man Lord Worlington is.”

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Her mother sat on a bench and tapped the space beside her. “Sometimes, love just happens to be like that. It isn’t really anyone’s fault.”

It’s definitely Lord Worlington’s fault.

Nora refrained from saying so. There was no time for them to argue over whose fault it was and if Lord Worlington deserved forgiveness or to be loved by someone like her mother, or anyone for that matter.

“Mother, I-I have a plan,” she said wearily.

Her mother’s head snapped up to hers. She could see the wariness in her own eyes before she asked, “What do you mean?”

Nora swallowed. There were only two ways this could go. Her mother would balk at the idea but come to accept it as the only way out of their problem, or she would ask her to forget about it.

I hope it’ll be the former.

She didn’t know what she would do if her mother refused to go with her.

“Why don’t we run away together and finally be free of him?” Nora suggested, her hands behind her back as she bit her lip in trepidation.

Her mother was still for a moment, her hair flowing down in the midnight breeze and her blinking eyes the only evidence Nora wasn’t talking to a sculpture.

“What?”

“Aren’t you tired of living this way with a man who doesn’t love you? You should come with me, Mother. We can escape together,” Nora repeated desperately.

Her mother’s eyes widened in fear as she looked around them as though Lord Worlington would suddenly appear behind them.

Nora’s heart ached for her mother. She’d become a shell of her former self. This person here in front of her was not the mother she knew when she was a child.

Why can’t you see this? Why do you let him turn you into this?

She turned away to hide the lone tear that slid down her cheek.

“You should never speak of something like that out in the open again. What if someone hears you?” Julia chided, fear plain in her eyes.

“Mother, please. Can’t you just consider this?” Nora asked her.

“No, Nora. Moreover, even if I entertained this foolish notion, where would we go? How far would we run before he finds us? Timothy is a very powerful, proud man. He will not take kindly to being played like a fool. He will find us, and when he does, the consequences will be more dire.”

Nora sucked in a breath. She had thought about it all. She knew he would go after them, which was why she’d needed to make sure that they had enough money to disappear for a while. At least until he accepted the idea that they would never return to him.

“You don’t have to worry about that, Mother. I will take care of everything. We could

go to your cousin, and she will help us out for as long as we need—at least until the dust settles and he stops searching for us. And then we could go wherever we wish to. I'll get a job, and you can do as you please," Nora said convincingly, smiling at her mother.

"And what about money? How will we survive until you get a job?" Julia asked. "We can only live on my cousin's mercy for so long."

"You don't have to worry about that, Mother. I have some money saved up already. It will keep us afloat for a while until I am able to get a job. I am a noblewoman, Mother. It would not be difficult for me to find work as a governess." to care for our needs."

Nora was excited. "Oh, Mother, we could leave tonight if you so wish it. I have been thinking about it for quite some time."

"No. I will not have it. We cannot escape, Nora. I don't want to do that," Julia said with conviction, her voice sharper than it had been earlier. The spell had been shattered before it could take root. "I love Timothy, and I will not leave him."

Nora reared back like she had been slapped. She'd accounted for her mother refusing to go with her, and yet the shock of it was almost too much for her to bear.

"And me? Do you not love me enough to want to run away with me? He's trying to separate us, Mother," she cried out, calming herself when her mother flinched.

"You know I love you, Nora. I have always loved you. You are my daughter. But I love him as well. You know that. I don't wish to lose either of you," Julia pleaded.

Guilt ate at Nora for putting her mother in a tight spot. Of course, her mother loved her.

“I’m sorry, Mother. I know you love me, and I’m aware that you love Lord Worlington, but it doesn’t change the fact that he isn’t good for you,” she tried to convince her.

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The Viscountess shook her head before Nora finished. "I cannot leave him. He wasn't always like this. He used to be so loving and caring. That was why I married him. And I know he loves me too. He just needs help in remembering that. Maybe he can change, Nora."

Nora sighed at the realization that nothing would come of this. Talking to her mother was like talking to a wall.

"How much more of Lord Worlington's abuse can you take before you realize that the man you knew is gone and you stop losing yourself in him so much?" Nora asked, her last-ditch effort to convince her mother to make the right decision. One that would guarantee them a better life.

How much more is he going to hurt you?

Nora wiped her eyes in anger. She let out a short, humorless laugh as she stared at the mark on her hand from the Duke's kisses.

The apple doesn't fall far from the tree, after all.

Here she was, upset with her mother for refusing to leave a harmful relationship, but hadn't she been close to doing the same despite knowing the truth. Her mother was blind to the truth of her situation, and Nora had been just as blinded.

She was also being absolutely foolish, trusting the Duke and falling for a fantasy even when the truth had been presented to her before she embarked on her rendezvous with him.

Maybe she had no right to think her mother made the wrong decision. After all, she had only just been eating out of the Duke's hand.

Nora stared up into the starry night sky, uncertain of what to do now that her mother would not be joining her in her escape plan, and also disappointed in the two of them for the kind of men they allowed into their lives.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Nora was at a ball when things got rowdy. She looked from her friends to the sudden commotion in the room. She knew it was him even before she saw him. He'd always had that pull that made everyone want to please him and speak with him. She wasn't immune to his charms either.

Her breath caught in her throat, Selina's words fading away as she watched him, unable to look away. His dark blue eyes held her in a trance she could not break out of. away from.

"Are you listening to anything I'm saying, Nora?" Selina asked, eyeing her curiously.

"Oh, I'm sorry. My mind was somewhere else for a moment," Nora offered apologetically.

Selina's eyebrows rose, and her eyes twinkled. She clapped her hands together and leaned in with what appeared to be childlike excitement.

"Anything you would like to share? I've grown tired of the stale gossip around here," she said.

"Perhaps we should let Nora breathe for a moment, Sel," Thalia, who had watched their interaction quietly until that moment, interjected.

Nora stared at her with gratitude. Her neck itched from Samuel's gaze burning into her back. She could feel his stare. Her hands clenched into fists as she willed herself to stay still and not look his way. It was harder than she imagined it would be, but she managed it, nonetheless.

"Lady Nora."

Nora tensed as his deep voice washed over her. She turned around to glance at him, every step like rocks tied to her feet.

"Your Grace." Selina curtsied, jabbing her elbow into Thalia's side to follow suit.

Thalia winced, glaring at her sister before bobbing a curtsy.

"Perhaps we could share the next dance," he said, his face devoid of any emotion.

Nora nodded. "Certainly, Your Grace."

She placed her hand in his, allowing him to lead her towards the dancefloor. His fingers tightened around hers as he led her onto the dancefloor, his eyes looking ahead.

"Meet me tonight," he said suddenly, his voice low so no one would hear them. "Come to the estate."

Nora grimaced as she stared fixedly at the couple behind him. Her voice was as neutral as his when she spoke finally.

"Certainly, Your Grace," she said. "There is not much time to lose, after all."

The music carried on as they danced in silence. Nora's heart clenched, as she wished

to be away from him and among her friends once again. They wouldn't hurt her with their words or actions, and they certainly wouldn't act like nothing happened if they did.

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She blinked away the hurt as the music began to reach an end.

I won't let this control me.

She bit her lip as she looked up at him for the first time since they began to dance. His eyes bored into hers, devoid of any emotion, confirming what she already knew.

He doesn't love me. I

You need to let go before I end up like Mother.mother, Nora.

She chided herself, frowning as she looked away from him once again. Samuel didn't love her, and he never would. She doubted he was capable of loving anyone—perhaps even himself.

I need to stop my feelings for you before it's too late, Samuel.

The music ended just as she came to a decision. She wouldn't pine for him, and she most definitely wouldn't end up like her mother. It pained her that no matter how violent her stepfather got, her mother never saw fit to leave him. So chained by love, she would rather endure his harsh treatment than walk away from him.

Nora stayed a distance from the Duke as he escorted her back to her friends. She watched as he bowed and then walked away, slowly disappearing into the crowd until she could no longer see him.

She turned to her friends, who were staring in the direction he had disappeared.

“Thalia, Selina, I need your help,” she said, pulling their attention back to her.

“What do you need?” Thalia asked.

“I don’t think I can do this any longer. I have to run away, and I need your help to do so,” Nora said.

“Have you finally spoken with Lady Worlington?” Thalia asked.

Nora grimaced as she nodded. “I have. My mother will not be joining me. It appears I will have to do this on my own.”

“I’m so sorry, Nora,” Selina said, her eyes filled with concern. “I know you wished she would be with you.”

“Ah... yes,” Nora muttered under her breath. “I do wish things had turned out differently, but it appears there is nothing I can do to change her mind.”

Thalia placed a comforting hand on her shoulder. “What do you need us to do? We will help you however we can.”

SheNora smiled, hoping that it conveyed her gratitude. “Thank you, ladies. I have thought about it. I will send a letter to my mother’s cousin to notify her of my plans to live with her. I will stay there and be a governess to her children so I can earn my keep.”

“That does seem well thought out,” Thalia said. “Are you certain she will allow it?”

Nora sighed. “I can only hope that she will. I have to be prepared for whatever happens, but there is little doubt in my mind that she will turn me away.”

“I suppose anything is better than living with your step-aunt.” Selina shivered at the thought of Nora living with Lady Mathilda.

They hadn’t met her yet. However, from what little Nora had told them and the actions of the Viscount, it was quite obvious the certain torture she was bound to endure if she lived with her step-aunt.

“I certainly hope that I can begin working as soon as I arrive there. It will help to keep my mind busy enough so I do not have to think of Lord Worlington or be consumed with fear for my mother,” she said.

“Perhaps I would even be able to forget about the Duke when I am able to do as I please, with no one breathing down my neck.”shoulder.”

“Perhaps you would be able to secure a husband there. One who will love and respect you, and will fully be your choice.” Selina giggled as Thalia shook her head at her.

Nora smiled at Selina’s enthusiasm. It would take some time for her to forget about the Duke, but Selina was not wrong. She would not live with the memory of a man tying her down and stopping her from getting all that she wanted.

“Perhaps I could,” she agreed with her friend.

From

Movement at the corner of her eye, she saw movement, distracting her from their conversation. Nora looked to the sidejust as a burly frame went out of sight. Her brow furrowed as she wrung her hands.

Did someone hear us?

She stared at the corner with worry. She could only hope that it had just been a person making rounds and they hadn't been paying mind to her conversation with her friends.

Nora's heart beat fast as she walked in the darkness of the night, her cloak wrapped around her in her usual fashion and her candle her only source of light to navigate through the unfamiliar estate. Sneaking around now reminded her much of the first night she had gone to the Duke to blackmail him. It seemed like such a long time ago.

She pushed the thoughts away. It would only make her question whether she wished to go through with any of this. She had gotten quite good at keeping her steps light and blending in with the shadows to ensure that no one would see her.

She placed a hand on her fast-beating heart. She had tried to convince herself that it was the fear of being caught that made her tremble so, but she knew it was a lie. Soon she would no longer be able to have any of these nights with Samuel.

They had come to mean so much to her, and yet she was about to rip it all away, not that she had much choice in the decision she had made.

She sighed sadly, the quiet sound fading into the still of the night. Her decisions had been entirely hers for a long time, but soon, all of this would be over, and she could do as she pleased.

She blew out her candle as she approached his door and knocked lightly. It would be

a travesty if anyone saw her sneaking into the Duke's room after their host had graciously invited them to stay the night.

She slipped in as the door opened an inch and walked into the room, taking a seat on the lone chair close to the window. Samuel shut the door and regarded her with his back pressed against the wood. She ached to touch him, to tell him of her plans and see what could be done.

Nora cleared her throat to push away her thoughts.

No more of that silly nonsense.

Samuel stepped forward with a glass in hand, his face solemn as he watched her. "I must apologize, Lady Nora. I started without you."

He raised the glass in her direction before taking a long sip.

"It's quite all right, Your Grace. I do not wish to be intoxicated tonight."

"Why is that, if I may ask, Lady Nora?" He walked over to her and then stopped right in front of her.

Nora swallowed noisily. The Duke had always looked like a predator, but she had never felt much like a prey as she did at that moment. She had never met a man who had as much power as he did. Certainly not her stepfather, who was quick to anger. She believed Lord Worlington to be weak of mind, the reason for his constant desire to harm those weaker than him.

"I know it is only our fifth night together, and there are two more before our agreement ends. However, I'm afraid we cannot continue with this, Your Grace," she said, looking up at him as she gathered up her courage. "I wish to end our agreement

tonight.”

Samuel hummed, the sound low as he regarded her. “Have I broken any of the rules you value, Lady Nora?”

Nora shook her head, keeping her mouth shut..

“Then pray tell, why do you seek to end it?”

She sighed, the words she had rehearsed leaving her lips with ease. “I must apologize, Your Grace. It has nothing to do with you and everything to do with me. I have merely changed my mind. I cannot continue to sneak out to see you like this.”

Samuel stared at her practiced indifference and the confident set of her shoulders. He had heard the slight tremor in her voice, although he pretended not to.

Would I have noticed if I hadn’t heard her speak about her plans to her friends?

He hadn’t been able to think about anything else since he left the ball, but now it was becoming clear that her mind was made up.

“Has something happened to cause you to change your mind, Lady Nora?” he asked gently.

“No, Your Grace. I merely do not wish to continue with this,” she said in a monotone.

“Look at me, Lady Nora,” he said.

“I’m afraid my mind is made up, and there is not much else to be said.”

Samuel’s jaw ticked. She spoke with such indifference that would have had him

stumped had he not already overheard her. He took another gulp of his drink to stifle the hurt in his chest. Her words, her refusal to look at him, and the knowledge that she planned to run away and did not wish him to know were like an arrow to his heart.the chest.

He didn't want to stop seeing her. He frowned at the realization, looking into his empty glass. He wished it wasn't true, but it was. He wanted to see her every time, and knowing that he soon would not filled him with panic.

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“I apologize for ruining the plan, Your Grace, but that is all I have to say. I must be on my way now before someone notices I am gone,” she said, rising to her feet.

Samuel watched her go with his lips sealed shut, despite all the words he wished to scream at her. His brow furrowed at his reaction. This wasn't how things were supposed to happen.

The door clicked shut, leaving him standing all alone in the middle of the dimly lit room as trepidation filled him.

Her plan and her desperation to leave would put her in danger if she didn't think it through.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Nora sat with her heart in her throat as the carriage jostled. Clenched in her fist was the letter she had received from her aunt, informing her that she wouldn't mind hiring her and would be glad to have her as a governess for her children.

Her heart was burdened. She hadn't been able to say goodbye to her mother, who had chosen to shadow her stepfather all over the house all day, despite his irritation with her doing so. She shook her head, looking out the small window at the night sky. The stars dotted the sky, and the half-moon looked beautiful.

I hope this is a sign of a new beginning for me.

Her eyes closed, and a smile graced her lips as she navigated her thoughts, through

the deep sadness that clouded her mind to the tiny sliver of hope that had begun to build. She would soon have a better life than the one she had had.

Fear gripped her, and her eyes snapped open as the carriage suddenly jolted to a stop, nearly propelling her from her seat. She held her bag tightly to her chest, crunching the letter underneath her skirt.

Has he found me so soon? Am I to endure a worse than the one I already have?

Her heart shattered at the thought of returning back home with her stepfather, only to be shipped off to Lady Mathilda, who would make sure she paid for her insolence and attempt to escape.

She heard the sound of cobblestone

Footsteps sounded outside, crunching beneath footsteps, and her eyes widened. She moved in the opposite direction, pressing herself against the door as she readied herself for whatever she was about to face.

Nora resolved in her heart as her face set into stone. Lord Worlington was stronger than she was, but she would not allow herself to be taken without putting up a fight, and she most definitely would not allow him to take the letter from her. It was the only way to escape him, and finding out about it would put an end to that dream.

The knob on the door turned, the sound loud in the quiet of the night. She bit her lip to stifle her cry as she lunged forward, just as the door opened and dark blue eyes greeted her.

“Samuel?” she said, her shock causing her to use his given name.

He climbed into the carriage, closing the door behind him as he sat next to her. “Lady

Nora.”

She blinked rapidly, shocked to see him. “What are you doing here?”

“What am I doing here? Should I not be the one asking that question, Lady Nora?”

Her brow furrowed. “What do you mean?”

“What do you think you are doing out here at this hour?” he asked, his voice laced with disappointment.

“I visit you at this hour,” she said with a frown.

“Yes, you visit. I know where to find you if ever you do not make it. Does anyone know you’re doing this now?” he asked her, still scolding.

Her eyes burned with rage. “Would that change anything, Your Grace? Would they have been able to reach me on time if something had happened?”

Samuel clapped, making her jump. “Shouldn’t this have been your thought before you chose to do this? What do you think you’re doing, traveling so late at night, and alone for that matter?”

“Well, what should I have done?” she asked, her voice raised in annoyance.

Who did he think he was, lecturing her on how to live her life? .

“I understand that your reputation has been ruined, but that doesn’t mean that you can do whatever you want,” he said.

Nora groaned as she tried to suppress her anger. “Do you think I would have chosen

this if I had a choice in how things should go? Thank you for your concern, Your Grace, but it truly is no business of yours how I plan to travel.”

“Of course, it is,” he bellowed.

“I cannot see how it is.” She matched his tone.

“I was the last person you truly had any contact with. Don’t you think if you go missing and an investigation is launched, it will lead back to me?” he asked.

Nora stared at him dumbfounded. Despite the shouting match they were currently engaged in, a certain part of her had managed to delude herself into thinking that the only reason he was here was because he cared for her and wanted to see that she was safe. But it seemed that was not the case.

“Then I apologize for not thinking about how this would affect you. Should that ever happen, I will ensure to send word to make sure that you are not blamed for my disappearance,” she said quietly.

Samuel regarded her in the small carriage. “And my reputation? How are you to remedy that? After all, I haven’t fulfilled your request yet, and you could actually ruin my reputation, which I highly value.”

Nora scoffed in an unladylike manner, crossing her hands over her chest as she stared fixedly at him. “I believe you said, on the night when I tried to blackmail you, that there was no way for me to ruin your reputation.”

He coughed awkwardly. “Be that as it may, I simply cannot let you go without fulfilling my own end of the bargain.”

Nora shook her head. “You need not worry yourself with that, Your Grace. Our deal was for seven nights, and I did not keep to that either. Perhaps we could consider it even.”

Samuel sighed, running his hand down his face. “Lady Nora, seeing as how I am the only one aware of your plan, I do believe it is my duty as a gentleman to ensure that you are safe. I simply cannot let you go on your way as such, knowing that at any point, you could come to harm and there would be no one there to ensure that you are safe.”

Nora gasped in shock as she stared at him. “H-how did you know I intended to carry out my plan this night? I never told you about that.”

He remained silent, a look of hesitation on his face and discomfort in his eyes. He stared out the window for a moment.

“Your Grace?” she called when the silence stretched on. “How did you know? Are you spying on me?”

He shook his head and sighed before speaking up. “After the dance, I came back to speak with you. That’s when I overheard your conversation with your friends. I overheard you saying you would be leaving soon.”

“Oh, I see.” She grimaced.

Nora hadn’t realized that they had been speaking loud enough for anyone to overhear them. The thought left an unsettling feeling in her chest. If he knew about it, then that could mean that someone else had overheard and could tell her stepfather.

She heaved a sigh. If anything, that made her decision to leave all the more warranted.

“I will escort you back home. Perhaps we could plan better and find a way for you to get what you want,” he said, holding his hand out to her as he opened the door, ready to step out into the cold night air.

Nora looked at the hand held out to her. She shook her head. This was the only chance she had to leave before she could no longer do so. If she returned home, her stepfather would only have her sent off to her step-aunt. She was ready to risk the chance of danger and getting caught if it meant she did not have to go to Lady Mathilda’s.

“I’m afraid I cannot do that. I have already made arrangements, and they are expecting me any moment now. I will not be returning home,” she said boldly, her tone leaving no room for argument.

“I see you have no intention of changing your mind on this. I suppose that is to be expected, considering the trouble you have gone through to make sure that you are able to do this.”

Nora’s heart ached as she prepared for him to leave. It would be the last time she ever saw him. She looked at his face, memorizing every single detail of it. Her thoughts would be the only place he would exist. At least until she was strong enough to keep him out of there.

“I suppose if you will not be going home, then there is only one thing that can be done,” he said, shutting the door behind him once again. “I will have to escort you there to make sure that you arrive safely.”

Nora’s eyes widened in surprise. “You do not have to do that, Your Grace. I cannot trouble you so. I am prepared to go alone, and I am certain that I will be fine on my own.”

“I’m sure you can take care of yourself, Lady Nora, but I will be going with you,” he said, rapping on the roof of the carriage, his face set with determination.

Nora stepped out of the carriage and stretched her aching limbs. They had traveled a far distance, making sure to stop only when they were certain that neither of them would be recognized. While she had been a wallflower ever since she ruined her reputation, the Duke was a well-known man, and it would raise eyebrows if he was seen with a woman when they knew he was not married.

She wrapped the cloak tighter around herself and kept her head down as he had advised her to do when they walked into the inn. She looked around the space, grateful to see that it was almost empty, save for two men who were far too drunk to be aware of their surroundings and a couple enjoying dinner.

Her stomach rumbled at the sight of food. She hadn’t eaten all day as her mind raced and worried about how she would carry out her plans without risking Lord Worlington finding out about any of it.

“My Lord, My Lady, what can I do for you?” the innkeeper asked, a smile on his face as he stared at them.

“Yes, my wife and I require a room for the night,” Samuel said.

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Nora's eyes flashed to his for a moment, shocked. She knew he spoke those words only so they would not attract any suspicious glances. However, that did not stop her heart from beating so fast.

All of this will be over when I arrive.

She tried to console herself, but the thought of him leaving her only filled her heart with more longing. He had burrowed himself into her heart like a rabbit digging a hole into the garden, too stubborn to leave and causing the gardener a heartache.

"And perhaps we can have some food brought up to the room and some hot water," he added.

"Certainly, My Lord," the innkeeper said, signaling for a younger man. "My son will show you up to your room, and food and water will be brought up in a moment."

Samuel nodded and took Nora's hand in his, leading her up the stairs as they followed after the young man.

"Here is your room, My Lord," he said, opening the door for them.

Nora thanked him and walked in, looking around the small space. There was only one bed, a wooden chair and table, and a wash basin at the corner. She gulped as her eyes landed on the small bed. It was barely enough to fit one person, and they would both need to be pressed against each other if they were to sleep in it.

"Why didn't you ask for two rooms?" she asked, looking away from the small bed.

“Hmm?” Samuel asked absentmindedly. He looked away from the open window and glanced at her. “What kind of married couple would we be if we asked for two separate beds?”

She shrugged, looking away as her cheeks flushed a bright red. A knock sounded at the door, filling her with relief. She sat on the bed as Samuel went to answer it.

He returned with the innkeeper’s son and two others they hadn’t seen earlier as they carried in buckets of steaming hot water and a tray of food.

“I’m sure you wish to wash off the grime from our journey. I’ll go down to look around while you do what you have to,” Samuel said, closing the door behind him on his way out.

Nora sat with her eyes fixed on the door for a moment before she got up to clean up, hurrying through the process before he could return. She washed her hair and skin, drying off in a matter of minutes, and changed into a much simpler dress.

Samuel returned a few minutes later, and they sat down for dinner. Nora ate without tasting anything. She doubted she would ever truly allow herself to relax until she was in the safety of her aunt’s home, free from whatever plans the Viscount had for her.

She sat in the single chair as Samuel dropped the dishes outside. She yawned as exhaustion hit her. Much like her inability to eat all day, she also hadn’t had a proper night’s sleep from the moment she sent the letter, putting her plans in motion.

Her eyes closed for a moment as she slowly blinked away the sleep.

“You should go to bed,” Samuel said suddenly, jolting her back into consciousness.

She stared at him and then at the bed, her cheeks pinkening once more. “But there is only one bed.”

Samuel rubbed his chin in contemplation. “It will not be the first time we lay in bed together. I’m certain we can both sleep on the bed.”

She glared at him, hiding how much his words affected her. “I do not think that is proper, Your Grace.”

“Neither was it when it happened the last time,” he teased, wiggling his eyebrows at her.

She shuddered, frowning slightly. “Now that our deal is over, I cannot allow it. I will be sleeping on the floor, and you can have the bed.”

Samuel laughed, the sound filling her with anger. “Of course, My Lady. I suppose if that will make you comfortable, then you can sleep on the floor.”

Nora snatched up a pillow, utterly irritated.

How can he be so irritating? Surely, he cannot be comfortable with me sleeping on the floor?

Still, as she walked the short distance to the fireplace, the Duke did nothing to stop her. Instead, he sat on the bed, watching her.

Annoyed, she tossed the pillow on the floor with a plop and lay down, resting her head on the pillow.

At least I have a fire to keep me warm.

The Duke laughed once again.

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Nora's back was turned to him, and she could not see him. However, she could hear the squeak underneath him. She frowned, curling into herself as she struggled to find a comfortable position on the floor. Soon, it would all be over, and she would not have to deal with him anymore.

She tossed and turned once again, in search of a comfortable position, when she saw legs standing in front of her. A gasp escaped her lips as the Duke's hands slipped underneath her form. She squeaked and shook in his grasp.

"Put me down, Your Grace," she said, trying to wriggle free, but the Duke held her tightly, looking down at her with an amused expression.

She tightened her hands around his neck as he carried her to the bed. He laid her down carefully and stood back up, before going back to the fireplace.

"I will sleep on the floor instead. I want to be closer to the fire," he said, groaning as he lay on the floor.

Nora's eyes clamped shut. He was lying. She could tell he was only doing that so she did not have to sleep on the floor or be made uncomfortable with him next to her on the bed.

All night, she had been trying to ignore her feelings for him and her nervousness about being in such a small space. Although they'd spent many nights together, this was the first time they intentionally planned to go to bed.

Something in the air felt charged, and it made her nervous. Still, she wouldn't be able

to sleep, knowing that she was the reason why he was lying on the floor.

It's only a night. Besides, he's right. We've spent nights together before, and this will not be any different. There's nothing to worry about, Nora.

"You can join me on the bed," she said in a small voice.

She doubted he'd heard her and was about to repeat herself when he sat up.

"You don't have to do that. I am quite fine here," he said. "I do not wish to make you uncomfortable."

"No... no. I won't be. Please, join me."

She waited patiently for him to decide, the silence between them only disturbed by the crackling fire.

"All right," he agreed, finally. "As long as you're certain that you're fine with it."

He got up from the floor, pillow in hand as he walked towards the bed. He lay down on her left. She tensed, unable to move as their sides pressed against each other with no space between them to keep that from happening.

Nora lay awake, every part of her attuned to his every movement. The sleep that latched onto her suddenly seemed to have disappeared, leaving her wide awake and aware of him beside her.

"I'm worried about my mother," she said suddenly, in part to distract herself from him and also because she wanted to talk to someone about her fears.

"Now that I am not there to protect her, Lord Worlington is probably going to hurt

her even more.”

Her breath shuddered. She had tried not to think about her mother all along, knowing that doing so would make her turn around and go back home. Her mother had made her decision and was willing to live with her abusive husband, but Nora was not willing to make that sacrifice. Not when it would cost her everything.

She pursed her lips, fighting to stave off the guilt that threatened to overwhelm her.

Have I made the wrong decision?

If anything happened to her mother while she was away, she would never forgive the Viscount. ut even more so, she would never forgive herself for abandoning her.

She swallowed back the whimper that threatened to escape her lips and took a deep breath to calm herself.

“My father was a very wonderful man, and we were a very warm and loving family. Mother was always happy and ever smiling.” She smiled, the memories of the past that she strongly held onto playing in her head.

She could still hear her younger self laughing as her father chased her around the field, laughter and giggles surrounding them, her mother’s concerned tone warning them to be careful only moments before she gave in and laughed as well, joining in their fun.

Nora sighed. “We were truly very happy, but it wasn’t meant to be. My father died when I was ten years old. Mother loved him greatly, and although he was an earl, she had spent most of what we owned on treatments that were supposed to make him better. Nothing worked, and for the next three years, she was inconsolable and beside herself with grief. It pained me to see her that way. So, when she started to become

happy again, I was overjoyed, thinking she'd found a way to deal with her grief."

She scoffed. "When I first met the Viscount, I was suspicious of him. Something about him could not appeal to me, but Mother convinced me that it was only because I was worried he would take Father's place in our lives. She assured me that wouldn't happen.

"For a moment, things were wonderful again. The Viscount was affectionate towards her, and that was all that mattered, especially since I was a mere child whose opinions didn't matter. Mother was blinded by love and couldn't see that he truly was bad for her."

Her hands tightened on the sheet she held up to her chest. "She still is, despite all that has happened. I don't believe she would ever see the Viscount for the monster that he is."

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Samuel's rage was evident in his eyes. "Did he ever... lay his hands on you?"

Nora looked away, and Samuel's hands balled into fists.

He breathed in heavily before speaking. "I hate violent men... My father—the late Duke—was a very strict man when it came to educating me. My relationship with him was more that of a teacher and student than father and son."

The Duke turned to face her, and she could see in his eyes that it was not something he enjoyed speaking about. "His strictness was part of the reason the rumor about me being violent exists. Like father like son, after all."

Samuel chuckled humorlessly. "His need for me to be perfect meant that whenever I failed at something or did it wrong, I would be punished cruelly. I came close to dying once after he left me out in the cold as a punishment. It was a moment of realization for me. He could never be the father I wished him to be."

Nora gasped, making him chuckle. Her heart ached for him, the little boy who only wished to be loved but instead received pain and torment.

"Perhaps I should not say this, but it is a secret I have carried for so long." He swallowed. "When he died, I felt relief instead of sorrow. It was like a burden had been lifted off my shoulders and I could finally breathe."

Silence returned to the room. "I guess there was a reason we found each other, after all. Two broken people hurt by those who should care about them. Our stories will bring tears to many eyes if we make it a drama in the theater."

Samuel laughed suddenly, his body shaking beside hers. “Have you considered investing in business, Lady Nora? You appear to have the mind for it.”

“Perhaps I should.” She grinned. “With you as my teacher, I would be rivaled by none.”

She smiled when he chuckled once again. She had never seen him so free of his worries as he currently was. She leaned forward and pressed her lips to his, kissing him softly.

Samuel’s hands came up to her shoulder, and he gently pushed her away from him. She looked at him with a confused expression.

“I cannot touch you now that our deal is over, Lady Nora,” he said with a pained smile.

Nora pushed away from him, slightly embarrassed and also disappointed. She hadn’t thought that he would reject her like that.

“I can, however, teach you how to please yourself,” he said, rushing to explain when she only looked at him with confusion. “You said you only did it once but could not enjoy it.”

Nora nodded as her face turned red. He lifted her dress up to her waist. He took her hand in his and pressed it to the nub at the apex of her center.

“Rub it gently. Feel around it and only stop when you have found the place that feels so much better than all the others,” he said, moving her fingers around.

She gasped as her fingers strummed underneath the nub, sending pleasure through her body.

Samuel grinned. “There it is. Pull up the hood.”

He directed her fingers to the hood, pulling it up as she rubbed against it. She tossed her head back as pleasure flowed through her, her earlier embarrassment forgotten.

Her hips tensed as the heat mounted, becoming more and more intense inside her. She groaned as her legs shook and she came with a loud moan.

Nora looked at him in shock.

“Now you know what to do when you wish to pleasure yourself. You learn more as you continue to do it,” he said, pulling her skirts down to cover her exposed legs.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

The sun rays shined brightly into the room, waking Samuel from his slumber. He groaned, lifting a hand to protect his face from the sudden brightness. His eyes adjusted to the space, and he looked down at the woman fast asleep beside him.

She was every bit as beautiful asleep as she was when she was awake. She moved in her sleep, freeing his hand from under her body. He pulled her closer to him, breathing in the scent of her hair, a mix of flowers and oils.

He tensed suddenly. It was the first time that he had ever spent the night with a woman until the next morning, and the first time he’d ever slept holding her in his arms like that. His jaw ticked wildly. He should not have been so affected by it, and yet it filled him with irritation that he was so happy to have her wrapped in his arms like that.

Samuel had made his seven-night rule because it helped him to avoid the problem of developing feelings for the woman he was with. He could never develop feelings for

her, not when he knew he couldn't marry her.

Her light snores drew his attention back to her, and he sighed. There she was, innocently asleep as his mind raced. How could he marry her when it would only bring her pain?

He rubbed a hand down his face in agitation and confusion. This was not the way things were supposed to go. He shouldn't be developing feelings for her, especially since he had only spent five nights with her, the fifth of which she had only accepted merely to tell him that she was putting an end to their agreement.

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Samuel could never give her hope of anything more between them. He could never marry her, nor did he want to. He couldn't risk turning out to be as cruel as his father was.

His mother had been nonchalant towards him, but he knew that although they had an understanding, she too had understood just how cruel the man she married truly was. Samuel couldn't risk marrying Nora and turning out to be the very man he hated being around.

The thought of having kids with her was not something he could stomach. She would want kids if he could ever bring himself to marry her. He couldn't do that, knowing the kind of father and husband he would be.

Some men were meant to be neither husbands nor fathers, and he turned out to be one of them.

He turned towards her as she turned in her sleep and woke up. Her eyes fluttered open slowly, and she squinted against the brightness of the room. Samuel grimaced. He had gotten so lost in thought that he forgot to close the windows to block out the sunlight.

"Good morning, Your Grace," she said in a sleepy voice that still held much sleep.

"Good morning," Samuel responded. He looked her over, his heart bleeding as he realized that there was no easy way out of this.

His decision to stay away from her would only hurt the two of them. However,

staying would also hurt them. He could only make the decision that would be better for them in the long run.

“Have you been awake for long?” she asked him, stretching.

“No, I only just woke up,” he said, rolling off the bed.

He splashed water on his face as he stood before the open window, wishing the morning breeze could blow away his worries.

“I will have food brought in for us and water for a bath. Then we can continue on our journey before none is the wiser,” he said without looking at her.

His feet led him towards the door. He needed to be away from her so he could clear his thoughts and find a way out of the terrible situation that held his thoughts captive.

He did not want to be with her, but he also did not want to lose her, which was the best decision he could make for her. Seeing her off to her aunt’s was the last thing he would do for her before she would be out of his reach.

“I don’t think I want to go,” she said, making him pause just as his fingers grazed the knob.

“I beg your pardon?” he asked, wondering if he had heard correctly. her right.

“I do not wish to go to my aunt’s. I thought about it all night, and there is no way I can leave my mother with my stepfather. I do not think I could ever stop worrying about her if I leave, so I simply won’t run away,” she said, smiling at him.

“Are you certain of your decision?” he asked her.

Her eyes held uncertainty even as she nodded. “I would be able to do as I please within the confines of my current station if I go to my aunt’s. I will no longer have to live in fear of what my stepfather could do at any moment. However, my mother has no one to defend her when he tries to hurt her. I don’t believe I can forgive myself if I leave and something happens to her.”

She smiled sadly, looking out the window. “My plans had always been for the two of us. I admit that I panicked when Lord Worlington threatened to send me away. I cannot decide which is a worse fate. Staying home with him just to protect my mother or going to live with his dratted sister.”

Her face had gone red with frustration. “So, while it pains me to give up on the freedom I have dreamed of for so long, I know I will not enjoy it if she is not there to enjoy it with me.”

Samuel heaved a sigh mixed with relief and dread. “I see you have thought this through and made up your mind.”

She nodded. “It was all I could think of last night.”

Samuel nodded. “I will have hot water and breakfast sent up, and we will be on our way.”

He walked out of the room, his troubles solidifying. It had been easier when his decision was merely to let her go live with her aunt or keep her with him. However, now that she would be close, Samuel did not know how he would stay away from her.

He clenched his jaw as he returned to the room to prepare for their journey back home. He ate in silence, the food tasting like ash in his mouth. Nothing was going the way he wanted it to go.

Nora sat opposite Samuel in the carriage, doing her best to look everywhere but at him. He had been absent-minded during dinner, only speaking when she asked him questions. It hadn't taken long for her to realize that there was something on his mind he did not wish to speak of. She had clammed up, hoping things would be better when he cleared his thoughts.

She held her bag tightly, looking out the window. Things hadn't turned out to be better. In fact, they had become worse. Samuel was cold towards her for reasons she could not understand.

"Is something wrong, Your Grace?" she asked him, unable to carry on with the silence a moment longer. She stared straight at him, waiting for him to answer.

They were still some distance away from her home, and sitting in awkward silence was not how she intended to spend the rest of their journey if it could be helped.

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Nora tensed up as the Duke regarded her quietly. His dark blue eyes bored into hers. She tried to look beyond the walls that he always had up. He had been different with her the night before. Perhaps she could see past that and find out what it was that was making him guarded.

“Has something happened? Perhaps you could tell me, Your Grace,” she said when she couldn’t look past his walls. He was shutting her out, much like he always had in the past.

She had always felt like she knew nothing about him other than what he was willing to show her. Last night had filled her with hope that things could be different, but now it seemed like it was too good to be true. He had reverted to his old self.

“My feelings or the thoughts that keep me quiet are of no importance to you, Lady Nora,” he said finally, turning away from her as he picked through the papers he had gotten from the innkeeper.

She stared at him in shock. “I apologize for intruding. I understand that you don’t have to share every detail of what you are thinking merely because you opened up to me last night and told me things you have never told anyone.”

“Quite so, Lady Nora,” he said, rifling through the papers for the current affairs.

The carriage trundled on in silence as Nora sought a way to keep herself busy, so she did not have to deal with the thought of the Duke and the reason for his sudden coldness towards her.

“You were right for wanting to end our agreement,” he said suddenly, not looking up from the papers.

She flinched. After making her decision to return home, picking up where they left off was the one thing she had begun to look forward to. She had hoped that they could continue with it, at least until her seven nights were over and he no longer wished to see her.

It appeared she was right, after all. The moment he offered her help, he would no longer wish to continue.

But why come after me? A sense of responsibility? The gentlemanly thing to do?

She massaged her head, the thoughts causing her a mild headache that was more bothersome than hurtful.

“I had hoped that we could?—”

He raised his hand, cutting her off before she could finish what she wished to say. She stared at him desperately, unable to understand what was going on.

Why are you so cold?

“We cannot continue, Lady Nora. I wish I could give you what you want, but I cannot marry you or make you happy,” he said.

She scoffed disbelievingly as she crossed her arms over her chest protectively. “I never asked you to marry me, Your Grace. I am quite aware of what our deal was. It was never about marriage for either of us.”

Nora glared at him, irritated by his words. They irritated her not only because he had

uttered them when she knew not to ask him for them, but also because she had started to hope for more.

A part of her had begun to hope that his presence in the carriage, stopping her from leaving and telling her his secret meant that he had begun to have feelings for her, but it appears that it had only been a moment of weakness on his part.

She laughed.

Is the Duke ever weak?

All of this could have been because he merely wished to even things out since she had volunteered information about herself and her past, even though he hadn't asked for it in the first place.

"I apologize if my words have caused you any level of discomfort, Lady Nora. It was never my intention. I merely wished to inform you how things are to be." He folded the papers and stared at her. "We are approaching familiar grounds soon, so I'll let you go here. I'm glad you were able to come to a decision. I only wish you had been able to achieve what you truly desired."

Nora panicked. His words sounded like a goodbye. Like he would no longer be seeing her from now on. She didn't want it to be goodbye, and yet she knew it was only wise to keep her thoughts to herself.

Although their seven nights had not ended the way they were supposed to, he had promised her nothing more, and now there was nothing keeping them in contact.

She nodded in acceptance, biting her lip to stop it from quivering. She had never been great at goodbyes, which was one of the reasons why she mostly kept to herself.

“Of course, Your Grace. Thank you for coming to my aid.”

Samuel regarded her for a moment, his eyes scanning her face. He sighed and rapped on the roof of the carriage, and alighted the moment it stopped.

She watched, finally allowing the whimper she'd held back in his presence to break free. She would miss him, that much was obvious. The nights had come to mean more than just a means to make money for her. She had come to enjoy his company, and she had fallen in love with him.

“There you go. That's what you get for loving a man who doesn't care for you,” she said with a wry smile, sniffing quietly. She rested her head on the back of her seat, closing her eyes as she tried to forget all about it.

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At the moment, there were more important things for her to worry about, and that was how she would navigate her way into the estate. It would be a miracle if the Viscount had not noticed her absence just yet, although she could not see how that could be possible. She had been out of the estate for too long away.

“Where have you been?” the iscount said as soon as Nora stepped into the house.

She had had the carriage drop her at the back of the estate, away from prying eyes. She’d quickly discarded the bag she’d carried and walked in only to be greeted with the sight of the angry Viscount waiting for her at the foot of the stairs.

“I was—” She stopped, unable to come up with a reasonable excuse as to why she had been absent all night long. She eyed him. How much does he know?

“How could you spend the night out?” he asked as his face burned with fury. “Have you no shame? Sneaking out to spend the night with a man?”

Nora gasped, her eyes widening as she stared at him in shock.

He shook his head, his disappointment clear. “Did you think I wouldn’t find out that you were out with some unknown man? How long has this been going on? How long have you been sneaking out under my roof?”

He advanced towards her threateningly as his hands balled into fists. “Answer me right now.”

Nora backed away from him, but she could see in his eyes that she had made a

mistake, as the action only served to aggravate him some more. He lifted his hands and slapped her across the face.

She fell on the floor, the force from the slap enough to have her toppling over. She stared up at him in shock. The Viscount had almost always refrained from hitting her, focusing mostly on her mother instead. However, there were times like this when he was so angry that he did not care for anything other than satisfying his anger.

“Not only have you chosen to disgrace this household by spending the night with a man, but you have also chosen to humiliate yourself. How could you have been so stupid as to ruin your reputation?” he bellowed.

Nora’s eyes widened as she sought the nearest escape. She had made a terrible mistake by choosing to return home instead of running away. Now that it seemed her secret was out in the open, the Viscount would only have a stonger hold over her.

“Imagine my surprise when I found out that you were responsible for spreading those horrid rumors about yourself. I chose not to believe it because, surely, no one would be so stupid as to do such a thing. But now I find out that not only did you ruin your reputation, but you also chose to spend the night alone with heaven knows who,” he roared, pacing the hall.

Nora looked at her mother, who stood behind the Viscount, pleading with him to forgive her, even though he paid her no mind.

“Nora, how could you have done such a thing?” she asked in a tone filled with worry and concern.

SheNora glanced down in shame. She could not very well tell her mother why she had done it, as that would only make her feel terrible and make her stepfather take his anger out on her even more.

“The only reason I did not try to find you a husband was because I thought the rumors about you having been caught in the arms of a man and fleeing were true,” he said, shaking his head in disbelief. “Who would want a soiled lady, and one who is renowned at that? And now I find out that you were responsible for it.”

He glared at her as she picked herself up from the ground and stared at him. She would not allow him to make her feel ashamed of the choices she had to make. If it hadn't been for his destructive ways, she never would have done so.

She clenched her mouth shut, knowing that whatever she said or did would only cause him to be more aggravated.

“Now that I know that it was all your doing, I will see to it that you are married,” he said, clamping his hand around hers before she realized what was going on. He dragged her towards her room as the panic set in and she tried to free herself from his grasp.

The Viscount pushed her into her room, an ugly smirk on his lips. “You will not be leaving this estate until I have found you a suitor.”

“What? No, please no.” Nora ran towards him just as the door slammed shut.

She grabbed the handle, turning it even as she heard the key turning into the room, making her a prisoner.

She tried the handle once more, her mind refusing to accept what she knew was true. She slid down against the door when nothing happened, her heart breaking and her mind reeling with shock.

No...

CHAPTER NINETEEN

It had been a week since Samuel last saw Nora after they parted ways on the carriage ride, and he couldn't get her out of his mind. She plagued his thoughts in his every waking moment.

Samuel hadn't been able to stop thinking about his feelings for her. She had slowly wormed her way into his heart with her every word and action, and now that she was no longer with him, it was all he could do not to think about her. He had been so cold towards her when she'd done nothing but be warm to him.

Although he should keep his distance from her much like he had told her he would, Samuel couldn't help but worry about her. The last time he saw her was when she decided that she would return home for her mother's sake, and it worried him.

She had given up the life she wanted to make sure her mother wasn't left alone with an abusive man she refused to leave.

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“Have you heard anything I said, Samuel?” his mother asked, pulling him out of his thoughts. He looked down at her, his brow furrowing.

In truth, he hadn’t been paying attention to anything she said. He doubted he had paid much attention to anything that had gone on around him during this time. He had avoided Benedict, knowing his friend would pick up on any change in his demeanor.

Unfortunately, at the moment, that meant all of him. Nora had succeeded in taking over every aspect of his life even in her absence. It was a thought that left a sour taste in his mouth.

“Samuel?” his mother called once again.

Samuel looked up just as he was about to answer her and saw Selina and Thalia, Nora’s friends. He offered his mother an apologetic look.

“I’m sorry, Mother, but there is something I must do. Perhaps we can continue this walk some other time?” he asked, although he did not give her time to respond before he slowly led her in the direction of their carriage.

He kept an eye on the ladies in the hope that they would not disappear before he had a chance to ask them about Nora’s welfare.

Samuel hurried across the park, not stopping for a conversation with any of the people who tried to speak with him or greet him.

“Lady Thalia, Lady Selina, how wonderful to see you both here,” he said, wearing the

mask he reserved for almost everyone. Nora was the only one who had seen parts of him without it.

“Your Grace.” Selina’s eyes widened as she looked between her sister and the older woman with them. “This is my mother, Lady Flemington.” Fletcher.”

Samuel nodded, bowing slightly. “Lady Flemington, good evening.”

“Good evening, Your Grace,” Lady Flemington replied warmly, staring up at him with unbridled curiosity.

“I do hope I can borrow your daughters for a mere moment, My Lady. There is something rather important I wish to discuss with them,” he said, looking between the girls and their mother.

“Oh, certainly, Your Grace. I do hope there is no problem,” she said, staring at her daughters, who shook their heads.

“Not at all, My Lady. I merely wish to ask a question,” he said honestly, tapping impatiently on the side of his trousers with his glove.

Lady Flemington walked away, standing underneath the shade of a tree as she offered them the privacy that they required.

“Your Grace, how can we be of assistance to you?” Thalia asked, her eyes boring into his.

Samuel suppressed the smile that tugged at the corner of his lips. She was strong of mind and seemed like the type who was not easily intimidated.

“Your friend, Lady Nora. How is she?” he asked, keeping the desperate curiosity

from his voice.

“We cannot say for sure, Your Grace. It’s been a few days since we saw her,” Selina added, her face mirroring the worry Samuel felt in his heart.

He swallowed. It was one thing for him to not have seen Nora, especially with how cold he had been towards her the last time. However, the girls always seemed to be inseparable, always together whenever they were at balls. Nora also happened to talk about them a lot, which made things even more shocking.

“Has something happened?” he asked.

Thalia looked uncomfortable. “I’m not certain how much Nora has told you, and I simply cannot betray her confidence in such a manner.”

Selina rolled her eyes at her just as Samuel spoke. “I assure you, Lady Thalia, whatever is said here will only remain between us. I merely wish to know how she is, since I have neither seen nor heard from her in some days.”

Thalia glared at Selina, who jabbed her lightly in the ribs. “Of course, Your Grace.”

Selina rushed to continue now that Thalia appeared to be on board with the idea.

With every second they spent deliberating on how much they wished to tell him, Samuel’s mind wandered as he thought about all that could have happened to Nora at her stepfather’s hand.

“We truly haven’t seen Nora for some days. However, she was able to write to us a week ago, informing us that Lord Worlington has kept her locked up and forbidden her from leaving the house,” Thalia said.

“He found out that she was responsible for ruining her reputation, and now that he knows the truth, he wishes to marry her off. She has been forbidden from leaving the house, and we are not allowed to visit her.”

“It’s been a week since we received the letter from her saying she cannot see us, and so far, we haven’t received any other letter from her. Our letter to her went answered, so we are left to imagine that the Viscount has the letter, and it never got to her,” Selina added.

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“It is either that, or she is unable to have a second letter sent to us,” Thalia said.

Samuel sighed. He should have convinced her to go to her aunt’s, where she would have been safer. Instead, he had chosen to be selfish, only thinking about how he would feel if she left. Now, she was in trouble, with no one to protect her.

Guilt, shock, and fury ate at him. He was furious with himself. However, his fury was also directed at the Viscount, who couldn’t see how wonderful and strongminded Nora was, and at her mother, whom she’d returned to protect but who couldn’t protect her from the vile man she married.

He kept his face blank, keeping his emotions to himself. There was no point in them knowing the turmoil churning within him.

Samuel thanked the ladies, escorting them back to their mother, who was patiently waiting for them. As he walked back home, his mind filled with ideas on how to get Nora out of the confinement she had been placed in.

He could not sit still as she was treated harshly and then married off to some undeserving man, much like in the fashion she had hoped to avoid by ruining her reputation.

A thought occurred to him as he neared his estate. The one thing people like the Viscount liked was being seen as important. He would host a dinner party at home, the first one he’d have since he became the Duke. Then he would invite the Viscount and make sure to be clear that the invitation was extended to everyone in his household, including Nora.

When he finally got her alone with him, he would find a way to make sure that she didn't return to the prison her home had become.

Samuel rushed into the estate, walking into the sunroom, where he was certain to find his mother.

"Mother, I wish to host a dinner party at the estate," he announced, stunning her.

The Dowager Duchess stared at him, her mouth opening and closing. Samuel marveled at the sight, feeling a slight bit of pleasure at it. This was the first time he had managed to stun her into silence. His mother often had a lot to say when it came to the decisions that he made, no matter how many times he made it clear that he did not care to listen.

"Oh, that's a surprise. I cannot say that I am not surprised by your decision to host a dinner party. Where has this come from?" she asked after she found her words.tongue.

Samuel shrugged. "I simply believe it's time we have one. I have never done so since I became a duke. Don't you believe it is time people are treated to one?"

She nodded, still staring at him in shock. "I suppose that is true. I cannot deny that it would be a good idea to host a dinner party, but why now? And all of a sudden?"

She walked up to him, looking him over. "You did not seem to have this idea on our walk, so what could have happened between the time I left you and now?"

Samuel's jaw ticked. Even now, she refused to acknowledge that things could never be as she wished them. He had hoped for a mother who cared about him when he was merely a young boy, but he hadn't gotten that. Instead, he had gotten a mother who constantly disappeared and reappeared as she liked, never caring what happened to

him.

Now was not the time for her to act like the mother he needed all those years ago, not when he didn't need one anymore.

"If you will not tell me why you wish to host such an event?" she asked, sitting back down.

Samuel looked at her for a moment and sighed. "Please, take care of the necessary preparations, Mother. I would hate for this to not turn out the way that I wish it to."

His mother nodded, turning to him. Samuel frowned when he saw the glint in her eyes. He dismissed it and walked away. He would leave it all to her. There were other things that he needed to take care of, if this was going to go the way he wished.

He walked to his study, drained by the conversation with his mother. It was never a good feeling speaking with his mother about things that caused her to pry. He preferred to keep her at arm's length. However, she refused to let things be.

He pushed the thought to the back of his mind as he prepared to pen a letter to the Viscount.

Samuel had never had reasons to make dealings with the Viscount, especially since they did not run in the same circles. The Viscount had always kept questionable company, one that did not much suit Samuel's taste, but now was not the time for him to balk at the thought of inviting him.

Samuel heaved a sigh as he sent for his butler. Now that he had made sure to specify that his invite was for the whole family, the Viscount would have no choice but to make sure that Nora, and her mother by extension, were present at the party.

He was a duke. While he was not one to pull rank, he knew that now, the Viscount had no choice but to bring Nora along, as anything else would be considered a slight towards him.

CHAPTER TWENTY

“I trust you can manage to behave yourself for the next few hours?” Lord Worlington growled at Nora, glaring at her like he would rather she hadn’t been invited.

“Heaven only knows why the Duke would personally invite you,” he muttered under his breath before turning to glare at her once more. “I certainly hope you haven’t managed to cause any trouble for me, girl. I will not be as kind as I am now if that’s the case.”

Nora scoffed quietly. The Viscount did not know the meaning of the word kind. He had locked her in her room all week, only allowing the door to be opened whenever she was to have a bath or eat.

Unfortunately for her, none of the servants were willing to risk their positions for her, and she would never ask them to. Although she could tell that they pitied her and wished she did not have to experience this, they unfortunately feared Lord Worlington more, and that was all it took to keep her captive.

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It was surprising even that he continued to feed her every time she was supposed to eat, although she was certain it was because he planned to marry her off and did not want her looking terrible when the time came time to marry her off.

To him, she was merely a means to fill his coffers with money. She had never been anything more, and it would be delusional for her to imagine the opposite. Until the day came when she was to marry, she would remain a stranger.

A prisoner in my own home.

“Is anything funny, girl?” Lord Worlington growled once more, coming to stand before her menacingly.

He had been more threatening towards her lately, which she knew was because now he believed she had no right to refuse to act in the way that he wanted her to act..

She shook her head immediately. This was the first time she would be let out of her room, and the last thing she wanted to do was ruin it and be sent back to her room before she could even make it out the door.

“No, Lord Worlington,” she responded somewhat meekly.

She had not lost her fire as he thought. However, it was best that he thought so. Nora did not know what her next move would be. She hadn’t expected her stepfather to find out about her ruining her reputation. Nor had she realized that she would be caught and locked the moment she returned, before she even had time to try to convince her mother to leave once more.

She stared at her mother now, wishing the woman would find her strength and try to help her at least once.

Her mother had come to her room once. Nora couldn't tell if it was on Lord Worlington's orders or if she had chosen to do so on her own. Her mother had tried to make her see reasons why marrying the man Lord Worlington had chosen for her might not be a bad choice after all, especially if it would get her out of her room.being locked up.

Her eyes remained fixed on the carriage door, looking anywhere but at her mother. In all the years she had willed her mother to fight back and leave her scoundrel of a husband, this was the first time she had ever truly been exceptionally disappointed in her.

They arrived at the dinner party in the estate that Nora had visited a few times. She looked up when she stepped out. This was the first time she would be arriving without a cloak wrapped around her, and yet it didn't feel as wonderful as she'd always imagined it would be.

“Remember what I said, Nora. You are to stay within sight at all times. The moment you leave my sight for even a moment,we will all be returning home, and you will face punishment for your actions. I need not try to impress upon you why that would be grave,” the Viscount said in a threatening tone, wrapping his hand around her arm tightly.

“Your future husband will be visiting us in a couple of days to discuss the details of your marriage. You will be married off by the end of the month.” He grinned at her, his smile widening when her mask of composure slipped, showing how horrified she truly was.

Hearing him set a date suddenly made her see how real it was. She would be losing

her freedom soon enough and becoming the woman her mother had slowly become under the Viscount's terror.

He let go and sighed, putting on an air of civility. "Well, come on, then."

He held an arm out for her mother, who took it and followed him in while Nora walked behind them, her steps trudging, every second leading her to her doom.

Nora walked in, looking around for her friends. She heaved a sigh when she saw Selina waving her hands at her excitedly and rushed over to them.

"Nora, oh dear heavens, I have missed you so," Selina said, wrapping her in a hug. "Are you all right?"

Thalia looked at her before pulling her into her arms much like Selina had. "Tell me, Nora. What had happened in the past days?"

Nora swallowed back her tears now that she was away from the house and with her friends. "The Viscount was waiting for me when I returned home. He'd found out what happened and was so enraged. I have been locked up in my room all week, and this is the first time I've been allowed out since he locked me in."

She shook her head to clear the sadness she felt. "The Duke was kind enough to escort me back to London when I realized I couldn't leave my mother behind. I haven't been able to thank him."

She frowned. A part of her wanted to tell them all about the night she spent at the inn with him, but it suddenly seemed so private. A memory she wanted to cherish for herself.

"It's quite clear to me now. I am in love with the Duke, but he is not in love with me.

I have decided it is best if I do as Lord Worlington says and marry the man he's chosen for me. Surely, he cannot be so terrible that he is worse than the Viscount," she said sadly, her words holding so much pain.

"Oh, but the Duke seemed to be?—"-"

Thalia shook her head at Selina, stopping her words. "Enough, Selina. I'm sure Nora knows more about how the Duke feels than we do."

Selina heaved a sigh, her usually happy mood suddenly dampened.

Guilt ripped through Nora. She had only just met her friends after over a week, and she had managed to ruin the mood.

Samuel's eyes continued to drift to Nora no matter how many times he tried not to look at her. He could tell that she did not wish to be there. Her eyes told the story of her tiredness, although every other part of her was so put together that he would be none the wiser if he hadn't already known all that she'd had to go through at the hands of that swine.

I have to find a way to speak with her alone.

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That was the only way he would ever truly be able to ease his worries. Not that he thought he would ever be truly free of his worries about her.

“Samuel, the evening is perfect for a stroll, and I’m sure Lady Marina is quite wound up from being in such a crowded room. Perhaps you could take her for a walk around the gardens,” his mother asked him, wearing a small smile.

Samuel looked between his mother and the petite blonde. She curtsied, giving him that beautiful smile, but he was not moved.

All night, his mother had constantly tried to get them to talk, even though he had made it clear from the moment she chose to invite the lady that he was not interested and would have nothing to do with her.

His mother had never been so resilient about matching him with a lady as she was with Lady Marina.

“May I speak with you for a moment, Mother?” he asked. “Alone?”

Lucy-Anne looked between her son and the woman she wished him to marry, her expression showing how torn she was to leave her out of their conversation.

Samuel scoffed. His mother had never been torn when it came to making decisions that concerned him, not even when she knew his interest lay elsewhere. He walked a short distance away, waiting for her to join him.

He stopped after he was sure they were out of earshot and stared at her. “Mother, I

need you to stop insisting on matching me with Lady Marina because I will not marry her.”

The Dowager Duchess matched his look. “You have not tried to find a duchess for yourself, which is why I have had to resort to such means. You can no longer avoid it. It is your duty as the Duke to marry and have an heir. How else will you carry on the family name?”

Samuel glared at her, utterly irritated by her refusal to let the topic go. “We have had this conversation before, Mother. I will not entertain it again, because this will be the end of this discussion.”

His mother looked taken aback. “Samuel! Where is your understanding of responsibility?!”

Samuel walked off, leaving her standing there. He realized that he no longer cared about what was expected of him as the Duke. Nora had changed that for him.

He had always been able to pick up on the signs, although she tried not to let it show, since they were entertaining.

“Your Grace, this note came in for you,” the butler said, handing him a note.

Samuel looked at it quizzically, turning it around for a clue of whom it was from. However, the note did not include a name.

Meet me at the veranda. We need to talk.

He crumbled the note in his hands, immediately turning and heading in that direction. Surely it had to be from Nora. She must have been looking for a way to speak with him. He struggled to wipe the smile off his face as he hurried towards the veranda.

Samuel paused when a movement caught his attention. He frowned when he saw Nora walking down the hallway. He hurried after her, eager to speak with her.

There were so many things he wished to speak with her about, none of which seemed right whenever he thought about them. But first, he wanted to apologize to her for being cold during their trip back. He knew she had begun to develop feelings for him, that much had been obvious for a while. However, he should have handled the situation better, even if he did not wish to be married.

He followed her, his brow furrowing as she turned a bend that led away from the veranda and into the study. She'd been there enough times to know where the veranda was. He shrugged as he followed her into the study.

"Nora," he called, reaching to touch her.

He withdrew his hand when she jumped and turned around in surprise. She looked shocked to see him there.

"Your Grace, what are you doing here?" she asked.

Samuel took in all of her and the letter in her hand. She hid it behind her, her face turning red at being caught.

"I should be asking you what you are doing here," he said.

Shouldn't you be on the veranda?

"I got lost and couldn't find my way back," she said in a small voice.

Samuel shook his head, advancing towards her. "You have been here a few times already. You cannot get lost so easily."

She opened her mouth to respond, but no words came out. At that moment, Samuel realized the one thing that mattered more than anything he'd been thinking about telling her when he finally had a chance to speak with her.

I've missed you.

He cleared his throat. "I have been so worried about you. So worried that Lord Worlington would try to hurt you that it has hounded my every waking and sleeping moment. I haven't been able to sleep for the past few days."

He looked away from her. it was the first time he would reveal his feelings to anyone, the first time he'd truly felt something for anyone, and it hadn't been so easy for him to admit.

"Your Grace, this may be the last time that we see each other," Nora said, ignoring what had turned out to be a slight confession on his part. But it possibly meant nothing to her, considering how much he'd changed his mind and how he had been harsh with her.

"I am to be married soon and will no longer be able to see you," she said, looking away from him.

Samuel's heart pounded heavily in his chest. He hadn't the faintest idea how he had expected things to go. However, things were turning out wrong. Despite knowing already that the Viscount wished to marry her off, hearing it from her lips and seeing the look of hopelessness that showed that her fight was over and that she believed she had lost was too much for him to bear.

"There is still one more night for us to spend together if we include the night spent at the inn," he said calmly, although his emotions were like a raging sea.

Nora looked up at him with disbelief. “Don’t you get what I am trying to tell you, Your Grace? I do not have one more night to share with you. I am a prisoner until I am married, and even that is to happen sooner than I thought. It’s all over.”

Her words ended with a choked sob, her legs giving out as she used the table in his study to hold herself up. She breathed in deeply, her eyes filling with hurt and pain she’d tried so hard to keep from him in all the times that they were together.

They were two broken people, like she had said at the inn. Broken and hurt, disappointed by those who should’ve protected them. He was the only one she had left to protect him from what was beginning to seem like her fate.

Will I fail you too?

Samuel swallowed back his emotions. Now was the time to be logical and think up a way to help her. He reached behind her in her unguarded moment and snatched the letter from her hand.

“No... don’t read that!” she screamed, rushing towards him to get it from him.

Her mouth opened in shock, and her eyes widened as she lost her footing and stumbled into him, knocking him down, with her on top of him.

She gasped, trying to pull away from him as she once again tried to get back her letter. “You cannot read that. Not yet, at least. Not before I leave.”

Her voice was pleading, and yet Samuel paid her no mind, holding her to him with one hand and ripping the letter open with the other. His eyes scanned the letter, confirming what he already knew to be true. This was goodbye and regret at having not been able to tell him that she loved him. Wishing things had turned out differently between them.

“You were not supposed to see that until I left. I was planning to hide it in one of your drawers so you would find it someday, but not today,” she said, her voice defeated.

She pushed herself up with her hands on his chest, but he held her in place. “Why did you send me a note to meet you on the veranda?”

Nora looked at him quizzically. “I never sent you any note. This is the only one I planned to send you.”

She motioned to the letter in his hands just as they heard voices coming up in the direction of the study. She tried to stand up, her eyes wide with panic, but she was not quick enough, as the door opened to show a couple of the guests along with Lord Worlington walking into the room.

“Nora? We have been looking all over for you, and this is what you are up to?” he bellowed as she flinched.

Her mouth opened, and she got off Samuel, standing with so many eyes on her. They had been caught in a scandal.

“Get over here, girl,” Timothy said, taking her hand in his and dragging her out of the room.

“Don’t hurt her,” Samuel said, getting up off the floor to follow after them.

He did not care much for what the crowd thought. The only thing he cared about was getting to her before Lord Worlington could hurt her, considering all she had already been through under his tyranny.

“Samuel, stop right this instant,” his mother screamed, stopping in his path. Her eyes

held her fury as she glared at him with so much anger than he had ever seen her display before.

“What is wrong with you? Your behavior is quite inappropriate. What is this I am hearing about a scandal?” she snapped, poking his chest. “You are an embarrassment. I can barely recognize you anymore.”

Samuel returned his mother’s glare, causing her to back down “I don’t care what you think, Mother, and I certainly do not care what members of the ton think of me. I only care about Nora, and right now you are in my way.”

He spoke loud enough to command the attention of those who were around him, and they stared at him in shock. He had meant it when he said he didn’t care what anyone thought. Not even his mother.

He walked past her, relieved when she did not run after him or try to stop him. All he wanted was to reach them before they disappeared.

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Guilt filled him as he ran outside. He should've let her go when she tried to get away from him. It was the only way he could ensure that her stepfather did not harm her.

No, that's not true.

He shook his head. The man delighted in hitting women weaker than him. He would have tried to hurt her no matter what had happened today.

Samuel's face set with determination. This would be the last time he would allow the Viscount to raise his hand to Nora. Never again would she be subjected to the kind of punishment he had constantly inflicted on her.

Samuel

He reached their carriage just as Lord Worlington pushed Nora towards it.

"Get in, you stupid girl. I should have known you would find a way to embarrass me no matter how much I tried to drill it into your head not to do so. I warned you of the consequences of your actions, but you didn't listen, and now whatever happens is on you."

He raised his hand to hit her just as Samuel rushed towards him and punched him in the chin, causing him to lose his balance and fall over.

The Viscountess rushed towards them, her arms stretched out to help her husband up to his feet, but he brushed her away, looking at her with scorn.

“Get off me, woman. This is all your doing. You should have been harsher with her and taught her how a woman should behave. Instead, you would rather chase after me and try to control everything I do,” he bellowed, standing to his feet.

He stared at the Duke, his glare faltering the moment he saw the murderous glint in Samuel’s eyes. Samuel regarded the pair with irritation. The mother for caring too much about a man who would hurt her daughter and the man for hitting Nora.

His hands clenched into fists, and he watched as the Viscount took a step back.

What a weakling of a man.

He calmed himself, looking at Nora, who stood with her hands wrapped around herself as though she would rather be anywhere but there. Regret and guilt filled him once again. This was not how he had expected things to play out when he planned the dinner party.

He shook his head. None of it mattered anymore. He would make it right one way or another.

“I will be coming by the estate tomorrow to speak with you. If I see any hair out of place or missing from her head, I will make sure you pay dearly for it. Are we clear?” he growled, glaring at the Viscount, who looked like he was barely managing to hold himself back from punching Samuel.

“You had better be there tomorrow like you have said,” the Viscount said instead, climbing into the carriage after ushering Nora and the Viscountess in.

Nora remained silent as the carriage drove them home. Even her mother, who was often given to tears and pleading, knew to remain silent. The air between them was charged as Timothy massaged his chin where Samuel had punched him.

He laughed suddenly, the sound causing her to jump as he leaned forward to stare at her. “How cunning you are. I never would have expected this from you, with how you behave.”

He laughed again, clapping his hands maniacally as Nora looked at her mother, who was watching him, not knowing how to respond to his sudden outburst of laughter.

“This is actually working in our favor, my dear. You did the right thing, and I must say that you have made me proud tonight. I have never been so impressed as I am now,” he said, laughing once again, only stopping when he winced from the pain in his jaw.

“Perhaps I should be angry that he hit me, but I cannot be, not when you will be marrying a duke and making me a lot of money. My coffers have never had such a prospect of looking so abundant before.”

The Viscount cackled once again, leaning back into his seat as the Viscountess wrapped her hand around Nora’s.

Nora looked down at their intertwined hands as her stomach dropped. This was so much worse than marrying whatever old baron the Viscount had chosen for her. He only intended to use the Duke as a means to make money. She could not allow it.

What can I do?

The Viscount was so much stronger than her, and now that everyone knew they had been caught in a terrible position, it would ruin her if the Duke did not marry her. She doubted the Baron would be eager to marry her when he found out her reputation had truly been ruined.

She could only imagine Lord Worlington’s reaction if things did not go the way he

wanted them to.

The Viscount laughed once again, looking up at the ceiling of the carriage, his fingers calculating some imaginary sum.

“I do not care how it came to be or how you managed to lure him into the study with you, but marrying a duke is definitely better than the baron I had planned to marry you off to, no matter how ill-mannered of a man the Duke is.”

He glowered before bursting into laughter once again, the sound grating on Nora’s ears as the carriage drove them back home.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

“Idon’t know how else to tell you this, but I do not think you can be like your father even if you tried,” Benedict said, handing Samuel a glass of alcohol.

Samuel took a sip as he heaved a sigh. The party had ended moments after his outburst, as Benedict and his mother ushered the last of the guests out of the house. They had been buzzing with excitement, desperate to get more information.

The dinner party had turned out to be the most entertaining thing that had happened in a while, and those who had missed it would soon hear about it from their friends, filled with deep regret for missing out on what turned out to be theater.

Samuel did not care much about any of that. He had meant it when he said he did not care about the opinions of the members of the ton, although he knew it would not be the same for Nora. Although she was strong, she was also a lady, and that meant that she would face more judgment from people than he would—not that he would ever let it get to that.

Samuel sighed as he stared out the window. Benedict clapped him on the back before taking a seat. He had turned out to be like his father, after all. He had hurt a man in the throes of passion. Losing himself because he fell in love with Nora had been one of the reasons that had stopped him from wishing to have a wife. He had seen what love did to people, and now he’d experienced it firsthand.

“Samuel, I need you to know that I am not saying this to console you as a friend, but anyone in your shoes would have done the same thing. You were only trying to

protect Nora from that monster. That doesn't make you like your father. Instead, it suggests that you are different from the kind of man he was."

He nodded, although he could not bring himself to accept his friend's words. It made sense that he would protect the person he loved no matter what. However, his father had been prone to violence and cruelty. It would only take so little for him to begin to toe the line and continue the legacy his father had left behind.

"I don't know, Benedict. I have never felt such rage as I did at that moment. It was like something took over me and I couldn't stop myself even if I tried to," he said, looking down at his hand.

His knuckles were bruised from the heavy blow he landed to Lord Worlington's chin. He should've been able to stop himself and Lord Worlington with his words, but instead, he had done more than that, and that was unforgivable.

A knock sounded at the door that had been left slightly ajar, and the Dowager Duchess walked in, wearing a small smile.

"Can I please speak with my son a moment, Benedict?" she asked, walking into the center of the room.

"Certainly, Your Grace," Benedict said, getting up from the chair to excuse them.

Samuel's jaw ticked wildly as he waited for his mother to tell him exactly what he knew to be true. He was turning into his father.

Instead, she remained standing in front of him, peering down at him until he was forced to look up at her.

"I don't wish to speak to you, Mother," he said, still angry at her and also self-

conscious.

She was the only one who knew exactly what had transpired with his father. Although he had told Benedict about it, his friend had not been there to witness it directly.

“It will only be a minute, I promise,” she said, taking the seat opposite him.

She stared at him for moments until he wondered what it was she saw as she looked at him.

“The note you received. It was from Lady Marina,” she said, looking away from him as she blushed.

Samuel stared at her in shock. It was the first time he had seen her look so vulnerable. However, it did not come as a surprise to him that she had been the one responsible for it.

“I cannot say that I am surprised, Mother. I suspected that you had something to do with it,” he said.

She sat up straight, heaving a sigh. “It was the only way I could think to get you what you needed even though you have been fighting me on it. I was actually planning to make you get caught in a scandal with Lady Marina.”

“When I first heard the sound and whispers that you had been caught with a lady in the study, I thought it was her, and for a moment, although I did not wish to trick you into marriage, I was content to have done what needed to be done to ensure that you would be married.”

Samuel stared at her, utterly speechless. He had thought that she only wished to set

him up with Lady Marina so he would be forced to speak with her. He hadn't thought that she would go this far.

"I never would have believed that you would go as far as risking the family's reputation to get your way," he said, unable to understand why she couldn't just let him do things the way he wanted.

"I thought you were determined to never marry, and I did what I believed needed to be done," she said, standing up from her seat and walking over to the window. "I know that you are a true gentleman and you would never have allowed a lady to come to ruin, so I had counted on that to ensure that you would be married before winter came."

She turned to face him now, her eyes boring into his. "I had never expected that you would fall in love." She waved her hands in the air.

"Love is a fickle and foolish thing, and I believe it will fade away with time. However, I suppose I should be content that you will at least marry," she said.

"You do not approve of my choice of a wife, I know that," he said. "But Nora will make an excellent duchess."

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“You are right. I do not approve of her, but I suppose it doesn’t matter, after all. It is as you said—it is none of my business.” She offered him a small smile, which he returned.

His smile faded as he remembered what he had done. “I punched Lord Worlington.” Swinton.

Samuel stared in shock as his mother laughed out loud. He had never seen her laugh so freely before, only managing a smile and a peal of half-hearted practiced laughter when she was with the ladies in her circle. She had always been so stern and cold that it was a shock to see her like this.

“Good,” she said, smiling. “In truth, I have always hated the man. I’m glad that someone has finally given him a taste of his own medicine.”

Samuel was dumbfounded. The woman before him was nothing like the woman he had always known and the memories of her he carried in his heart.

“You need not appear so shocked. Although Julia and I have never been friends, I have seen her hiding her bruises way too many times for me to care about him. Somebody had to do it, and if your father was alive, he probably would have done the same.”

Samuel shook his head, his smile and shock fading, only to be replaced with anger. “This is what I never wanted to be. A man like father. Violent and cruel for no reason other than the pleasure of it.”

The Dowager Duchess nodded in agreement. “You are right, your father was very cruel and violent with you. However, he was never that way with anyone else. Especially not with his wife.”

Samuel stared into her eyes. He could see the honesty in them.

“I never approved of the way that your father treated you. However, I was never allowed to voice my objections no matter how strongly I felt. His father raised him in the same way that he raised you because he believed that was the only way to raise a duke right to grow up fearless and deserving of the title,” she explained, returning to her seat.

“That was what he was taught. However, you are right to hate him for choosing to treat you in a way that had caused him pain, even when he could have done things differently.”

Samuel looked away. He had not expected that he would ever hear any of this from his mother. Suddenly, things appeared different from how he had always viewed them.

“You do not have to raise your son to be that way. You could be different. When things don’t work, you try a different approach. I’m sure you have used that logic in your business before,” she reasoned.advised.

Samuel rested his head on his chair, suddenly exhausted. “This is why I have never wished to marry. It only serves to bring heartache and misunderstanding to one or all parties involved.”

She laughed once again. “Marriage is not what we imagine it to be when we are younger and still read fairytales.”

Her face fell, and her brow furrowed as she sighed. “You never had the chance to grow up with a fairytale notion of marriage, however flawed it would have been. I suppose none of it matters now. You no longer have the option of remaining unwed. After all, you have fallen in love.”

She got up, heading for the door. She stopped and turned around. “You do not have to worry about turning into a man like your father. You will never be like him, that much is obvious. However, if you still fear that it is a possibility, I will be thereto make sure that it doesn’t, and I suspect the lady will do so as well.”

Samuel smiled at her, grateful that she had not invalidated his fears or made him feel worse, as it often happened whenever they had a conversation, however rare it was.

“Samuel, I am sorry I did not stop your father from treating you the way he did. I know it does not excuse it, but I was young, and he was master of the house. It seemed like my hands were tied,” she said. “I cannot say for certain now whether that would have remained the case if things happened now, and I suppose that says a lot.”

She turned and left, leaving him in the quiet room to ponder on his thoughts and come to a decision. The one certainty was that he would be visiting Lord Worlington tomorrow. There had never been anything more certain than that.

He stood to retrieve the decanter and fill the glass when he noticed Nora’s letter in front of the fireplace. In all the commotion that had ensued, he had forgotten to pick it back up. Samuel bent to retrieve it, glad that it hadn’t been thrown into the fire or trampled on by the people who had filed into the room to witness the moment he was caught with her.

His thoughts drifted to Nora. Was she asleep? He doubted anyone would be able to sleep at a time like this when they were plagued by thoughts of their possible ruination.

Wait for me, Nora. I promise not to ever abandon you.

He would keep that promise even if he broke anything else. He hadn't told her he loved her, nor did he tell her that he wished to marry her. He hoped she would not worry herself with the thought that she had trapped him into a marriage he did not want.

Samuel remained awake until sunlight filtered through his window, plagued by the idea that she worried he would not want her.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Samuel yawned as the carriage rode through the cracks in the cobbled street leading up to Lord Worlington's home. He hadn't been able to get much sleep, and although he wished to, the last thing he wanted was for Nora to have any reason to believe that he would not be coming for her if he was delayed.

He would propose to her and make her his wife. He had thought about it all night. She made him happy, that much had been obvious from the very first night they spent together, when he had been so carried away that he barely noticed it had become day.

He loved her and would be happier to have her in his life than if she was married off to someone else.

The doors opened before he could knock as the butler stepped out. "Your Grace, His Lordship awaits you in his study."

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Samuel followed after the butler to the study, where Timothy sat waiting for him, a large grin on his face.

“Your Grace,” he said, walking towards him. “I’m glad you kept your word.”

Samuel held back his glare as he looked around. “I want Lady Nora to be present for this.”

Lord Worlington blustered. “I do not know why she has to be. It is not a woman’s place to decide on these things. She merely had to accept your proposal, and I believe she accepted it when she was caught with you in such a compromising position.”

Samuel grimaced as the man laughed disgustingly. He leveled him with a look that had his laughter turning into a cough.

“Of course, Your Grace, I’m sure she will be delighted to be present,” the Viscount grumbled, reaching to ring for a maid.

“Yes, My Lord,” the maid said in a subservient manner as she awaited his instruction.

“Fetch Nora,” he said with a glower like a petulant child who was made to choose between his toys.

The maid returned with Nora before walking away. Samuel glanced at her, taking his time to make sure that there was not a single bruise on her. Satisfied, he nodded.

“Lady Nora, I am here to ask for your hand in marriage. Will you marry me?” he

asked, ignoring Lord Worlington.

“Of course, she will. There is no other op?—”-”

“No, Your Grace. I do not wish to marry you,” Nora said, cutting off the Viscount.

“What? What do you mean you do not wish to marry him? He has ruined your reputation, and it is only right that he takes responsibility for it,” he shouted, pacing in front of her with a venomous look.

Samuel stared at her in shock. Much like the Viscount, he had expected her to say yes, especially after he had read her letter and knew that she loved him.

“Lady Nora, is there perhaps a reason why you do not wish to marry me?” he asked calmly.

Nora glared at the Viscount as he paced in front of her. She would not give him the satisfaction of knowing that he had won. She would never let him win.

All night, she had been bothered by the fact that for the Viscount, this was only a business transaction, although she had not expected much from the man. However, knowing that Samuel wouldn't be happy if she were to agree to the marriage was another reason that stopped her from doing so.

No one would be happy other than Lord Worlington, and she refused to give him the pleasure, as she would never be happy knowing that she had trapped Samuel into a marriage he did not wish to be in.

“I know that you truly do not wish to be married, Your Grace, and I cannot be happy knowing that you are stuck in an unhappy marriage you do not wish to be in. How could anyone ever wish that on someone they claim to love?

I will not let you marry me because of a scandal, when I know that you do not love me,” she finished.

“What are you on about, woman? What does it matter if he doesn’t wish to be tied down? Shouldn’t you have thought of that before you chose to meet in a secluded location and cause a scandal?” Timothy yelled, pointing a finger at her in anger.

“She accepts the proposal, Your Grace. She is merely in shock from all that happened last night,” he said to Samuel, before turning to her, his face turning into that of the monster he truly was.

She took a step back as he advanced on her, his finger pointed at her. “You. Get out now.”

Nora winced as she bellowed. She was used to the Viscount’s rage, and yet something about the way he approached her seemed different, like a man who was near losing his marbles.

“If you would leave us, Lord Worlington. I should like to speak with the lady alone,” Samuel said with barely restrained anger.

Nora watched the tick in his jaw as he glared at her stepfather. She waited for him to make his decision, her breath caught in her throat.

“This is not how things are meant to be done, Your Grace. This is a precarious situation, and I should be present for it,” the Viscount blustered.

“And you will be when she has accepted my suit and is ready to proceed with the marriage. Not a moment longer,” Samuel said, never budging on his decision.

He eyed the Viscount, who glared at both of them before walking out of the room.

Nora released the breath she did not realize she had been holding as the Viscount slammed the door shut behind him, mumbling as he went down the hallway. She waited until she could no longer hear him before turning to Samuel.

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“I meant it when I said I have no intention of trapping you in a marriage you do not wish to be in. All Lord Worlington cares about is lining his pockets. However, that is of no importance to me. I will not jeopardize your happiness or freedom, even if it means I have a scandal attached to me.”

“Nora,” Samuel called, smiling at her, but she shook her head.

“No, Your Grace. I bid you to not be so familiar with me. You know that I love you. I cannot deny it, since you have read my confession. I cannot have you call me by my given name, not when I am about to lose you,” she said, her voice shaking with the strength it took to not shed a tear.

“Nora,” he called once more, his smile bigger.

“Why do you treat me this way?” she asked, a single tear rolling down her cheek, escaping from the dam she had built around her tears.

He reached for her, wiping it with his thumb. “You will not lose me, Nora. I am not here merely because I have ruined your reputation.”

She gave a watery laugh. “I have already managed that on my own, Your Grace. You need not worry about it.”

“I was up all night, thinking about this. About you and us. And I have come to only one conclusion. It is that I cannot do this without you. I love you, Nora. I cannot say for certain when I fell in love with you, but know that I speak truth when I say that I do.”

He caressed her cheek, looking into her eyes. Nora gasped when she saw nothing but truth there.

“For the longest time, I was afraid that I would turn into a man like my father and hurt the people that I should love and protect.” He laughed, moving away from her.

His face showed his pain as his mask crumbled. He was finally letting her see all of him. Not some part that he wished to show her before retreating into himself, but every single part of him. Her eyes filled once more with tears as he spoke.

“I still am afraid, and I do not know if there will ever come a time when I no longer fear turning into the man that he was, but with you by my side, I know that I can do anything and I can be anyone, even a man who is without fear.”

He took her hands in his, caressing them softly as her breath caught in her throat. She had often tried to imagine how it would be when he told her he loved her and what it would feel like. However, she had not been able to imagine it.

She had never been able to convince herself that he would ever truly love her. Not now, and not ever. And yet here he was, choosing to face his fears and let go of the things that had kept him bound to the life that he had lived, just like she had let go of her hurts and fears to love him wholly and truly.

“I read all of the letter, not just the parts I looked at before we were caught,” he said, making her laugh. “I read all of it, and I love you too. I love the color of your hair and the intensity in those beautiful green eyes. I love how fiercely loyal and protective you are towards those you love, and I love that you were willing to let me go if that was what it took to make me happy.”

“

You are a better person than I am, Nora. I am selfish and flawed, and I cannot imagine life without you. So, although I should oblige you, I simply cannot, and I hope that you will come to love me for my flaws as well, as I will love you for yours. Although I cannot think of anything that is flawed about you.”

Nora sobbed softly, going into his arms as he pulled her close. She had come to accept the fact that much like her mother, she was doomed to have a love that would go unrequited and would only lead to her ruin, but now it was clear that that was not to be.

He had said that he would defy his nature for her, and she was ready to do the very same for him, no matter how long it took her to unlearn and let go of the hurts.

“I have the letter here with me. I do believe it has become my favorite thing,” he said, making her blush.

Nora hid her face in embarrassment as Samuel teased her, threatening to read the letter to her until she accepted his proposal.

He pulled away from her and smiled warmly. “Say you will marry me, Nora. There is no one else I want to be with. I cannot imagine my life without you in it, not after I’ve had a taste of what a good life we will have together.”

Nora nodded. “I will marry you.”

Samuel smiled, handing her a box. She opened it to find a beautiful emerald ring that matched the color of her eyes. She gasped as she looked up at him, tracing the beautifully cut stone.

“It has been in my family for so long, passed down from Duke to Duke when we meet the women we wish to marry. I cannot think of a more fitting person to wear

this ring,” he said.

Nora’s eyes watered as she offered him her finger. He slid the ring on her. He kissed it on her finger, smiling at her.

He lifted her chin with a finger and then kissed it, smiling at her.

He tilted her chin up, lowering his lips to meet hers in a kiss that had her toes curling.

Nora parted her lips to welcome his as he wrapped his arms around her and pulled her closer. He pecked her on the lips once more before pulling away, a smile on his face that matched the one on hers.

EPILOGUE

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Samuel smiled as he watched Nora walk down the aisle, her red hair styled in intricate curls down her back and her yellow dress adding to her sunny disposition. Her smile matched his as she walked up to him, looking every bit as lovely as she had the first time he saw her.

He looked to the side, where Benedict stood slightly behind him, a teasing smile on his lips.

“I now pronounce you husband and wife,” the vicar said as they exchanged rings.

Samuel’s smile remained fixed on his lips as they made their way out of the church.

The past few days leading up to their wedding had been the happiest days of his life. There was never a doubt that he would be happy and fulfilled in his marriage.

“So, Duchess, how does it feel to be married?” he asked her, grinning widely.

“I do not think I can say for certain, Duke. Perhaps you could ask me that again when the night is over,” she teased, wearing a matching wide smile.

Samuel’s eyes widened as he looked around them to make sure no one was standing near them.

She giggled softly, the sound sending a shiver through his body. “I have been reading some books I found in your library, Your Grace. One would wonder why you have such.”

She ran down the stairs towards the carriage, and Samuel followed after her, snapping her up as their family and friends laughed behind them at their silliness.

He enjoyed being with her like this. No longer did he have to be serious all the time, wearing a mask to keep people away from him, but with her, things were different. He could be who he wanted to be without holding back.

They arrived at the wedding breakfast that was being held at his estate, and Nora took in the delicacies like roast meat, pies, and all sorts of cakes and desserts.

Samuel walked around, thanking family and friends for joining on their special day. He stopped to look at Benedict, who signaled for him, and he pulled away Nora.

“Do you have anything?” he asked.

Benedict nodded. “I have the information you requested. Lord Worlington is involved in a few illegal businesses. With all that I have found, I am certain that we can make him go to trial for what he has done.”

Samuel nodded. “Thank you, my friend. I cannot think of a better wedding gift than this. I do hope the Duchess will be happy with that.”

Benedict laughed. “How easily you have adjusted to calling her your Duchess mere moments after your wedding.”

Samuel joined in the laughter. “Ah, but she has always been my Duchess. I have only just been able to officially call her that.”

Benedict clapped him on the back. “How you have changed, my dear friend. I cannot say I am not relieved to hear it.”

“Come on. Let’s share the news with Nora and her mother,” Samuel said, leading Benedict over to where Nora stood with her mother, smiling at over something she said.

“Lady Julia, there is something she said.

“Lady Worlington, there is something we must tell you and Nora,” Samuel said. “We have found out that the Viscount has a hand in the trade of counterfeit jewels to unsuspecting nobles. Those who have fallen victim to these sales are embarrassed and vengeful. This will make it possible for us to make him pay for how he hurt you both.”

Nora nodded in satisfaction. However, her mother gasped. They turned to her as her face fell, showing her devastation.

“Oh heavens. I cannot say that I am happy with this news. I must confess that I love Timothy. I know he is incredibly flawed, but I have loved him from the moment I saw him, and I don’t think I will ever not love him.”

She turned to Samuel. “I do know that he has to pay for everything that he has done, and I know that he has hurt us, but I will need some time before I can fully accept this.”

She regarded Nora with a smile, caressing her cheek lovingly. “I know that I have disappointed you over and over again. It must not have been easy for you to watch me be so weak. I did not mean to be such a coward or ruin the idea of marriage for you. I can only be grateful that you have found your own happiness free from all of the pain and fears you had in the past. I do hope you will forgive me someday.”

Nora shook her head, hugging her mother. “You do not need to apologize to me, Mother. I understand what you are going through, and I promise that I will always be

there for you, no matter how long it takes you to feel ready to move on.”

She pulled away and smiled at her mother encouragingly, just as the Dowager Duchess joined them.

“Lady Worlington. I would like to invite you on a trip,” the Dowager Duchess said suddenly. “I am a part of a dowagers’ club. Most of the ladies are widows. However, there are some who simply wish to join us and enjoy the time we have together, and we allow them. I do hope that you will consider it and join us on our trip. It truly will help you get your mind off everything that has happened.”

Lady Worlington smiled at her. “Thank you for the offer, but I do not know if I can do that. I still have a lot to do at home.”

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Nora looked between them and then at Samuel, who nodded. “If you truly wish to go with her, I would be more than willing to help with everything.”

Her mother smiled. “Truly? I wouldn’t want to be a burden.”

Nora shook her hands. “Of course not. He is my brother, after all, and I do not mind taking care of him. You are never a burden.”

“Nora!” Nora.

Selina turned around with a smile as her friends hurried towards her.

“Oh, Nora, it was such a beautiful ceremony, and you look so beautiful in your dress. I could not stop crying,” Selina said, wrapping her arms around Nora in a hug.

Nora giggled. “Thank you, Selina. I’m glad you were both able to join me.”

“We wouldn’t have missed it for anything,” Thalia said, smiling at her as she hugged her too.

“It was indeed a beautiful wedding. I don’t believe I’ve been so happy to see two people wed,” Benedict said. “Pleased to meet the friends of the new Duchess.”

Selina smiled, placing her hand in his for a kiss. “I’m Lady Selina, and this is my sister, Lady Thalia.”

“Lady Selina, Lady Thalia. I don’t believe I will have any rest if I do not tell you how

beautiful you both are.”

Selina giggled, turning to her sister, who glowered.

Nora hid her smile. Thalia had always been protective over her sister when it came to men like Benedict. Men with sugarcoated tongues who were so quick to dole out compliments and only really cared for what they stood to gain.

Benedict was as much a rake as they came, and Thalia would never let Selina come near him if there was anything she could do about it.

“I’m certain it will not be so difficult for you to live with yourself if you do not compliment us, Your Grace,” Thalia said, an eyebrow raised as she looked him over with a sarcastic smile on her face.

Selina softly jabbed her in the ribs, causing Thalia to glare at her.

“Do not listen to my sister, Your Grace. She does come off as cold sometimes, but I assure you she isn’t,” she said with a soft smile that contradicted Thalia’s.

Nora giggled at something Samuel said as they retired for the night. She had looked forward to having him to herself, where they could just be who they were without having to worry about anyone but themselves.

“So, it would seem that we will be having our seven nights, after all,” Samuel said, a wry smile on his lips as he advanced towards her almost predatorily.

“Ah, but, Your Grace, we will be having more than seven nights together. We will have nights for as long as we both shall live.

“I think I like how that sounds,” he said, lifting her into his arms as she wrapped her

legs around him.

She lowered her head to kiss him as he carried her up the stairs to their bedroom.

“Careful, love. We wouldn’t want to end up with broken necks only hours into our marriage,” he said, spanking her ass and making her giggle.

She laughed as he hurried to the room, dropping her on the bed. He jumped in beside her, and climbed atop her, supporting himself on his hands and knees. She kissed him softly as his hands wandered up and down the length of her body, pulling and tugging at her clothes until she lay naked on the bed.

She stayed her hands before she could cover herself up, even as her body turned a shade of red. Samuel kissed a trail from her neck to her breasts, sucking her nipples into his mouth, one after the other. He smirked as her body arched off the bed.

“I’ve dreamed of worshipping all of you,” he said, kissing down to the small of her waist and the dip of her navel.

She writhed on the bed as he kissed even lower, parting her red curls with his hands. He breathed her in and licked as she groaned under his ministrations.

“Oh, Samuel,” she groaned, wrapping her hands around his head, the memory of the last time they were together like this igniting her pleasure and searing her skin.

“I’ve touched myself as I thought of you. Just like you showed me,” she said, moving his head away as she played with her clit, arching her back as she rubbed the swollen nub.

Samuel groaned. “I don’t believe I’ve ever seen a more beautiful sight.”

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He took her finger, bringing it to his lips as he licked it clean. He then directed her hand to his covered length. “This is what you do to me, my Duchess.”

He stripped off his clothes and lined himself at her core, grinding his teeth as he pushed into her warmth. He kissed her eyelids when she moaned in pain.

“I’m sorry I have to hurt you, Duchess,” he said, his eyes showing that he truly meant what he said, not that she had ever doubted him.

Nora spread her legs wider to accommodate him as he slid into her once again until he was fully inside her. He pulled out and thrust back in, slowly until she got used to him being inside her.

She gasped as he rolled his hips, her eyes widening when pleasure shot through her. She looked at him in surprise, and he grinned.

“There it is,” he said, rolling his hips once again to hit the same spot.

She rolled her hips against him, matching his movement, however poorly she did it. Her arms wrapped around his back as she pulled him closer.

Nora gasped as the pleasure built in her core. She rolled her hips faster, chasing after the pleasure. Her eyes closed as Samuel latched on her nipple, the sensitivity intensifying.

“Oh, Samuel,” she moaned, her lips parted into a silent O.

Her pleasure built faster, intensifying until she could no longer control it, losing the rhythm she'd developed. She gasped as Samuel's movement turned erratic, and his eyebrows kitted, his face contorting into what was now her favorite expression on him.

So free and without fear as he spilled inside her, his warmth coating her insides. Nora tensed around him, groaning as her body shook and she came.

She came down from her high, her chest heaving.

"Oh my. I don't believe I have ever experienced anything like that," she said just as Samuel pulled out of her, pulling her into his arms for a cuddle.

"There is so much more to come," he said, pecking her on the lips. "You are my forever, my little rabbit"

Nora nodded, his words sounding like a promise to her. There truly was so much more to come.

The End?