



Her Wolf of a Duke

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Category: Romance, Adult, Historical

Description: "I vow to you, Your Grace, as long as I am here you will not ruin another soul."

Finding a good match for her sister is all Emma needs from this house party. Yet one look destroys her plans. Because the Ruiner of Reputations is here, talking to her sister...

Duke Levi has not yet met a woman he can't charm. Until Emma. And she is a challenge he cannot resist...

Enraged by the Duke, Emma takes a vow: she will not let him ruin anyone at this party. Even if that means spending every moment with this enraging, charming man... breaking her heart in the process...

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

Total Pages (Source): 89

CHAPTER 1

“Sister, you simply must have higher expectations for yourself than this!”

Emma sighed, resting her head against the cool window of the carriage. On more than one occasion, it rattled and her head bumped against it gently, but she paid it no mind. In fact, she hoped she might hit her head even harder and therefore not have to listen to another word from her younger sister.

She had thought it made perfect sense for her not to search for suitors herself during their trip, but Sarah clearly had other ideas. She disagreed with them completely, of course, as they were not at all aligned with her own: find Sarah a husband, see her married off, and then escape.

“Sarah,” she said at last, pulling away from the window, “you and I both know that my prospects are slim to none. I am five-and-twenty, and it is not as though I am a prize.”

“Good,” their father grumbled. “It appears you have learned something after all.”

“That does not mean you cannot try,” Sarah replied, ignoring the comment. “You may surprise yourself!”

Sarah would only have such enthusiasm until the moment they stepped out of the carriage. Emma reminded herself of this in the hopes that the following half an hour might be a little more bearable.

It was strange how timid Sarah was when in front of others. She was a very pretty girl. She should have had far more confidence in herself than she did, and yet the moment eyes were on her she withdrew into herself.

Emma tried not to judge her too harshly for that. After all, even as a spinster she could not scoff at her own looks (though she did). It wasn't that she was not pretty, for as far as the aristocratic standard went she was quite acceptable, but she hated her reflection. She was not blessed with her mother's green eyes as Sarah had been. They were hazel, and she hated them entirely.

"In any case," Emma said gently, "I am not attending this party for myself. I am doing so for your sake."

"Everything you do is for my sake."

"And for good reason! You know, I heard that there will be a few dukes in attendance. You may surprise yourself, as you say."

"Sister, the party is to be hosted by a duke."

Emma blinked. She was not made aware of who they were to be staying with, and she was quite surprised that their father had told Sarah, even more so that her sister had kept such knowledge from her.

"If a duke is hosting, then that is even better. You may find during your introductions that you fall for him at once, and then this shall all be settled. Which duke was it, again?"

"You will never find a match for your sister if you are this stupid," her father sighed. "I do not know why you don't simply take my offer of a friend of mine being her husband."

“We have a deal, Father. I have until she turns one-and-twenty. That leaves a year and a half until you can call upon a friend.”

She did not often stand up to her father, but on that occasion she hadn't felt like she had much of a choice. He had been furious with her for turning three-and-twenty and still turning suitors away, and it was a deal that she had to make to stop him from ridding himself of both of them.

It was beneficial to him, too, of course, for it meant he would not have to lift a finger. Emma would do everything, and he would simply pay for whatever was necessary. He did so without complaint, which was one of very few things that Emma was grateful to him for.

“Then you have less than a year and a half,” her father said, “to learn all of the eligible dukes' names. The one hosting, for example. Sarah, do you remember it?”

“Yes, Father. It is the Duke of Pridefield.”

Their father smiled triumphantly, as if proving his point that Emma was an imbecile, but Emma did not notice. Instead, her blood ran cold. She knew of the man, and of his equally dangerous friend.

“The Duke of Pridefield,” she whispered. “I am indeed aware of him, Sarah, and he is not the sort of man you will be associating with. You will not speak to him, am I clear?”

“I must at least make an introduction. He is the host, after all.”

“I will allow that, but from then on you shall avoid him at all costs.”

“Why?” Sarah asked, and as Emma did not think her father would explain it to her,

she took matters into her own hands.

“He is a scoundrel, as is his friend. One does not receive the moniker of ‘Ruiner of Reputations’ without reason, after all. In any case, you will do well to avoid the both of them.”

“You will not tell your sister what to do,” their father said coldly. “You might think that you know better than I do, but as is always the case you are wrong. Should the Duke of Pridefield express an interest in your sister, then the match is settled, no matter what deal we once had.”

“But he is a rake, Father. He is known for his scandalous reputation, which I would wager is why you did not tell me that it was his estate we would be visiting. Sarah deserves far better than that.”

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“The both of you deserve exactly what I have planned for you. Sarah shall marry the highest ranking gentleman that offers to take her hand, and you shall...”

Emma knew perfectly well that he did not care what became of her. His spinster daughter was a disappointment in his eyes. It was just as well that he had no intentions of finding her a match, she thought, as that was not why she was attending the party. It was to take place over several days, and in that time Emma hoped to find a suitor for her sister. That was all that she intended to do, and it was already a daunting prospect. Sarah wanted a love match, and that was a very finicky thing indeed.

Upon their arrival, Emma saw her three friends in an instant. They were all standing together, a strange mismatch of ladies that Emma would only add to the variety of. Their looks, however, did not matter to her at all. She was simply ecstatic to see them. She practically threw herself out of the carriage in excitement; she knew she would receive a scolding for that from her father that evening but she didn't dwell on it.

“You are here at last!” Cecilia Penton beamed. “I was afraid that you were not coming. We spinsters must stay with one another, you know.”

“I believe what you meant to say is that without me you are the oldest,” Emma laughed.

It was true; Cecilia was but three-and-twenty, though she might as well have been a spinster since she was all of seven.

Cecilia laughed, a stray blonde ringlet bouncing as she did so. It was a shame that she had never had any interest in marriage, for she was the very definition of beauty. Her blue eyes captivated many gentlemen, the beauty marks beneath her eye and above her lip giving her a very striking appearance, but the words coming from her pretty red lips frightened each one away. It was just as she liked it.

“Well,” Cecilia continued, “I must admit that is another excellent reason for my liking you so much. I cannot wrangle these two blushing future brides alone.”

“Cecilia, be quiet!” Dorothy yelled.

“Why? Can you not stand the thought of anyone looking at you?”

“You know perfectly well that I cannot,” Dorothy huffed, folding her arms over her ample bosom, her cheeks flaming so much that they almost hid her freckles.

“Well, unfortunately,” Emma said kindly, “you are one of four very witty ladies. You cannot hide away forever.”

“Sadly, no. Then again, among the three of you I can hide very well. I am the shortest, after all, and though wider than you I believe gentlemen find it easy to overlook the one that appears to have been plucked from a local farm and wedged into orange satin.”

Beatrice, the youngest of the group, grimaced.

“Your sister again?”

“Indeed. I have tried so hard to avoid her wonderful advice, but she refuses to let me escape into the corner. All of my gowns are these horrific bright shades.”

“Then it is just as well that I have your measurements,” Cecilia winked, “as well as a lack of need for my own new gowns. I shall show you what I have later, yes?”

Dorothy’s green eyes came to life.

“Oh, Cecilia, thank you!”

They were a strange group of all shapes and sizes, all with different ideas of what they wanted, but they did all agree on the very important fact that they would, eventually, achieve their dreams. That made their friendship very easy, and as a debutante, Emma knew that Beatrice was very grateful for that. Her dark blue eyes were wide, watching the exchange.

“I thought we ladies were supposed to see each other as competition,” she joked.

“Should I ever be seen as competition,” Cecilia grinned, “something must have gone very wrong, indeed.”

“None of us are competition to you, Bea,” Dorothy sighed. “Well, except for Emma, should she ever change her mind.”

“Dorothy Godwin,” Emma said in a strict tone worthy of a governess, “I cannot have this week pass with you being so... like this. You are a beautiful young lady, and only twenty. One day, you shall find a very nice gentleman that shares your floral passions and you shall be very happy indeed.”

“I do hope so.”

“I know you will!” Beatrice smiled.

Beatrice Jennings was the newest addition to their group, having met them at a ball a

few months prior, but it was as though she had always been there. The best part about her was that she softened whatever Cecilia said, which lightened Emma's load a good deal.

“Have you ever been to this estate?” Dorothy asked, turning to Emma. “The three of us have not.”

“Nor have I, no. I do not tend to spend time with rakish dukes. It would be a very nasty habit indeed.”

A dry cough and a side glance from her father told her that she had said a little too much with that.

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“It wouldn’t be too bad,” Cecilia said absent-mindedly, “to have been born as one, though.”

“A dream, truly,” Emma replied, rolling her eyes. “Though I must say, the Pridefield Estate is certainly grand. Well maintained, too.”

“Unless the Duke made his staff do it quickly as he knew of our arrival,” Beatrice suggested.

“No,” Dorothy said softly. “I have already looked at the grounds. They are clearly kept to this standard at all times. I would have been able to tell if they were not.”

The three other ladies laughed at that. Dorothy was an intelligent lady, but she did not always notice when a joke was being made.

“Oh!” Beatrice said quickly. “Emma, have you met— Emma?”

But Emma had already followed her friend’s line of vision, her eyes coming to a stop on a devastatingly handsome gentleman. He was tall, muscular but not too terribly so, with green eyes beneath a brush of brown hair. She had to admit, his hair was usually a little too long for her taste, but she didn’t seem to mind when it came to him. Then, she saw that he was standing beside their host, and her heart pounded as she realized just who he was.

“Emma?” Cecilia asked, nudging her sharply.

“Cecilia, that hurt!” she whined. “What is it?”

“Do you not know who he is?”

“Of course I do. He is the Duke of Lupton, the Duke of Pridefield’s rakish friend.”

“Precisely. Perhaps it might be a good idea to greet him?”

“Certainly not. I would rather speak with that tree than risk engaging in conversation with him.”

“You are a liar. I saw how you were looking at him.”

“I... You simply do not see very many men as tall as him, that is all. It caught my attention.”

“Caught and didn’t let go,” Beatrice grinned.

“That is nonsense. You all know that I am only here for Sarah’s sake.”

“Then perhaps,” Dorothy considered, “for Sarah’s sake, you should make yourself known to him? He ought to at least know who the two of you are.”

“Have you all made introductions?”

All three ladies nodded, which caught Emma by surprise. It made sense for Beatrice to have done so, but Dorothy was terribly shy and Cecilia preferred to frighten gentlemen to making herself known to them. It meant, however, that other than Sarah, who was off speaking with her own friends, she would have to make his acquaintance alone.

And then he spotted her.

He came over to her in an instant, smiling devilishly. He had a confident air about him, which she tried not to take as a bad sign.

“Your Grace,” Cecilia said politely, “this is Miss Emma Kendall. Emma, this is His Grace, Levi Hunter the Duke of Lupton.”

“It is a pleasure to meet you,” Emma curtsied, hoping her cheeks were not stained pink.

“The pleasure is all mine, Miss Kendall. I do hope that you enjoy your time here. I know that I intend to.”

His eyes lingered on hers for a moment, the brilliant green holding her in place before he smirked a little and walked away.

No, she said to herself, No, I must be mistaken.

“Emma?” Beatrice asked. “What has gotten into you? You look terrified!”

“Did you notice that?”

“Notice what?”

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“He was smiling—smirking—at me. Is there something on my face? On my gown?”

“Why do you care if there is?” Cecilia asked.

“Is there?”

“No,” Beatrice said gently, “though I must agree with Cecilia. You do not usually care for such things.”

“Yes I do. You all know that I like to be presentable.”

“Yes, but not to the extent that you panic like this.”

“Ah,” Cecilia said knowingly.

“What?” Dorothy asked.

“Nothing,” she grinned. “Nothing at all. Now, we really ought to see some other guests before the festivities begin. Are your chaperones nearby?”

Both young ladies nodded, gesturing to their mothers. Emma’s heart ached. It had been her father that was charged with her entrance into society, and it only made her more determined to undertake Sarah’s. She couldn’t allow her sister to go through what she had. Perhaps, if her mother had been alive...

She shook her head and tried not to think about it. It was how her life had been, and there was no use dreaming about it being any other way. She would be happy once

Sarah was married, she was certain of it.

She simply had to find her a match, first.

CHAPTER 2

The estate was, as expected, as beautiful inside as it had been outside. Everything was newly decorated, and for an unmarried man the Duke of Pridefield was certainly in keeping with what was fashionable. He had set all of his guests to explore the estate to their hearts' contents, and they were to be in the drawing room that night to share a drink before they went to a grand dinner. Everything had been meticulously planned, which Cecilia seemed to scoff at.

"You know," she whispered, looping an arm around Emma's, "if I were a duke, I would make all of my guests stop what they were doing when I thought they should. They would be on my schedule."

"Then it is just as well that you are not a duke," Emma laughed, "for I might not have enjoyed your company so much."

Cecilia laughed in turn. She had always been a spirited lady, and having long since discovered that such behavior turned suitors away, she did not seem to care at all.

"We are going to the greenhouse," Cecilia explained. "Dorothy has heard about some plants that she has never seen before. Will you be joining us?"

It was an incredibly tempting offer, but Emma knew that she was there for a reason, and that went far beyond listening to her friend regaling them with tales of different plant specimens. Sarah was her priority, and she had to act accordingly.

"I am afraid not. I must escort my sister to make some introductions."

“Oh dear, is your father threatening to make good on his word?”

“It would appear so. He mentioned it in the carriage. If I do not find a match for her, then he will, and I cannot bear the thought of that.”

“Nor can I,” she sighed. “Very well, but if the two of you grow weary of the same foolish men over and over, you know where we shall be.”

Emma nodded, and Cecilia left to find the others. She went to Sarah, who seemed quite apologetic about it all.

“You really should spend time with your friends,” she said kindly. “Father can accompany me, I assure you.”

Emma raised an eyebrow at her sister, and at once the younger lady’s resolve disappeared.

“I know,” Sarah said. “He is not a very good matchmaker, but then I am not the easiest to find a match for. I am very particular.”

“And you have every right to be. I shall hear no more of this, not when we have so many introductions to make.”

Fortunately, Sarah had made a very good impression during her presentation to the Queen, and it had led to many gentlemen vying for her hand. She was seen as a prize, just as Emma had been—once—and Emma was pleased that she had not ruined her sister’s prospects by not marrying.

Thetonknew exactly who she was, and Sarah recognized the newer faces that Emma did not, and so they managed perfectly well.

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They came across a gentleman that was watching Sarah. He was relatively tall, not particularly muscular and was quite plain. There were no strongly discernible features to him, with the exception of the fact that he wore spectacles.

“William Mercer,” the gentleman greeted, bowing to the two of them. “The Right Honorable Baron Rosendale.”

Sarah curtsied in return, but Emma was not so easily taken by the man. Sarah had always longed for a love match, and Emma was willing to do anything to assist in that, but it was still necessary for her to have protection and security, and that required more than such a title as baron.

Even so, he was a handsome man, and if it meant that Sarah could use it as a practice of some sort, then it would not be so bad.

“Miss Sarah Kendall,” Emma said for her.

“Truly, you are a remarkable beauty,” he smiled. “Might you sit next to me at dinner tonight?”

He certainly had confidence. Emma went to respond, but before she could, Sarah had already opened her mouth.

“It would be my pleasure,” she replied sweetly, and the gentleman nodded and walked away.

It was very uncommon for Sarah to respond so quickly. It had always been Emma’s

duty to decide what was right for her sister, after all.

“Sarah!” she hissed. “Why on Earth did you do that?”

“I do not know. I panicked. I did not want to hurt his feelings.”

“No, which is why you leave it to me. Fear not, it is only to be one meal. We will find you better than a baron.”

“I am perfectly fine with his title, Sister. I am aware of the Mercers, and they are very wealthy. I would be well taken care of.”

“Then why did you have that look on your face?”

“What look?” she asked, quickly turning horrified. “Please do not tell me it was obvious. I would hate to have caused him any offence.”

“Not at all. I only noticed because I am your sister. I must ask, though, what you were thinking.”

“Well, there was no harm in it, truly. He simply does not look like the sort of man I thought I would marry.”

“Then we shall find you another. There is no harm in it.”

“I know, but I do not wish to judge him too harshly. Fortunately, it appears I shall be seeing him at dinner.”

Emma smiled fondly at her sister. She liked that her sister was kind, though she was concerned that such kindness might have been to her detriment at times. They continued on their way, but nobody truly caught Sarah’s eye. Though Emma tried not

to mind too terribly, she had to admit that she was growing wary of her sister's prospects. Should she hope to marry, she would have to find the right man soon. She was not yet twenty, but Emma had thought of herself as young and full of possibilities for far too long. And then the years slipped by and suddenly she was a spinster.

It had been a choice for her, but she did not want that for Sarah.

By the time dinner was announced, they had not found anyone to suit Sarah's tastes. They went to the dining hall, marveling at the grandeur of it, and then an elegantly liveried servant led them to their seats. Emma had, of course, hoped to stay with Sarah, but there was only one seat beside the baron. Emma gave her a quick smile for luck before being led away to another part entirely. She looked at the table before her, an expensive oak one with a long red runner on top of it, and tried not to think about what Sarah would be doing. Instead, she counted the marking lines of the wood, whispering to herself.

"Are you trying to fall asleep?" came a deep voice.

Emma turned to her left to see the same devilishly handsome man from before, the Duke of Lupton. He had a friendly enough expression, but his large build made his presence a looking one, and it was not one that Emma had ever truly noticed in a man before.

"No, I was... well, I was counting the table markings, if you must know."

"And here I thought the Duke of Pridefield always hosted the best parties."

He was only saying it in jest, but she felt incredibly guilty nonetheless. She felt heat rising in her cheeks, which did not go away no matter how much she willed it to.

“You know,” he continued, “I do like a lady who blushes.”

She flushed even pinker, which made her furious with herself. It was a most unbecoming manner for a man to speak to a lady, but she could hardly say as much. She could not cause a scene, not when everyone in attendance knew her sister.

She turned away from him, facing forward. Across from her sat Miss Gretchen Winston, and she was scowling at her. Emma knew her well enough, given that she and Sarah were acquaintances, and from what she knew Gretchen was not the brightest young lady. She was known to be quite the fool, and that made her easy pickings should a gentleman ever want to... pluck Thankfully, it appeared that nobody did.

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“Good evening,” Emma greeted, hoping that the scowl had not been deliberate. “Have you enjoyed your first day?”

“Yes.”

That was all she intended to say, judging from the tight set of her mouth. Emma nodded, looking down again. A strange lady, she thought, but no stranger than most.

“It is so rare for a lady that says exactly how she feels. It is admirable, I must say.”

It was the Duke of Lupton, and he seemed to have turned his attentions to the younger girl. Emma was completely vexed at that— how brazen, how completely out of line?

Gretchen, of course, brightened in an instant.

“Thank you, Your Grace. I prefer to be honest and open. I cannot bear to dance around feelings.”

“I could not agree more. I actually think more ladies should be like yourself, wouldn’t you agree, Miss Kendall?”

“I believe we have rules in our society that we all must follow, Your Grace. Would you not agree that we have them for our own protection?”

“We do, but I would argue that it is also enjoyable to push those boundaries. That is where a good deal of entertainment comes from, after all.”

“I would have to disagree with you,” she said firmly. “You may enjoy such things, but I am not so inclined.”

“Is that to say that you would never wish to see a contortionist?”

“I have never seen one, no.”

“But, should the opportunity arise, you would not have any interest in seeing it?”

“I do not understand why you are asking me this.”

“Well, you would never climb onto this table and fold yourself into unimaginable shapes, would you? And yet, it is a perfectly acceptable thing to watch as entertainment. That is to say, there is a time and place for breaking such rules, is there not?”

He was trying to engage in conversation, not to bother her, but she wanted no part in it. Then again, she considered, Gretchen seemed very naive to what was an obvious rake, and she may not have had a good introduction to her, but she wanted to protect her regardless. It was the right thing to do.

“You may find examples such as that,” Emma protested, “but my point stands. We are expected to act a certain way here, and so I believe we should do so.”

“Would that mean that I am forbidden from telling Miss Winston that I think her green eyes are beautiful, and that I wish more young ladies style their hair like her?”

Gretchen was thoroughly enjoying what the Duke of Lupton was doing, but Emma could see through it.

“If you can do that, then I can do the same,” she nodded. “And if you ask me, I think

fewer gentlemen should be like yourself, Your Grace. Tell me, did you have a say in where we were seated tonight?"

"No, I did not."

"How interesting, for neither did I. Therefore, if we did not choose to sit beside one another, one could also infer that neither one of us has the intention of talking to one another."

"True, but I believe it is polite to do so."

"And I believe polite society frowns upon blatant flirtations across the dining table."

He smiled at that, and it only made her angrier.

"My apologies," he said, trying to take his smile away. "You simply— you are quite a funny lady, you know."

He chuckled, and Gretchen did the same, though Emma was not entirely certain that Gretchen knew why it was a supposedly funny thing to say. Emma certainly did not.

What infuriated her, however, was how nice his laugh was. It was a gentle sound, far softer than she had expected from a man of his stature. It was that pleasantness, though, that made her so angry. He had no right to be so charming, not when his intentions were so evident to her.

The meal could not have ended soon enough, and Emma was thankful to leave the room at once. The guests dispersed to different drawing rooms, and Emma watched for which one the Duke of Lupton entered and deliberately chose another. Thankfully, she found Sarah inside. She was sitting by the Baron, smiling and laughing with a lemonade in her hand.

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She froze for a moment, bewildered. What exactly had passed between her sister and the Baron at dinner?

Before she could go to her, however, her friends stepped in front of her. Cecilia was smiling brightly, while Beatrice and Dorothy were looking at her with no little amazement.

“So,” Cecilia began, “these two shall be of no use speaking, but they had questions. What is happening between yourself and the Duke?”

“Nothing at all,” Emma protested, seeing the flicker of disappointment in her friends’ eyes. “He is a scoundrel, a rake through and through. I knew there had to be a reason for the way he greeted me today.”

“He certainly has a reputation, yes, but that does not signify. I have a reputation for being impossible to hold a conversation with, and yet you know that to be untrue.”

“It is not his reputation that concerns me, it was the way he spoke to me. And to my fellow diner, as well.”

“Gretchen Winston?” Dorothy managed to muster. “Why do you care about her? She is awful.”

“Be that as it may, nobody deserves to be ruined, and with the way he spoke to her, it was clear to me that those were his intentions.”

“Does that mean we cannot hold out any hopes for a courtship at all?” Beatrice

pouted.

“Indeed. Should I ever see that man again, it will have been too soon. My apologies, but I must speak to my sister.”

Her friends nodded and stepped to one side, and Emma approached her sister. Before she could reach her, however, her father took her wrist and turned her to face him.

“I will not have you ruin this,” he growled, menacing although quiet enough so as not to draw any attention. “That is a perfectly fine gentleman for Sarah, no thanks to you.”

“I understand, Father. I was only trying to—”

“No. You could not do the one thing that you spinsters are supposed to be good for. If you cannot help your sister, then I will not allow you to be a hindrance to her either. Leave her be.”

Emma knew better than to disobey him. She stole another glance at Sarah, who had not even noticed her, and when her father left her alone she turned toward the door to leave.

“Emma, what is it?” Cecilia asked, suddenly wary.

“It is nothing, Cecilia,” she assured her. “I simply need a moment for air.”

“We shall come with you.”

“No, no it is quite alright. You are all enjoying yourselves.”

“Well, we shan’t do so knowing you are unhappy.”

“I am not unhappy,” she protested. “I simply need a moment for myself. I shall return in just a moment.”

Thankfully, they did not protest any further and she was able to leave. She choked on the air once she stepped outside, her hand over her chest. It felt as though she could not breathe.

She was a failure of a sister. She had to find Sarah the best possible match, and now she was sitting in the drawing room with a baron that she did not know at all. It wasn't what they planned, and she blamed herself entirely. She had to be the one in charge. She had to be the one to find the perfect suitor, and now—

She heard a giggle nearby.

Snapping out of her panic, she stepped forward carefully. It was an incredibly girlish giggle, accompanied by a deep whisper. The hairs on her arms stood on end. Thankfully, of all people to catch someone being improper, scandalous even, Emma knew that she would not engage in gossip and ruin. She followed the voices until she found them, and she almost fell to the floor.

It was the Duke of Lupton and Gretchen, standing far too close to one another, whispering and laughing. Rage filled her at once, and she stormed over to them.

“What do you think you are doing?” she accused the Duke in a hushed voice. “Who do you think you are?”

“I am speaking to a lady, and I am the Duke of Lupton.”

Gretchen giggled again beside him, and Emma was completely dumbfounded by his reaction. He had beensseen, which meant he had imperiled Gretchen's precarious reputation. He might have to marry the poor girl, or rather he would have if Emma

told anyone. Fortunately, Emma would never do that to another lady— could he tell as much? Was that why he was acting in such a manner?

“Stay away from her,” she hissed, pulling Gretchen away.

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“Of course,” he replied brightly. “As you wish, Miss Kendall.”

Why, she thought, does he refuse to argue with me?

Thankfully, however, the crisis had been averted. She would tell Gretchen to be careful and there would be no harm done.

Then she saw Gretchen’s scowl again.

CHAPTER 3

Granted, Emma had not expected immense gratitude for what she had done—perhaps mortification instead, but she hadn’t expected outright fury.

“Gretchen, you do not understand,” she explained. “Gentlemen like that—”

“What you do not understand, Emma, is that there are some things that you need not meddle in.”

“I am not meddling. I am trying to help you.”

“Well, you are not helping at all. I know you spinsters have nothing else to do, but that does not give you the right to ruin things for others. Perhaps, instead of being yet another bitter spinster, it might be better for you to find a nice old man in there and marry him before you age beyond all hope.”

Without waiting for a response, Gretchen stormed back inside. Emma remained still

for a moment, steadying herself. It was just as well that Gretchen did not stay with her, for Emma was quite certain that the reminder that there were but five years between them might have been too much for the young lady to bear.

She rolled her eyes at the absurdity of the situation, though she had to admit that it hurt a little. Once again, she had tried to help only for it to not have been the right thing to do. She shook her head. It had been the right thing to do; she had saved the young lady from ruin, and regardless of what Gretchen thought about it she did not regret her actions at all. She had done what she had to do.

Steeling herself, she returned to the drawing room. She could see Gretchen in the corner, her face like thunder, but she did not go to her and press the matter. She was likely embarrassed, and Emma did not wish to make it any worse. Instead, she returned to her friends, as she would not be allowed to see Sarah for the rest of the night.

“There you are!” Beatrice smiled. “Are you feeling better?”

“Very much so, yes. Now, perhaps you might all tell me what you did today?”

“Oh, Emma, the greenhouse was spectacular! Would you believe it, the Duke has an orangery I have never seen one in person. It was full of oranges, and even more citrus! Oh, I could spend hours in there.”

“Was it... orange?”

“There were oranges inside of it,” Dorothy explained, “And other citrus fruits.”

Emma nodded, feeling quite ridiculous for not knowing what an orangery was. Then again, Beatrice always liked when she could explain things she knew a lot about, so she tried not to be too hard on herself.

“And,” she whispered, leaning close, “you mustn’t tell anyone, but we shared one of each fruit between us!”

“Without me? The nerve of you all!” she joked in response.

“We saved you some, of course. It is in my room. We can go and get it now, if you like.”

Frankly, Emma knew that after all of the events of the day, if she were to go anywhere near a bed she would crawl beneath its covers and sleep. However, she did wish to try the fruits, especially if they had pleased Beatrice.

Before they could leave, though, Emma felt a tap on her shoulder. She thought it might be her father, and her heart pounded in her chest as she wondered just what he would have to say to her. When she turned, however, she saw that it was none other than the Duke of Lupton.

“Again?” she asked without thinking.

Her friends stared at her.

“Might you accompany me on a turn around the room?” he asked.

She could hear the whispers of her friends behind her, but she refused to dignify them. She wanted to try her orange, but she also could tell from how the gentleman was looking at her that he would not rest until he had gotten his way. It would be easier, she considered, to give him what he wanted and then leave it there.

“One turn,” she nodded, taking his arm before turning to the ladies. “I will join you shortly.”

“You do not know where my room is!”

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“Then please wait here for me, if it is not too much trouble. I shall only be a moment.”

They agreed, and Emma left with the Duke. They only took a few steps, however, before she was faced once again by Gretchen’s sour expression.

“Might we go to a different drawing room?” she asked, and he followed her line of vision to Gretchen and whisked her away without question.

She was thankful for that, at least.

“I thank you for not refusing me,” he began as they walked.

“I very nearly did, if you must know.”

“I do, which is why I thank you for not doing so. We have some things to discuss.”

“Do we? I wouldn’t know what about. It certainly wouldn’t be to do with the poor young lady you were being improper with, for only a fool would tempt such scandal. And you are no fool, are you?”

“Certainly not. I would never— well...”

“So will you marry her, Your Grace? You were certainly acting as though you wouldn’t mind it as a consequence.”

“Is this about dinner? Miss Kendall, I assure you that I was only trying to be kind.

She seemed ill at ease, and I wanted to make her comfortable.”

“That and then some, yes? I am not the naive thing you might think I am, you know. I understand what it is a gentleman is after when he does such things to a woman.”

“Ah, yes?” he asked. “And what might that be?”

She turned scarlet once more. In truth, she did not have the faintest idea, only that it led to ruin and she did not want that for anyone.

“It is something that one does not discuss in polite company. Might we leave it there?”

It seemed to satisfy him, and she was quite pleased about that. Perhaps spinsters were more inclined to know about such things? In any case, she was simply pleased that he wouldn’t press the matter further, as she wouldn’t have known the first thing to say in response.

“I must admit,” he said, “I find you very interesting indeed.”

“Is that because I do not feel an inherent desire to swoon at your feet?”

“Something like that,” he chuckled. “I mean, other ladies in your position might see this walk as an opportunity to at least ask me about myself, but you act as though you could not care less.”

“It is not an act, Your Grace. I have no need to enquire about you.”

“Ah, might that be because you have already asked others?”

“No, it is because I can already tell you everything that I need to know about you. For

one, you hold an opinion of yourself that is entirely too high.”

He smiled at that, and Emma wondered why that was. He should have taken offense, and she would have been lying if she said it was not the desired outcome. She wanted him to leave her be, and she hoped that by taking a simple turn about the room she might satisfy his need to speak with her, but it seemed to have the opposite effect.

“Do continue,” he nodded after a while. “I should very much like to know how I am perceived by those who do not truly know me.”

“Then you might wish to know about the way it is clear that you have always been given what you want. You enjoy it, too. Nobody would ever refuse you, for you are so very important.”

“Ah, so you do not think I have ever been told that awful two-letter word?”

“No.”

“Yes, that one.”

He was, she decided, completely infuriating.

“Your Grace, pardon my asking, but why did you ask me to join you?”

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“In all honesty, I saw how that young lady was watching you and I thought I would come in for a swift rescue. She seems quite ghastly.”

“Well, you were the one that—”

She couldn't, for Gretchen's sake, say what had happened aloud. If someone were to overhear, it wouldn't end well.

“You see?” the Duke nodded, “I did nothing wrong. Perhaps we might agree to keep it that way?”

“You know precisely what you did!” she hissed. “We ladies are not these little things for you to enjoy yourself with then cast aside. I know what men like you do to ladies like her, and I will not stand for it.”

“Even if I were guilty of what you accuse me of, which I decidedly am not, why do you care? It isn't as though she is a friend of yours, she has made that very clear.”

“That is as much your concern as that floor tile. I do not need to explain myself to a man that I shall never speak to again.”

“But you will speak to me again. The dining arrangements are fixed. If you wish to pass each meal wordlessly then you may do so, but I do not think it the most pleasant option.”

Emma wished she hadn't attended at all, and simply left Sarah in their father's care. It wasn't as though she had been of any use, and now she was forced to spend the rest

of her time in the proximity of a handsome duke with a hideous tongue. It was a dreadful fate, even worse than the one she had lived before. She willed the Duke of Pridefield to enter the room and tell everyone to leave, as the event had to unexpectedly come to an end, but of course he did not.

“For what it is worth,” he said suddenly, “I am sorry. You must know that what happened outside was not my doing.”

“No, I don’t suppose that it is ever the fault of you hapless gentlemen. It is the wanton ladies that ambush you, isn’t it?”

“In this case, yes.”

“Even if that were the case, which I doubt, you did not have to talk to her. I could hear her giggling thoughtlessly at you as if she were some sort of parrot. You should have known better than to tempt it. What if it were not me that found you?”

“You say that as though you have no plans of ruining the girl.”

“Because I do not! I would never do that to someone, even if they do not like me.”

“In which case, I must thank you. You must know that I would have married her if necessary, as that would have been my duty, but to know that I do not need to is quite the relief.”

“We both know what you would have done,” she snapped. “You would have refused, claimed that you wanted nothing to do with her, and destroyed her in an instant. You probably would have had that ridiculous smile on your face as you did so, too.”

“I do not think my smile is ridiculous.”

“And how much time do you spend in the mirror looking at it?”

He laughed, but he did not have a response. She had won, and she tried not to look too triumphant about that.

“I think it might be best that you at least try to enjoy my presence,” he suggested, “or, at least, you do not outwardly loathe it. It would only dampen the others’ experience, which is hardly fair to our host.”

“You may care all you like for the feelings of another duke. I can see where your loyalties lie in that respect. I, on the other hand, shall be far more occupied with the lives of my fellow ladies.”

“A noble cause, indeed.”

“Yes, and so you should know, Your Grace, that as long as I am here, as long as we are under the same roof, you will not ruin another soul. I will not allow it.”

“As you wish, Miss Kendall.”

He winked at her with a smirk, and she turned on her heel and stormed away.

CHAPTER 4

Emma found her friends, and they left for Dorothy’s room. It was very spacious indeed, and immaculately decorated. Emma realized then that she would be in a room of her own for the first time since Sarah was born. It was an unusual arrangement, especially given that they had plenty of rooms to spare, but their father had insisted upon it. He needed more space for his things, he claimed, as Emma and Sarah took up enough room in his life as it was.

It would be a quiet night, she imagined, and though there were times when she wished she had a room of her own, she suddenly longed not to.

“So,” Cecilia began, handing Emma segments of orange, “might you wish to tell us why the Duke himself asked to speak with you?”

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Emma bit into a segment, the juice fizzing on her tongue. It was far tastier than any orange she had ever eaten, a sunny sweetness that lifted her dour mood for a moment.

“My word,” she said through a bite. “These are wonderful!”

“Emma!” Cecilia nudged.

“Oh, must I tell you?”

“Yes. You must.”

“Very well,” she sighed, “I heard him out in the gardens with another young lady, unchaperoned. He wanted to ensure that I wasn’t going to tell a soul what happened.”

It wasn’t quite the truth, but it was a version that they would accept and wouldn’t question her too much about, which was ideal for her purposes. She had very little interest in discussing it all any further.

“Did you see who the lady was?” Beatrice gasped. “Surely she saw you too. She must be terrified.”

“She... certainly did not react as I had expected. Then again, she could well have been in shock. It is an awful thing to happen, after all.”

“You are too forgiving,” Cecilia said bluntly. “It is about time that you told people precisely what you think.”

“Believe me, I did. That Duke shan’t forget what I told him for a long time.”

And yet, she was quite convinced that he already had, that he hadn’t even listened to her in the first place. Whether she liked it or not, he was a man with a powerful position in society, and no matter what she said or did, she wouldn’t change that. He could go on to do exactly as he pleased, as she assumed he had always done, and nobody would stop him.

As she laid in her bed, struggling to sleep, she wished Sarah was with her. They often had long discussions into the night, and she longed to tell her about the horrid Duke and then in turn hear about the Baron she had seemingly fallen for. Instead, she would have to wait for a chance moment to pull her aside, as their father seemed quite set on their separation.

Eventually, she fell asleep, but she awoke early the following morning with a terrible headache. She tried to ignore it, dressing for breakfast and going downstairs. She took her seat and realized, too late, that the Duke had been telling her the truth the previous night. She jumped when she saw him.

“Fear not,” he said in a mockingly brave tone, “I am not a phantom. I am but a man, plain and simple.”

A man indeed, and one she couldn’t stand at that.

Emma did not know what to say to the Duke the following morning, and so she said nothing at all.

She ate her breakfast in silence, though he made a few attempts to speak with her. Instead, she listened to his conversation with Gretchen, as the young lady was more than happy to speak with him.

“Your Grace, you look lovely this morning.”

“Thank you, Miss Winston,” he replied, “though I must admit that I have a terrible headache.”

Emma thought he might be mocking her, but then had to accept that he couldn’t possibly have known that she had such an ailment that morning. He was a villain enough without her adding to it.

“That is terrible!” Gretchen said kindly. “Perhaps you over-indulged last night?”

“Perhaps.”

“Which may suggest that you do not remember what happened at last night’s event. That is quite a shame.”

“Yes, in all honesty, I have no recollection at all.”

The Duke smiled kindly at Gretchen, and Emma noticed a glimmer of something other than gratitude in her eye.

“Well,” she continued, looking directly at Emma, “I suppose you remember everything completely?”

“No, I do not believe so. I was with my friends all evening as far as I can remember, and should anything out of the ordinary have happened I am quite certain that I would not have forgotten it.”

Gretchen’s sour look, the one Emma noticed she always had when addressing her, was evident. Thankfully, the meal came to an end and she no longer had to partake in it. She did not care what happened after the fact, only that she had prevented a terrible

outcome. She went to the parlor room, where her friends were waiting, and then they all left to explore the estate. Dorothy gave her a tour of the grounds, giving little pieces of information as if it were her own estate. Emma wondered just how she had acquired all of this information, but then it was hardly out of the ordinary for her friend to research such things in advance.

“Emma,” Beatrice said quietly after a while, “How are you feeling this morning?”

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“Perfectly well, thank you. Why do you ask?”

“Well,” she explained, writhing her hands together and averting her gaze. “It is just that we saw how your father treated you last night. I didn’t like it.”

She cast an eye to her father, who was nearby but not paying her any attention.

“Oh, that...” Emma replied, setting her jaw. “It is nothing to worry about at all. My father is simply excited to see that my sister has a suitor, and that she has found one so quickly. I suppose he doesn’t want me to ruin it, even if he hopes that I might find her a man of higher rank.”

“What rank does this suitor have?”

“He is a baron.”

“Ah. I can see why he might be concerned about it, then.”

“I do not,” Emma laughed gently. “I have never been concerned about the rank of whichever gentleman wins the hand of my sister. I only care that she likes him in return.”

“And when that happens,” Cecilia sighed, turning to them, “will you at last find a match for yourself?”

“I have no such interests,” Emma explained. “I am like you, remember? We have no need for suitors, not when we have one another as friends.”

“You shall have us, too,” Dorothy replied, puzzled. “Even when we are married, if we should be so fortunate. You can be both our friend and a wife, you know.”

“I have already told you all my plans. I shall see that Sarah is happy, and then I shall go to live with my aunt in Somerset. That hasn’t changed.”

“Even now that you have met the Duke of Lupton?” Beatrice asked.

All three ladies turned to her and stared.

“Why would the Duke of Lupton change my plans?”

Beatrice shifted from one foot to the other for a moment, unable to look her in the eye.

“You have never mentioned any gentlemen before, that is all. It is a surprise to me that you have had your attention captured by such a man. I do not mean anything by that, of course, but— well, given that you are never one to speak with a gentleman, there has to be a reason why it is different this time.”

“Yes, the reason being that he is insufferable enough to warrant my admonishment.”

They all fell silent for a moment, and then Emma cleared her throat.

“What exactly do you know about him, anyway?” she asked, and her friends giggled.

“I knew it!” Cecilia beamed, “You cannot keep things from us, Emma. We see them even before you do.”

“Then if I were to have an attraction to the Duke, which I do not, would it not be your duty to tell me precisely who he is?”

“Emma Kendall in love with a rake,” Beatrice said dreamily. “Stranger things have happened, perhaps, but I have never heard of one.”

“I am most certainly not in love with him! I do not even know him.”

“But if you did know him—”

“No! Now, please, tell me about him before I walk into that pond there and do not return.”

Eventually, the laughter faded and Cecilia nodded.

“The Duke of Lupton is quite elusive. The truth about him is, at least. His father died years ago, that much is known, but it was never said what he died of. Some say it was his own son, though that is hardly believed. One thing is for certain, though. The late Duke of Lupton was a horrible man. It was as though he always had this dark cloud over him, as well as anyone that dared stand too close to him, and so they kept their distance. That never seemed to affect his son, though.”

Emma thought back to her accusation that the Duke had always been given what he wanted, and she questioned it immediately.

“I asked my mama about him,” Dorothy added. “When he came to speak with you, Emma, I thought it might be best that we know as much as possible. She did not know very much, but she could tell me that his late father was completely miserable. All rules and formalities, even for his own family. He liked the power, I suppose. But Mama tells me that the new Duke is nothing like him at all. That has to be good, does it not?”

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“Well, if they have nothing in common,” Emma considered, “that would suggest that His Grace has no sense of duty and doesn’t believe in rules. I cannot say those are very good traits to have, either. What is said of him must be true: he is a rake and a ruiner and we are all better off leaving him alone.”

Her friends groaned at her, and even Emma herself questioned why she was being so unkind about him. Yes, she had seen him alone with a young lady, but she was being very quick to pass judgment on him, and that was not something she ever did.

“Perhaps I have him sized up too quickly,” she confessed. “Though I am firm in my saying that I have no interest in the man. I will, however, be civil with him, especially if his father was as you claim.”

Suddenly, her father called her. He was a short distance away, and so she gave a quick nod to her friends before leaving to see him.

“Father,” she said carefully, “please do not shout for me as if I were household staff. You are more than welcome to come to me when I am with friends.”

“I am very much aware of that. I simply do not like to spend much time around those girls. They are not good influences on you.”

“Dorothy and Beatrice are,” she argued.

It was true that, as far as a parent might be concerned, Cecilia might have been improper and unladylike, but there was nothing terrible that could be said about the other two. They were perfect ladies, prim and proper (when in society, at least) and

the very picture of what Emma's father had expected of her.

"Then I shall single out that dreadful Miss Penton, although you never like it when I do."

"She is kind to me. I— My apologies, Father. I understand. What can I do for you?"

"Your sister wishes to take a walk on the grounds with Lord Rosendale and requires a chaperone."

"I see. Can you not accompany her?"

"Is it not your responsibility as her sister?" he reminded her.

"Yes, but I thought you did not want me spoiling the match."

"I do not, and you will not. However, you know as well as I do that I cannot bear doing all of this chaperoning and watching and keeping guard. That is why you do it."

"Very well. Where are they?"

Her father pointed in a vague direction and after a truly appalling amount of searching Emma found them. Sarah was smiling, very brightly at that, and Emma's heart leaped. The Baron was not perfect, but if he made Sarah happy then that was all that truly mattered. That was all that she had ever wanted for her. She waved to her friends, then left for the couple. Sarah was ecstatic to see her, and seemed about to introduce Emma and the Baron to one another before remembering that they had already met.

"I hardly saw you last night, Emma," she smiled. "You were not with your friends

either. Were you alright?”

“Perfectly so, yes. I was simply meeting the other guests. Now, I shall be chaperoning the two of you, so we may leave when you wish.”

The couple shared a smile before Sarah took the Baron’s arm and walked slightly ahead. Emma followed behind, shamelessly listening in on their conversation. She learned that Lord Rosendale was four-and-twenty years of age, the eldest of seven children, and passionate about science. Emma found it quite boring when he began telling Sarah about what he had been reading, but Sarah was enthralled, asking him all sortsof questions. It made all of the listening and attempting to understand worth it at least, Emma thought.

A second set of footsteps fell into rhythm alongside her. She wondered if one of her friends had come to join her, but as she turned to her left she saw none other than the Duke of Lupton, already smiling down at her.

“What do you want?” she asked.

“How nice to see you, too,” he replied. “You see, Miss Kendall, I thought it might be best if I came on this walk with you, so that you could watch me more easily.”

“I do not want to watch you.”

“Yes, you do. You said so yourself.”

Emma remembered what she had said the night before and groaned.

“You do not find it easy to express gratitude, I see,” he nodded.

“I do when it is warranted. I am not at all thankful that you have ambushed me like

this.”

“An ambush? I thought this was a pleasant walk in the gardens.”

“It was, until a moment ago.”

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“Then allow me to make it pleasant once again.”

“By leaving?”

“Miss Kendall, I have already told you. I cannot leave. If I do that, then you cannot watch my every move and ensure that I do not ruin every young lady within the radius of three hundred paces.”

She smiled at that, but it was only a small one. She didn't like that she had done so, especially knowing that the Duke had heard, but she couldn't help herself. She felt quite ridiculous about it all.

“Your Grace, I can see you are enthusiastic about being in my vicinity, but I am chaperoning my sister. I must give her my full attention.”

“Then you can give her yours. I shall give you mine.”

“Are you flirting with me?”

“If that is what you want me to do, certainly.”

Emma groaned. She most certainly did not want him to, but it was clear that he was not leaving and so she had to accept her fate and allow him to follow. There were worse people, she thought, to be stuck beside.

“Your sister seems pleased with him,” the Duke noted after a while.

“Please refrain from thinking about my sister.”

“Well, since you asked me so politely. I shall think about hers instead.”

And then, in spite of herself, she laughed. It was a ridiculous thing to laugh at, and it was not that funny, but there was something about the way he said it, or even the way he had seemingly come to her with intentions of flirting even though it would not work. Whatever it was, it made Emma laugh, and as she went to breathe in again, she did the worst thing she could have possibly done.

She snorted.

Immediately, the Duke of Lupton followed suit, exploding into laughter at her. Emma froze, her face turning a startling shade of red, but that only made it worse. He laughed harder, gasping between his fits. “Perhaps you are not quite the perfect lady I thought you. I confess, I find it rather a relief.”

She did not know how to respond to that. She understood that she was not perfect, but it was such a foolish thing to mock her for. When he, at last, calmed himself and they continued on their way, she laughed softly.

“I suppose that you have a secret of mine too now,” she said. “That makes us on equal footing, yes?”

“In what sense?”

“That you might leave me be, and I shall leave you in return.”

He was quiet for a moment. She saw a difference in him in an instant. He was pensive, thoughtful, and if he had always been like this, then perhaps she might have been happier to speak with him.

“Is that what you want?” he asked, apparently surprised into sincerity for the first time since they had met. “Do you truly find me so despicable? Hate me, even?”

“I do nothateyou,” she replied without thinking. “You are a rake, and not the sort of gentleman that I dare know too well, but that does not mean I hate you.”

“I understand, Miss Kendall. My apologies.”

Without another word, he left. Emma was pleased about this for the first few minutes, continuing on her way and listening to her sister and the Baron again, but soon she thought about the Duke again. She hated that she was thinking about him at all, but she decided that it was because he had been so infuriating and nothing more. He was, after all, the most persistent gentleman that she had ever met, even compared to those that called on her during her first season out in society.

When they returned from the walk, Lord Rosendale took his leave and Emma and Sarah were alone together for the first time since their arrival. Emma took the opportunity to speak with her.

“Might you show me your room?” she asked. “I would so like to see it.”

Sarah nodded with a smile, and they left to find it. It was larger than Emma’s and painted a pale blue. It was a beautiful room to stay in, and Emma felt a small pang of jealousy at that. Her own was nice enough, painted a pale green and on the perfect side of the house to receive a lot of sunlight, but she missed her sister even so.

“I missed you last night,” Sarah said absent-mindedly, sitting on the edge of her bed. “It’s strange, because I have so longed for my own room, but one night without you was enough for me to realize how wrong I was.”

“I feel exactly the same. It is a shame that, given how taken you are with Lord

Rosendale, we shan't be living together for much longer.”

Sarah blushed a bright pink, laughing softly.

“Is it that evident?” she asked.

“Sister, I have never seen you smile like this. Your opinion has certainly changed very quickly, in any case.”

“It has, hasn’t it? I do not even know why. I simply sat with him at dinner, and we talked to one another, and the more he spoke the more I wished to hear.”

“Yes, I noticed during the walk that he quite enjoys talking. He enjoys science, yes?”

“Particularly physics, yes. I cannot pretend to understand all of it, but he is happy to explain it to me, and he doesn’t make me feel like a fool when he does so. It makes a nice change from most gentlemen.”

“Indeed. It is quite fortunate that the two of you met so soon into this event.”

“It is. Do you suppose Father approves of him? I assumed he had higher hopes for us than a mere baron.”

“Sarah, you know as well as I do that he simply wants to see us married so that he can be rid of us. He does not care who we marry.”

“In any case, he likely much prefers the fact that you have ensnared a duke.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“That... that is why you were accompanied by the Duke of Lupton, was it not?”

Emma couldn't believe what she was hearing. Her sister was an intelligent girl, yet she had been so confused by something Emma thought was very simple.

"No, Sarah. He accompanied me, I believe, because he is a rake, and I am a lady. He would 'accompany' anything in a skirt."

But she could see the way her sister was looking at her, as if there was more to it than that. Emma knew perfectly well that her sister was incorrect, but she couldn't find the words to explain why. So she simply looked out of the window. After all, her sister was indeed very intelligent.

More so, perhaps, than Emma gave her any real credit for.

CHAPTER 5

"You were caught with Miss Winston?" Leonard Kingsman, the Duke of Pridefield laughed that evening, taking a moment with him alone in his study. "That is foolish, even for you."

"I couldn't stop it! I left to take air, and suddenly she was standing behind me."

"Then why did you not immediately run for the hills? You are fortunate that it was only Miss Kendall that saw the two of you, else you would have been a husband by the end of the week."

"I know. It was a dreadful situation. I must have taken things too far at dinner that evening."

"What do you mean?"

In one motion, Levi drank the whiskey that Leonard had poured him, placing the

glass down firmly.

“You know how I am, Leonard. I like to keep up my little facade. It keeps the ladies away. It should, at least.”

“What I find interesting,” Leonard chuckled, “is that you do it to keep the ladies away, and yet Miss Kendall wants you to leave her alone and you cannot do it.”

“That is precisely why I am drawn to her. You know as well as I do that we dukes have a target on our backs, especially with ambitious ladies and their even more ambitious mothers. When we meet someone that doesn’t treat us like a cut of steak, we wish to see more of them.”

“There is being treated with respect, and there is vowing to ensure you do not ruin young ladies. That is quite an accusation, you know.”

“And a perfectly reasonable one, if you think about it. I am no paragon of all that is good, after all.”

“As far as she knows.”

Yes, it was all an act, but other than his fellow rakish friends nobody had ever questioned it. His friends had only questioned it because of their own lifestyles, which he chose not to share in. Ladies, less-than-ladies, and their schemes weren’t something that interested him, but he liked the protection a rakish reputation gave him. It led to mothers shielding their daughters from him, fathers refusing matches even though he had a grand estate and was, well, a duke. His wealth meant nothing if it risked a reputation, and it was the perfect excuse for him not to marry.

“So, what do you plan to do now?” Leonard asked.

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“What do you mean? She asked me to leave her be, and so I will. I still have honor, unlike some.”

His friend chuckled again.

“It is a shame. She wouldn’t be the worst wife, if you were so inclined.”

“And have her meet my mother? I would rather my staff pulled lit coals from my fireplace for me to walk over in bare feet. It is my preference that she remains hidden away. Besides, it is quite clear that Miss Kendall does not wish to marry.”

“Your mother is harmless, or at least she is now. She hardly even knows where she is at times.”

Levi sighed. His mother’s health had been in decline for a few years, and though he had hoped that her illness would soften her harshness, she was the same as she had always been. She still hated him, and she still regretted ever having him, in spite of the fact that he was the one caring for her.

“One day,” Levi said, “We shall have to marry and continue our family name. I am choosing for that day to come after my mother has passed.”

“Do you suppose Miss Kendall will be unmarried by then? Evil people have a tendency to live a very long time.”

“I do not know, and it is none of my concern. I do not wish to marry her. I do not even know her.”

“Not after the dreadful impression you have given her, no, but you can remedy that. You are a duke, after all.”

“Kingsman, enough. If I wanted to marry a spinster, I am quite certain that I could find one that was more willing.”

“Ah, is that why you had me change my mind about where we are all to sit? Because you know I had planned for people to change their seat each time so that we could all meet one another.”

“You can go back to your original plan, if you wish. I only did it because I— well, it was not to flirt.”

In truth, he did not know why he had asked him to do it, other than the fact that he had made the comment to her and he didn’t want her to see that he was bluffing.

“No, this is how the week shall pass now. You may consider it your punishment, as you shall now have to sit beside her three times a day. That won’t be an issue, will it?”

“No, of course not, but if she is not happy about it I will not force her to remain there. She is here to enjoy herself every bit as much as we are, after all.”

“Of course. She need only come and tell me herself, and it will all change immediately.”

But Levi had a feeling that she would be too stubborn, or perhaps too prideful, to do such a thing. He would be with her, as well as Miss Winston, for the remainder of the event, and he did not know what to say about that.

All he knew was that, as dinner drew close, he found himself becoming almost

excited about it. He had left her during the walk because he felt like a nuisance, and he did not wish to pester her more than necessary, but there was still something that drew him to her, and he wanted to know just what it was. Sitting beside her so often would help him piece together the riddle. Wouldn't it?

And so, that evening, sitting beside her and enjoying the meal that had been prepared for them, he did not even notice Miss Winston across from him. He found himself stealing glances at Miss Kendall, instead, and it pleased him to notice that she did the same to him.

"You may speak to me, if you wish," she mumbled.

"Are you quite certain? I do not wish for you to be uncomfortable."

"If you think that your mere presence can do that, then you ought to rethink yourself altogether."

"Very well, then. How was your day?"

"Pleasant enough. I spent a lot of it with my sister, actually."

She seemed to soften as she said those words. Levi did not doubt that she cared a great deal for her, and it was quite refreshing. He had no brothers or sisters to care for, and he had always felt as though he was missing something.

"I always wanted a sister," he sighed. "Or a brother, though I must admit that I preferred the thought of a sister."

"Oh? Why is that? I would have thought you'd rather have a brother to practice fencing with, or boxing, or some other barbaric sport."

“I was never one for such activities. It may sound strange, but if I had a sister, I would have been charged with her debut, and it would have given me something to do. I understand that it isn’t easy, and the sister of a duke would certainly make for an interesting time, but it would have been something, at least. Instead, I spend each social season wandering the ballroom, watching the festivities but never truly part of them.”

“Well, you could always find a nice young lady to dance with. That would solve your problem, would it not?”

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“It certainly would!” Miss Winston replied, but neither one of them gave her any acknowledgement.

“I have never met a lady I liked well enough for that. Besides, once those vicious mothers decide that I am looking for a wife, I shall not know peace until I marry—when that happens I shall be back where I am now, terribly bored.”

“Until it was time to find a match for your daughter.”

“You make an excellent point. Might you have any suggestions in case that day should ever come?”

She laughed at him, a real, light-hearted laugh with no malice in it at all, and tilted her head in thought. He wondered what had changed her mind since that afternoon, as she was far easier to speak to and he was enjoying it. Perhaps, he thought, she had concluded that he was not truly a rake, and was willing to see him as something other than an enemy. Then again, she had no reason to see him that way. It was his own fault that he was perceived the way he was, after all. He had dug that particular trap for himself, and walked into it with open eyes.

“For a start,” she began, “you must have her gowns made months before the season. I had my sister’s made a month or so after the prior season. It gave the modiste more time, and as long as the young lady’s measurements do not change too much it is worth the effort.”

“I see, I see,” he nodded, gesturing as if he were writing her instructions down. “And when searching for a suitor, what is the best way to find the perfect one?”

“Do not marry her off to a friend. That is the worst possible thing you can do, for no lady wishes to marry a man twice her age. Other than that, you should allow her to make her own choice. We ladies know what we want, and more than anything we want to be respected.”

He refrained from asking her what it was that she wanted. He did not want to ask her too much in case she closed herself off once again. For some reason, she had softened towards him, and he did not want that to change.

A silence settled between them, but it was not uncomfortable. Levi was smiling, and when he turned to Miss Kendall he noticed that she was too. In fact, the only one in the room that seemed unhappy was Miss Winston, who was looking at Miss Kendall with an intense displeasure, her eyes narrowed and her lips pressed into a tight line. He pitied her, though he wondered why she was so insistent on speaking to a rake when she was able to choose any man she wanted. She was a pretty young lady, and if she chose a gentleman that truly did care about her advances then she would soon be married.

He was, however, not that gentleman.

She was too young, too immature, and frankly she was far too interested in him for him to dare speak with her. One small conversation at dinner had led to her accosting him a few mere hours later, and he had learned from that. He had been fortunate that it had only been Miss Kendall that had seen the two of them, for he had meant what he told her. Had his hands been tied, he would not have refused her. He knew what his duty was, and that was yet another reason to avoid Miss Winston completely.

“How are your efforts with your sister’s match?” he asked.

Her eyes searched his for a moment, and he wondered if she thought he might have been mocking her. He was not, of course, but the way she leaned away from him

made him think twice about his tone.

“Very well, it would seem, though admittedly I didn’t have a thing to do with it. She is with him now, just over there.”

She pointed to her sister, and when Levi followed to look he saw that there was a gentleman beside her that he recognized.

“Would you care for the opinion of a rakish duke?”

“I would, indeed,” she nodded. “If only to tell my sister what to avoid.”

“Lord Rosendale is a very good man. He has no debts, to my knowledge, and he is from a good family. He is very well respected. If your sister has taken a liking to him, I would recommend that sort of a match.”

She seemed to nod in thought for a moment before thanking him for his input. She did not seem too certain of the Baron, however, and Levi wondered just why that was.

“Have you any other concerns?” he asked.

“Not that I can think of, but it all seems rather convenient. My sister has already been out in society for a year, and she has never taken to someone so quickly. What I must be wary of is whether she simply chooses the first gentleman to show interest so that the matter is done with.”

“Does that sound like something she might do?”

“It would be a first. She has always been more withdrawn than me, but with this gentleman she... she seems positively forthcoming.”

“Then that is a good sign, I would think. Have some faith in her.”

“I do! I have a lot of faith in my sister. Why wouldn’t I?”

“Because you have always been needed, I imagine. I suppose, as you have not had a hand in this, you might be wary that she is making a decision for herself, and that you are afraid that she might make an error.”

She seemed to agree with that, nodding slightly with a thoughtful expression.

When the guests left for a drink, Levi found that he remained at her side. If she asked why, he planned to make another joke about how she had to keep watch over him, but to his surprise she did not say a word, instead following him in that same companionable silence that they had shared before.

He turned to see Miss Winston scowling at the two of them, and in spite of himself he couldn’t help but feel happy that he had the safety of Miss Kendall beside him. Miss Winston could not catch him alone, he realized, if he never was alone to begin with.

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And so he remained in Miss Kendall's proximity for the rest of the night. He did not mention it, nor did she, and they also did not say a word to one another, but she never left his sight and he had to admit that he quite enjoyed it that way. He liked the quiet connection that he swore was beginning to form between the two of them.

Which, he reckoned, could be very dangerous indeed.

CHAPTER 6

"Emma, how much longer are you going to play pretend for?"

As she was on her way to bed, Cecilia had cornered her, following her all the way to her room and going so far as to enter it behind her.

"Cecilia, I am exhausted. Can we discuss this in the morning?"

"It is no surprise to me that you are tired after all of the walking you did this evening, by the Duke's side at that. I thought you hated him?"

"I do! Well, I do nothatehim, but it isn't as though I searched for him deliberately. He was escaping Gretchen, you see."

"Emma, for all of your intellect you certainly seem to forget the way things are. If he wanted to be rid of her, he would do so. He only asked that you stay with him because he wantedyou around, and unless I mistake myself, you wanted that very same thing. Otherwise you would have fled as soon as you were decently able.."

“Then perhaps he considers me a friend. It is not a crime to enjoy the company of a gentleman but nothing more. You have enough gentlemen friends yourself.”

“Yes, but I do not then claim that I cannot stand them. Emma, I am not scolding you for befriending the Duke, but you must be honest with us, and with yourself.”

“I am,” she lied.

Cecilia raised an eyebrow at her, and Emma knew that she was not being very convincing at all.

“Well,” Emma sighed, “I am trying to be. I do not know how to feel. He is nice to me, and I am trying to tell myself that it is simply because he is a rake but I cannot make myself believe that.”

“Then it may well be that he is not the villain you thought he was. That is perfectly fine, but you cannot pretend that it is anything more than you wanting to know him.”

Emma nodded in defeat. She wanted to be angry with the Duke, resent him completely, but she didn’t have enough proof to satisfy herself as to whether he was or was not a hopeless rake.

Cecilia left the room, and Emma tried to sleep. Her day had been a confusing one, and it made for a fitful night.

She had found herself warming to the Duke of Lupton, but that did not mean she liked him at all. No matter what Cecilia said.

Granted, he was not the worst person that she had ever met, but he remained insufferable. He was nice to her, but she did not know why that was, especially when she had been so unkind to him in return until dinner the night prior. She had assumed

it to be his rakish ways, but the way he had tried to avoid Gretchen had made her question that.

They were all spending the day near the nearby lake for a picnic, and in the quiet on one of the banks Emma had allowed herself to think. She did not like that she had done that, for her thoughts at once had turned to the very Duke that she did not wish to think about.

“Emma?” Sarah asked, sitting beside her. “Are you alright?”

“Yes, thank you,” she replied. “My apologies. I believe it is the heat that has me rather out of sorts.”

“And it had nothing to do with the gentleman that keeps stealing glances at you?”

“What do you mean?”

But she had already looked up and seen him. He was standing in a group of gentlemen that were playing Pall Mall, coincidentally including Lord Rosendale, and the pair of them glanced their way at that very moment.

“I see,” Emma nodded. “Perhaps they are looking at that streak of butter on your cheek?”

“What?” Sarah yelped, raising a hand to her cheek as Emma laughed.

“Fear not, you look lovely. I do not know why they are doing that, though. I can understand the Baron, but the Duke is another matter entirely.”

Emma reconsidered as Gretchen approached the gentlemen and seemed to speak with them. Had that been a pleading look she’d received from the Duke? She wished they

were closer so that she could hear them, but as it was she had no idea at all.

What she could see, though, was the lack of enthusiasm in his eyes. He did not seem at all interested in her, and that made Emma feel quite at peace. If he was indeed being honest with her, and he had no interest in Gretchen, then perhaps she had ambushed him after all.

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“The others are nearby,” Sarah said gently. “We could join them, if you wish for company.”

“It would be nice, yes. I was going to join you all, but...”

“I understand, Sister. There has been a lot of changes of late. I have met a potential suitor, and you have made a lovely enemy for yourself.”

“Yes, Gretchen seems to loathe me entirely.”

Sarah blinked at her.

“I meant the Duke of Lupton, Emma.”

“Oh! Yes, of course.”

“Although you are right. Gretchen looked disgusted with you this morning. She has never liked me, but I did not think it was this bad.”

“It has nothing to do with you,” she explained. “I saw her doing something that she should not have been, and I believe she expects me to bury her in scandal because of it. I would never do something so dishonorable, but I don’t believe she understands that.”

“No, she would not. In any case, you shan’t feel any better about it by sitting alone. Join us!”

Sarah rose to her feet before pulling Emma to hers, and they joined her friends. They were sharing sandwiches and watching the stillness of the lake. It was precisely what Emma had been doing, but the addition of the food was welcomed and it was nice not to feel alone.

It still felt strange between herself and Cecilia, but she tried not to think too much of it. Her friend was right, and she had to be honest with herself, but she did not want to be. It frightened her, for one, to accept that she had met her match in the Duke, but it was even worse to accept that she had been wrong. She had always been able to pick out the wrong sort, and she did not want him to be the first time she had made an error, as if Sarah married the Baron and Emma left for the country, he would have been her last judgment.

It was juvenile of her, but she did not want her final one to be wrong.

After a while, a Pall Mall ball rolled their way. Sarah looked up as the Baron approached and excitedly scrambled to her feet to greet him.

“I hadn’t thought you’d lose a game just to see me,” she giggled.

“Perhaps the game was simply an excuse to find a way over here?”

“Considering your goal is in the opposite direction entirely, I would have to believe that.”

“Astute as always,” he chuckled. “You know, you could always join the next game. It is a perfectly decent sport for a young lady.”

“I have never played. I would hate for you to think my skills were so very awful that you couldn’t look me in the eye again.”

“Then perhaps I could teach you? I assure you, I do not always hit the ball perfectly away from where I intend to.”

Sarah turned to Emma, and Emma noted how wide her eyes were in hope.

“Of course,” she nodded, “But, if you are going to play, you must also win. I shall accept second, actually, as it is your first time.”

Sarah practically fizzed in excitement, clapping and thanking her profusely. Emma was not nervous for her; in spite of her sister’s memory, Sarah had played Pall Mall once, and she was brilliant at it.

When she looked up, however, she noticed that the size of the group had decreased. Looking more closely, she noticed that Gretchen had left.

As had the Duke of Lupton.

At first, she chastised herself for having searched for him again, but then she had another thought entirely, a far more frightening one. They had both disappeared, and there was no sign of them anywhere.

“I shall only be a moment,” she said quickly, leaving in the first direction she thought of.

She did not know quite where she was going, but she had to find them. Nothing would be happening that was untoward, she reasoned, but she had to find them in order to be certain of that. She wanted to trust the Duke, and so she would have to do so until he gave her proof that she couldn’t.

Then she found it.

She heard that same giggle from the first night. She followed it right to the carriages, which had been left to escort the guests back to the Duke of Pridefield's home. There, to her shock, she found the two of them behind one, and when they saw her the Duke turned pale and Gretchen turned scarlet.

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“Gretchen, what are you doing?” Emma demanded. “I have already told you of the danger of this. You are risking your reputation for this, and it is not something I can allow.”

“I am not asking you to allow it.”

“I do not care what you are asking of me. You do not understand what could happen. You are fortunate that I have no intention of ruining you, but had I been someone else it could have been very different indeed. You are playing with fire.”

“You do not have any idea of what you are talking about. I will not listen to the instruction of a glorified maid who could never find a match for herself. It is you who does not understand.”

“You say that because you are naive. You will one day thank me for this.”

“I will not!” she thundered. “I will never thank you for storming over to me and talking to me as though I am a child. You do not know a thing.”

“Gretchen—”

“You are not worth it,” Gretchen said coldly, straightening herself and walking away without another word.

Emma watched the girl leave, wondering just what she had been doing. It was foolish of her to think that the Duke had wanted anything to do with her other than—

She whipped around to face the Duke.

“And as for you,” she scowled, “I cannot believe you would lie to me the way you did! I am the fool for believing you, but I won’t be making that mistake again.”

“Miss Kendall, I have already told you that I know what I am doing, and that my intentions are honorable.”

“Yes, how very honorable of you to hide away with a young lady, alone at that. You might think that every lady is a pretty little fool, but I am not. I know precisely what you are doing, and I will not stand for it.”

“Well, you are certainly pretty, but you are not little at all. You are, in fact, very tall. As for being a fool, I cannot claim whether you are or are not. It depends entirely on what you believe me to be doing.”

“You are going to ruin her,” she said, her voice shaking. “You are selfish, and you do not care for her at all. I should have known better than to trust a rake, and so in that respect you are right. I am a fool.”

She turned to leave, but he took her wrist. It was not a tight hold, but she felt trapped all the same.

“I am not lying to you,” he said firmly. “I am doing what is necessary for the moment. You must understand that I would not do this if I did not need to.”

“Of course, that is why you are as prolific as you are. You care only for the ladies in your vicinity, especially the unmarried ones. Truly, how chivalrous of you.”

He had not let go of her wrist, and after a moment of silence a smirk spread across his face.

“Miss Kendall,” he said slowly, “you are not jealous of her, are you?”

The words could have sent her into a fury, and they would have if she were not aware of the fact that others would have heard.

“Of course not,” she snapped. “There is nothing I want less than to chance ruin with you.”

“Is that so? In that case, why did you so readily take Miss Winston’s place?”

Emma wondered what he meant by that, but only for a minute as it quickly became apparent that she was now the unmarried lady with a known rake, and she was very close to him. Granted, that was partly because he was holding her there, a fact that would only compromise her all the more.

“If I were you, Miss Kendall,” he continued, “I would refrain from spending all this time chasing other young ladies and trying to keep them in line, and focus your attention on yourself. It is unwise to attract such advances. As you said, it is chancing ruin, playing with fire.”

He looked at her intensely for a moment before laughing slightly, brushing a lock of her hair behind her ear and leaning in close. She felt his breath on her neck, hot as if he were burning her, and smiled into her ear.

“Be careful,” he whispered. “Even spinsters are not immune from such dreadful scandal.”

As he pulled away, he took the liberty of kissing her cheek. With a final smirk, his head turned to one side, he left her standing there.

She felt positively scandalized, and she struggled to regain her composure. She tried

to think about why he had changed so suddenly, but it quickly became all too clear to her.

This Duke, the one that had made her feel so infuriated, was the real one. The other, the kind man that was nice to her and treated her respectfully, was an act, one designed to wear her down so she wouldn't dare question him. What made her feel worse than anything he had done, however, was how easily she had fallen for it. She was not wise, not as much as she thought at least, and he had won in an instant.

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Straightening her spine, she set her shoulders back and wiped her cheek. The duke had not left a mark, but she did not like the thought of his touch lingering somehow. She fixed a smile on her face and returned, the others looking at her expectantly.

“Where were you?” Beatrice asked. “Are you alright?”

“I am perfectly fine. I was simply wondering if we would be returning soon, and if I could do so sooner, and so I spoke to the footmen. I am afraid I am unwell.”

“You have certainly been out of sorts,” Sarah nodded. “I can accompany you home, if you wish.”

“No, it is perfectly fine. You have a baron to play Pall Mall with.”

“He will understand. I would much rather ensure you are well. Besides, if you are not here then Father will have to chaperone, and we both know he will not be happy with that.”

“I shall chaperone you,” Cecilia offered. “Emma will only feel worse if she knows she has ruined your afternoon. Is that not right, Emma?”

“Yes, quite.”

And so, after an apologetic look from Sarah, she returned alone. The Duke of Pridefield was happy for her to do so, and instructed the footmen to find a maid for her so that she could be taken care of. Rake he might be, but he knew how to follow the rules of civil society.

If only she could say the same of the Duke of Lupton.

CHAPTER 7

Levi hated how he had acted, but he tried not to blame himself for it.

At least, he could not blame himself for being accosted once again. He had tried so hard to avoid Miss Winston, but she had a strange need to always be near him. He had been patient that afternoon, deciding that being polite but distant would keep her at arm's length, but she had taken it as a challenge.

"An incredible shot, Your Grace!" she cheered when he just missed a goal. "You must have been playing this for years."

"Thank you," he replied, "but no, I never much enjoyed garden games."

"You can hardly tell. You shall win, I believe."

"I am five points behind. It is very unlikely."

"Well," she replied, twirling her hair around her finger, "I believe you shall succeed all the same."

He saw the looks the other gentlemen were giving him, and he wanted to wade out into the lake and dive under the surface. He wondered how long he might have had to hide there before she would leave, but he was quite certain that he could not hold his breath for that long.

"Rosendale," he asked the Baron quietly when her back was turned. "How much for you to throw this game?"

“I am only fourth, Lupton,” he replied. “It is hardly a close game, either. Smythe has practiced since our last game, I am certain of it.”

“So it shan’t take much for you, then. Might you hit your ball over to that group of ladies? It is my understanding that you are courting Miss Sarah, after all. You should ask her to join us.”

“Indeed.” A smile flickered across Rosendale’s face. “Under those circumstances, I am more than happy to make that sacrifice.”

On his turn, Rosendale perfectly hit his ball to the ladies. He had hoped that, in doing so, the presence of another lady would make Miss Winston more inclined to leave him be. Unfortunately, it had only caused her to become bolder, as there were fewer gentlemen there to be witnesses to what she was saying.

“Your Grace,” she said as the others moved to the next part, “I’m afraid I do not feel well. It must be the heat.”

“How unfortunate. Shall I find someone to escort you home?”

“I would rather you did. I feel...I feel very weak. Should I faint, I wouldn’t wish to languish alone in the sun.”

He could have scoffed at her, but it was not worth the trouble. If he sent her back in a carriage, he could at least be rid of her without any further issue, and so he went to Smythe and tapped his shoulder. He explained the situation quickly, and they left for the carriages. It was only a short walk away, and when they arrived Smythe left once more. He was, after all, winning the game, and he did not wish to miss a turn.

“Thank you,” she said softly. “I already feel much better.”

“Then you shall be perfectly fine to return home alone, yes?”

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“Well, I am not so certain of that. It could suddenly change, and then what will I do?”

“I can have a maid arranged for you. The Duke of Pridefield shan’t mind.”

“But I would much rather you accompanied me. It would be nice to have a friend with me.”

“Am I a friend to you?”

She giggled at that as if he had asked her something absurd.

“Your Grace, you and I both know what is between us, but if I must call it friendship then I shall.”

Before he could refute it, however, Miss Kendall appeared.

She was furious, and he could not believe that she had caught them at the worst possible time once more. He saw betrayal in her eyes, and he hated it. She chastised them both, but as she did so he realized that she had been waiting for it to happen. She had expected him to do something to prove her assumptions correct; to play the role that he had assigned himself so long ago.

And so, as Miss Winston stalked away, he decided that he would do exactly that. If it was a rake she expected, that she wanted, then he would give her a rake. He was excellent in the role when necessary, and for the sake of proving a point he would play it well.

Too well, he realized, as he had left her flustered and then she seemed to leave altogether. He wondered if he had taken their argument too far, but he reasoned that she was not listening to him and had therefore left him with no other choice.

And so, he finished the game, which he ended up coming in second with, and they played a second with Miss Sarah joining them. She was good, very good, especially for a beginner. As the game continued, however, he found that she was standing beside him as Rosendale took his turns. She looked at him expectantly, as though willing him to say something.

“You... play very well,” he managed.

“I wish to know what you think of my sister,” Sarah replied bluntly.

“She is certainly proper. I will say that she is pleasant company, when she wishes to be at least.”

“I want you to take care of her. I know it is not right for me to instruct a duke, but you must know that she has done everything she can for me, and I have never been able to offer her anything in return. She deserves the best, and I expect you to give her that if you are suggesting such intentions.”

He paused, looking at the young lady’s face. She seemed serious about her words, though she was quite timid in his presence.

“Is that what your sister believes?”

“It is what her friends and I have seen. You have been by her side for a while during this party, and if we are correct in our suspicions I want to know that your intentions are honorable.”

“They always are.”

She seemed to laugh gently at that, and then it was her turn. She no longer waited beside him during the game, and he took that to mean that she had said what she had been building the courage to say, and now there was nothing more that she needed from him.

She won the game, and he took that as his sign that he would not be victorious in any other attempts. He left for the carriages for a second time, this time returning to the household. He had been thinking about Miss Sarah’s words, and how they had noticed him by her side. He had told her that Miss Kendall was pleasant when she wanted to be, and that was true, but even when she was being decidedly unpleasant he had to admit that he liked being near her. It confused him, for he should have taken offence at her treatment of him and wanted nothing more to do with her, but he couldn’t bring himself to.

Upon his return, he needed some time to think, and so he decided to go to the library. Leonard wouldn’t mind, as he had often opened his home to Levi when he needed a moment to himself, without his mother’s presence lingering around him.

He chose a book and took a seat without much thought, when suddenly he heard a gentle huffing sound. He looked up to see none other than Miss Kendall, who had been sitting there, standing to leave.

“Wait,” he said quickly. “Stay. I did not mean to intrude.”

“You never do, Your Grace. I am doing what you instructed me to do and leaving situations that could lead to scandal. Even I, a glorified maid, could fall victim to scandal. Or so I am told.”

“It was unfair of Miss Winston to call you that. You mustn’t listen to her.”

“I have far greater issues than what some young lady thinks of me,” she snapped. “I am rather preoccupied, for example, with avoiding ruin, as it would appear some people are determined to see it happen.”

“You wound me. I would never want to see you ruined.”

She laughed emptily, closing the book that she had been reading and putting it back on the shelf. She looked at him almost with pity, or perhaps despair. He did not know how to read her, and it intrigued him more than it confused him.

“Then why did you do that at the park?” she asked. “Why have you followed me back after it? Please, if you wish to upset me, do not. Leave me be. I need only see my sister married and then I can leave this dreadful society. Do not make it harder than necessary.”

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“Is that truly what you plan to do?”

“What else is there for me? I am unmarried, and I do not wish to burden my father for longer than the five-and-twenty years that I already have. You would never know such concerns, as your title is yours by right.”

“There you go with your assumptions. I shall remind you, Miss Kendall, that you do not know me any better than I know you. You are intelligent, but you do not know everything.”

“It is as though you enjoy insulting me.”

“It wasn’t an insult,” he promised, also leaving his seat. “I only mean that I can see you are better than some maid. I do not want you to hate me, no matter what you might think. I only ask that you listen to me, and believe me when I tell you that you have misunderstood something.”

“What is there to misunderstand?” she asked, exasperated. “There is a young lady that does not know any better, and you are clearly taking advantage of that.”

“Or she might be taking advantage of my reputation,” he suggested. “I am not a fool, Miss Kendall. I know when I am being tricked, and just because I do not say it outright does not mean I do not see it.”

“Why would she tempt scandal?”

“Why does anyone? It is not for me to say, but each time you have seen Miss

Winston and I, it has been under unfortunate circumstances, ones that I did not plan for.”

There was silence for a moment as she searched his face, though he did not know what she was looking for.

“Why are you telling me this?” she asked. “It is none of my business what you do, and yet you are trying so hard to explain your actions to me. There is no need to, not really.”

“I do not know why. I simply want to. I do not want you to think badly of me.”

“Your reputation does that for you, Your Grace, and you seem quite proud of that. You do not need unfortunate circumstances to help you.”

“So you do think badly of me.”

The thought of that upset him more than it should have. He wanted her to like him, and though he refused to question just why that was, he knew it to be the case.

“Do I think badly of the gentleman that behaved abominably to me? I suppose that I should, don’t you?”

“I only did that because you clearly want me to be that way. If you continue to insist that black is white, eventually you will convince people, after all.”

“Do you mean to tell me that you are not what you want others to believe you are?” she laughed. “Your Grace, I shall be civil with you, but I do not want you too close to me. Beyond ensuring that you do not ruin any unsuspecting young ladies, I do not want to see you.”

“I apologize for my actions. I should not have done what I did.”

“No, you should not have.”

She left the library, and though he wished to follow her he did not. He had thought himself so clever for his act, but now he could hardly think back on it without scolding himself for it. He was neither funny, nor clever. He was exactly what he had been pretending to be for years. A rake and nothing more, without even the good memories that a true rake might have gathered.

But he couldn't forget her sister's words. They had seen the two of them together, and seen something in Miss Kendall that they had not noticed before. They expected him to care for their friend and sister, and he had failed before they could even warn him.

He shook his head. It was none of his concern, after all. No promises had been made, and they were not even courting. Then again, why had Miss Sarah been so determined? She did not strike him as overly ambitious or cunning, nor determined to make the most illustrious match possible given that she had seemingly chosen a baron for herself.

He tried not to think about it. Thankfully, it was not long before the others returned, and so he threw himself into the middle of it all. He socialized more than he ever had, determined to prove that he was a good man, one that was well-liked. Not only that, but it meant Miss Winston could not come too close to him. He hoped Miss Kendall would be keeping an eye on him, but she was nowhere to be seen.

“You are quite the sociable creature,” Leonard remarked that evening. “Did you enjoy the picnic?”

“Indeed. You certainly know how to host.”

“I do,” he nodded in mock thought. “You should do so yourself sometime.”

“Pridefield,” he warned. “I shall not remind you of my mother again.”

“I know, I know. In any case, it is nice to see you enjoying yourself. It has something to do with that spinster that has caught your eye, I assume?”

“Have you truly noticed?”

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“Levi, everyone has. It may surprise you, but people are capable of whispers and gossip without telling the subjects of their conversation about it.”

His friend laughed, but Levi couldn't help but wonder if it was already too late.

He was already too known to her to become unknown.

CHAPTER 8

“Your sister told me something very interesting yesterday.”

Emma had expected something to be said in her absence during the picnic, but nothing like what Sarah had said to the Duke of Lupton. What surprised her more, however, was how she had come to learn of it.

They had been sitting at breakfast, and though she had not forgiven the Duke, he seemed to crave that forgiveness. Therefore, he was acting as though nothing had happened at all. I shall never understand men.

“She is a very interesting lady,” Emma nodded, ignoring him otherwise.

“Indeed, but I never would have expected her to be so brazen.”

She looked at him sharply. Had he taken liberties with Sarah in the same way he had with her and Gretchen? She knew her expression was accusatory, and she hoped that it would lead to him confessing what happened without her saying a word.

“I cannot believe how poorly you think of me,” he sighed. “We had a pleasant conversation during a game of Pall Mall, nothing more. She simply wanted me to know that you are a good lady, and that I am to be good to you in return.”

“Why did she tell you that?”

“Your guess is as good as mine, Miss Kendall. I shall assume that you did not put her up to it in a bid for my attention?”

“Given that your attention is the last thing I could possibly want, you may indeed assume that.”

“Ah, quite a shame. I would love for some proof that you are not as frightening as you wish to be.”

“I am only frightening to those that ought to be afraid. I am only good, in spite of what my sister says, to those warranting my goodness. You may choose which one you are deserving of.”

“Your goodness, I believe.”

She scoffed, rolling her eyes before leaving the dining hall. They were all to visit the nearby village that day, and she wanted to prepare herself, as well as make any changes to Sarah that they deemed necessary. She had a maid, but their father had chosen the least costly one he could find and so she was not the most adept in her role.

However, she also had a very important matter to discuss with Sarah and needed the time to do that. Her younger sister was caught very much off guard when she cornered her.

“Why on Earth would you say that to the Duke?” Emma asked, exasperated.

“I do not know what you are referring to. I do not speak to any dukes.”

“Do not play coy with me. He has already told me at breakfast what you did. What were you thinking?”

“I was thinking that, if he is so determined to look your way constantly, then he should at least have honorable intentions. Do not act as though you have not noticed. Half of the party has!”

“What do you mean?” Emma asked, suddenly quite concerned.

“There have been whispers, Sister. Nothing of any untoward behavior, simply that the Duke of Lupton has been seen watching a spinster. They find it preposterous, but then you have always been well liked so it is not too terrible.”

“But it is. I cannot be seen with a man such as him. It will ruin your match!”

“I do not think this match of mine can be ruined. I do not mean to get ahead of myself, but we really are quite taken with one another. You shall be rid of me soon enough, I believe.”

“Rid of you? Why would you say it in such a manner?”

“It is what Father says. It is what he has always said, you know that.”

“Yes, but I am not Father, am I? I shall miss you terribly when you are gone.”

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“When you are lying by the sea, Aunt Megan’s servants bringing you sandwiches? I do doubt that.”

It was a nice thought, being treated in such a manner, but it wasn’t going to be the case. For one, their Aunt Megan did not spend all of her time by the sea, and not only that but she did not have a large staff. There were certainly no spare servants to hand-deliver food to her, at least.

“I would miss you even if I lived in a palace,” she promised, fixing a stray curl that had fallen.

Inexplicably, she was believing that she would actually come to miss the Duke as well. She reacted strangely to him, in a way that nobody had ever made her before, and she did not like it at all. It did not make any sense that a man that vexed her so could have such a profound effect on her, when she had passed so many years unruffled by the most ardent of suitors.

They were soon ready to leave, and as they joined the others in the grand hall she chastised herself for noticing the Duke of Lupton before anyone else. He was smiling brightly, socializing with anyone and everyone. He seemed to genuinely enjoy it, and Emma wondered if that was all she had been, all that Gretchen had been. Meaningless conversation, a way to be known by others. It calmed her a little, to know that she was not as important to him as she thought, but she would have been lying if she said that a small amount of hurt did not come with that, too.

They boarded their carriage, Sarah joining Emma and her friends. They liked Sarah well enough, though Cecilia thought she was a little too timid. Then again, she

thought that of anyone that was not as outspoken as Emma was, and not many ladies could reach such a feat.

“So, have the two of you met any prospective suitors thus far?” Emma asked Beatrice and Dorothy before the talk could turn to herself.

Both ladies shook their heads, much to her dismay.

“I have been spending far too much time in the gardens for that,” Dorothy explained. “We’ve played a game since our youth, Beatrice and me. She points out plants and I name them. I hadn’t expected her to find this many new challenges for me.”

“I will say,” Beatrice nodded, “that it is far more entertaining here than it is in other places we have played it. The Duke of Pridefield has many exotic plants.”

“He also has many interesting gentlemen,” Emma coaxed. “Ones that you might find pleasant to talk to.”

“Oh, I couldn’t do that,” Dorothy giggled. “I do not know how to, and should I do it incorrectly and make a fool of myself then the party shall be ruined for me. Perhaps I might say a few words to a few gentlemen an hour or so before we leave? That way I shall only ruin the hour.”

“You are being ridiculous,” Cecilia huffed. “You speak perfectly well, I can hear you just fine. You are simply making excuses because you are afraid.”

“Yes! That is precisely what I am doing. Very astute, Cecilia.”

“Well, such behavior will not lead to a good match. It will lead to your father, exasperated, choosing a man for you. You do not want that, do you?”

“What I want is to study botany, but we cannot all do as we please. In all honesty, my father finding a husband for me would be welcomed. That way, I would not have to do it myself.”

“And marry a man old enough to be your grandfather?” Beatrice asked, horrified. “You run that risk, you know. I would much rather be a spinster. The two of you have it right.”

“Beatrice, I swear that you will find a match too,” Cecilia sighed. “I am as bad an influence as they say, aren’t I Emma?”

“We both are, it would seem. Where did we both go so wrong?”

The pair continued with their dramatics until they arrived at the village, at which point the five of them laughed and stepped out into the sunlight. It was a warm day, perfect for wandering. Emma hoped to explore the village, then find somewhere to purchase baked goods for Beatrice and a nice flower shop for Dorothy, ending at the library for Cecilia. She had not told the group of her plans, but she was excited for them nevertheless. It had been a tumultuous time, and she wanted nothing more than to spend time with her friends and her sister, not needing anything more than their own company.

She did not know why she expected it to actually happen.

They were but twenty paces away from the carriages when Emma heard a sixth pair of feet join them, heavier and more purposeful. She knew who it was before she had even turned around. To nobody’s surprise, the Duke of Lupton was now standing with them.

“What is it, Your Grace?” she asked in a colder tone than was considered proper.

“I was wondering if I could join you?”

“Do you not have other friends to walk with?”

“Ah, so you admit it! We are friends. Wonderful, I shall accompany you in that case.”

Emma knew she was glaring, but she did not attempt to stop. She was furious with him for intruding upon her time with her friends, but worse she was anxious that her friends would grow tired of his intrusions. However, her friends were immediately taken with him, even Cecilia. Emma wondered just what it was about him that everyone else noticed but she couldn't understand.

“It is nice to be afforded such gallant protection,” Sarah laughed as they walked the bustling streets. “Although, should it have been needed, Cecilia would have more than sufficed.”

“I shall consider this a day's rest,” Cecilia chuckled in return. “Thank you, Your Grace, for affording it to me.”

The Duke nodded. “You may all truly enjoy yourselves today. You shall have nothing to fear in my presence.”

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What was worst of all was that, in spite of herself, Emma did feel protected around him. He was a large man, one that could easily take on a more threatening stance if he thought it necessary. He felt like their protector, and she hated that she liked that about him. She wished that he was all-bad, so that she at least had reason enough to hate him, but he was just good enough that she felt guilty for doing so.

“You are quiet today, Miss Kendall,” he said after a while. “Have you recovered from your ailment?”

“Yes, Your Grace.”

Sarah nudged her sharply in the side. “He is being nice,” she hissed. “Can you not do the same?”

“Gentlemen are always nice, until they are not,” Emma whispered back.

They came to a stop outside of a shop, and Dorothy looked excitedly in the windows. The display was all in pink, girlish accessories everywhere one looked.

“I do need ribbons,” she said in thought.

“Then we shall go inside,” Cecilia nodded, and the two of them entered at once, Beatrice and Sarah following behind.

Emma went to follow them, too, but she was aware that the Duke was standing behind her and it would have been unfair to leave him outside waiting for them. She turned back quickly.

“You may leave us, if you wish,” she suggested. “Such feminine activities are not for you, one would think.”

“You seem sad, Miss Kendall.”

Granted, she was. She had planned the day meticulously, and she had hoped to be of use to the group for a change. Sarah no longer needed her, having seemingly found her match of her own accord, and with how easily they had chosen a shop to enter and Emma having no say in it at all, she felt unimportant to them, too. She had hardly seen them during the party, and it was as though nothing had changed for them in her absence.

The duke did not need to know about any of that, though.

“I am anything but upset. I am finding the village very enjoyable, actually. I want the same for you, which is why it may be best that you go and find something you enjoy, rather than following ladies doing what ladies enjoy. This sort of thing is not particularly suited to you, is it?”

He chuckled, looking down at her with his perfect green eyes.

“If anyone knows about female beauty, Miss Kendall, it is me. Come along.”

Emma scoffed at him, and he turned back to her.

“What is it?”

“Well, you may claim to know what beauty is, but you do not know the first thing about what actually goes into it.”

“No, I mean what is your own trouble?”

She froze, her mouth agape.

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“You act as though I have given you the plague. What have I done that has caused you so much offence?”

“What haven’t you done?” she snapped. “You know perfectly well what you did, and twice at that. You cannot honestly pretend that I did not see you with Miss Winston, alone. Your behavior proves to me that you are a rake and nothing more, and I cannot— I will not pretend that it did not happen simply because you are kind to me and you like socializing.”

“Very well, we shall acknowledge that it happened. Moving forward, what will it take for you to forgive me?”

“I shall never.”

“That isn’t true. Anything can be forgiven, I believe, if the apology matches the crime.”

His jovial tone had disappeared, replaced by something far more serious. He was more handsome, Emma decided, when he was not putting on an act.

“Say, for example,” he continued, “I never speak to Miss Winston again, and I leave her alone entirely, would that satisfy you?”

“Is that to say that you have already gotten what you wanted from her?”

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“No, I– Miss Kendall, I am trying to prove that I am not the man that you think I am. What would it take to do that?”

“Why does it matter to you? You shall only know me for the duration of this party, and then we shall go our separate ways and you will never see me again. Why do you care whether or not I forgive you, or like you?”

He was quiet for a moment. Emma wondered what he would say in response, and the longer he said nothing the more she wanted to know. However, he simply laughed and at once his seriousness was gone again.

“That is an excellent question,” he nodded, remnants of laughter on his lips. “I shall bid you goodbye. Enjoy the rest of your day.”

He left before she could say another word.

She watched him leave, wondering who the real Duke was, and whether the one she saw was the false Duke, or the true.

She did not know, and against all odds she did not like that she didn't.

CHAPTER 9

“Are you suggesting that I change the rules for you?” Leonard asked, an eyebrow raised.

“Not exactly,” Levi said in response, shifting his weight from one foot to another.

Levi had wandered the village alone for the rest of the day, looking for something to occupy his mind with until they all returned. He didn't want to spend all day thinking about Miss Kendall again, and this time he was at least half-successful. He only thought about her upon their return to the estate, when he caught sight of her leaving for the gardens with her friend (Miss Godwin, if he recalled correctly) and he wondered what she had thought when he left them.

He had met with Leonard that evening in his study again. He liked the time away from all the other guests and their watchful eyes, and so he welcomed the break, but that evening he had other reasons for their meeting, too.

There was to be a treasure hunt the following day, scheduled for the afternoon. The guests would be in pairs, and the winner would receive what Leonard described as a very illustrious and important prize, not that he dared say what it was. Levi did not care much for winning, but he did have a partner in mind that he wished to be with.

"Does Miss Kendall even want to be partnered with you? She does not seem very fond of you at all."

"Which is precisely why I wish to spend the afternoon with her. I want her to see me differently. I want her to think that I am helpful. I tried this afternoon in the village but she treated me as a nuisance instead."

"It is entirely possible that you were being a nuisance. Have you considered that?"

"I may or may not have. I am aware that they were going into shops of the feminine variety, but something in me keeps pulling me toward her. She doesn't hate me, I can see that, but she doesn't like me either. It is fascinating."

"So you want me to pair the two of you together tomorrow so that you can make her like you completely?"

“In all honesty, I want to be paired with her tomorrow because getting the truth out of her sounds fun. Would that be alright?”

Leonard laughed at him kindly, taking a piece of paper out of a drawer and handing it to him. Levi scanned it and quickly realized what it was. It was the list of pairings for the treasure hunt, and among all of the names was his own.

He was already paired with Miss Kendall.

He narrowed his eyes at Leonard, wondering what his motives had been.

“I must say,” Leonard said, “I was wondering if you might come and ask this of me, but in any case I have taken the decision out of your hands. I think she will be good for you.”

It was exactly what he wanted; a chance to prove that he was not the villain she thought, but he hadn’t thought that such a desire had been apparent to anyone else.

“So you would have forced me into her proximity?”

“Is it force if you are asking me to do it? I do not believe so. I believe I am actually doing what you want, not that you are thanking me for it.”

“I– very well. Thank you.”

“Good,” Leonard grinned. “You are most welcome.”

Levi left soon after, but Leonard’s words stayed with him. He knew that he did not have any real feelings for Miss Kendall, but he had to admit there was an attraction there and there always had been. He had never intended on taking a wife, but he supposed if he had to, she wouldn’t be the worst possible option. She was good to

those she loved, and fiercely loyal, but she did not hesitate to put him in his place. That was to say that she was not a complete wallflower that would bend to his every will, which was far more interesting than a lady that would.

Perhaps that was why he was so intrigued by her.

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In truth, he hated how easily people saw his title and decided to like him regardless of how he acted. No one seemed to have true feelings, good or bad, for him. Only his title. When it came to Miss Kendall, however, she only seemed to like him when his mask fell and he stopped his act. She was an exception, and that interested him.

The following morning, when the pairs were made, Miss Kendall glared at him as he had expected her to. He tried to feign surprise, but he wasn't any good at it and she saw through it regardless.

"This was your doing," she accused, "wasn't it?"

"Not exactly, no, but as we are together, it would be unwise to dispute it, would it not?"

She rolled her eyes, took the first clue from him, and began on her way. Levi had not yet read it, but he knew that his friend had quite a flair for the dramatics when he felt like it. The clues were written in poem form, each pair having a different starting point that led to the same end, the ones in between being in varying orders.

"My face is round, I watch the day," Miss Kendall read. "Tracing time in golden ray. Might you know?"

"Might you?"

"You are infuriating," she groaned, but then she lit up. "Actually, I just might. Come along."

She ran off at a speed he had never seen in a lady, and he tried to keep up with her. She seemed to know precisely where she was going, eventually coming to a stop at the sun dial by the roses.

“It uses rays of sunlight to tell the time,” she explained. “This must be right.”

Levi set about searching for the clue, soon finding a folded piece of paper in a crevice. Miss Kendall cheered brightly, but instead of taking the paper from him she allowed him to read it for himself.

“I have no tongue, yet tales I tell. Seek me where minds explore and swell. That has to be the library, yes?”

“I am inclined to agree, Your Grace. Very astute of you.”

“Might we be the most intelligent people here?” he asked in a joking manner as they set off for the next clue. “I believe we are.”

When they entered the library, Levi noticed how she froze a little at the sight of the chairs. It was where she had been when he walked in on her, and though he had practically forgotten the moment it was evident that she had not.

“How will we find the clue in here?” she asked. “This is one of the largest libraries that I have ever seen.”

“Mine is larger,” he mumbled, wandering the room and picking up a few books.

At last, they found it underneath a glass vase. Levi found it first, but Miss Kendall was quicker, and so when they each reached out to touch it, she took the vase and he, in turn, took her hand.

Her skin was incredibly soft, and her hand was delicate. He almost forgot that it was most improper to hold onto a lady's hand for an extended amount of time, and he would have had Miss Kendall not tried to pull away. They both shared an uneasy laugh, and then he stepped back and allowed her to unfold the paper.

"In winter's chill, I bloom in light. My scent is sweet, my blossoms white."

They looked at one another for a moment. It was about flowers, that much was obvious, but with how vast and manicured the gardens were, it could have been anything.

Suddenly, Miss Kendall sprang into action, running out of the library with him on her heels.

"Where are we going?" he asked.

"The orangery, of course. Dorothy told me all about them. Orange blossoms are one of her favorite flowers, you know."

When they arrived at the orangery, Miss Godwin was already there with her partner, Miss Penton. They seemed to be looking intensely at a clue that they had found, and so they would have to search for a different one in there.

"Emma!" Miss Penton called. "How are you enjoying your search?"

"It has certainly been entertaining. I hadn't thought the Duke of Pridefield to be a poet. And the two of you?"

"This is our first clue," Miss Penton sighed. "I cannot make head nor tail of it, and it isn't as though Dorothy is in any rush to leave here."

Miss Godwin blushed fervently at that.

“It simply smells too wonderful. I have had an orange for breakfast every day since our arrival.”

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“I shall tell him so,” Levi assured her. “He will be pleased to hear that.”

“Can we help you at all, Cecilia?” Miss Kendall asked. “We could find another clue for you and then take yours.”

“No, never! I am not a cheat, Emma. I am simply missing something vital, I believe.”

“Oh!” Miss Godwin exclaimed, at last looking at her clue. “Do you suppose it is the dining hall? The clue mentions weapons we use each day. That would be a knife, wouldn’t it?”

“Dorothy, you do have your moments of brilliance!”

The two ladies gave a rushed goodbye and then hurried on. Miss Kendall laughed softly before searching for another. It was easy enough to find; it was tied with ribbon to one of the branches. Though she was tall, it was just out of her reach. Levi brought it down for her, but he handed it to her so that she could read it.

“Thank you, Your Grace,” she said begrudgingly. “Coins are tossed to make a wish, but not for food as I have no fish. That is a strange clue, wouldn’t you agree?”

“For someone that is unfamiliar with the Duke of Pridefield, yes, but fortunately for you we have quite the competitive edge in that respect. Come along.”

The clue was referring to a fountain on the other side of the estate, and so when Miss Kendall tried to run, he stopped her. She would have been out of breath by the time they reached it and the exhaustion would have slowed them down more than if they

simply took their time.

However, their slower pace gave him time to truly look at her. She seemed to revel in the challenge, a fierce look of determination in her eyes. She truly was beautiful, and there was no use trying to ignore that fact. Even walking at their slow pace, she did so with purpose as she followed him.

“Your friends are lovely,” he said into the silence.

“Yes, they truly are.”

But then she sighed, a moment of despondence flashing on her face.

“Is something wrong?”

“No, no of course not. I simply... Do not take offence to this, as you are proving to be a better partner than I had expected, but I had thought I would be paired with one of them. I have hardly seen them.”

“I do not take offence. I understand perfectly. I would have enjoyed doing this with the Duke of Pridefield, but as he is hosting the event and has written all of the clues, it would not have been fair.”

She laughed softly at that.

“Do you enjoy being needed?” she asked.

“What do you mean?”

“Well, as a duke, you are at the pinnacle of our society. You have a purpose, and thetonis better off for having you be a member of it. Is that something you like?”

“It is a lot of responsibility, I suppose, but I shan’t claim to hate it. It feels good to do something, even if my lack of a wife and heir means I am not achieving perfection. Why do you ask?”

“It is nothing,” she replied.

“It is clearly something. I can see it in your eyes. You can tell me, I promise not to share it with anyone else.”

She looked at him for a moment before taking a deep breath, looking away into the distance.

“When my mother died,” she explained, “I was very important. I had to help raise my sister, as well as find a good match for myself. I suppose I did well with the former, but with the latter I was a failure. I had suitors, but I never found one worthy of abandoning my sister for, and so I remained unmarried. Now, a spinster, I am actively hurting my sister’s chances.”

“And yet she has found a baron. He is no viscount, but it is a match. She certainly seems happy enough, at least.”

“Yes, and I did not do that. She did it on her own. I was of no use to her. Then there is the matter of my friends—”

“Who clearly think the world of you.”

“They did before, but I am not as important as I once was. I had made plans yesterday, and not so long ago they would all have been excited to hear them. Instead, it was as though they had devised their own plan and I followed along with it. I can hardly blame them, of course, for I am never there.”

“Have you told them any of this? It may well help, you know.”

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“I should. I simply do not know how.”

“The way you have just told me would work quite well. They are intelligent ladies, they will understand.”

She seemed to have some confidence instilled in her once more at that. Whether she believed him or not, he was uncertain, but she trusted him enough to be vulnerable and so he hoped his words had sparked some hope for her.

They reached the fountain, and Miss Kendall made a sound of understanding before taking the next clue and handing it to him.

“For years I have stood and for years I will last. I turn bare and then green as the seasons pass.”

“The tree!” Miss Kendall said triumphantly. “There is the large oak tree nearby. That has to be it.”

Her moment of vulnerability had passed, and Levi was almost grateful for that. He liked that she was willing to speak her mind, but he preferred to see her happy. Her hair, which had been pinned, had started to come undone from her spirited movements, and she did not care to fix them. He also, he noted, preferred her that way.

She was always so perfect, so uptight, that the sight of her acting so playfully made him think of her in a completely different manner. She was beautiful, and no amount of forcing himself not to think as such could change that.

They reached the tree, and the final clue was tied to a branch that was rather high. It would be an easy climb, if one knew what they were doing, but before he could discuss a plan with her she had already begun her ascent.

“Miss Kendall,” he said, trying to hide his concern, “do you think this is the best idea?”

“I have hands and feet, do I not? I am more than capable of this, thank you.”

Granted, she seemed to do it with ease, but then as she reached out for the clue they realized it was just out of her reach. She stretched out as far as she could without letting go of the trunk, but it lay a fingertip distance out of her grasp. With one last try, she leaned out even further and at last closed her hand around it.

And then fell.

Instinctively, Levi ran beneath her, and she tumbled into his arms. He staggered as he caught her, though she was feather-light she was in his arms. She had her eyes closed, as if preparing for the impact, and they flew wide as she realized that she was safe.

Her face was dangerously close to his, and his body screamed at him to close the distance altogether in spite of the fact that he had never done such a thing before. He had to remain frozen to fight the urge, and given that she also had not moved he wondered if she somehow felt the same.

They remained still for a moment, her eyes locked on his. He waited for a sign, something, anything, that told him what she was thinking.

She cleared her throat, looking at the ground.

“You may put me down now.”

He obliged, and she unfolded the clue she had retrieved without saying it aloud.

“The ballroom,” she said bluntly. “Let us go.”

CHAPTER 10

You are such a fool, Emma scolded herself, the greatest fool to ever live, even.

She hadn't thought of the risks as she climbed the tree, only that she might redeem herself after being unable to reach the one in the orangery. Her judgment was also clouded, she considered, because she had only just told the Duke something that she had been concerned about without hesitation. She couldn't trust him.

And yet she wanted to, and when he caught her and held her in his arms she felt safe for the first time in her life. He had set her ablaze, and it was very dangerous indeed. Then again, he did not take liberties with her the way she had expected, and as soon as she asked him to put her down he did so, leaving for the ballroom with her in a most honorable fashion.

Which was, she decided, the real reason why she was such a fool.

“Congratulations!” the Duke of Pridefield announced as they entered. “You are the first to finish. It appears that you make an excellent team.”

“Is there a prize?” Levi asked.

“Indeed. I had this locket made for the winner. I thought if two gentlemen won, one could give it to a lady as a gift. Fortunately, Miss Kendall may have it for herself.”

“Oh!” she gasped. “Thank you. It is lovely.”

It was a delicate gold chain with a perfectly sized locket on it. It was large enough to fit a small miniature in, or a dried petal as Dorothy preferred to do. Despite its dainty size, the craftsmanship must have cost a fortune, and it led her to wonder just how wealthy dukes were.

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“Here,” the Duke of Lupton said gently. “Let me fasten it for you.”

Her fingertips moved deftly on the back of her neck, quickly fixing it in place. His gentle touch on her neck should have felt foreign, but it did not. It was almost natural, which she supposed was worse but she could not bring herself to believe such a thing. She was grateful that he did it so quickly. If he spent much longer touching her she did not know what she might have said.

As the other guests finished, they were greeted with a drink and socialized with one another. Dorothy and Cecilia arrived first out of the group, going immediately to Emma with large smiles on their faces. They had not won, which Emma had expected to irritate Cecilia, but they seemed to have enjoyed themselves nonetheless.

“You know,” Cecilia said wisely, “had we not spent most of our time on that one clue, we might have won.”

“And who would have taken the prize?” Emma asked, and their eyes fell on her locket.

“Oh, Emma, that is beautiful!” Dorothy sighed wistfully. “I should have liked it for myself.”

“Well, one day, we shall all have identical ones made for ourselves. What do you think?”

Dorothy’s eyes sparkled at the idea.

“Who was Beatrice paired with?” Emma asked. “Did you see her?”

“She was with that awful Gretchen. The poor girl must have had a miserable time.”

Emma grimaced, clumsily unclasping her necklace and slipping it into her bodice. It wouldn’t have been fair, she thought, to celebrate when her friend had had such a miserable time.

And yet, when Beatrice appeared, she was arm in arm with Gretchen.

All three ladies looked at them in confusion, and Emma swore that when Gretchen noticed them, there was a sly smile on her face.

“What on Earth is Beatrice doing?” Dorothy asked. “Gretchen Winston is awful, she knows that.”

“Perhaps she is only being polite?” Cecilia suggested. “In any case, she shall come over when she is ready. In the meantime, shall we search for your sister, Emma?”

They searched the ballroom for a while before deciding that Sarah had not yet finished. Eventually, she came into the ballroom on the arm of a much older gentleman, one that none of them recognized.

“Poor thing,” Cecilia sighed. “Come, let us rescue her.”

She took Dorothy’s arm and marched over to her, perhaps not wanting Emma to be in any trouble with her father. She was grateful for that. Sarah joined the two of them but gave Emma a look of horror as they went back to her.

“We must talk later,” she whispered.

“Sarah? What is it?”

“Later.”

With a fixed smile, Sarah leaped into a bright conversation about the treasure hunt and where she had been. Emma did not listen to a word of it, however, instead paralyzed by the look on her sister’s face when she approached her. Whatever had happened, she was terrified, and a thousand possibilities flooded her.

Before she could take her away, their father appeared and told Sarah to join him. She did not argue, as she never did, and followed him without complaint. Emma moved to follow, but one look from her father was enough to stop her in her tracks. It was not for her to do, that much was clear, and she did not wish to make it worse for Sarah, whatever she was doing.

“Is she alright?” Cecilia asked. “She seemed unwell.”

“Something is wrong. I will have to find her later in order to find out what exactly it is, but it has to be something. I have never seen her look so scared.”

“Perhaps she simply had an unpleasant time with that man,” Dorothy suggested. “Try not to dwell on it until you know more. In the meantime, we should decide what we have done to make Beatrice prefer Gretchen of all people.”

“I shall find out,” Emma said firmly, watching them leave the ballroom together, still arm in arm. “It will provide a distraction.”

Her friends did not argue, and she ran off behind them.

She kept her movements quiet, not wanting to alert them to her presence. The hallways caused each sound to echo, but as the ladies were speaking it was difficult

for them to hear her, especially as she was keeping her distance. She took off her slippers and held them in one hand, making herself practically silent.

“It is strange that you and I have never spoken before today,” Gretchen remarked. “I had noticed you before, but you were never alone.”

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“No, my friends have always made certain of that. They are very good to me. You should join us!”

When I have passed away, perhaps, Emma thought to herself.

“Unfortunately, I cannot. Miss Kendall dislikes me, you see, and I fear that she would make life difficult for me.”

“Emma? She doesn’t dislike anyone. Well, apart from a few rakes, but that is more than justified. You must have had a misunderstanding.”

“No, she made it very clear. You shall see for yourself in just a moment, but I am in love, and she is doing everything in her power to stop it.”

Emma paused. Love? Is that what she thought she shared with the Duke? She almost chuckled at her naivety, but that would have led only to her being seen, and she wished to know what was happening. She continued on her way, listening to them as well as she could.

“Emma has never stopped a love match. It doesn’t sound like her at all.”

“All spinsters do it. They envy us younger ladies and do everything in their power to make us one of them. Unfortunately for her, I shall not be one, for I have already found the perfect husband! He wrote a note for me last night and slipped it under my door, asking me to meet him here alone. If you wouldn’t mind...”

They came to a stop outside a door, and Emma pressed herself into a nearby

doorway, praying that they would not notice her.

“Could you wait here for a few moments? And then, all I need is for you to open the door. I will take it from there. Thank you for being such a good friend!”

Without another word, she slipped into a room, closing the door behind her. With Gretchen gone, Emma at last approached Beatrice with a puzzled expression. At first sight of her, Beatrice groaned.

“Emma, she is insufferable,” she whispered. “She was ecstatic when we were paired together, and then I had to spend all afternoon by her side while she tried to decipher the clues. She was useless at it, by the way, but she wouldn’t let me help her. Now she has brought me here, and for the life of me I do not know why!.”

Emma hushed her gently before pressing her ear to the door. She could not understand any words, but it was undoubtedly the Duke of Lupton’s voice on the other side of the door. Her heart pounded, wondering why he had asked her to meet him again.

Then she heard the frustration in Gretchen’s voice, and her footsteps approaching loudly before the door swung open. Unable to adjust her position, Emma fell forward, and sprawled out on the floor. Gretchen made a horrible scoffing sound and stepped over her, almost kicking her in the process.

Emma scrambled to her feet, Beatrice helping her. Her eyes did not leave his, and though he looked as though he wanted to say something he did not. She turned and left with Beatrice without another word.

“She meant him?” Beatrice asked incredulously. “But he—”

“It is a long story. She seems to have a plan, but given what we just witnessed it

would seem that it has not worked. Leave it be.”

“But you and the Duke—”

“Beatrice, please, I cannot discuss this right now. There is nothing between the Duke and me. I only wished to help save Gretchen from ruin.”

Beatrice nodded, not pressing the matter.

“I will not breathe a word about it to anyone, of course,” she said gently. “Whatever Gretchen is trying to do, I will not help her succeed. Now, if you will, do not let me out of your sight again. Terrible things happen when you are not around.”

Emma laughed softly. She pitied Beatrice for the terrible afternoon she had had, but she also envied her slightly. At least she could call it a terrible day and forget about it, but Emma had spent a wonderful time with the Duke and then he had ruined it. Again.

Well, he hadn’t ruined it exactly. After all, he could not have been blamed for Gretchen ambushing him again, but that did not explain the note. She shook her head, remaining silent until they reached the ballroom and found Cecilia and Dorothy and pulled them to one side. They explained what had happened, and they swore not to tell a soul about it.

“It is very strange, though,” Dorothy reasoned. “Who would willingly tempt such scandal?”

“Fools,” Cecilia replied. “Innocent little fools that think they would be an exception to ruin. They never are, either.”

The Duke reentered the ballroom at that moment, and he saw Emma at once. She did

not know what to do except take the moment to find her sister. It had all been a welcome distraction, but she knew that whatever was happening to Sarah must have been worse than what Gretchen was attempting. She began searching for her, but she was not in the ballroom. Her father, on the other hand, was, and he looked furious that she was approaching.

“Where is Sarah?” she asked as politely as she could.

“She has complained of a headache and retired to her bedchamber for a while. You are to leave her be.”

“But—”

“You are to leave her be. She does not need you storming into her room and filling her head with thoughts. We are in a precarious enough situation as it is.”

“What do you mean?”

“Emma, I cannot explain every detail of every situation. I do not have the time, nor the patience, nor the will. You will leave your sister be, and I will explain my reasoning when we return home. You can wait a few days, can’t you?”

It was true that there were only three days remaining until they would leave the party, but it was an awfully long time to wait. She couldn’t stand the thought of her sister suffering and not doing anything to help her, even if it was simply offering her support through it. Then again, her father did not take kindly to disobedience.

“Of course, Father,” she replied. “I shall leave her until then.”

She was, of course, lying, but he accepted it and turned back to his conversation as if she were not there at all. Thankfully, his inability to acknowledge her served her well in that respect, as he would not notice her disappearance.

She made her way quickly to Sarah’s room, knocking gently on her door.

“Sarah?” she asked softly. “May I come in?”

She did not receive a response, but she could clearly hear her sister on the other side of the door.

She was crying.

Without another thought, Emma forced her way in.

CHAPTER 11

Levi knew that he was playing with fire by sending Miss Winston a note, but she had left him no other choice.

He wanted Miss Kendall to forgive him, and he did not want to make an offer only to not keep it. And so, without much thought, he set upon finding a way to bring an end to Miss Winston's plans once and for all.

It had worked well, in the end. She had gone to see him expectantly, and for a brief moment he pitied her, knowing that he was going to break her heart with his words. But it had to be done.

"I am so pleased that you asked to see me, Your Grace," she beamed. "It has been such a long afternoon."

"Did you enjoy yourself?" he asked, hoping that it might serve him well to ease into the more difficult part.

"Well, I was with quite an unfortunate young lady. She spoke only of the baked goods she likes to make. I could hardly believe it when she said it. Could you imagine? We ladies do not bake, such things are for servants!"

"Yes, I suppose your interests are far more ladylike, aren't they?"

"I enjoy the pianoforte, and I am told my watercolors are of superb quality. You are welcome to see them whenever you wish."

"Miss Winston, you and I must speak."

He had said it more bluntly than expected, but it was as though she had missed that

entirely.

“We do, Your Grace. That is why I have been so excited to see you. I understand now may not be the opportune moment to begin a courtship, but I would love to begin one upon our return.”

She stepped closer to him, dangerously close, and looked up at him with wide eyes. He found himself missing Miss Kendall’s gaze—the flare of her eyes when she suspected him, the brightness when she followed an intriguing idea, the startled wideness after he caught her at the tree. Every one of her expressions had come naturally to her, but here with Miss Winston, the innocence was forced. He took a step back, but his back hit the wall and she stepped forward once more. He placed his hands on her shoulders and gently pushed her back.

Her brow furrowed at him, and at once all hopes of being gentle with her abandoned him.

“I have asked you here to request that you stop this.”

“What do you mean?”

“This. You are acting as though I am your husband, and even though you have been caught doing it and warned about it you are continuing to do so.”

“Do not act like you haven’t been enjoying it. I thought we had an understanding between us!”

“And what exactly did you think that understanding was? Miss Winston, you have been throwing yourself at me since we arrived, and I admit some fault in that as I was kind to you at that first dinner, but it was not an invitation for you to follow me at all times.”

She staggered backwards, face pale in shock, and then glared at him.

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“So the rumors were true,” she whispered. “You are a rake, through and through. You have made me believe that you were someone special, but I see now that was a lie. And now I am ruined, with nowhere to turn.”

“You are not ruined,” he replied, seeing through her act. “The only person aware of what you have done is Miss Kendall, and she has no intention of causing you any scandal. She has been trying to help you, though you have snubbed her at every opportunity.”

At last, the remnants of her performance fell away, leaving an extremely sour expression behind.

“You will regret this,” she warned, turning on her heel. “You could have had a wife that was loved by the ton. I hope you enjoy your spinster wife, and all of the scandal that comes with it.”

He wanted to explain that he didn’t want to marry Miss Kendall, but for some reason he couldn’t say the words. It was better, wasn’t it, if Miss Winston believed he was already spoken for?

As she opened the door, and Miss Kendall herself fell into the room, it took everything in him not to laugh. She was unharmed, of course, but the look on her face was something to prize in future recollection. When Miss Winston walked over her, he went to help her to her feet, but she had already done so herself, her friend quickly fixing her hair before they left. She gave him a look of disgust, and it was so intense that he remained where he was, not chasing after her.

It was, after all, his third time being caught by her in such a position, and it was less than unlikely that she would forgive it once again, even if it was to rid himself of Miss Winston once and for all.

When he rejoined the other guests, both Miss Winston and Miss Kendall were absent. He wondered if there might have been something in that, but Miss Kendall's friends did not seem too upset about anything and so he decided it couldn't have been that. He approached them, Miss Jennings narrowing her eyes at him.

"Good evening, ladies," he greeted. "Did you enjoy your afternoon?"

"We did, indeed," Miss Godwin replied, clearly unaware that anything was wrong at all. "Though I must say, the prize was beautiful. I wish I could have won it myself."

"Prize?" Miss Jennings echoed. "I was unaware that there was a prize."

The ladies looked at one another as though they had had a secret be revealed.

"Emma won," Cecilia explained quickly. "It is a beautiful necklace, and we have agreed to all have ones made to match it. When we saw you return with Gretchen, Emma hid it. We thought it might be best that you didn't have insult added to the injury of spending all that time with her."

"I see," Miss Jennings nodded. "It was a strange afternoon. Miss Winston was quite pleasant to be around, if I am completely honest. I told her all about my baking, and she seemed very interested. Then after the... incident, she looked disgusted with us."

"That is my fault," Levi explained. "I had told her not to speak to me again. She has tried over and over to have us caught alone together, and I cannot believe that it has taken me this long to realize her plans."

“We all have lapses in our judgment,” Miss Godwin said gently. “Let us all be grateful that it has ended here, yes? You are very fortunate in that respect.”

“Indeed, although Miss Kendall seemed furious with me. Might you know where she is?”

“She is with her sister, Your Grace. I do not believe she wants to be disturbed at this time, as it seemed quite serious.”

“Very well, I shall give her some time, but I do think it would be best that I explained myself, even if for my own sake. I do not want her holiday to be spoiled by my actions.”

The three ladies seemed content with that, and so he made his plans. He would see her the following morning and explain what had happened, and if she chose to believe him then he would be grateful. From there, he would never tempt scandal again. His brush with it had been more than enough, and he did not wish to do it a second time.

In the meantime, he wanted to see Leonard in his study. He had to tell somebody what he had done, someone that was not a group of young ladies that could not hear half of what he had to say. He noticed that his friend was absent, a sign that he had retired for the night. He made his way to the study, but as he walked down the hallway he saw none other than Miss Kendall.

Her eyes were red, and though she was carrying herself in the same elegant way that she always did, Levi could tell that she was not happy about something. He hoped that it wasn't because of him, but then he realized that if it wasn't because of him, it had to be about her sister, which could have been even worse.

“Miss Kendall, are you alright?”

“Your Grace, please, not right now.”

“But something is wrong, I can see that. If this is because of Miss Winston...”

She let out a sort of loud grumble at him, her head in her hands as she did so before looking into his eyes.

“I do not care about all of that. If you wish to run into the night with your bride-to-be, then I wish you well. If you wish only to ruin her, then do that and prove me right. Do whatever you must, but do not concern me with it.”

“What has happened? This is nothing like you at all.”

“Some of us have real problems, Your Grace, problems that do not involve having to choose which lady you ruin next.”

She pushed past him and stormed away, and he wished that he could have seen her the following morning instead of then and there. In any case, she wanted nothing to do with him and he had to respect that. He had done what he had said he would, and now he had to take the consequences that came his way.

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“You really are a sorry sight,” Leonard chuckled when he entered. “Victors do not typically look like that, you know.”

“Victors do not typically ruin their own afternoon by trying to make things right, but here I am.”

He paused, looking at Levi with a most puzzled expression.

“What exactly have you done?”

With a sigh, Levi explained everything that had happened, even daring to mention his moment with Miss Kendall at the tree. Leonard raised his eyebrow at that, but he did not say anything about it until he had finished.

“You are becoming more like me every day,” he said at last. “And that isn’t a good thing, not when you have striven for virtue all these years. What has this lady done to you?”

“Miss Winston has been doing some ridiculous things, Leonard. I wish you had seen some of it.”

“I do not mean Miss Winston. I mean Miss Kendall.”

Levi looked at him for a moment. He was right, and he knew that, but he couldn’t admit to himself that Miss Kendall had the effect on him that Leonard had seen.

“It is dinner soon,” Leonard continued. “Would you like to change where you sit, or

do you wish to accept what is coming to you?”

“I can stay where I am. If Miss Kendall has not come to you herself, I shall assume she is content.”

“That is the right response, Lupton. This is one of the reasons why I respect you so much. Come, it will be over with before you know it.”

Leonard was but a year older than Levi, but he took on an almost brotherly role when necessary, and though Levi found it annoying at times, he let his friend have his way.

They left for the dining hall, and to Levi’s surprise both Miss Winston and Miss Kendall were in their places, though neither looked too happy about it. Levi took his place and greeted those around him, but there was no denying the ice in their responses.

They ate their first course in silence, but then a gentleman beside Miss Winston turned to the man next to him, his speech slurred.

“All I am saying is,” he laughed, “if a lady puts herself in such a situation, then she must accept what comes her way.”

“Wilson, you must have some sympathy,” his friend replied, though it was clearly in jest. “These ladies do not know what is coming to them.”

“Of course they do! It is something they are told over and over, and so if they disregard such warnings then what happens is their own fault.”

“Do you not blame the gentleman?”

“Of course not, for I have laid eyes upon a lady before. It isn’t as though we can help

ourselves.”

“Enough, gentlemen,” Levi ordered, and both men looked at him and then down at their plates once more.

“I believe they have a point, actually,” Miss Winston said, looking Miss Kendall in the eye. “If a lady is so brazen, then it is only fair that it is known to others. Wouldn’t you agree, Miss Kendall?”

Levi knew what she was doing. She had put Miss Kendall in an impossible situation where she could neither agree nor disagree. If she said it was just, then she would be admitting that Miss Winston had to be outed, and Levi had made it plain that he would do his duty if necessary. If she disagreed, however, she would be looked at as though she were defending herself, whether she had outright confessed anything or not.

“I suppose,” Miss Kendall said in a measured tone, “if we are to hold ladies to a certain standard, it would be best to hold gentlemen to the very same ones. We must all be the very best that we can be if we are to be a credit to England. Is that not right, gentlemen?”

Both men that had started the subject were quiet. Miss Kendall, also silent, continued with her meal, though she looked somewhat pleased with herself. Levi turned to acknowledge her, but she was already looking away as though nothing had happened at all. After dinner, when everyone else left for drinks, she disappeared again. Levi worried for her, but he was well aware that she was a capable lady that knew how to take care of matters. If she needed him, he hoped, she would be able to come to him.

And yet, her absence was clear. He found himself looking for her even though he knew she wasn’t there. The party was less fun in her absence, and when he saw her friends without her he had a feeling that they felt much the same. They seemed

askance, as though a part of them was missing, and he wondered if they knew what had happened to her.

But he did not wish to take any more of their time, and so he did what he had learned to do long before. He wore his brightest smile, and he socialized. He had one or two whiskeys more than he usually did, but he pretended not to notice. He wanted to dull the ache that her absence caused, that the unknown of it all worsened. He would enjoy his night if it killed him.

CHAPTER 12

Emma hadn't known what to expect when she approached Sarah.

Given the muted sobs she'd heard through the door, she'd thought she would find her sister lying in her bed, weeping into her pillow. Instead, as she entered she was confronted by her sister sitting in an armchair, looking perfectly ahead.

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It was frightening, almost, to see her in such a composed state save for her tears. In an instant, she leaped into action, running to her and holding her in an embrace.

“Oh, Sarah,” she whispered. “What is it? What happened?”

“I am to marry.”

“Baron?” she asked, smiling. “Well, that is wonderful news! It is sudden, and I know it is daunting, but—”

“Lord Frenton. Father told me this afternoon.”

The words rang out in Emma’s ears. She had never heard of the man, and she was quite certain that Sarah had not, either.

“Is he... a good suitor, at least?”

“He is old, Sarah.”

Emma, thinking at once of the wide open door, quickly ran to close it before returning to her.

“He is a friend of Father’s,” she continued. “Fifty-six, can you believe it? It is as though Father is punishing me, but I do not know why. I haven’t done anything to anger him.”

“Perhaps he is doing what he thinks is best?” Emma asked, to which Sarah gave her a

skeptical look. “Yes, very well, it is not something he does, but you never know. How did he come to this decision?”

“I was paired with the Viscount for the treasure hunt today, and it was awful. He expected me to follow him the entire time and not say a word. We lost, in the end, of course, but the entire time he was saying these... things... He said I would make a lovely wife one day, and that any gentleman would fight until his last breath to have me. I should have seen then and there what would happen, but I never would have thought— Oh, Emma, I do not know what to do!”

She had spoken so quickly that it took Emma a moment to realize what had happened. She remembered the old man she had returned with, and if he had only been six-and-fifty she dreaded to think what he would look like within the next five years. He was not the match for Sarah that Lord Rosendale had been, and their father had been happy with it as it meant at least one of his daughters would no longer be his responsibility. Something had to have changed, and Emma was determined to know what.

“I shall speak with Father,” she promised.

“No, Emma. You are not even supposed to know about any of this. I am forbidden to tell you until the day of the wedding. I was— I was supposed to make you believe I was marrying Lord Rosendale.”

With those words, Emma decided that she truly did hate her father.

“I will tell him I heard Lord Frenton discussing it. I do not care how angry he will be that I know, I want answers. He shall not be unkind to you about it, I assure you.”

“He is always unkind to us, even if we do exactly as he says. There is no escaping this. I must accept it, and even though I certainly am not reconciled at this moment, I

will be in time.”

“And if you are content to do that, then you may. I, on the other hand, am not.”

With that, she gave a sister a tight embrace before leaving. Her eyes stung with tears for Sarah, and she could not return in such a manner. She quickly tried to dry her eyes before fixing her posture and going on her way.

Of course, she simply had to see the Duke of Lupton as she did.

He was looking at her kindly and she hated it. She hated that someone could be so nice to her when she was so undeserving. She couldn't do a thing right, and when it came to the Duke, a man that she was warming to in spite of her best efforts, she did not want to ruin that too.

So she rid herself of him as hastily as she could; she did not wish to spend any more time with him than was necessary, not after what had happened. She would have to sit beside him at dinner, and that was already more than enough.

And so, she returned to the party. Her friends were there, and what she needed in that moment was a mere hour or so where she could forget all that was happening around her and simply be Emma Kendall.

“There you are!” Cecilia said brightly. “How is your sister?”

“She is well,” she lied, “she simply had a long afternoon with the Viscount.”

“Yes, and I thought that my time with Gretchen was terrible,” Beatrice sighed. “Poor girl, she must have been at her wit's end. I do not know the Viscount, of course, but he doesn't seem very kind. He was practically dragging her along with him.”

“Such a brute,” Cecilia nodded. “In any case, it is done with now. She is more than welcome to stay with me for the rest of our time here, if she wishes. I am more frightening than any viscount, and if it is protection she is searching for then there is no better chance than with me.”

Emma smiled, knowing Cecilia was only half speaking in jest.

The dinner was excruciating, and Gretchen’s attempt to ensnare her with her own words had been the second worst part of it all. It was not as biting or scathing as such a cutting comment could have been, but it was enough to rid her of her appetite. She had no interest in engaging in such childish behavior, not when there were real troubles coming her way. Within the hour, she would be speaking to her father, and that would be the most difficult thing of all, far worse than anything Gretchen could try to do to her.

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Not because she was afraid—though she was—but because he would confirm her fears that it was not a threat he had given Sarah, but a promise.

He did not seem all too pleased to see her approaching him. He was surrounded by other gentlemen, including Lord Frenton, who eyed her carefully.

“Not now, Emma.”

“Father, we must talk.”

“No. I am otherwise occupied.”

“It is alright,” Lord Frenton nodded. “She is your daughter after all. We shall still be here upon your return.”

She hated her sister’s appalling fiancé, but she was slightly grateful to him for that. With a sigh, her father followed her to an empty drawing room, and Emma closed the door behind them.

“Is it true?” she asked.

“That you have pulled me away from a few lovely hours of being a man rather than a father? Yes, it would appear so.”

She looked at him incredulously, her arms folded in spite of how fearful she truly was.

“Is Sarah to marry?”

“Did she tell you that? Because I—”

“No, Father. You know how gossip travels in the ton, and it has led me to believe that Sarah is to marry that Viscount.”

“I will not hear a word against Frenton. He is a good man, and one that is willing to marry her quickly.”

“Lord Rosendale was much the same.”

“Lord Rosendale is young, and young men are wild. There will be no offer of marriage for months, I can guarantee you that, and by then she will be a spinster like you and I shall never be rid of either of you.”

“You do not know that!”

“I do. In spite of what you may think, Emma, you do not know very much at all. I blame that Miss Penton for that, for making you think that you are any better than what you truly are. You are not some special exception to ladies where you know what is best. I am your father, but more than that I am a gentleman. I know more than you ever could, and I am telling you that Lord Frenton is the best Sarah can do if we want her married quickly.”

“Then why did you allow her to form an attachment?”

“Because the Viscount had not shown interest then. I do not need to explain myself to you. This is what will happen, and that is final. You will not change my mind about it no matter what you say, and I do not understand why you believe you could.”

Emma took a deep breath, steadying herself. Her father had always spoken to her in such a manner, as if she were an imbecile, and it had always made her feel like one, but she knew then and there that what he was doing was anything but right and anything but fair.

“I am a good father,” he continued. “I have fed you, and I have housed you. You really should be thanking me, but instead you willingly became a spinster and allowed your sister to believe in such trite things as love. It isn’t real, Emma. What is real is protection and security, and a viscount can offer that more than any baron. Do you not want what is best for her?”

“I want her to decide.”

“Then you will be disappointed. The deal is done. The Viscount and I shall be drawing up the contract upon our return. I have half a mind to find another friend of mine and do the same for you, but as you promised to leave for your mother’s sister’s estate once Sarah married I am not too concerned.”

“You also promised I would have a year to find her a match. I still had time.”

“Yes, and instead you have spent your time with your friends, and a duke that you have no intention of marrying. You have brought shame upon us all, and yet you expect me to trust you to know what is best for your sister. Well, I do not, and so this is how it will be. If you do not wish to accept it, then there is no need for you to return home with us at all.”

Emma could feel her hands trembling. She knew that she would not have been able to change his mind, and she had only wanted to know the truth, but now that she had it she was furious. She hated the answer that she was given; that this was the way it was and to bite her tongue about it. She wanted to scream, she wanted to take the vase of flowers nearby and throw it against the wall with as much strength as she could

muster. She wanted to release her anger out into the open and let it leave her rather than fester within.

But she could not. She knew that her place was to smile and nod and accept, and so she did. She wore the same placid smile for the rest of the night, and spoke with the other guests politely and said what a joy it was that her sister had found a match. She saw Lord Rosendale out of the corner of her eye, drinking his brandy in one motion, and pitied him greatly. She had seen his affections for Sarah, and she knew how confused he must have been. She could not tell him the truth, she thought, but she could at least speak with him and offer sympathy.

“Good evening,” she said gently, curtsying to him.

“Good evening, Miss Kendall. I am not sure it is wise for you to be seen talking to me.”

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“It would appear that I am quite unwise, as things go,” she laughed nervously. “Are you... are you alright?”

“I do not know how to be. I know I have only known your sister for a short while, and I shan’t claim to love her or any such flights of fancy as that, but I could have loved her. I would have been a good husband to her, even if my rank is not as high as the Viscount’s. I do not know what I did to change her mind.”

“You did nothing wrong. You must know that. Sarah is only– well, our father has expectations, and he has insisted that she follow them.”

“But it was one afternoon! With a man almost thrice her age, I will add. Something has to be wrong with all of this, and I intend to learn what, but she will not speak to me. She is not even here at present.”

“She is in her bedchambers, unwell. That should tell you enough.”

She hoped that he was intelligent enough to know that, while she could not tell him outright, she could lead him to the truth.

“You are not happy about this either, are you?” he asked. “I can see it in your face. You do not want this, and given you want only her happiness, I will assume that she does not either.”

Emma gave him a small and quick nod, as that was all that she could do. At least, she thought, he understood the truth of the matter, even if there was nothing that he could do about it.

“I will fight for her, Miss Kendall,” he promised. “If it makes her happy, I will do what I must. I want only her happiness, and if that does not lie with the Viscount then I will do anything to change that.”

She nodded, thanking him before returning to her friends. There wasn't much that Lord Rosendale could do, but it was more than Emma could. He was, after all, a man.

“Is he all right?” Dorothy asked gingerly. “We have heard whispers.”

“Of an arranged marriage?” she laughed emptily. “Yes, I am not surprised.”

The three ladies looked at her in shock. Cecilia was the closest to anger of the three of them, but none of them had any emotion stronger than their surprise.

“That poor girl,” Cecilia muttered. “Let us hope that he is at least a good man, because he does not have many other things in his favor.”

“It is my fault,” Emma whispered. “I pushed our father too far by being a spinster, I know I did. I simply thought he would give me more time, but he was given an offer and now... I shall never forgive myself.”

“None of this is because of you!” Dorothy exclaimed. “It is your father that made the deal, and so the blame lies completely with him. He has made his choice, and it is as Cecilia says. Perhaps he is not a bad man, and he will be a good husband to her in the end?”

“Or,” Beatrice said slyly, “Sarah will find her own way out of all of this.”

“What do you mean?”

“When an animal is cornered, and it has nowhere to go, you mustn't be surprised if it

bites. I am not saying that Sarah is an animal, but I am saying that if she feels she has no way out of this, she may take matters into her own hands.”

Emma trembled, dreading the thought of what her sister might do to escape her fate. Beatrice was smiling, optimistic as always about what Sarah would do.

Emma, on the other hand, was terrified.

CHAPTER 13

Emma wondered if Sarah would hide away until the time came to return home, but the following morning she was at breakfast again.

She wanted to shield her from the knowledge that there was gossip surrounding her apparent engagement, but she already knew that such attempts would be futile. It would reach her eventually, and it was better for her to hear of it sooner rather than later.

“Would you mind chaperoning a walk?” she asked Emma quietly as they dressed for the day. “Father has requested that I walk with the Viscount, and we both know that his request is truly a command.”

“Certainly. If you wish, I can remain beside you and we can talk so that the Viscount does not manage to say a single thing.”

Sarah laughed sadly at that.

“I believe I am in enough trouble as it is. Besides, if I am to be his wife, I would at least like to know about him. Perhaps he has a large family, too?”

Emma bit her lip. At his age, it was unlikely.

“Did you like that Lord Rosendale was one of seven?”

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“Emma, please do not remind me of him,” she sighed, fixing a stray hair. “But for what it is worth, yes. I thought, rather foolishly, that I could marry him and be a part of a loving family, and so could you. I couldn’t help but imagine the two of us knowing love, real love, from someone other than ourselves. It was foolish to do so, but I must admit that I do not regret it.”

“And you shouldn’t. If it made you happy, then it was the correct thing to do.”

Emma stood behind her sister as they looked in the mirror. It was as though her younger sister had aged a year in the time they had been away. She seemed weary, exhausted, and Emma pitied her greatly. It was too much for a young lady to bear, and the fact that she was taking it all so well astounded her.

Then again, it wasn’t as though they had much of a choice.

When they arrived downstairs, Lord Frenton was already waiting. He greeted them politely, albeit in quite a forced manner, and they left without another word.

The walk was silent, stilted, and not at all like the one Sarah had shared with Lord Rosendale. Emma tried not to think about him, as her sister had requested, but she had to. It wasn’t fair, and it wasn’t right. It infuriated her, and the fact that she had to simply stand by and watch it happen made it even worse. She followed behind them, waiting for one of them to say something—anything.

At last, the Viscount cleared his throat.

“I shall want children, of course.”

Emma stifled a scoff.

“Of course, my lord,” Sarah nodded. “How many?”

“As many as time allows. I require an heir. My last wife did not give me one.”

“Oh, you have been married before?”

“Twice, yes. The first was a lady I truly loved, but she passed away only a year into our marriage. The second was a lady my father chose. Her name was Elizabeth and we were married for thirty years. In that time, she gave me a daughter, but as she was of no use to me I married her off in her first season. I have not spoken to her since, for around eight years now. It is a shame, I suppose, as the two of you could have been friends.”

Emma felt nauseous at that. His daughter was older than his new bride. His daughter was older than her.

Nearby, she could see the Duke playing cards in the garden with some other gentlemen. He was laughing with them, and she wondered if he was winning. She scolded herself for thinking of him when there were far greater issues at hand, but she couldn't help herself. He looked up and noticed her, and she must have looked very concerned indeed because he abandoned his game in an instant, joining her.

“I do not wish to speak with you.”

“I am aware,” he nodded, “but as you look so unbelievably miserable, I ought to do the gentlemanly thing and at least accompany you.”

“That will not aid my misery.”

“No, but you won’t be alone in it.”

“I am already in very good company,” she sighed, gesturing to her sister.

He winced.

“Do not tell me they are courting.”

“In all fairness, they are not. They are practically engaged.”

“Ah. Is that what you were telling me last night?”

“Do not ask me about last night,” she replied coldly.

“Very well, I will not,” he nodded, and they walked in silence for a while before adding. “They do not look very much like a couple, do they?”

“Not at all. My heart is breaking for her, but it is what must be done. She is resigned to it, I believe.”

“I wish there was something I could do, as your sister is a lovely young lady.”

“Yes, well, it is as I told you. Some of us have true struggles.”

“So you do wish to discuss last night?”

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“What I wish more than anything is to wake up in my own bed and have had all of this be a terrible nightmare, but that will not happen.”

“I am sorry, Miss Kendall.”

“You may be as sorry as you please. It changes nothing. I do not know what you want me to say, Your Grace. I enjoyed my time here, for the most part, and the Duke of Pridefield hosts an excellent party, just as you said. Is that better?”

“I am not opposed to what you have said.”

“Shall I say that I was wrong about you, and that you are not a rake? Shall I confess that I have not known what to do with myself, and I feel useless as a daughter, and a sister, and a friend? Is that what you wish to hear?”

“Of course not!”

“Then why are you here? Why are you with me rather than playing cards? You have a life outside of me and my concerns, so go and live it. I have far much more on my mind than whether or not you are beside me during it all.”

“I know, but I thought I could at least help.”

“You are not helping. You have been a distraction from it, but nothing more.”

Emma thought he might argue more, but he simply nodded, accepted it, and left again. She almost regretted it, but she couldn't. Every word had been true, after all;

she needed to give her efforts to her sister, who was trying to find something good about her new match.

Sarah had always tried her best with everything she did, and Emma had admired that about her, but she knew that under her calm surface there was a storm brewing, and soon enough she would begin to thunder.

She decided to listen to her sister instead, as they were only slightly ahead of them and therefore in listening distance.

“Would you wish to stay in London?” Sarah asked softly.

“I am amenable to that, if my wife wanted to. I see the good and bad in both the city and the country, and I am happy to raise my children in either. I will say, though, that my estate in Somerset is vast. It is far more impressive even than my home in London, which is the envy of many as it is.”

Emma sighed. The Viscount had almost done well by suggesting that Sarah could choose where they settled, but he had ruined it by telling her about his wealth. He likely thought that that would impress his bride-to-be, but Sarah did not care at all about money. If she did, she would not have fallen for a baron as quickly as she had.

“Miss Sarah,” he said after a while, “I shan’t pretend that this is a good match, nor will I try to fool myself into thinking that you could ever love me, but I want you to know something.”

At this, Emma truly paid attention. The Viscount was, at least, being realistic.

“We could find a friendship in all of this,” he suggested. “That is what your father expects. He says you will do it if he asks, and that this is what is best for you. I can offer you security, and afford you all of the privileges of a married lady without any

of the duties—besides bearing my children, of course.”

It was a nice offer, and most ladies would have appreciated it, but Emma knew Sarah wouldn’t be interested in the least. She had always longed for a true love match, and this was decidedly not one. Nor would it ever be. She would be unhappy throughout the marriage. There would be glimpses of happiness, likely from her children if they had any, but when all was said and done she was destined to live in misery.

Their walk ended soon after, and though Sarah hid it well, the promise of a friendship at most with a man old enough to be her father did not make her happy at all.

“I wish that I could see Lord Rosendale,” she whispered when the Viscount left them.

“You could. I could find him, chaperone another walk if you wished.”

Sarah shook her head.

“I am forbidden from speaking to him. Father told me that, if I did, he would take me home at once and have the marriage contract signed that very day. I only have two days of freedom left, Emma. I want to make the most of them.”

“The Viscount sounds as though he wishes to give you some freedoms,” Emma tried, in a vain attempt to find some light in the situation. “He is a better match than some are afforded.”

“Ah, so that means I should not be allowed to be upset about it?”

“I never said that. I am trying to help you.”

“Well, you are not. I am trying to see the good in this, Emma. Honestly I am, but it is impossible. I do not love this man. I hardly even like him, and now I must spend the

rest of my life with him even though I would rather walk through fire. My life has ended.”

“Sarah, please, try not to think that way. I know it is difficult, but you might be surprised by your new life. You may even grow to like it, one day.”

“I shall never like it,” she spat. “How dare you? You will be perfectly happy within the year, sitting with Aunt Megan and enjoying the finer things in life, while I will be languishing in a drawing room with an old and withered man, desired only for making his babies.”

“That is not—”

But she thought better of it. Instead, she sighed and put her arm around her sister’s shoulder, trying to comfort her but knowing that she couldn’t. Sarah, meanwhile, burst into tears.

“I’m sorry,” she gasped. “I’m so sorry. This isn’t your fault, Emma. I know it isn’t. It is Father’s.”

“It is alright,” Emma soothed. “I understand. This is awful, Sarah, but it will be alright. If you ever truly cannot bear it, you may visit me. You could even stay with me. I am certain that, if you have given him a son eventually, he shall let you leave. He does not seem to hold ladies in the highest regard, after all.”

“No,” she chuckled sadly, “no, he doesn’t, does he? Very well. I shall not think about it until we are home. We still have today, and tomorrow is the ball, and I can have one final night of enjoyment before I lose everything forever.”

“Except for your sister,” Emma reminded her. “You shall never lose me.”

“No,” Sarah replied, steadying herself. “I shall never lose my sister.”

Emma could see resolve in her eyes, and though it pleased her to know that Sarah had found some peace in it all, she had to admit that she was very wary of it, indeed.

Sarah was planning something, and Emma intended to learn just what that was.

CHAPTER 14

In spite of Sarah's brighter spirits, Emma did not speak to the Duke.

Instead, she spent the last of her time at the party leading up to the ball with her friends. She had hardly seen them, and knowing that she would be living several days' travel away within the year made her desperate to spend some time with them.

Not only that, but there was something she had to ask them, although she was reluctant to do so.

They were sitting in a parlor room, drinking tea and eating cake and biscuits together, when at last Emma decided it was time to speak with them.

"Am I a good friend?" she asked, and all three ladies turned to her.

"Of course!" Beatrice replied. "Why would you think otherwise?"

And so, it all came flooding out of her; her concerns that she was no longer needed, her fears that marriages were going to separate them, her failures as a sister and friend. The words kept spilling from her lips, and by the time she had finished and took a breath her friends were looking at her in astonishment.

"Is that truly how you have been feeling?" Dorothy asked.

"Yes, and I know it is unfair of me to see you all that way, but it is the truth."

"Then we should have been better friends," Cecilia said gently. "It shall take more than marriages to divide us, you know. You must also know that your... well, what you share with the Duke, has not changed how we see you. We are pleased for you."

“There is nothing between the Duke and me, how many times must I say it?”

“When your actions match your words, we shall believe it,” Beatrice teased. “But Cecilia is right. You are still the most wonderful lady we know, and it is a gift to be able to call you my friend. That will not change, be we wives or spinsters or bluestockings.”

She looked directly at Cecilia as she said the last word.

“Yes, yes, I am aware of what you all think of me,” Cecilia laughed. “And that is why I am telling you, Emma, that we do not care. We are a very different group of ladies, certainly, but that doesn’t mean we cannot be friends. I would argue that, when we are old, we shall only have more in common. Our hair, for example, shall be the same color at last.”

Emma laughed, finding comfort in her friends’ words. She had been afraid of losing them, but that was only a fear. It did not make it true, and given how certain her friends were, it was not even a possibility.

“What colors are you all wearing tonight?” Dorothy asked after a while. “My sister has insisted on me wearing this horrid yellow thing. I shall look like a chick, and I have half a mind to squawk accordingly.”

“I will not be allowing that,” Cecilia declared. “I came here with enough gowns for you, and that is how it will be. Your gown for tonight’s ball is a pale blue. Mine is green.”

“Mine is yellow!” Beatrice smiled, “Although I will say it is a gentler shade than what I imagine your sister had chosen for you, Dorothy.”

The three ladies turned to Emma, and she realized that she had not even thought

about it.

“I do not know, yet. I suppose I could wear the same as I did to the first one. Nobody will notice.”

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“Emma,” Cecilia warned, “if I must march you down to the modiste right now and have her fashion you one, I will do so. If this is to be our final evening together for a while, it will be perfect. I will not allow it to be any other way.”

Emma sighed, but she was smiling, and the four of them left for her bedchambers to select the perfect gown. They searched through all of them when suddenly Dorothy gasped, pulling one and holding it up.

Emma had forgotten that she had brought it.

It was the gown she almost debuted in, bright white with jeweled embellishments. She had chosen another in the end, one that wasn't nearly as extravagant, and then there was never a time that she wished to wear it after that.

“I cannot,” she protested. “It is white, and I am not a bride, nor am I a blushing debutante.”

“It is a gown,” Cecilia replied, holding it to her, “and nobody is insisting that you wear a feather or a veil with it. Dorothy has made the perfect choice. This is the one.”

There was no use arguing with them, Emma knew that much. In any case, she could afford to make a slight fool of herself. After all, it wasn't as though she had anyone to impress. There would be no husband coming her way, and so there would be no harm in wearing something that wasn't particularly well regarded. It excited her, even, to do something that she shouldn't.

Suddenly, there was a knock at her door, and the girls scrambled to hide the gowns

again. Emma opened it to see Sarah in the doorway, smiling softly.

“May I join you?” she asked, and she was welcomed in.

“Do you have plans for this evening?” Beatrice asked, as they all fussed around her.

They were also aware of Sarah’s maid and her inability to achieve perfection, and so they worked together to have her ready.

“Well, I do plan to do something quite spectacular,” she blushed, “but I cannot say just what it is, yet. All I can say is that I will be celebrating my final evening of freedom.”

“You speak as though you are headed to your grave,” Cecilia tutted. “Is he truly that awful?”

“No, not really. I have come to accept it, in all honesty, and it is as my sister told me; he could be far worse.”

Sarah was strangely tranquil. Emma did not believe it at all. No more than she had believed it when Sarah was a child, saying she did not want dessert and then robbing the kitchen blind after the household had gone to bed. Something had to have changed, she thought, but Sarah was not saying just what it was.

When the ladies were dressed, they met in Emma’s room so that they could all leave together. When they arrived there, however, Emma was still standing before her mirror. She hadn’t been able to decide on her jewelry, and it was beginning to make her feel very frustrated indeed.

“There is an easy solution to this,” Cecilia said brightly, taking the locket from her desk and fastening it around her neck before she could protest. “There. You look

lovely.”

“I cannot wear this! The Duke of Lupton won it with me. I do not want him to think—”

“He did not give it to you, though, did he? No, the Duke of Pridefield did. Nobody shall know where it is from to begin with, as you had already removed it when most guests returned. It is a locket, Emma, not a badge with a name on.”

She looked at her reflection, and she had to admit that it looked lovely. It wasn’t like the jewels that her friends wore, but it was more like her than any diamonds could have been. She had never liked grand displays of wealth, and the locket was a delicate thing, personal, something that held a memory, and Emma preferred that. With a nod, she turned to the door, her friends following closely behind.

As they entered the ballroom, Emma felt all eyes turn to them. They were, after all, quite a bizarre group, and so it was no surprise to her. Regardless, they paid no attention to it and enjoyed themselves.

“He is watching you,” Dorothy whispered to her after a while.

Emma turned, and the Duke of Lupton was standing nearby, his eyes not leaving her.

“That is none of my business. He may do as he pleases, after all.”

“Very well, but I thought you might wish to speak with him.”

“Dorothy, why on Earth would I want to do that?”

“Because you may not see him again after tonight! You never know, and I do not want you to live the rest of your life wondering if you should have told him the

truth.”

“There is no truth. If there was, I would have told him by now and you know that.”

“If you insist, Emma. Oh! My mother is summoning me. I shall find you later.”

Dorothy quickly made her way to her parents, and Emma was left with her thoughts. Why was it, she wondered, that everybody seemed to notice something that she could not? She did not feel that she was lying to herself, but then with all of the changes she had witnessed she hardly knew herself anymore.

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“Here,” Cecilia said, handing her a glass that smelled stronger than lemonade. “It shall make the evening easier.”

“What is it?”

“It is better if you do not know. Drink it quickly before anyone sees.”

She drank it in one, the liquid burning her throat. She whimpered slightly, returning the glass to her friend.

“Cecilia, what was that?”

“A lemonade... mixed with brandy. You seem uneasy, and I thought it might steady your nerves.”

As the burning subsided, Emma had to admit that it left quite a pleasant taste on her tongue. Her friend seemed to notice that change, and disappeared for a moment before bringing her another, which she gratefully drank.

“How are you managing to make these?”

“We spinsters are never noticed. It is a blessing. Besides, my reputation is set in stone by now. I do not believe I could lower it any further if I tried, which of course I promise not to.”

Emma laughed, enjoying the new taste. It had certainly helped to settle her, which was fortunate because at that moment she saw Sarah dancing with Lord Rosendale,

an irate Lord Frenton nearby. She handed Cecilia the glass, and her friend mumbled something about fetching her a stronger one before Emma left to speak with him.

“Good evening, my lord,” she said gently. “Is everything alright?”

“That sister of yours is aware that we have a deal. We are to be married!”

“I understand, my lord. Did she not tell you that she planned to dance with him?”

“Of course not. Had she done so, I would have forbidden it. Rather, I would have told your father to. He told me she is a docile young lady, one that does not cause mischief, yet there she is practically wreaking havoc!”

“It is only a dance, my lord,” she replied gently, but she couldn’t help but understand his frustration.

This must have been what Sarah had planned, Emma thought, and why she was so looking forward to the evening. She would be able to have a final dance with the man she was falling for, and then perhaps the life that followed would not hurt so badly.

“I have half a mind to march over there and drag her back,” he thundered.

“You shall do no such thing,” a deep voice came.

Emma was relieved, in spite of herself, at her rescuer. The Duke of Lupton had clearly seen what was happening, as he hadn’t stopped watching her, and had brought himself into a situation that did not concern him. Instead of being angry with him, however, she was only grateful. He had come to her aid at the right time, and though she had wanted to fix the situation herself, she could not scoff at his help, not when it was selfless.

“Your Grace,” the Viscount argued, “you must understand that Miss Sarah is to be my wife. She must obey me.”

“Oh, did I miss the ceremony? Has she said her vows, and promised you to obey you until death do you part yet? I must admit, it hurts to know that you did not think to invite me to your nuptials.”

Emma watched as the Viscount scrambled to find something to say. The dance ended and Emma looked over at her sister, who was looking back at her with a fearful expression. She understood completely, but to end the matter she needed Sarah to join her. She summoned her, and though she seemed to not wish to do so, she came toward them.

“Lord Frenton,” Emma said brightly, “my sister has returned. Perhaps the two of you may now share a dance?”

“I should have all of her dances, given the circumstances.”

Lord Rosendale, smiling politely, took Sarah’s left hand in his, as if mocking the Viscount. She was not wearing an engagement ring—the Viscount hadn’t troubled himself with that detail—and the Baron looked pointedly at it for a moment before making a theatrical gasp.

“My word, her engagement ring is so small that I cannot even see it! Are you certain that you can take care of her, given... your straitened circumstances?”

“Young man, you ought to learn your place. As a baron, you are not half the man I am, and you do not understand the first thing about having a high rank in society.”

“I am half your age, but twice the man. Let us not forget who is forcing whose hand in all of this.”

“Gentlemen,” the Duke of Lupton said firmly, “I understand that tensions are high, but this is no way to behave. If it is rank you care so much for, Frenton, then you might heed my warning as a duke. This is unacceptable, and I will not have any young lady forced to do something against her will when I am here. Miss Sarah, do you wish to dance with this Baron?”

“Yes, Your Grace,” Sarah replied softly.

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“Then the matter is settled. The two of you may go and enjoy yourselves. In the meantime, Frenton, you might wish to remember that a duke is a powerful ally before you attempt to make such statements of yours. Am I clear?”

“Yes, Your Grace,” he grumbled, leaving to join her father.

Her father would be furious the following day, scolding them profusely for what they had done. Emma knew that she would bear the brunt of it, as she was the eldest and expected to keep her sister in line, but she could not bring herself to care. Like her sister, she was simply excited to enjoy an evening without thinking of what would come the morning after it. She wanted to be happy, no matter the repercussions.

“Dance with me, Miss Kendall.”

She looked up to find the Duke’s green eyes firmly on hers.

“I– I cannot, Your Grace. There are enough rumors about the two of us as it is.”

“Let them talk. In fact, I propose that we give them something to talk about, a great finale to this event. It would be quite excellent, wouldn’t you agree?”

Emma wanted to reject him. She wanted to return to Cecilia and continue to watch her sister enjoy her final night as her own person, but there was an intensity in the Duke’s gaze that she could not refuse.

“One moment,” she said quickly, moving quickly to her friend.

The glass that Cecilia was holding had a much darker drink inside this time, but that did not matter. Emma drank it in one, enjoying how it burned more than ever.

“Emma, what are you doing?”

“Having some liquid courage. Wish me luck.”

She ignored her friend’s calls, returning to the duke and placing her hand on his arm.

“Does this mean you wish to dance with me?”

“It does. One dance, and nothing more.”

They took to the floor, and the whispers began. Sarah smiled in satisfaction at her, and Emma knew it was because her sister had been waiting for this dance with this partner since the moment she had met him. The music began, and they danced wordlessly for a while. She wondered if the Duke might say something to her, and part of her hoped he would, but he did not, and she tried not to mind.

Then, he cleared his throat.

“I must apologize for what I did,” he said softly.

“There is no need. Thank you for all that you have done for me.”

She looked up at him, and his eyes stopped her in her tracks. She knew how to dance, and the feeling of his hand on her waist was exquisite, but all thoughts of that ceased and all she could do was move as well as she could and look into his eyes.

“Miss Kendall, I do not want you to hate me.”

“I do not. I do not think I could.”

“Then why have you been avoiding me?”

At last, she tore her eyes from his, only to be met with Gretchen's. She was standing in the crowd, glaring at her. At once, she regretted looking away and looked back at him, his gaze piercing.

“I do not owe you an explanation, Your Grace.”

“You do not, but I would appreciate one nonetheless.”

Her heart pounded, as in truth she did not know why she had avoided him, aside from the fact that he made her feel unlike any other person ever had.

“Your Grace, you and I are even, so to speak. I saved you from scandal, and you have helped my sister enjoy her evening. We have helped one another, and now we can go our separate ways and forget any of this ever happened.”

“Is that truly what you want?”

“It has never mattered what I want,” she whispered.

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“It has to me, which is why I am asking you. Is never seeing me again what you want?”

She went to answer, but at that moment the music ended.

Yes, she told herself, say yes and be done with it!

But she did not say a word. Instead, she curtsied and excused herself. The drink was beginning to have an effect on her, and she did not know how long she could control herself for before she gave in entirely. She needed time, and she needed to think, and so she went to the veranda.

She knew perfectly well she would not be alone for long.

CHAPTER 15

Levi could tell from the look Miss Kendall had given him that he had wanted her to follow him, but he gave himself a moment before doing so. He knew that she would be alone, and that was dangerous, but all eyes were on the dancefloor and he felt that he could slip away without being seen.

When he did step outside, however, Miss Kendall seemed unusual. She had always held herself well, but she was leaning onto the balcony, breathing shallowly. As he approached, a small groan reached his ears.

“Miss Kendall?” he asked, and she turned sharply to him before wincing.

“My apologies,” she said in a slightly pained tone. “The evening air has made me—well, in all honesty I believe it was the brandy.”

“Brandy?”

“Cecilia gave me a few drinks that she had mixed,” she explained. “It was unwise to take them, but then I have hardly done anything intelligent of late.”

“That isn’t true.”

“But it is. You may not believe me, but there was a time when I knew everything about everyone, and did all of this with ease. Now, I can hardly form a sentence without stumbling over my words. I do not recognize myself, and I do not know what to do about that.”

“If you ask me, I would say that you need not do anything. You are wonderful the way you are.”

“Do not say that.”

“But it is the truth.”

“Please,” she begged. “Do not say anything nice to me. I do not like it. I do not like how it makes me feel.”

“And how does it make you feel?”

“It makes me feel as though I am doing something very wrong. I wish to be alone. I must think.”

“Well, if you cannot think regardless, you might as well enjoy my company.”

“I do not enjoy it!”

“Why not? What is it about me that you take such issue with?”

“You are a rake,” she snapped, stumbling slightly. “You are a rake, and a ruiner, and I have never wanted you near my sister. I have spent far too long protecting her for you to ruin her!”

“I have never been near your sister.”

He had made what he thought was a fair point, but it seemed to enrage her. He was aware that she wanted him to leave, or at least that was what she was telling her to do, but he was quite concerned that, if he left her to her own devices, she might stumble over the balcony.

“You have been near me,” she replied. “That has done more than enough damage.”

“You say that, but you cannot act as though you did not enjoy our time together. I could see it in your face that you found everything we did together fun, and so you cannot lie and tell me that you did not.”

She was standing close to him, which he liked as a general principle. More importantly tonight, it meant that he could take hold of her if necessary. She was beautiful, which had been precisely why he had been unable to take his eyes off of her all evening. And yet, there was more to it than that. She was intelligent, and she was the first lady to see him for who he was, rather than his title. She had been the first lady to make him see the man he had led society to see him as, and he had not liked what he had seen.

Then again, he was most like himself when Miss Kendall was around, and that man was the sort of man he could truly respect.

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He had asked her to dance with him because he wanted to, but also because he could see that she wanted the same thing. She was looking up at him with curiosity, possibly even desire, and he knew that she wanted him in equal measure. He would not have asked, otherwise.

“It does not matter what I do and do not enjoy. It is my duty to be a good example to my sister, and to help her find a match. Because of you, I have done neither of those things.”

“And yet she has a match, and if you ask me you are a wonderful example of what a lady should be. You have poise, you are kind, and you can navigate society with ease, even when there are attempts to cause you embarrassment. My question is whether or not you liked my attention, not whether or not you thought it was proper at each and every moment.”

She laughed, her face in her hands for a moment.

“We both know that I did,” she whispered. “You know, you truly are the worst sort of gentleman. You may be charming—seductive, even—but such traits are not good ones to have, even if you do have an effect on ladies.”

“Ladies including yourself, yes?”

He stepped towards her, and as she stepped back she was pressed against the banister, looking up at him with wide hazel eyes. She was not looking at him with fear, but with a need that he knew she could not have described even if she wanted to.

He smirked at that, and though he expected her to look at him with frustration she did not. She remained frozen, looking at him as though he had ruined her plans entirely, which he supposed he had. Even so, they had been the perfect plans to ruin.

She never would have done enough to please her father. Such gentlemen as him were never content with what others did for them. She was fighting a losing battle, and he wondered if she knew that. He was always going to do exactly what he wanted with her sister, no matter what Emma did for her, because he never would have allowed himself to admit that a lady had done better than him. He pitied her that she had never realized that herself, as she saw other things so clearly.

“Well?” he asked, she had not yet said anything in response. “Are you included in that list of ladies?”

“You know that I am,” she whispered. “But that does not signify. I am certain that such charms work on every lady. Miss Winston, for example.”

“Do not think about her right now.”

“Do not tell me what I can and cannot think about. If you had your way, I would only ever think of you.”

“And is that such a crime?”

She scowled at him, and couldn't help but smirk in response. She was fun to fluster, which was why he did it as often as he did. She was always so proper that when he broke her out of that it was exhilarating.

“This isn't about you, besides the fact that you are here and I wish that you were not. I wish to return to the ball, even if I face a particular scowl in there.”

“Stop thinking about her!”

“How can I when you have used her to anger me all this time?”

Levi sighed, taking a step back so that she could pull away from the banister. She straightened herself, taking a breath.

“I admit, I did find it entertaining at first, but you must know that I did not do anything untoward with her.”

“You did! You used the same charms that you are using right now, but you were not interested because they worked on her. You only like me because I do not care for them.”

“I never tried to charm her. When will you listen to me about that?”

“When it is the truth.”

“Then you ought to listen to me now,” he sighed, exasperated. “I have already told you that it has never been as it seemed.”

“Then how was it, Your Grace?”

“She was trying to trap me. She is an ambitious young lady, I shall not take that away from her, and it has led to her doing everything in her power to make the most advantageous match that she can, even if it risks her ruin.”

She was quiet for a moment, and he hoped that an apology would follow her silence.

“You never refuted my other claim,” she said firmly.

“Which one? You claim that I do quite a lot.”

“That you are only interested in me because I lack any interest in you in return.”

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“It is partly that,” he confessed. “I have never met a lady so determined not to like me as you are, but it is more than that.”

“In any case, I cannot be seen with you. I cannot be another notch on your belt, no matter how much you might like me to be.”

“If it is any consolation, that was never my intention.”

“Then what was it?”

“Conversation and friendship, if you dare to believe that. You are interesting, and I like the sort of person you are. I admire how hard you have tried to make your sister happy, and the lengths to which you would go to please your father. You are a pleasure to be around, when you are not accusing me of the most outlandish things. That is why I enjoy being around you, and there is nothing to do with my belt there.”

Silence fell between them, and he looked into her eyes as she thought about what he had said to her.

With the way she had looked up at him, he could have inferred many things about her wants, but he would never act upon them unless she explicitly asked, and he knew she was too proud to do that.

“There was never anything between Miss Winston and me,” he repeated, and she came to a stop.

“Please stop,” she said softly, looking into his eyes.

“Or what?” he asked, “Until you believe me, I shall tell you over and over. Should you want me to stop, you should simply listen to me.”

“It is nothing to do with her,” she explained. “I simply cannot stand to hear you say the right things over and over, m-making me feel things that I do not want to feel, and tearing down my defenses. They have been there for far too long for you to destroy them.”

She came close to him, in spite of her words. Levi wondered just how many drinks Miss Penton had given her in the ballroom.

“Perhaps,” he said softly, his hands hovering mere inches above her shoulder in case he had to push her back for her own sake, “it is time for these defenses of yours to come down. You should trust yourself to make the right decisions without holding people at arm’s length.”

“You only say that because you want me closer.”

“Then come closer.”

“I cannot.”

“Then step away. I am not forcing you to be this close to me, after all.”

She seemed to realize where she was at that point, no longer being held in place at the banister but free to move, to leave if she wished.

At that, her shoulders slumped. She had lost all of the fight that had been in her, her anger dissipated, and for the first time since he met Miss Kendall he did not know what she would do. He half expected her to walk away from him and return to the safety of the ball, or to make another cutting comment about how he was a good for

nothing more that she could never care for. He did not want either to happen, but it was what he had expected.

What he did not think would ever happen, however, was that she would grab his collar with both hands, pulling him down towards her and closing the distance between them altogether.

Her soft lips pressed into his, and he lost all of his own defenses. It was wrong, he told himself, and she couldn't think properly and would only ever regret it, but he couldn't make himself believe it. There was so much desperation in it, so much desire, that he had to give her exactly what he had thought about since the first moment she admonished him.

They pulled apart, breathless, and her face registered only shock.

"My apologies, Your Grace," she said quickly. "I did not mean— Oh, God."

"It is alright, Miss Kendall. What is it?"

"I simply— I have been so good all of my life. I have spent years trying to be the perfect lady, hoping that it might one day mean something, but it doesn't. I am unmarried and unwanted, and my sister that has done much the same thing, will never know love either. If this is what doing what is expected of us leads us to, then I no longer want any of it. I want to do the wrong thing, just for one evening."

She said it so quickly that it took Levi a moment to understand. He took her shoulders to steady her, as she had begun stumbling again. She looked up at him again with a desperation in her eyes, and he could no longer do the gentlemanly thing.

The truth was, he wanted to do the wrong thing every bit as much as she did.

And so, he pulled her close again, holding her tightly to him as he kissed her in return, with a passion he did not think he had in him. He had kissed before, but it hadn't been anything like this. He had never felt anything like it, something so intense, so wonderful, until her. She was unlike any other lady he had ever known, and that was precisely what made her so important to him, and what made him so desperate to please her.

Given the way she was holding onto him, he could only believe that he was doing so.

But they knew the risks, and of course the danger presented itself. Suddenly, there was a gasp nearby. Miss Kendall's touch disappeared from his neck, and he opened his eyes to see she had darted several feet away from him, trembling and terrified.

“What is it?” he asked, but he already knew what had happened.

Reluctantly, he turned to see a gentleman standing by the open veranda door. Beyond his figure many more of the ton stared at them, eyes wide and mouths wider. They had been seen, and Levi cursed himself for it in an instant. The one time he had truly done something ruinous, and it was before the most reputable members of the ton. There was nothing that he could do; Miss Kendall was ruined and the fault was his own. He should not have followed her, he should not have teased her, he should have left her alone when she asked.

She was still trembling, and the worst part was that he could not comfort her. In fact, he could not move at all, and neither could she. It was only when her father came and harshly took her wrist that he truly realized what all of it meant. Her reputation was destroyed once and for all, as was her sister's, and the blame was his entirely.

He remained there even after she had been dragged away from him.

CHAPTER 16

The carriage ride home was silent.

Emma waited for it, the barrage of insults that would come her way once her father felt like it was time for it. She tried to press herself into the back of her seat, as if it might make her disappear altogether.

She did not see the Duke before they left. It had been a blur after the incident, with her being whisked away to her room and talks of duels had. No such thing happened,

in the end, as her father was not willing to risk his life for her. She was pleased with that, as it at least meant there would be no blood on her hands.

Her father cleared his throat, but still there was nothing. Emma looked to Sarah, wanting to apologize, but that only would have caused the explosion from her father and she wanted to avoid it for as long as possible.

It happened the second they were in their home.

“Are you satisfied now?” he asked, in a menacingly quiet tone. “Are you at last pleased that you have destroyed everything?”

“Father, you must know that I had no intentions of doing that.”

“Did you not? What did you think would happen? You act in such a disgusting manner with a man, one that you knew to be a rake, and then you are surprised that it hasn’t ended well. I am not a fool, I know that this was deliberately done so that you could ruin your sister.”

“I would never do that!”

“Yes you would. You knew that I had found a match for her, a wealthy suitor that was willing to marry her quickly so that I could be done with it, but you hated that. You couldn’t stand that you had no hand in it, and so you did what you had to do to destroy it. Do you suppose Sarah is grateful for that?”

“She doesn’t like the Viscount, so she may well be, but that is not why I— what use is it trying to explain myself to you? You do not care. You only wish to admonish me.”

“And I have every right to! What did you expect would happen?”

“I was not thinking at all. I do not know what came over me. I would never have done what I did if I thought it might affect Sarah, you must believe me!”

“I cannot even look at you,” he scowled. “Go to your bedchambers and do not leave them. Am I clear?”

She nodded, leaving at once. She could not argue with him any further, not when she knew that he was right. She had been reckless, and she had been caught, and it was entirely her own fault.

After some time passed, there was a gentle knock on her door. She opened it, and Sarah shuffled in quietly. Her eyes were red, as though she had been crying, and Emma felt a wave of nausea overcome her. It was not just her own reputation that she had ruined, but her sister’s too, and that was unforgivable.

Then, she noticed that her sister was smiling.

“I wanted to thank you,” she whispered. “For doing all of this for my sake.”

Emma faltered, reaching out to embrace Sarah but pausing at her words.

“What do you mean?”

“I am not so easily fooled as the ton, Emma. I know that you would only do something this scandalous if it meant saving me, and given what Father has said it may well have! The Viscount shall want nothing to do with me now.”

Emma refused to pretend that what she had done with the Duke was because she wished to rescue her sister. In truth, it was partly the drinks Cecilia had given her and partly because she wanted to do it. She wanted to do something that was for herself alone, something selfish, as she had never dared before. If kissing a rake and not

needing to marry was what she wanted, then that was what had to be done. The fact that it helped her sister was merely a welcomed addition.

“But what of Lord Rosendale?”

“If he truly meant what he said about me, then he shall come for me. He knows where I am, after all. Now that the Viscount will see me as damaged goods, Father shall have no other choice but to accept the match if he wants to be rid of me.”

“Do you truly believe that shall work?”

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“It has to. Emma, I finally have a chance at happiness, and it is all thanks to you. I cannot believe this has happened so suddenly. I thought that my life had ended!”

“Well, I am pleased that you have at least found some good in all of this. Our father certainly has not.”

“We cannot care what he thinks. We have only ever done our best for him, and he fails to ever show any gratitude for it at all. If you ask me, we should have rebelled years ago. Besides, with how angry he is with you, he is yet to mention my own little rebellion.”

Emma thought back to Sarah dancing with Lord Rosendale, and how happy she had looked as she did. She must have known the trouble it would go on to cause, or would have had there not been a far greater issue at hand by the end of the night. Could they really be blamed, she wondered, for needing to do something for themselves for the first time?

“You certainly appeared quite proud of yourself.”

“Oh, I was. I thought, if I were to be engaged within mere days after our return, I had to have one final good memory. Now, thanks to you, I may be able to make more.”

Emma felt lighter from their conversation. In truth, the only person whose fate she cared about was her sister, and if she was happy, then there was truly nothing sad to be taken from it. Emma herself had always planned to be alone, after all, and so what could the loss of reputation do to her?

She was, of course, in disgrace. The day passed, a maid bringing her lunch to her as she had not been allowed to leave her bedchambers, but by the afternoon she was summoned to her father's study. The second earful that she received would not matter as much to her, partly because Sarah had already made her feel better about it and partly because it wouldn't be anything that she had not already heard from him before.

"You seem well for a ruined lady," he scoffed when he saw her.

"Father, I—"

"No, I believe you have done enough. You may not have noticed, but your sister is yet to receive any callers today. She had not one, but two suitors vying for her hand, and now thanks to you she has none at all. Have you no shame? You simply had to bring her down with you, didn't you? Had to prove that, if you could not have exactly what you wanted, then we could not have anything at all."

"That isn't true! I had no intentions of hurting Sarah, and I never have. Besides, we have barely been home for a day. Give them time, and they will come."

"You do not know that. You do not know anything. You have ruined your sister, and all for a rake, and now I shall never be rid of you."

"I shall be living with my Aunt—" she began.

"As if that matters! I shall always be looked at differently because of what you did, and all because you had to fall for the oldest trick in the book. At least now you shan't pretend you are some intelligent thing."

"But I—"

“I have heard enough from you,” he shouted. “Now, before I lose my patience with you entirely—”

“That is no way to speak to a duchess,” came a deeper voice.

Emma turned quickly to see the Duke standing in the doorway, leaning against the frame with a complete disregard for his surroundings.

“Your Grace,” her father stammered. “You must know that I—”

“I have heard quite enough from you,” he continued walking toward Emma.

“But this is not what I expected at all.”

“Then you ought to hold higher opinions of others, especially when those of you yourself are so low. Now, are you going to act as chaperone or not?”

“It is rather too late for that,” Emma whispered.

“I told you I have heard enough from you,” her father snapped.

“Do not make me do something I shouldn’t,” the Duke said firmly, looking her father in the eye.

He was a tall and foreboding man, one that would intimidate almost anyone if necessary. He certainly frightened her father well enough, as he simply straightened and said nothing more.

“Your Grace, what are you doing?” Emma asked, bewildered.

“Asking for your hand, of course. That is typically what comes from situations such

as these, is it not?"

"In normal circumstances, yes, but you... well, you said you do not wish to marry."

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“I also told you that, had I been seen with Miss Winston, I would have done the honorable thing and married her. Did you not believe me?”

“No, in truth I did not. Now please go, at least for now. My family is in turmoil enough for the moment.”

“Unfortunately, it is not as easy as that. This is what must now be done, and I will not leave until I have an answer from you. Will you be my duchess?”

“She will,” her father replied, but the Duke simply looked at him with disgust.

“I do not recall asking you, and you will not accept on her behalf.”

He looked back at her, and she was lost for words entirely. He was not the worst possible suitor, of course, and they had formed a friendship in the short time they had known one another, but that did not mean that she wished to marry. It would mean leaving Sarah behind, for one, and that left her at the hands of a father that was furious as it was.

“You need not accept,” he whispered, “no matter what he says. I am not here to force your hand, only to do my duty. I thought of you, and how your sister might be affected and how that would harm you more than scandal ever could,, and nothing else mattered to me. If you do not want this, then I will go.”

“No, stay,” she said quickly. “I– yes, I will marry you.”

“Wonderful!” her father announced, smiling brightly as if he hadn’t been storming at

her moments before. “We shall arrange for the ceremony to be held in a week’s time. We can acquire a special license for it, I assume.”

“I will do what I can,” the Duke nodded, though he did not give her father the courtesy of looking him in the eye.

Instead, he looked straight into Emma’s.

“I shall call on you tomorrow.”

“There is no need, Your Grace. A courtship is not necessary, in such circumstances.”

“It is not, but that does not mean I wish to not see you until our wedding. I will see you tomorrow.”

He did not give her a chance to argue, instead simply leaving the room. She turned back to her father, expecting him to make a comment to her of some kind, but he simply waved her away. She did not doubt that her sudden engagement would have destroyed his argument, but that did not make him happy with her. She had still caused so much damage that there was hardly any saving it, but the wedding would help, it had to.

Emma went to find Sarah in an instant. She was in the library, hiding away with a book and smiling softly.

“I am engaged,” Emma announced bluntly. “To the Duke, of course. I am to be the Duchess of Lupton.”

Her sister looked at her in amazement, then cast a glance over her bare left hand.

“Did he not think to bring a ring?”

“He may bring it tomorrow. I do not believe that he expected me to accept it. He did not seem to mind either way, if I am being honest.”

“In any case, you did,” Sarah nodded, before narrowing her eyes at Emma. “Why did you do it? You could just as easily have left for Aunt Megan by morning and be done with all of this.”

“I could have, yes, but that would have meant leaving you behind. Granted, I shall have to do so regardless, but I would much prefer to stay nearby, at least until you are married.”

“You cannot pretend that it is only for my sake. Emma, when will you at last admit to yourself that you like this gentleman? You kissed him, for Heaven’s sake!”

“I would never fall for a rake! I simply was not thinking, and Cecilia had been handing me alcohol, and what happened, happened. What matters now is that I find a way through this for you.”

“You need not worry for me. I shall be completely happy as things are, and I can always visit you in your illustrious Lupton Estate, can’t I?”

“Of course, you shall always be welcome.”

It felt strange giving such an open invitation to a home that was not even hers, but there was also a sense of satisfaction in it. She would be going from a spinster to a duchess, and though she was not a spiteful person she could not help but think back on how Miss Winston spoke to her, and the things she called her, only for it to have ended in the way it had.

Suddenly, Sarah took Emma’s hand in hers, looking at her with hope.

“You will be a marvelous duchess!” she beamed. “I couldn’t be happier for you. You deserve this and more after all that you have done for me.”

“Sarah, I did not do that for your sake. I told you, it was simply because I was not thinking properly.”

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“I do not mean the scandal, I mean everything else. You were practically my mother, and you never asked for anything in return. You were prepared to remain a spinster all your life if it meant finding me the best possible match. I cannot, and I will not, allow you to go a second longer without realizing just how much you have done for me.”

“Well, I suppose that I never thought of it that way. I simply wished to take care of you, and so I did. I never expected any acknowledgement for it.”

“Well, now you have it. Come, we must call upon the modiste with much haste!”

She rose to leave, and Emma followed, but as they left the library they were met by the butler, who could not seem to meet their eyes.

“Your father wishes to see you, Miss,” he said to Sarah. “It appears a gentleman has called on you.”

CHAPTER 17

Fortunately, the suitor was not the Viscount.

Emma felt a greater relief than she had ever thought possible when she saw Sarah walking with the Baron in the gardens, accompanied by their maid. She supposed that she was no longer trusted to act as chaperone, and she did not mind that too much.

What she did mind, however, was the fact that her own plans had changed completely. She had her aims, and though they were not perfect they were at least her own. She had never been the sort to dream of a stately home and fabulous wealth, but

she could not be ungrateful for it. After all, who could ever be resentful of such a life?

Except she was.

The following morning came, and the Duke arrived for their walk. They left the household quickly, the maid following along after them. Emma did not know what to say, but given the silence she decided that he did not either. Someone, she decided, had to say something.

“It feels strange doing this,” she said suddenly.

“Because we are already engaged?”

“I suppose, although that is not what I mean. It has simply been a long time since I have been courted. Not that I was ever in a serious courtship, of course. I simply had a lot of callers.”

“I do hope you are not trying to make me jealous,” he joked, and she sighed, an undeniable smile on her lips.

He could be a friend to her, at least.

“Not at all, Your Grace.”

“Perhaps, in light of the circumstances,” he said carefully, “you might drop the formality? I should like to do the same.”

“The circumstance being that we are engaged, or the circumstances that led to such an engagement?”

“Both of them, I would say. We might as well do so now, if you do not mind?”

“Of course not.”

“Very well, Emma.”

He had a grin on his face as he said it, and Emma couldn't deny the strange feeling in her chest as he called her by her given name. It was personal, somehow even more so than their kiss. It was the last wall she had been able to keep between the two of them, and now...

“Indeed, Levi.”

It felt strange to say, but he seemed satisfied and they continued on their way.

“We are, indeed, engaged, are we not?” she asked.

“I should think so, given that I asked you to marry me and you accepted. Why do you ask?”

“Because, and you mustn't take this to mean I crave material things, but there is no ring.”

“Oh! Yes, of course. It must have slipped my mind when your father was being so ...dreadfully traditional.”

“You may come to expect no less from him, for he will not change.”

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“Then it is just as well that I have very little interest in you and I ever seeing him. I should think that is his preference too.”

“But we shall see my sister, yes?”

“As often as you please. I have no qualms with her at all,” he nodded. “Indeed, if our situation has affected her own fortunes, I would not mind finding space for her. I cannot stand a bully, and the thought of leaving her with one gives me a great deal of unease.”

“Do you mean it?”

“I do. I would not make such a promise if I did not intend to keep it.”

His words had filled her with hope, although she couldn’t help but notice the seriousness in his tone. She wanted to ask him about it, but it did not feel like the right time to do so. If anything, it was simply his hatred of her father, which she could not blame him for.

“Why did you call on me today?” she asked. “We are to wed in a week, and so it is not as though we must do all of this.”

“I wanted to see how you are. It was a difficult ending to the party, and with all that is being discussed in the ton at the moment, I thought it wise to ensure you are doing well.”

“In spite of everything, I am indeed. I had always thought that ruin would be worse

than this, but then not all ladies are surprised with a proposal. I was certainly not expecting one.”

“Because I am a rake? A ruiner of reputations?”

“Yes. No— what I mean is... I did not think you would care what became of me.”

He seemed genuinely shocked at such a belief.

“I apologize,” she said softly, “for all of this. It was not my intention.”

“You have no need to apologize.”

“But I do! I was the one that kissed you, and now we are here.”

“I did kiss you, too.”

“Only because I did not leave you with much of a choice. It was willful, the worst thing that I have ever done.”

“Well, did you enjoy it?”

She could feel her blush creeping into her hair. How could she answer such a question, especially when he was looking at her the way he was?

“You mustn’t ask such things,” she protested, continuing on her way.

He followed after her, chuckling as he did. Emma wanted to turn and tell him that he infuriated her, and that she did not like him at all, and that the way he acted was unbecoming at best, but she could not. He fell into step beside her again, holding his arm out, and instinctively she took it. He had strong arms, and in spite of herself she

felt protected by that.

“You did not answer me,” he said after a while.

“Because I do not dare. We have caused enough trouble.”

“And now we are in your garden, by your home, not under the ton’s watchful eye. Even if we were, it is not as though we could find ourselves in any more trouble than we are already. Therefore, you are able to answer me. Did you enjoy it.”

“Yes,” she replied at last. “Are you satisfied?”

“I certainly was, yes.”

“Levi!”

“Emma.”

“You are insufferable,” she sighed.

“And you will be my wife, which means you face a lifetime of irritation. Truly, you poor thing.”

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But he was laughing kindly, and Emma couldn't help but do the same. He was not an unkind man, nor a spiteful one. That was to say, there were worse men that she could have been engaged to.

He took a ring from his pocket, taking her hand in his and slipping it on.

"I did remember, by the way. I thought it best to wait until everything was easier. My proposal was not ideal, so I hope this makes up for it."

It was a beautiful ring, with a large diamond in the center. It was far more expensive than she had ever expected to see, unless Sarah had made a particularly good match, and it felt heavier than she had thought jewelry could.

"You shouldn't regret what happened," he continued, "not if you enjoyed it. And, if you therefore do not regret it, you should not apologize."

"Very well. This ring is beautiful. Thank you."

"It was my grandmother's. It's funny, she refused to give it to my father. She said the match was not right, and so she could not support it. My mother always wanted it, claiming that it was her right."

"Was it not?"

"No, not if my grandmother did not want her to have it. Instead, she gave it to me. She told me to make better choices than my parents had, and until then I could not give it to any lady."

“Does that mean you think this was a good idea?” she teased, but he was serious.

“Her instruction was to do better, and I do not believe I could have found worse for myself than what my parents shared.”

Emma fell silent, wondering what had happened between them, but only for a moment because he then cleared his throat and looked steadily into her eyes.

“I should be the one apologizing to you.”

“Why? You never do anything you regret, and so by your rules you should not apologize.”

“It isn’t that I regret this, but this match is far less than you could have found. I am marrying you because it is my duty to do so, and it will be far better for you than staying here, but I never wanted to marry.”

“Nor did I.”

“No, but I will not be a true husband to you. This is a marriage of scandal, and nothing more, and that is all it will ever be. For that, I must apologize.”

It felt as though the air had been knocked out from her. She was not in love, and she was not foolish enough to think that he could be, but to be told that it would never happen was another thing entirely.

“Why will this never be a real marriage?”

“Because it will not. I do not want to be a loving and doting husband. I am not capable of such a feat.”

“Do you truly believe that?” she asked, trying to keep herself steady.

“I do. I know it to be the case.”

She searched his face for something that told her more, but there was nothing. She couldn't see any affection at all, and while it felt unfair to expect it of him she wanted to see something even resembling it. However, there was nothing, and she had to move past expecting such a thing. He had never promised her any such thing, and so she could not well expect it.

“Very well,” she nodded.

“If you wish to cancel the engagement, I will not blame you.”

“You would like that, wouldn't you? Unfortunately, Lord Rosendale called on my sister yesterday, which means that he is willing to look past the scandal. If the ton is to not see my sister differently because of it, I must marry.”

“I am not asking you to do it for my sake. I am only asking because I want you to do what is right for you. That is the only thing I have ever done, after all.”

“Yes, well, it is the only thing that I have never done. There is no need for me to begin doing so now.”

“I have upset you.”

“Nothing upsets me, not anymore. I did not cry the night of that ball, and I do not intend to cry simply because a man that I do not love is telling me that he never will. You mustn't think that you have such power over me, Your Grace.”

“Levi.”

“I shall call you that when I am your wife. Until then, you are a duke to me. The Duke of Lupton. If this is how you want our marriage to be, one of convenience, then so be it. I will gladly comply with that.”

“Emma, if I could have this be any other way, I would, but I cannot.”

“Then all is well. It is no trouble, I assure you. I have never been one to have many expectations, and so you must know that you will have great difficulty in disappointing me. I shall be a good wife, in that respect.”

They continued in silence, save for a few mumbled questions about the ceremony. Levi had it all in hand, and had given Emma limitless funds to do with as she pleased, meaning that at least her trip to the modiste with her friends would be enjoyable. They were to go the following day, and there was a long list of items that she wished to purchase. It would require a lot of work on the modiste’s part, but so long as she paid her well it would be possible.

When Levi left her, Emma at last thought about what he had told her. Their marriage would be loveless, but at least she would be afforded the security of a duchess. She would be taken care of, even if not loved. That was more than she could ask for, she reasoned, and therefore there was no need to feel hurt. Perhaps, if she was a better lady, one of higher standing or one that was more ladylike to begin with, she might have earned affection, but as it was she did not warrant it and she was perfectly happy with that.

Or, rather, she would be. One could not be too sad, she decided, while having every whim catered to.

“Oh, that is beautiful!” Sarah said softly when she saw the ring. “What a treasure! I have half a mind to whisk it off of your hand while you’re not looking. Not that I ever would, of course.”

“It is certainly lovely,” Emma nodded with a sigh. “Sarah, you will be happy with the Baron, won’t you?”

“I truly believe so. He told me on our walk yesterday that, no matter the scandal, he wants to be my husband. His family agrees. They told him not to listen to any of it, and that if I am the lady he wants as a wife then he is to make good on his desires. I cannot believe how fortunate I am.”

“Good, that means this is not for nothing.”

“What do you mean?”

“Nothing,” she smiled, though she had to admit even her smile was pained.

She had sacrificed years of her life for her sister, and so what difference would a few more make? She would be happy enough in her estate, living in a manor house with dozens of servants. Love, in her position, was frankly too much to ask for.

And so she would not ask for it at all.

CHAPTER 18

Being a duchess, even an unloved one, came with many good things.

For one, it meant that the modiste was more than happy to prioritize her wedding gown, as well as her five new nightdresses and other items for her trousseau. As she was without her mother, Sarah and her friends had been more than happy to accompany her into town. They did, however, seem faintly concerned for her.

“Are you quite certain that you are alright?” Cecilia asked. “This cannot be an easy position for you, given the circumstances.”

“No, it is not, but I am made of stronger stuff than whatever whispers say of me. Besides, I shall need a wedding gown with or without a modiste, and should I be forced to sew my own we shall only have even more gossip to avoid.”

She laughed, and her friends followed, but there was an undeniable awkwardness in the air. The five of them had plenty of space in the shop, and while Emma had her measurements taken her four companions selected fabric and discussed styles. Emma could hear them whispering to one another, and she wondered if they were aware that she could.

It appeared that they were not.

“Is she alright?” Dorothy whispered. “I hate to think that she is unhappy about all of this.”

“Of course she is unhappy,” Cecilia replied. “This is not what she wanted, even if it is evident that she likes His Grace. You can see it in her face that she doesn’t want any of this.”

“But that could change,” Beatrice tried. “I know of many couples that did not meet under the greatest circumstances, but they are now very much in love. Perhaps the same could happen for her?”

“She does like the Duke,” Sarah agreed. “He is fond of her, too. He would not have proposed if he did not.”

“Be that as it may,” Cecilia sighed, “if she wanted this, there would have been some happiness in her eyes, even with all of this scandal. We all know of the Duke’s reputation. It is a miracle that he did not leave her in ruin, but for now we cannot expect any more than that.”

Her fears confirmed, Emma stopped listening. She was not enough for the Duke to change his mind, only enough to do his duty. She had to accept that, and be quiet and polite while doing so. The modiste took her final measurements before going to retrieve the fabrics with a smile.

“I must confess that I cannot create too elaborate of a gown,” she explained, “but I will make something of quality.”

“That will be perfect, thank you. I do not have too many ideas, although my sister has had what feels like hundreds.”

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“Well, you are a beautiful lady. You do not need anything to distract from you. What about this?”

She held up an elegant white silk, and Emma nodded without looking at it too much. It felt wrong for her to wear white, given the circumstances, but it was not as though she had a choice. She would return two days later to try the gown for the first time, and she tried not to dread it. It was more than she ever would have expected to feel about a wedding, not that she had ever expected to have one. It felt altogether too uncomfortable, but she had to continue.

She had to do it for her sister.

As they left the modiste, Emma pretended not to hear the whispering around them but it was impossible to ignore.

“Such a wanton.”

“Despair can lead to depravity, but to be so brazen—”

“And in front of so many!”

“She deserves a rake for a husband. Like finds like, after all.”

Cecilia grumbled, taking Emma’s arm tightly.

“If you would like me to respond to some of these people, I shall gladly do so.”

“That will not be necessary. I understand that I have done this to myself, and I am more than prepared to accept my punishment. Thank you, though.”

Cecilia made a regretful face. “If you insist,” she conceded, and they continued on their way.

“I cannot wait to see you in your gown,” Beatrice said dreamily. “I know she does not expect to have enough time to make anything extravagant, but that does not matter. What matters is that you will look wonderful.”

“A vision,” Sarah agreed. “And what’s more, you shall be married before me! You never would have said that before, would you?”

“No, as it was not what I had planned.”

“Even so, I couldn’t be more excited for you. It will be a perfect ceremony, and then you will go to your new home and start a new life. Who knows? You may even find a closeness with the Duke that you are not expecting. That is what we all want for you.”

Emma knew this, but she also knew that it would never happen. She felt herself tear up, but she quickly steeled herself. She had planned for her life to be loveless, and that was precisely what it would be. There would be no difference, strictly speaking, and so there was no reason to be upset about it.

“Are you quite certain about all of this?” Dorothy asked. “I know that we have already asked you, and I do not mean to anger you by asking, but this has all been so sudden, and it is the exact opposite of what you have always wanted to happen.”

“I am happy for this, I assure you,” Emma smiled. “I am fine, and the Duke and I will be happy enough. This is how it must be, and there is nothing more to it. I knew the

risks, after all.”

Nobody pressed her further. A part of her hoped that they would, but she appreciated that they did not wish to upset her further. It was to be a lonely life, but it would not be so bad. She would have children to care for, eventually, and friends to see. Granted, when Dorothy and Beatrice inevitably married, their visits would be fewer and further between, but she would still see them. It would not be too terrible.

When the time came for her fitting, she listened to the same whispers on her way into and out of the modiste. The gown was perfect, and far more elaborate than she had been led to believe. Even Emma herself had to admit that she was a vision, and had she been marrying someone that she truly loved, it would have been a dream come true.

On her way home, however, she looked at the floor as she walked and saw that someone was blocking her path. She looked up to see Gretchen, that same furious look in her eye.

“Congratulations,” she said emptily, as Emma pushed past. “You successfully stole the Duke from me. I hope that you are happy.”

“Gretchen, not now.”

“Then when?” she laughed, following her. “You know what you did, and now you run away from me!. Are you a coward?”

“No, I am simply otherwise occupied. I have a wedding to plan, after all.”

It wasn’t the kindest thing to say, but in that moment she did not care about what was and was not kind. She had heard enough as it was, and all she wished to do was return home and continue with her preparations.

“You will listen to me,” Gretchen huffed, taking her wrist. “You owe me that much.”

“I do not owe you anything. I did not force you to follow the Duke everywhere and try to entrap him into marriage. It is because of you that I know him at all, considering how hard I had to try to save your own reputation.”

“No, you simply wanted him for yourself. That is why you followed him everywhere. You simply could not bear the thought of him being near another lady, one that would make a far better wife than yourself.”

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“If that is how you wish to see it, then I will not stop you. I have more important things to do than stand here arguing with you.”

She hoped that Gretchen would give in and let her leave, as she was coming to the point that she would say something that she would regret, and she did not wish to do that. She wanted to have a simple enough week, as simple as one could be when there was a wedding at the end of it, and she would not allow anything to change that, even if she had to admit that Gretchen had a point.

“You need to leave him be,” Gretchen said. “You did this, and now you are going to ruin his life. You are not good enough to be his wife, you know that. No duke dreams of a spinster wife, one that is old and incapable of doing all that a wife should.”

“And yet, you were found alone together and you received no proposal,” she snapped. “Perhaps you might be better to leave me be and wonder why you are unmarried and unprotected, while I shall be a duchess in a matter of days.”

“And perhaps you might like to remember what people are saying of you. You shall never be respected. I feel for the Duke of Lupton, for he will not be able to regain any respect now. A rakish duke with his spinster wife. Truly, what a pair you are.”

Emma took the self-assured look in Gretchen’s eye to mean that she was satisfied, and would now leave her be. She turned on her heel and left for her carriage. Indeed, Gretchen didn’t say another word, and Emma could leave without any further issue.

But her issues were far from over.

It did not matter how she felt, however, not when she had so much more to contend with. Her marriage would protect her sister, and that was all that mattered.

Sarah, however, did not seem so certain of that.

“What happened?” she asked the moment Emma returned home. “I should have been with you. I knew that something would happen.”

“Nothing happened,” Emma protested, but she knew there were tears in her eyes.

“Emma, do not lie to me. What happened?”

“It was Gretchen,” she sighed. “She saw me when I was in town, and she said these terrible things to me, and I want to disbelieve it all but I cannot. She was so proud of herself too, as though she knew she was hurting me.”

“Well, you always bare your heart for all to see. You mustn’t listen to her, no matter what she said. This marriage will be good, however it started. She is envious that you have what she so badly wants, and in spite of what she thinks you did not need to use any schemes to achieve it. You need not give her another thought.”

Emma nodded, but she couldn’t bring herself to agree. The truth was that Gretchen had picked her apart completely, and made her feel like the most disgusting wretch. She was not worthy of being the Duchess of Lupton, but she would have to take the title. There was nothing that she could do to change that.

CHAPTER 19

Levi felt evil for what he had done, but he couldn’t think of any other way to fix things.

He hadn't known what to do when they were seen on the veranda, as in all honesty there was nothing to be done. They had risked everything, and in the moment it had been a wonderful thing but it had come back to bite them, and now...

Now he would be a husband, and she would be forced to be his wife. He had never wanted to marry, but he knew his duty. In terms of possible wives, she was the least objectionable, but that only made it worse. It was because she was so lovely that he dreaded forcing her into such an arrangement. She had deserved so much more, and he would never amount to that. It was easier for him to keep away, and to give her the chance to find happiness elsewhere.

He suggested as much to Leonard, as they drank in Levi's parlor room the evening before the wedding.

"If you do that," Leonard sighed, "then you are an even greater fool than most."

"It is not foolish to want her happiness, which she will never find with me. I do not know what else to do. I am already doing what is right and marrying her. What more can I do?"

"I know, but you are only doing this to yourself. Nobody forced you to follow her out of the ballroom, and nobody forced you to kiss her. Clearly, you hold some affection for her, so why don't you simply act on it?"

"You know why. After what happened with my father, I cannot allow myself to risk that same life. I cannot become him."

"And you wouldn't, but there seems to be no point in telling me that. You refuse to believe me whatever I say."

"You do not know that. My father was young once, too. He enjoyed socializing as I

do and he smiled and flirted and enjoyed himself. It was marriage that made him the way that he was.”

“No, he had always been that way,” Leonard explained. “It was simply the fact that he could hide it behind closed doors that made him feel comfortable showing that side of him. You are not like that, Levi. Stop treating yourself as though you are. It isn’t fair to Miss Kendall.”

“Nor is it fair to her that she will inevitably have to meet my mother.”

“Oh, God, are you truly going to do that? Couldn’t you just move your mother into lodgings of her own? You could send a few servants with her.”

“No, it is only right that I keep her with me. If I didn’t that would only mean visiting her often, which is a choice that I do not wish to make often. Besides, she might like my wife, and if that is the case then all will be well.”

“And if she does not?”

“Then other arrangements will be made,” Levi shrugged, finishing his drink. “Now, might you like to tell me when you plan to marry, or will we only discuss my antics as usual?”

“When I do something noteworthy, you are more than welcome to talk to me about them. Until then, I shall discuss the man that declared that he would be a bachelor until the day he died only to marry the first lady that caught his eye.”

“Very well,” he sighed. “I await that day with bated breath.”

Leonard smirked, leaving soon after. It would be a long day, and Levi knew perfectly well that he would need his rest, but he had realized something very important that he had forgotten during his conversation.

He was yet to tell his mother about his wedding.

He hadn't been able to bring himself to speak to her. She was cruel when she was well, and vague and distractible when her illness plagued her, and in neither case did he wish to visit. However, he had to tell her before he brought Emma home. He had to give her some warning.

He left for his mother's wing of the house. She was welcome to roam the household as she pleased, but she avoided him where possible and he was perfectly happy with such an arrangement. He found her in what she had deemed her drawing room, sipping tea on a settee.

“Mother,” he said gently, “might we talk?”

“If you insist,” she sighed, not quite looking at him.

“I have something to tell you.” He sighed, some lost little part of him still yearning for her acceptance. “I do not believe you will like it.”

“I hardly ever like what you have to say, so go on. Tell me what you must.”

“I am to marry tomorrow.”

She looked as though she might drop her teacup. She eyed him carefully—for once with no anger in her face, only shock.

“Tomorrow?”

“Yes. It is my fault entirely that you have not known, but it was a quick arrangement and I have been otherwise occupied.”

“A short engagement,” she nodded. “So you were untoward with some girl and you were seen?”

“Indeed. It is not what I wanted, but it is what is happening. She will be with me tomorrow after the ceremony, and you may meet her the following day.”

“And why can I not be present at your wedding? Am I not worthy?”

Levi faltered, and began to pace a little to help himself think. She had never been at all interested in what he was doing, and so he hadn’t thought for a moment that she would want to be there, but now that he was thinking about it he couldn’t help but wonder what her motives were.

“I hadn’t thought that it would be of any interest to you.”

“Seeing my only child marry? I can hardly think of anything that could be more important to a mother.”

“Well, you may attend if you wish. There will be a lot of guests present, but if you want to be there then we can have it arranged.”

“Good. I shall be ready.”

“Do you... do you not mind?”

“Why would I? It doesn’t matter what you said to your father, I always knew you would find a wife eventually. You were never strong enough to keep to your oath.”

Levi laughed, in spite of everything. He wondered how he had even a shred of kindness in him when his parents had seen anything but unkindness as weak.

“I shall see you tomorrow, Mother.”

“What is her name? I would hate to meet her and not know.”

“It is Emma, Mother. Emma Kendall.”

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She nodded, and he left again. It had been one of their longer conversations, and that had been his choice. It was easier to keep their discussions short, else it would turn to the same thing he had heard all of his life. He was pestering her, and she would have had an easier life without him. He wondered if, once upon a time, she was a kind young lady that had a lot of love to give, but he couldn't imagine her that way.

He couldn't sleep that night. Each time he tried, he thought of Emma, and how he was going to cause her life to be completely miserable.

When he did fall asleep, the nightmares began. He was running in a forest, and Emma was chasing after him, calling his name while he ignored her and continued running. He was raising his voice at her, telling her to find more than him, but as he did so she fell. She did not get back up.

Eventually, morning came and he dragged himself from his bed, dressing himself at the last minute. He did not break his fast, for he did not feel capable of eating a thing. He boarded his carriage, unable to think of anything at all.

He waited at the altar, his heart pounding. He hoped that she would change her mind, and that she wouldn't come at all, but then the guests rose from their seats and she entered the church. She was beautiful, and in spite of it all she was smiling. Her hand was on her father's arm, and though there were no traces of pride or happiness, nor any of the other feelings one might expect from a man giving away his daughter, he seemed less bitter than usual.

Levi tried to see that as something good.

The ceremony passed, the guilt thick in his throat as he recited vows that he wouldn't be keeping. He would not honor and cherish her. He would do his best by her, but he could not truthfully vow to always love her when he knew that he never would. Emma knew that too, and she looked at him sadly throughout it. He wondered who else in attendance would know how much of a farce it all was, but then he remembered the circumstances under which they were marrying, and he decided that most people knew.

"There," she whispered to him when the ceremony had finished. "That wasn't as bad as I had expected."

He wondered just how bad she had expected it to be, but he thought better than to ask then and there. The wedding breakfast was beautiful, but again he could not eat anything. All that he truly wished to do was avoid his wife, but that was not easy when they had to greet their guests and thank them for attending. Emma looked at him a few times, as though she wished to say something, but she didn't. At last, Miss Godwin arrived and Emma was distracted.

"Oh, Emma, this is all so beautiful," she said. "I can only hope that my own wedding is half as lovely as this one day."

"It will be. With any luck, you shall have longer to arrange things than we did."

"I never would have guessed you had such little time, had I not been at the ball. Truly, it is perfect."

"Then perhaps the Duke and I can help you with your preparations?" she offered lightly. "You know, you would not even need me. The Duke did practically all of this himself."

"Did he?" Miss Godwin asked before turning to him. "Your Grace, you certainly

have an eye for these things!”

“Thank you, Miss Godwin. You are welcome to visit us anytime, should you wish to see our home. I will be decorating it again soon, and if you care about that sort of thing you may be of help.”

“It would be an honor!”

She left, and Emma sighed, almost leaning into him as she was standing so close.

“It will be nice,” she said gently, “to return to our home. There is something so special about it being ours, don’t you think?”

“It shall be yours, more than anything,” he replied, and she looked at him as though he had drawn his pistol.

“What do you mean?”

“Because the home shall be yours to manage,” he replied quickly, not wanting to discuss the matter in front of their guests.

In any case, his response pleased her and she settled. He could see his mother sitting alone, and he wondered why she had asked to join them at all. She had not looked happy during the ceremony, and she still looked the very picture of melancholy sitting there. It was a miserable life, he thought, but that was partly of her own accord. She could have found joy for herself after his father passed, he thought, but she simply stayed in her wing, unwilling to do anything else.

“Is that your mother?” Emma asked, following his line of vision.

“Indeed. You and I must discuss her later.”

“If it is about her living with us, there is no need. I like that she will be there.”

He wondered if her mind was filled with dreams of having a mother figure again, and he ached that he would have to tell her that his mother had little interest in being perceived as a mother. He had to tell her, however; it was far better for him to do so than for his mother to take it on herself. He could at least tell her nicely.

“She tends to keep to herself, that is all.”

He decided that he could explain the rest of it some other time.

“Very well, she can continue to enjoy her own space. Truly, I do not mind at all.”

“You are being very agreeable. You may tell me if you are displeased by something.”

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“I know, and I will should the opportunity arrive.”

He called her agreeable, but he knew the truth. She was being complacent. She had not been angry with him for anything, not for ruining her, nor for telling her that he wished to spend little time with her, nor for any other disappointment that he had given her. It should have made him happy, but instead all it did was make the guilt even worse.

The day passed by, and Levi tried to hide away on the sidelines. It was an unsuccessful endeavor, given that he was the groom, but thankfully his new wife proved to be the more popular one. One smiling guest after another thanked her for the beautiful day, and each time she curtsied and thanked them for attending. She was smiling by then, a real smile, and he ached to see it. She had accepted her fate, and was trying to see the good in it. She was certainly doing far better with it than he was.

“Well, Your Grace,” Miss Penton said, appearing beside him, “I hadn’t expected it, but it would appear that you kept your word. I should thank you for that.”

She was speaking to him with what he imagined was her form of kindness.

“There is no need to thank me. I am only doing what is expected of me.”

“Perhaps, but there are plenty of gentlemen that would not have seen this as their burden to bear. You did, and regardless of how I feel about you, I can accept that you have done what was necessary.”

“And what do you feel about me, exactly?”

“Do you wish for me to tell you the truth, or would you prefer the response of a polite wedding guest?”

“The truth.”

“I do not think you are good enough for my friend,” she replied bluntly. “I knew that she would one day marry, but I had always expected it to be a gentleman that was exceptionally loving, someone that could make her see the world differently. You see things even more drearily than she does, and I do not think that is fair at all.”

“Have you told her this?”

“No, and I do not believe that I ever will. She seems happy, and if she is happy then so am I. You have kept to the promise you made her sister, and as long as that continues I see no need to hate you.”

She did not tell him what would happen if he broke his word. She did not need to, and Levi wondered if she was only saying such things because she knew what he was doing, and was giving him a word of warning. She smiled politely at him and walked away, not telling him anything more.

They left for Lupton Manor soon after. He had hoped that their party wouldn't end, as that would mean they did not have to board a carriage alone together and travel as a pair, but of course the time came and before he knew it his carriage was rumbling along and he was sitting beside a beautiful lady that just so happened to be his wife.

The wife he did not want.

“That was a perfectly lovely day,” she said softly. “Thank you for all that you did to

prepare for it.”

“It is nothing, truly. It gave me something to do with my day. I actually enjoyed it far more than I had expected.”

“Then I shall charge you with the redecoration of the household. I do not believe that I will be of any use to you, although Dorothy seemed quite interested in it all.”

“I meant what I said. You may invite your friends to stay whenever you please. I would rather you had company that you enjoyed than my mother.”

“I am certain that your mother will warm to me in time,” she laughed softly. “Besides, you will be there. It is not as though I will be without friends.”

There would be no better time, he realized, to tell her the truth about what he expected.

“You see, Emma,” he began, the words paining him to say, “I meant what I told you earlier. My mother is likely to be a friend to anyone. She will not like you, for she does not like anyone. As for myself, I will be with you for a reasonable time for a honeymoon, and then I will be returning to London.”

He dared to look at her face, and in an instant he wished that he hadn’t. She looked empty, which was even worse than anger or misery. He hadn’t wanted her to feel any of those things, but at least anger was something that passed in time.

“Very well,” she replied, trying to fix her smile once again. “I shall at least have our children, in time, to keep me company.”

“Emma, we will not be having children.”

“Why not?”

“Because I do not want to have any. I have never wanted children.”

“Very well,” she replied, staring straight ahead of her even though there was nothing to look at there.

“I do not mean to be difficult.”

“No, of course not. I understand, Your Grace.”

“We do not need these formalities anymore.”

“Do we not?” she asked. “I thought our given names were reserved for those we considered friends, and if you want nothing more than to keep me at arm’s length, as you do your mother, then that is not something that can be considered friendship.”

He opened his mouth to argue, but no sound came out. She was right, after all, and she was giving him exactly what he wanted. That was what frustrated him more than anything; part of him wanted her to argue, and to be that same lady that openly chastised him at any opportunity. This lady sitting beside him was not the same one that he met, that he kissed, and he couldn’t help but want her back.

CHAPTER 20

Emma had not expected much of her marriage, which was why she did not object to anything Levi said.

He had not needed to marry her, and yet he had, and so she had to show gratitude for that whether she truly felt grateful for it or not. She wore her gown, she walked down the aisle, she smiled and she greeted and she enjoyed herself to the best of her ability.

But when he told her that he would be leaving her alone, and that she would never have any children to care for, she could no longer keep her smile. She fell silent until the carriage arrived at Lupton Manor, when she thanked the footman for helping her out of the carriage.

She couldn't help but be in awe of the grandeur. Lupton Manor stood tall, its stone walls imposing. Rows of tall windows were arranged in perfect symmetry, and ivy climbed the face in tendrils. Emma's eyes traced them upward, as the green faded to blend in with the drab grey stone.

Despite its size, however, there was a quietness to it, the kind of stillness that came from standing for so long without a single change. Emma wondered if her new life was to be the same; quiet and still, but imposing all the same.

The staff were lined up outside of the house to greet them, and so she wore her biggest smile. She wished to make a good impression, especially if she were to spend the entirety of her life there.

"This is the housekeeper," Levi explained, "Mrs. Telson. She will be the one to show you the home later, as well as introduce you to the staff. I am certain, however, that you will come to know them all in your own time."

"Of course."

Mrs. Telson, fortunately, seemed kind. She was a short woman, rather old, but her smile seemed real, not at all like the forced ones she had seen in servants before. It would be nice to have an ally, at least.

Her affairs were brought into the home, and at once Mrs. Telson began to take her on a tour. Emma noticed, however, that her husband was already making his way out of the door.

"Where are you going?"

He froze in the doorway, not quite able to meet her eye.

“I am needed elsewhere.”

“On our honeymoon?”

“Yes. My affairs do not cease to exist simply because I am married.”

“Affairs?”

At last, he looked at her. Emma was aware that her staff were looking at her with pity, but she ignored them to the best of her ability.

“Business affairs,” he explained quickly. “Mrs. Telson will take care of you.”

With that, he was out of the door. Emma sighed, following Mrs. Telson as they toured the estate.

It was a beautiful home, one that she never would have assumed a man had decorated. It was too soft, too fashionable. The walls were different shades of pale colors, wallpapers adorning some of them. The furniture was new, and clearly expensive. She was aware that her husband, and by extension herself, was very wealthy, but she did not know quite the extent and she almost did not want to. It would be more money than she had ever thought possible, she knew that much.

“Do ignore His Grace,” Mrs. Telson said gently as they stood in the light purple drawing room. “He tends to spend a lot of his time away. It has nothing to do with you, he is simply a busy gentleman.”

“I do hope that is the case.”

They continued their tour, but something was not making sense to Emma. The Duke was sociable, and he enjoyed company. He liked the attention, and he was good in

conversation, and so truly there was no reason for him to remain so distant, especially when they had been forming a friendship. It was only when he had to propose to her that all interest fell away.

The thrill of the hunt, she thought, but never the catch.

They avoided Levi's mother's wing entirely. Mrs. Telson thought better than to bother the lady, and Emma did not hesitate to agree. His mother had not seemed happy at the wedding, which had no doubt been because she knew the circumstances under which they had married, and therefore likely thought very little of her indeed.

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Upon the end of the tour, Mrs. Telson had to leave and tend to other matters, but she welcomed Emma to do as she pleased. It was strange being alone in such unfamiliar surroundings, but she would soon adapt. It was what she had always done.

She went to the library, taking the first book that she saw and returning to the drawing room with it. When she returned, a plate of biscuits had appeared along with a pot of tea. She smiled, and took a biscuit, being careful not to leave any crumbs anywhere. She was sitting too straight, and breathing too lightly, but it was hard to feel at home when everything was so unfamiliar.

“I remember that look.”

Her head turned rapidly to see Levi’s mother in the doorway. She was looking directly at her, no real softness in her eyes.

“Do forgive me,” Emma said quickly, jumping to her feet and curtsying.

“Whatever for?”

“Well, I assume that this is your tea that I have taken for myself.”

“Heavens no. If I wanted a tea I would have one sent to my own wing. I had them prepare this for you. I knew that my son would not care to do it. You must know that if you want something, you need only ask for it.”

“I know. I simply feel undeserving of it all. I did not mean for any of this to happen.”

“Of course not. Nobody ever plans to be the Duchess of Lupton. No woman’s ever truly considered that a happy ending.”

The lady joined her, and it was then that Emma noticed that two teacups had been brought. She abandoned the book beside her, wondering why the Duke’s mother cared to speak with her.

“My apologies, but I have not heard that before.”

“Of course you haven’t. It would not be something that is said aloud, as it would ruin the family name. Just know that, whatever happened, it was not your fault. The title of the Duke of Lupton comes with a curse, you see, and they all fall victim to it eventually.”

Emma blinked. A curse? Such a thing would have had rumors, she assumed, but there had never been even a whisper about it. Perhaps this was merely her way of frightening the new duchess?

“Would you mind explaining it to me?” she asked. “The curse.”

“It would be for the best, yes. You ought to be prepared. You see, this particular line of dukes dates back several generations, and each time the eldest son has the same fate. He becomes angry and resentful, and he wants more power than any man should ever have. They always say that they will be different, but they never are. They always become the same sad and angry man as the father they so hated.”

“That is so profoundly sad. Do they not realize that they can change?”

“That is precisely the problem. They cannot. It gets them all eventually, and the ones that fight against it suffer the worst. It is easier for them to simply not try.”

Emma thought about that, and wondered if her husband was even aware of his curse at all. If his mother thought it truly was easier to never fight it, then perhaps she did not tell him about it to begin with. It would mean, then, that he could never try to be different, as he never knew that there was something to change in the first place.

“I had so wanted a daughter, instead,” his mother continued, sighing wistfully. “I had thought that, if I never produced an heir, the line would end with my late husband, and all would be well. Instead, His Grace arrived. I know that I was a terrible mother, but I could never face him. He has his father’s eyes, you see, and every time I look into them...”

“You see his father.”

She nodded sadly, taking her teacup and sipping it.

“All this to say, you mustn’t blame yourself for what he will become soon. It is not your fault, and to an extent it is not his, either. It is simply how it is for the Hunters, and there is no changing that.”

They continued their tea in silence, and Emma tried to find reasonable explanations for what she had been told. She wanted to believe that it was all coincidence, but it had been every Duke of Lupton’s fate eventually. Her husband would be no exception; he would therefore be a terrible husband and there was no changing that.

He must have known about it, Emma realized. That was why he did not want to marry, and why he refused to have any children. He had tried to stop himself from continuing the dreaded curse, but he had already made a fatal error and now was married. That meant that she was now a part of it, and she would eventually be subjected to the very worst of what a man could do to his wife, if his mother were to be believed.

“I did not ask you your name, by the way,” the older lady said after a while.

“It is Emma.”

“A very pretty name. Mine is Eloise. You may call me that, if you wish. I know that I do not hold any affection for my son, and you may think that I am evil because of that, but in spite of everything I think we could be good friends.”

Emma nodded, hoping it could be the case. She had always wanted a daughter, so at least she had that on her side. It did not, however, change the fact that her husband would hate her, if he did not already.

“And what of your mother?” she continued. “I do not believe I saw her at the ceremony.”

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“She passed away years ago,” Emma explained, suddenly feeling quite unwell. “My sister and I were very small. Sarah was but two years of age. My father did not take the loss well. He blamed her entirely, of course, and said that had she been stronger, the illness would have subsided and she might have given him an heir.”

“By the sounds of it, it might be for the best that he never had a son. My father was much the same as yours, I assume. Daughters count for nothing, and a son is everything. Unfortunately for him, he had six children and we are all girls. I couldn’t tell you where any of my sisters are now, though.”

“Did they all marry?”

“I do not know. I was the oldest, and so I was sent away to make the best possible match. From there, my husband did not allow me to speak with any other ladies. They would fill my head with thoughts, he said, which was not allowed under any circumstances. I never found them.”

Emma pitied the lady, even though she had a feeling that she had not been a good mother. She must have had dreams before, just like Emma had, and they had been ripped from her.

After their tea, Emma went out into the gardens. She needed the air, and she needed to be reminded of her friends. She wandered, trying to name the flowers as Dorothy did, but she was not as good at it as her friend. She watched the sun set, the bright yellow turning to orange and then red, and finally disappearing entirely and leaving the sky a deep blue. She left for dinner then, and ate alone.

“The Dowager Duchess takes her meals alone,” the butler explained.

“And the Duke?”

The butler seemed unwilling to answer.

“We hardly see him, Your Grace. He spends his days out.”

“Where?”

“His... his club, Your Grace.”

Emma sighed. Of course he would spend all of his time in his gentlemen’s club, no doubt enjoying those times where ladies became available. She had heard all about the escapades there from her father, who frequented them often himself, and it made her think of her husband flirting brazenly with other ladies.

She hated that the thought upset her, but that did not change things. Whether she liked it or not, her husband would only change for the worse. It was clear to her, more than ever, that she was destined for a loveless marriage and a lonely life. It was only a matter of time before what his mother had warned her about became true and he no longer allowed her to speak with her friends and her sister, and he became a monster. She did not want to believe it, but she could not help but be wrapped up in the chaos of it. She had always been so sensible, and yet for the first time in her life she felt herself believing in something so ridiculous, something she would have once scoffed at.

It did not help that three days passed, and she did not see him once. She did not want to care, as she knew precisely what their marriage was, but she did. She wanted her husband, she wanted her friend, and no amount of willing such desires to go away changed things.

And so, on the third night, sitting in the pale blue parlor room and holding a book that she could not bring herself to read, she wept.

She cried for the life that she could no longer lead, for the life that her sister would have that she wouldn't know enough about, and for the friends that would inevitably be seen as bad influences that she was forbidden from seeing. She deserved it, she decided, for acting the way she had, but that did not make it easier to withstand. If anything, it only made it more difficult as she had nobody to blame but herself.

She was alone, and there was nothing that she could do about it.

CHAPTER 21

“You are a friend, but even friends can outstay their welcome.”

Levi groaned as he opened his eyes, hauling himself up from the ground. Leonard was standing over him, a plate in his hand.

“What time is it?”

“You would be better off asking me for the day,” Leonard joked. “You have been here since your wedding day.”

“Where else could I possibly go?”

“Home, with your wife,” he suggested, and Levi groaned a second time.

“We both know that I cannot do that. It would be wholly unfair to her. She already has my mother to contend with, though she is likely keeping herself hidden away.”

“I believe what you mean to say is that you do not want to contend with any of it, and

so you are hiding here.”

“Is that a crime?”

“Perhaps it ought to be. Come, eat this.”

Levi looked at the blackened toast and the fish and wretched. Leonard had a wonderful cook, and so he knew then and there that Leonard had made it himself.

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“This is not breakfast.”

“You are correct. Technically, it is lunch. Eat. The charcoal will soak up the alcohol.”

Levi sighed, forcing the food down his throat while Leonard watched him.

“Did you want some?” he offered.

“No, not particularly. I did not overindulge for three straight days, and so it is not necessary.”

“You are exaggerating.”

“Truly, I wish I was.”

When, at last, Levi had finished his lunch, he instinctively searched for his glass. His friend laughed emptily at him.

“I have had it taken away,” he explained. “You do not need any more of that stuff. What you need is to sleep this away, and then speak to your wife,”

“I cannot.”

“I do not care. I can see that you are unhappy, anyone can, but avoiding the one person that you are supposed to care for more than anyone else is not going to help either of you. You need to tell her why you are doing all of this.”

“What good would that do? It will only make her afraid of me, and then we shall be even worse off.”

“Or, she will make you see that you are afraid for no good reason, and that you can be a good husband if you simply try.”

“Why is it that you can be so intelligent and still not understand a word that I say?”

Leonard handed him a glass of water, and the moment the liquid touched his lips he finished it and asked for another. Already, he was feeling the effects of his indulgence subside, and the numbing that it had caused left with it. It pained him to know what he had done, and what he was doing, but it did not persuade him at all to change his mind. She was better off without him, he decided, and that was that.

“I would try to understand,” Leonard explained, “if you were not being so ridiculous. She is not some wounded animal, she is the lady you married. Have you even once considered how she must be feeling about all of this?”

“It is all that I have been thinking about. That is why I came here. I wanted to forget about it all.”

“Well, you cannot. I am your friend, Levi, and as your friend I must tell you that this cannot continue. You will go home to her this evening, and you will tell her about everything.”

Levi sighed, taking a seat. He knew that Leonard was right, and that he would have to face up to it eventually, but he wanted to ignore it, and pretend there was nothing to discuss. He wanted to pretend that there was not a beautiful lady sitting in his home, wondering if he would ever return. It was unfair to her, and he knew that, but it was better than her seeing the man that he would become.

He had doomed Emma to a life with him, and looking her in the eye and telling her as much would only prove that. He wanted to continue the lie, and pretend that he was a normal gentleman, for a little while longer.

However, evening came and Leonard took him to his carriage, sending him home. He considered going to his gentlemen's club, but even in his clouded judgment he knew that he had to do better. He had to face his wife, even if she would then want to be away from him.

The moment he entered, he heard a soft sob from the parlor room, and his stomach lurched.

His mother had confronted her, he thought, and was saying the most awful things to her just as she had done to him all his life. He had left Emma with his mother, alone, all because he was too selfish to tell her the truth.

He burst into the room, prepared to tell his mother to leave them else he would have to find other living arrangements, only to find Emma alone, sitting on a settee, startled.

"My sincerest apologies," he said quietly. "I did not mean to intrude."

"It is quite alright," she said quickly, fixing herself and looking to the floor.

"Why are you crying?"

"Why do you care?"

He softened at that. In truth, he did not know why, but the sight of her in such sorrow pained him and he wanted to help her. It was another reason why he preferred to be away from her. At least then, he could tell himself that she was happy, and

hetherefore did not have to feel the ache in his chest that she was hurting.

He wanted to take her elsewhere, hoping that she might then listen to him. He picked her up from the settee, snaking an arm around her waist and holding her in his arms, carrying her out of the room. She squealed at him, her eyes looking around frantically.

“What are you doing?” she asked. “Put me down.”

But he did not respond, instead carrying her all the way to the study and placing her down in an armchair. She looked around the dark room in faint amazement; it was his own personal room, and so he had ensured that it was decorated to his tastes alone, rather than what was considered fashionable. Had she ever seen anything that was truly him, and not the mask he put on for society?

“Stay there,” he instructed, and poured her a whiskey.

He handed it to her, and she smelled it, immediately pulling a face. Her nose wrinkled.

“It helps,” he explained, and she tentatively took a sip.

She coughed immediately, recoiling and putting the glass back down. When Miss Penton had given her brandy, it had been mixed with lemonade and would not have tasted as bad, but he had given her strong alcohol in a purer form and she was evidently not someone that enjoyed that.

He couldn't help but laugh as she took another drink, but she gave him a furious glare when he did.

“Do not mock me.”

“I am not.”

“Then what are you doing?”

“Enjoying your company. It is how we were before, is it not?”

“It is clearly not how we are now.” She placed her glass on the table with a click.

“Emma, why were you crying?”

“You already know why, and if you do not then you are a fool.”

“Then a fool I am. I want what is best for you. Please tell me how I can do that.”

“You abandoned me!” she snapped. “I understand that you do not like it here, and that you do not love me, but you brought me here and left without another word.”

“I thought that was what you wanted.”

“Why would I want that? Why would I want to be taken somewhere completely unfamiliar to me and left without a single person that I knew there?”

“Because you cannot— you couldn’t bear the sight of me. You did not look at me all throughout our wedding.”

There was a beat, and Emma’s eyes did not leave his.

“Levi, I spent the entire day wanting you to look at me. I wanted you to tell me that you had changed your mind—”

“And that I did not want the match, is that what you wanted?”

“And that you would reconsider what you wanted from our marriage,” she finished.

“I waited and waited for it, but it never came. When you left me alone, that was all of the proof I needed that you did not want to be near me.”

“I only keep my distance for your sake. I wish I could tell you just how much I hate the position I have put you in, but it is impossible to understand.”

“I found it rather easy, actually,” she replied coldly.

His blood ran cold. He had never told her anything about his life, with the exception of a few things about his mother, but Emma was giving him a look of knowing. Somehow, she had learned the truth about him, and he was so ashamed by that that he was the first to look away.

“Who told you?”

“Your mother. She explained everything. She believes that one day you will be a terrible husband, one that I will hate. Tell me, Levi, have you ever considered that this curse of yours might simply be a superstition that you are choosing to believe in?”

He had considered. But he did not allow himself to hope. He saw pieces of his father seep into him more and more as time passed. He could see why his mother had always hated him; it was because she always knew what he would become, and she had to prepare for that.

“I did not choose any of this. The circumstances of my birth were out of my control, and now I have to be this way.”

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“You do not, but there is no explaining that to someone that wants to think a certain way. If this is what you want, then we have nothing more to say to each other. Enjoy your gentlemen’s clubs, and all that comes with them.”

“Have dinner with me,” he said suddenly. “That would help, would it not?”

“I do not want you to socialize with me out of pity. I eat quite well as I am.”

She stood up to leave, but as she passed him he caught her waist and pulled her back gently, causing her to stumble into his lap. He expected her to stand up again, or to fight him off, but she did not. Instead, she remained where she was, looking into his eyes as if searching for something that was long gone.

“It is not out of pity that I am asking you,” he explained softly. “Emma, I know that I have not been a good husband to you thus far, but at least now you know why.”

“A curse that is not real. Yes.”

He cleared his throat, not moving her.

“My mother never liked me,” he began. “Even when I was a small boy. She would tell me that she never wanted me, and that I was her greatest mistake. It was only when I finally made friends that I learned that mothers were not supposed to treat their children that way.”

Emma said nothing, looking into his eyes. He wondered if somehow she saw his father there.

“I have never been told why she did that to me, but now that we are married I believe I understand. My mother and father were... strange, and in a sense I wonder if she pushed me out to protect me. As a boy, I would always want to take care of her, and so when their disputes were at their worst, I would be the one to stand between them. She told me over and over not to, but I couldn't stop myself. I didn't care what she felt for me, I had to do what I could. I think she did the same for me, by telling me she did not like me and I should not come near her.”

“Did it– did it ever work, if that was what she had wanted?”

“I suppose so, in a way. Then again, my father died long before I could see any difference.. It was strange to see, you know. He terrified me as a boy, and then one day he suddenly fell ill and passed away within a matter of days. To this day, we do not know what happened. He was a beast, and he was killed by something so simple as an illness. I have never quite understood it. I don't believe I have ever understood anything about this family. That is why I wanted to keep you away from all of it.”

“Well, it is rather too late for that,” she pointed out. “We are now married, and I am a part of the Hunter family. Now, what are we going to do about that?”

“I do not know, for I had never expected anything like this. I do mean what I said, however. We could start by taking our dinner together.”

At last, she seemed as though she was considering it.

“It would be a start, I suppose.”

“Emma, I cannot be the husband that you dreamed of. It is simply not possible for me. I can say, though, that I can be better, far better, than I am now. I want to try.”

For a moment, he wondered if she might believe him. He hoped that she would, as it

was the truth. He wanted to be as good to her as he could, even if it would never be what she deserved. He had done everything to avoid causing her pain, but she had cried regardless, and so it was perhaps better if he simply treated her as any other husband would treat his wife, even if he would never be able to do so correctly.

She remained in his lap, agonizingly close to him, and her weight pressed into him. She was the most beautiful lady that he had ever seen, and she was his wife. He should have felt like the luckiest man in England, but all he could feel was dread that he would one day ruin her even more than he already had.

“Very well,” she said suddenly, standing up. “If you wish to try, then do so.”

“I will. I want this to be easier for you.”

“You should want it for yourself, too. You told me yourself that you only ever do what is right for you, did you not?”

“That was before we were married.”

“Yes, and your behavior has not changed since. It is quite alright, you do not need to give me any grand displays of affection or any declarations. I know what this is, and I am happy with it.”

“But you will come to dinner with me, yes?”

“I will,” she nodded, and he swore he could see a faint smile on her lips. “Goodnight, Your Grace.”

“Goodnight, Emma.”

She left the study, closing the door behind her. Levi sighed, finishing her whiskey for

her before regretting it in an instant. He had to stop reaching for his whiskey when he was unhappy, he told himself, as it was only going to make it all worse. If he was going to fight whatever was coming to him, he would have to try with everything he possessed, and he was determined that he would be able to do so.

And, if it was for Emma, he would find the strength to do it somewhere.

CHAPTER 22

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It had been a lot for Emma to understand, but she wanted to try.

In truth, she pitied Levi when he told her what had happened to him as a child, and so even though she was angry she wanted to let him try. She wanted to give him the chance to improve as a husband, and he seemed willing to do it.

He did, indeed, join her for dinner the following night. Though stilted, at first, it was nice to have company once more.

“What did you do today?” he asked, as their first course was served.

“I spent a lot of time meeting with the staff today. Mrs. Telson gave me their names, but I could never remember all of them without having a face to match them to.”

“What did you think of them?”

“They are all lovely. I must also thank you for finding me a lady’s maid, though that will take some time to get used to.”

“Yes, I must admit that I was surprised to learn that you did not have one before.”

“I shared one with my sister, but I found it easier to learn to do such things myself, and let Sarah have the maid. All that to say, I am quite adapted to doing things myself.”

“That is perfectly fine, but you should know as my wife that you can grow accustomed to the finer things in life.”

There was a strange fluttering feeling in her chest when he said that. He took care of her, even if he did not always go about it in the right way. It was just as well that he was trying, for she had something to ask him that gave her a great deal of nerves, indeed. She smoothed the paper that she was holding in her lap, the words swirling in her mind.

Sarah had been invited to a ball, and their father was refusing to accompany her after the stunt she had pulled, dancing with Lord Rosendale. There was something that Sarah wished to discuss with her, but she wished to say it to her in person, rather than by letter, and so she was hoping that Emma would accompany her.

The issue was that she was supposed to be on her honeymoon, and so if she were to arrive without her husband, questions would be asked, and she had had her fair share of whispers and rumors as it was. If she were to attend with Sarah, she would need Levi by her side, but that would be a great ask given the circumstances. He was already trying to be better, and she did not wish to push him too far.

“Something is troubling you,” he said gently. “What is it?”

“It is nothing,” she replied quickly, fixing a smile.

“I can see it in your face. You are more than welcome to tell me what troubles you, for if you do not then there is no way for me to help you. And I assure you, I wish to.”

“Well, I received this letter this morning,” she sighed, handing it to him. “It is from my sister.”

He read it quickly before handing it back to her. She watched as his face changed while reading it, shifting from concern to anger to concern once more.

“You may of course attend with her. Why has this been such a concern to you?”

“Because... I think it is best that you do, too. The rumors have only just begun to settle, but if I were to appear without you when we are supposed to be in newlywed bliss, I dread to think what people will say.”

“You seem to care an awful lot about how people see you.”

“I do. Perhaps it will not be so important when my sister is married, but for now I have done enough damage to her reputation and I think it is best that we show a united front through this.”

“Does that mean you were afraid to ask me to join you?”

“Not afraid, only that I might be asking too much of you.”

“I have told you that I am going to try and be a better husband. That means that I want you to tell me when you want something. I would be delighted to join you both. Will you need a gown for it?”

Emma thought for a moment about whether or not she had a gown for the occasion. She did have some beautiful dresses, but the more she thought about it, the less confident she was.

“I believe so,” she nodded. “I do not have anything resembling the finery that a duchess should wear.”

“Very well, I shall have the town’s modiste brought to you tomorrow. In fact, to make things easier, you might like to have several made. Have her design as many as you wish, and do not think about the cost. Also, you may wish to think about choosing the new family colors. My father always insisted on a deep red, but I never

thought much of that.”

“Family colors?”

“Yes, of course. If it is a united front you want, then a united front we will have. Might you have a preference?”

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Emma thought for a moment. She was pleased that it would not be red, as given her delicate reputation it was for the best that she avoided such a provocative color. She thought about Dorothy's bright yellow and orange gowns, and shuddered. They were a duke and a duchess, two members of the ton that were destined to shine, but that did not mean that they needed to dress garishly.

"Green," she settled. "It is a favorite of mine."

"Wonderful. Green it is. I have plenty of suits in such a color, and so we shall always pair nicely. Have as many made as you wish."

"Are you quite certain? I do not mean to bother you with the price."

"I told you, you are not to concern yourself with that. You are my Duchess, and therefore you will live accordingly. It is only gowns. I shall ensure the modiste is told the same thing if I must, so that you cannot avoid it."

"Your Grace—"

"Levi."

"Levi," she corrected herself, "I do not want to be a burden."

"Then it is just as well that I do not perceive you as one. Emma, there are more important matters than your gowns and how many I must pay for. Believe me, we have ample funds."

“I know, and I do not mean to suggest otherwise. I suppose it is simply because I am aware that my father did not give you my dowry. I do not even know if I ever had one.”

“We never discussed it. I have no need for it, and nor do you. A man like your father would only remind you of it at every opportunity, and so I do not want to give him the option to. We do not need him. You do not need him.”

Emma already knew that, of course, for she had not needed him for many years. Her family had, essentially, only been herself and her sister, and they had liked it well enough that way. She hoped that her sister was not too lonely without her, but she would be able to ask her that herself at the ball.

She nodded to Levi, thanking him. His only response was that she had no need to thank him, for he was only doing his duty. Emma wished that, rather than it being his duty, it was because he simply wanted to be good to her, but she did not say as much. He was doing the right things, and she couldn't expect him to be perfect and do it for the right reasons.

They continued to talk, and soon enough it was their final course. Part of Emma had hoped that the dinner would not end, as she knew what would happen when it did. Levi would return to his study, and she would be alone once more. She enjoyed his presence, and she did not want him to leave.

To her surprise, he did not leave her when they had finished. Instead, he led her to the parlor room and handed her a drink. She looked at her glass, and then at him, with a furrowed brow.

“You need not worry,” he chuckled. “It is not whiskey this time.”

“It is not that,” she sighed, taking a sip of her virtuously unaltered lemonade.

“Then what is it?”

“I wasn’t expecting you to join me after dinner, that is all. It is a welcome surprise, though, believe me.”

“Then I will stay,” he nodded, taking a seat. “Perhaps you might play the pianoforte for me?”

She bristled slightly at that.

“I have not played in years. I simply taught Sarah what I knew and then never tried again.”

“Then there is no better time to try it again. Please, I will not pass any judgment.”

Emma nodded shyly, finishing her glass and approaching it tentatively. Sarah had quickly surpassed her with her playing, and Emma had forgotten how to play almost entirely. She reached out to the keys, and played a few notes of a song she vaguely remembered, but that was all that she could do. She paused, wondering what Levi would think of her, but then she heard footsteps approaching, and suddenly he was standing behind her, his hands covering hers.

“Have I ever told you that I learned how to play?” he asked, grinning.

“No, you have never mentioned it.”

“Well,” he continued, sitting beside her, “I did not have much to do as a boy, and so I decided to learn. It took a very long time, and fortunately I had a tutor that knew how to do it, so he helped me.”

She removed her hands, and he played for a while. He was good, far better than

anyone else she had ever heard. She looked at the look of concentration in his face, his eyes closed as his hands glided across the keys and played the most beautiful song, one she had never heard before. He continued for a while, his eyes only opening when he had finished.

When he looked at her, her eyes wide, he seemed to panic a little, as though he had forgotten that she was there at all. She giggled at that, her expression softening. She placed his hands over his, and though she felt herself shaking she did not move them away again.

“Would you mind playing again?” she asked. “I would like to know how it feels to play well.”

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He did not question her, instead playing another song, something happier, and she relaxed her hands so that they simply followed his. His touch felt wonderful, exactly what she had been missing over the past few days. And she hoped that the song, much like the dinner, would not come to an end. It did, of course, but she did not take her hands away and neither did he. They remained side by side, and she tried to steady her breathing. She did not dare look at him, for fear that she would have to look him in the eye, which with how she felt she did not dare to risk.

“You play beautifully,” she whispered.

“Thank you, though you must know what you helped that time.”

She laughed softly, knowing perfectly well that she had done nothing at all; she had not even known the following note at any time. It was simply nice not to think, and to instead follow his lead. He was a good leader, both in dance and in playing pianoforte, and it no doubt reflected in his role as Duke.

“How are you coming along with your duties?” he asked suddenly, and the moment came to an end.

She stiffened, removing her hands and placing them in her lap.

“Everything is well taken care of,” she explained. “I am learning quickly, according to Mrs. Telson, and I will soon be ready to handle the running of the household alone, although that is quite daunting.”

“You need not do it before you are ready. In any case, that is not what I meant.”

“What do you mean? You were asking how I am doing.”

“Yes, I wish to know how you are feeling about it all, not what you have accomplished. You have only been here a matter of days, and so it is hardly fair for me to expect you to know everything. I only wish to know how you feel about everything.”

“Well, in that case... I will say that I am finding this easier than I had expected. I was never taught how to do any of it, and when I decided to be a spinster I forgot all of the things I had learned. Thankfully, I am feeling happier about my duties, especially today.”

“Good. Should you have any questions at all, you are more than welcome to ask me when you see me. Mrs. Telson should know everything there is to know, but should a problem ever arise, I will be happy to help.”

“Thank you. Mrs. Telson certainly is knowledgeable.”

“Indeed. I often say that what she has forgotten about this estate is not worth knowing to begin with.”

Emma smiled at that, but her worry soon returned. Levi noticed it, concern etched in his brow as he noted just how different she had looked of late. Her countenance had been more withdrawn, and he did not like it. He missed the young lady that he had met, though he knew he was partly to blame for how she was feeling.

“What is it?”

“I am afraid,” she confessed. “I am afraid that I will never be able to do all of this, and that you will be disappointed and wish that you had someone else to handle all of this. There is simply so much, and I do not know what to do.”

“Well, first of all, you must calm down. You shall not be able to think at all if you do not.”

Emma tried to compose herself, but it was difficult. Suddenly, she felt his hand on the small of her back, moving slowly up and down. She snapped upright in surprise, but the sensation was strangely reassuring and slowly she relaxed once more.

“Have I made you feel like this?” he asked.

“No, you have been perfectly lovely about it all. It is my father. He— he has always told me that I am not enough, and that I will always be a failure. I wanted to be good at this, and I hoped that it would come naturally and I would instinctively do the right thing, but it has not. I know that it is unfair to myself, but sometimes I make a mistake and suddenly I am ten years old once more, and being scolded for scratching my fork against my plate.”

He was quiet for a moment. She wondered what he would say, as she had not expected to say all that she had. She was ashamed of her past, and the treatment she had received from her father. He tipped his head back, looking at the ceiling with a small groan.

“If I ever see that man again,” he said in a low voice, “it shall be too soon. And I may well be the last thing he sees.”

CHAPTER 23

Emma had not expected Levi to respond the way he had to what she had said about her father.

She hadn't been certain of how he would react, but it was not a blunt assertion that he did not wish to cross his path again. Frankly, it was an ideal way for him to feel, as all

in all she felt much the same way. There was no need for them to see one another once Sarah was married and therefore no longer living there, and it was easier that way for all involved.

The following morning, she awoke feeling brighter than she had in a long time. She had enjoyed her night with her husband, with him even walking her to her bedchambers before leaving for his own. She knew that he would be sending for a modiste to see her that day, and so she dressed herself (she was still forgetting that she had a maid to do such things for her) and left for breakfast.

To her surprise, the Dowager Duchess was already sitting there, as if waiting for her.

“Good morning, Emma,” she said gently. “Did you sleep well?”

“Very much so, Eloise. Did you?”

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“Indeed. Though I will say, I heard the two of you playing the pianoforte very late.”

“My apologies. I had not thought that you would have been able to hear it.”

“I was wandering the hallway. You have no need to apologize, however, as I thought it was quite beautiful. You are certainly very talented.”

“Oh! No, it was not me playing, but Levi. He plays very well, does he not?”

Eloise pressed her lips together in a very tight and thin line.

“Yes, it would appear so.”

“You do not usually eat with me,” Emma continued, trying to change the subject.

“What has inspired such change?”

“It is quite lonely in my wing. I thought we might both enjoy the company.”

“I certainly would, yes. In fact, I will be seeing the modiste today about a few gowns. Would you like to join me?”

The older lady’s eyes sparkled, and Emma knew at once that her invitation would be accepted. She felt a twinge of guilt, as she knew that the lady had mistreated the Duke, but she wanted to find a way to bring them together one day. Even if that never happened, it would be nice to have a friend there.

The modiste arrived that afternoon, armfuls of green fabric in tow. It was as if Eloise

came alive, and at once she leaped into action, choosing the fabrics for each gown. They designed twenty in total, spending hours together deciding on them. The first would be delivered in time for the ball, and from there she would receive one per week.

When the modiste left, Eloise noticed a scrap that had fallen on the floor. It was a pale green silk, and she placed it on her lap and stroked it between her fingers. Emma watched her, pitying her for the life she had led. She would have had dreams, once, as any girl did, and instead she had been pushed into a life she never would have wished to lead.

“You know,” Eloise said gently, “I have not had a new gown in years now.”

“Did Levi never have any made for you?”

“Oh, he certainly offered, but I never accepted any. I did not think I was worthy of new things, not after how I have always treated him.”

“Do you... do you regret it?” she asked carefully.

“I do, in truth. I find it so difficult to be a mother to him, and I always have. I think about how I treat him, and I feel... I feel that I have failed in the one duty remaining to me. In truth, such thoughts have occurred more often now that you are here. I suppose that your being here, seeing him as someone worthy of being liked, possibly even loved, has proven to me that my treatment of him was my own fault.”

“It wasn’t solely you that was to blame.”

“But it was,” she smiled sadly, tears in her eyes. “I had many opportunities over the years to be a good mother, and to treat him like the child I had so wanted as a girl, but now I shall never have that chance.”

“You have that chance now, if you wish to take it.”

But the Dowager Duchess simply smiled sadly and shook her head.

“From what I have been told about him by my staff, and by you, I do not deserve a son like him, and even now I cannot believe how he has become the man he is. He should have become a tyrant, but... Well, I missed my chance to be a mother to him, and I cannot do anything about that not.”

“You can still change. You could do it even now. It does not matter that he is no longer a boy. Change can occur whenever one wishes to do it, after all. Why, I have changed so much of late that I would hardly recognize myself if I saw the lady I was a year ago.”

“You are fortunate for that. My issue is that I never did change. I had assumed, when my husband passed, that I might at last become the lady I had always wanted to be. I dreamed of being soft and gentle and kind, but it never happened. I still looked at my son with disgust, and I refused to leave the household the way that I always had.”

“Well, we could change that,” Emma suggested. “We could do it right now, and take a carriage into town.”

Eloise brightened for a moment, but then slumped once more, as if already defeated.

“I would love to, but I am afraid that it has been so long that I would not know my way.”

“I have never been, and so we shall be just as lost as each other! You never know, we may enjoy it. Even if you loathe it entirely, you can at least say that you tried. It would be an honor if you accompanied me.”

The Dowager Duchess made a few small noises to herself for a moment in thought, and then straightened herself.

“Very well,” she nodded. “I would love to.”

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The two ladies left to prepare for their day, and soon enough Emma was on her way to the front door. On her way, however, she was met by Levi, who looked her up and down with curiosity.

“Are you going anywhere interesting?”

“Indeed,” she replied, laughing nervously. “I am... I am going to town with your mother.”

His smile faltered momentarily, but he fixed it once more.

“How have you managed to persuade her to do that?”

“She has regrets,” she explained quickly. “We have decided that we cannot live with regrets anymore, and so we are going to do what we can to remedy the situation. You are welcome to join us, if you wish.”

He shook his head instantly.

“I couldn’t. I do not wish to intrude. Go, enjoy yourselves. You know the rules, you may purchase whatever takes your fancy, and you may take all of the time that you need. I only ask that you are home for dinner.”

Emma nodded happily, leaving for the door. She met Eloise there, and the two left for their carriage. Emma watched the scenery change as they traveled, and she was vaguely aware that Eloise was watching her. She wondered if Eloise pitied her.

“Might you have anywhere in particular that you wish to go?” Emma asked, looking back at the Dowager Duchess.

“I should like to see a modiste, although I would much prefer one that can fashion gowns of my style rather than your own. That is not to say I dislike what you wear, but I am rather too old for them.”

“We can do that. I would like to find a nice new quill, so that I may write to my sister. I miss her terribly, but fortunately I shall see her at the ball.”

“Is she married, too?”

“No, not as yet. She is not yet twenty years of age, and so she has time. Even so, she is quite taken with a baron, and she hopes to marry him soon.”

“Ah, a baron. She does not care for titles, then?”

“No, and she never has. She only wishes to marry for love, even though our father tried everything he could to change her mind. It is fortunate that she has found a nice gentleman that she has fallen for, as he was practically at his wit’s end.”

“She mustn’t bend to his will,” Eloise said firmly. “No matter what he says, she must do what pleases her. If this Baron makes her happy, then she must do all that she can to keep hold of him.”

“I agree. I have told her as much myself, and I am quite certain that she will do so.”

She told Eloise what happened at that final ball, and how Sarah had dance with the Baron in spite of her being forbidden from doing so. She neglected to mention what she had done herself as an act of rebellion, however. Eloise’s eyes sparkled at the tale.

“I should very much like to meet this girl. You younger ladies are bolder than we ever were, and though we should look down on you for that I cannot bring myself to. Perhaps, had I been brave enough to do the same, I would have lived a happier life.”

She sighed, and Eloise tried to smile encouragingly at her, raising an eyebrow pointedly.

“Yes, yes, I know,” Eloise smiled. “We will change our circumstances. I will try.”

“That is all that can be asked of you.”

When they arrived in town, they made their way into a different modiste than the one that had visited that day. It was an older lady, thankfully, who displayed older-style designs. Eloise brightened at the sight of them, and within minutes she had requested five. The modiste took her measurements, and then they left once more. Already, Emma could see a difference in the lady. She was smiling, walking taller, and she seemed almost confident in herself.

Then the whispers began.

They were very quiet at first, and few and far between, but it was as though they became more confident in what they were saying as Emma and Eloise passed them by.

“That cannot be the Dowager Duchess,” one lady whispered.

“It is, indeed,” an older lady replied, “I would recognize her anywhere.”

“But she has not left her home since her husband passed away!”

“Yes, that tends to happen when one is accused of causing it.”

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Emma paused, and that alone was enough to silence the two ladies. She turned and looked at them, and in an instant they avoided her gaze and turned away, walking elsewhere.

“You must ignore them,” she said softly. “I suppose scandal has changed greatly since you were out in society.”

“No, it has always been this way. It was one of the things I had hoped would have changed by now, but it would appear not.”

“Do not pay it any mind. What they are saying is not true, and so we cannot give it any attention as though it is.”

“But it is true. I was accused of a most heinous crime when my husband passed away.”

“That does not signify. It is not true, and so we will not be listening to it. Instead, we shall enjoy our time here as Duchess and Dowager Duchess of Lupton, and we shall return home when it pleases us.”

Thankfully, her mother-in-law agreed, and they continued on their way. The whispers continued, but nobody was brave enough to say it to their face and so it was an easy time away. By the time they were in the carriage once again, Emma wondered if she might be late to dinner. Eloise seemed wary of it, too.

“You may tell him that I am to blame, if you miss dinner,” she assured her. “It is my fault, after all.”

“It is nobody’s fault. We simply enjoyed ourselves and lost track of time. He shall understand.”

They arrived just in time, and Levi met them in the hallway. He greeted them both politely, and they gave him a brief explanation as to what they had been doing. He listened rather intently before taking Emma to dinner, Eloise leaving to have hers in her own wing of the estate.

“The gowns were an excellent idea,” he said brightly. “I do not know how you convinced her, but it is precisely what she needs. I have been looking at those same gowns since I was a boy. I do not know how she still manages to wear them.”

“She told me that you have suggested such a thing before. She believes that she is undeserving of the finer things.”

“I suppose she regrets a lot about her behavior when I was a boy, and what she continues to do now.”

“Do you ever want it to be different? She certainly does.”

“Of course I do, but it will never happen. It has been this way for too long now, and though she has grown kinder since your arrival, you must know that a mere month ago she was still unkind to me. This is how she is now, and it is for the best that we avoid one another.”

“It is a shame, for I truly do think she wants to be a good mother to you. It would be nice for her to join us for a meal one day, perhaps?”

“I suppose that would be tolerable. We might also secure her an invitation for the ball. Now that she will have a few gowns to wear, she may well wish to accompany us.”

“I think that is a wonderful idea. Would you be happy for that to happen?”

“I cannot say that it delights me, but my mother deserves some grace. She did not have an easy marriage, and it is not her fault that she did not want me. My father did not give her much say in the matter, after all.”

Emma did not mention that he was doing the same thing to her, and not allowing her to discuss the matter of children, as he was happy and they were having an important conversation that she did not wish to ruin.

“I hadn’t expected her to change this quickly,” he continued. “You have been good for her. Somehow, you bring a maternal instinct out of her that I never could. I am so pleased about that. No one deserves to be locked away forever, even if they choose their own cage.”

Emma smiled, allowing herself to accept the compliment.

The invitation was easily secured, and Eloise beamed at the news. At once, she left to plan how she would have her hair, and which jewelry she would select. Emma had a far easier time with that task.

She would have her hair pinned up in whichever way her lady’s maid pleased, and she would wear her gold locket.

CHAPTER 24

When the three of them arrived at Balfour Manor, Emma was completely beside herself with anticipation.

She wanted to see her sister, and at last find out what she wanted to discuss, but also she could see her friends, as they would be in attendance too. She found Sarah in an

instant. However, she did not like what she saw, and she approached quickly. She was speaking with the Viscount, fury in her eyes. The Viscount, meanwhile, was in utter shock, and Emma raced to find out who it was about.

“My answer is no, my lord,” Sarah said bluntly, turning from the Viscount.

“But I do not answer to you. I answer to your father, and he insists. You would be wise to follow suit and listen to him.”

“I will keep that in mind, I assure you, but for now my answer is unchanged.”

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He seemed to accept that, thundering away from her. Emma reached her and took her arm, taking her away.

“What was that?” she asked, and Sarah sighed.

“He seems to think that I want to dance with him, even though I have not given even the faintest suggestion that I ever would. Father’s doing, I imagine. Thank goodness you came, so I have some protection.”

“Indeed. Did Father not mention anything about it?”

“No, he didn’t say a word. I did not even know that the Viscount remained interested after what happened. I thought that I was free from it, and that I could continue my courtship with Lord Rosendale without issue.”

“You will, I will make sure of that. Have you seen him thus far?”

Sarah shook her head, glancing around the room.

“I do not believe he has arrived yet, but he should be here soon. He told me that he was invited.”

“Then stay with me for a while. Nobody will accost you when you are in the presence of a duchess.”

Sarah gave her a smile, and the two of them left to find the others. This was easy to achieve, as a gentleman had made the fatal error of asking Cecilia to dance with him.

Emm knew this, even though she had not witnessed him asking, as Cecilia was speaking to him with her chin lifted and eyes flashing, he was positively scarlet, and Dorothy and Beatrice were trying not to laugh.

“At last,” Sarah whispered, “some real entertainment!”

They made their way to them just as Cecilia had truly begun to take control. Emma almost pitied the young man. Had no one warned him about Cecelia?

“Am I dressed like a prize pig?” Cecilia asked. “Am I wearing a large sign that says ‘tell me to dance with you, for asking is too kind’? If I wanted to spend time with a demanding gentleman, I would have decided to work for one. At least then, I may find some financial gain in it. I shall not gain much from dancing with you, will I? After all, you are not particularly skilled in conversation, or dancing from what I know, and you cannot tell me a single reason why I should go with you beyond the fact that you are a man and you have told me to. Frankly, you will have to find a better reason than that.”

The gentleman was clearly frustrated with the exchange, his face contorted into a scowl and his hands balled into fists, and he stormed away without another word. Cecilia rolled her eyes at him, at last noticing Emma and Sarah and smiling, waving them over.

“Can you believe it?” she asked, incredulously. “I was simply standing with Dorothy and Beatrice, and then this gentleman appeared from nowhere and insisted that I dance with him. He did not even ask me, he instructed me to join him.”

“A terrible mistake on his part,” Emma grinned. “And not one he will soon repeat.”

“I do hope not, for the sake of the other poor ladies he may come across.”

Emma wondered if he was simply too young to know any better. He had, after all, seemed very young to her, hardly a man at all. She would have told her friend as much, and that perhaps next time it might be better for her to lead with kindness, but it would not have gotten her anywhere. Besides, she thought, it was a rude awakening for the young man, but it might prove effective in time, which was better than him believing that he could do anything he wanted.

“Where is the Duke?” Dorothy asked. “He did accompany you here tonight, did he not?”

‘He did, indeed. We are here with his mother, and so I assume that he is with her.’

“Oh! I did not know that his mother was still alive.”

“Nor did I,” Beatrice nodded carefully. “I wondered if she had passed away, but it would have been made known to the ton if that were the case.”

“In any case,” Cecilia said, “it is nice that he is trying. We all know that she was not the best mother, and he did not have to show her any kindness in response.”

Emma nodded, not wanting to think about what Levi had been through when he was a boy. Suddenly, she saw him nearby, his mother nowhere to be found. What was around him, however, was a group of young ladies that had flocked to him like birds. Emma’s brow furrowed as she looked at them all, wondering why Levi did not simply tell them to leave him be rather than letting it continue, smiling at them as though he were enjoying it.

He likely was, she thought, which only made it worse.

“Emma?” Sarah asked. “What is it?”

“It is nothing, Sister. I simply need to speak with my husband for a moment. I shall not be long.”

As she took a step away, however, Sarah took her arm. Emma turned to look at her, and saw that she was pleading with her.

Looking behind Sarah, she saw the Viscount approaching, as though he had been waiting for her to be left alone so that he could approach her again. Emma steeled her gaze, but he continued coming toward them.

“At last,” he said brightly, “I have found someone capable of using sense. Your Grace, I would like to dance with your sister.”

“Very well, you may ask my sister.”

“But she—”

“Does not want to dance with you. Is that what you were going to say?”

“She hasn’t said that to me, no.”

“Liar,” Sarah hissed, but Emma nudged her gently.

“Then you may ask her now. I do not speak for her.”

“Then where is your father?”

“He prefers not to attend events such as this one. I am my sister’s chaperone for this evening, and so you must either ask for my permission or that of my sister. The choice is yours.”

“Then I shall ask for yours, Your Grace. Given how your marriage came to be, you understand far better than your sister what it means to do what is necessary.”

She raised an eyebrow, knowing that an easy escape had been found.

“Are you making suggestions that my marriage is illegitimate?” she asked, enjoying the look of panic on his face.

“No, of course not. I am only saying that you know that marriage can help your

reputation when needed.”

“And whose reputation requires aid? It certainly would not be that of Miss Kendall, whose sister is a duchess,” she answered, meeting his eyes evenly to prove her point. “Not only that, but given that she already has a suitor that is showing interest in her—one that is of similar age to her at that—I do not believe there is any need for you to dance with her for her sake. Your help is therefore not necessary, my lord, but I thank you for your efforts.”

“But, Your Grace—”

“Must I have my husband come here and tell you all of this himself, or will you take a woman’s word?”

He was quiet for a moment, clearly trying not to show his anger. Emma kept her gaze cold and unbending, refusing to let the man think that he could treat herself and her sister however he pleased. She hoped, however, that he would at last accept her refusal and leave, for if she had to bring Levi she would have to confront him for being so close to so many women, and she did not want to do that then and there.

Thankfully, he nodded to her and walked away, bowing to Sarah as he went. Sarah, meanwhile, beamed.

“Sometimes,” she said brightly, “I wish that you were my father instead of my sister. I might have better fortunes if you were.”

“You are fortunate as it is. You have Lord Rosendale, after all, even if he is not yet here.”

But Emma saw the look of uncertainty in her sister’s face, as though she knew something was amiss.

“He said that he would be here,” she said quietly.

Emma tried to comfort her sister, but she too noted the strange absence of the Baron. He had come to see Sarah even in the midst of scandal, so he clearly did not care much as to what was happening in that respect. It was odd that he was not present, but there could have been any number of perfectly reasonable explanations. He could have been unwell, perhaps, or had an emergency to tend to on his estate. He would not have changed his mind and not attended the ball to see Sarah, Emma knew that much.

As she explained all of this, however, they both paused as they noticed a gentleman approaching Dorothy. He was a rather plain looking man, but she seemed pleased enough when he asked her to dance with him. He led her away to the dancefloor, and the others looked on in amazement.

“Well,” Emm laughed, “at least one of us is interested in dancing tonight!”

“I would dance too, if I was asked,” Beatrice protested. “You must not consider me a spinster yet!”

They all laughed, but then Emma saw Levi again, surrounded by a new group of ladies. They were practically crawling all over him, and she hated it. It was not jealousy, she told herself, for she did not love Levi, but she certainly felt territorial. He was her husband, a known rake, yet after a mere week of their marriage he was openly flirting with other ladies. It made her look like a fool for marrying him, and it made her feel unwell. Eventually, her friends noticed too, and Emma saw Cecilia’s hands clench into fists.

“Shall I say something?” Cecilia offered. “I refuse to let him disrespect you like this.”

“There is no need,” Emma replied gently. “Besides, he is already making a mockery

of my marriage. If you start, you shall not stop, and then it will eventually make a mockery of me, too. He is a duke, and so ladies will flock to him. It is to be expected.”

Cecilia did not seem convinced, but she did not press the matter. They returned to watching Dorothy, who did not seem to be instantly in love with the man but she seemed to enjoy the dance well enough. Emma wished that she had been able to enjoy her time out in society, not that she regretted caring for her sister’s debut the way she had. Besides, she reminded herself, she had been afforded the life of a duchess, and all of the security that brought. She had to be grateful for that, rather than missing what she did not have.

That did not mean, however, that she would accept her husband’s behavior.

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After the ball, they returned to their carriages. Sarah had survived the evening unscathed, her toes not stepped on from having to dance with a man that could not, and Dorothy was pleased with herself for being asked to dance. Levi's mother also appeared to be in high spirits, smiling brightly in the carriage as if she had been swept off her feet herself.

"That was marvelous," she breathed. "I had not realized how much I had missed attending societal events until I stepped into one. There were so many people, and gossip to listen to, and stories to hear. I have... I have missed so much."

Even Levi looked at her with pity when she said that.

"Then you may join us more often," Emma promised. "We would love for you to."

Levi did not seem so convinced, but she did not care in that moment what he thought was a good idea, not when she had seen what he had deemed appropriate behavior.

She did not say a word to him, of course, until his mother was out of sight and in her room.

"Might you be discreet in future?" she asked, and he looked at her with a puzzled expression.

"I can be very discreet, if that is what you would like, but this is our home."

"You know what I mean!" she hissed. "If you insist on not truly being my husband, and you wish to continue your rakish activities, then at least do me the decency of

being discreet, rather than parading your little friends around right in front of me.”

He smiled kindly at her, which only angered her further.

“Are you jealous?” he asked.

“Of course not, but I have no desire to have any further whispers about our match. I have heard quite enough of those.”

“I quite like that we are the topic of the ton’s conversation. It shows that we are interesting. Why else do you think so many ladies come to me? They believe they may have a chance with me. I find it rather entertaining, as they do not seem to notice what fools they are making of themselves.”

“They are also making a fool of me, and you are happily allowing them to do so.”

“Emma, if you do not want me to see other ladies as companions and friends, you need only tell me. I can understand jealousy. I am your husband, after all.”

“It is not jealousy, why can you not understand that? This is about the small scrap of good that is left in my reputation and me wanting to protect it, rather than openly being mocked. I am not going to stop you from cavorting around with other ladies, I only ask that you do not force me to watch it.”

“And that is all you want to ask of me?”

“Yes.”

“Are you certain of that? Because as my wife you are more than welcome to expect more from me. It would help protect that dignity that you care so much for, too.”

“I simply do not want to see it. That is all.”

“Very well,” he nodded with a sly grin, “it is done.”

Emma was quite taken aback by how easily he had accepted her request, and she wondered if she should indeed have asked for more. She reminded herself that she did not care what he did behind closed doors. She did not love him and she did not care deeply for him.

She then had to give herself that same reminder an hour later, and then again each time she awoke during the night.

CHAPTER 25

Emma felt that her marriage was, while not perfect, improving quickly.

They had settled into a nice routine, taking their breakfast together and then passing their days however they wished. It felt good to be afforded her freedom, and though she would have preferred a loving and doting husband, she had plenty to be thankful for.

They were having breakfast a week after the ball, a week after she had asked him not to flirt with ladies in front of her and he had agreed easily to it, and it had been something he had kept to, not leaving the household at all since then.

“Are you certain that you do not mind my going to see Dorothy this morning?” she asked, taking a pastry from the table.

“Why would I? You are free to do as you please. I have always told you that.”

“I know, but you have not been anywhere this week and it feels unfair for me to

leave.”

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“I have been here because I wanted to be, and because frankly I had nothing to do elsewhere. If your friend needs you, you must go.”

Emma nodded gratefully. She had not planned to divulge the contents of Dorothy’s letter to him, but she had to tell someone. According to her explanation, her parents had been unimpressed with how she had been acting, and that she was not taking the marriage mart seriously, and so they had done what was necessary.

Emma’s heart broke for her friend.

She left soon after they had eaten, and she wrung her hands together throughout her journey there. She knew, of course, how it felt to be forced into a marriage that she did not want, but at least she knew Levi before they married. Dorothy was clueless as to who her husband was, and she would not know until nearer the wedding day, which thankfully would not be for a while.

When she arrived, both Beatrice and Cecilia were already there, and tending to Dorothy as though she were an injured bird. In response, Dorothy was gently batting them away, though she seemed grateful.

“How are you feeling?” Emma asked, “It is a foolish question, I know, but I do not wish to assume that you are upset about any of this. You were never too fond of all of the things we ladies must do to make a match, after all.”

“That is true,” she laughed softly. “You are right to ask, as in all honesty I cannot say that I am upset completely. It would be nice to know my betrothed, but I will do so in time.”

“Do you know why they are hiding his identity from you?” Beatrice asked. “I do not mean to cause you any alarm, of course, but it is something to consider.”

“I have been wondering, but I think it is best that I trust them. My mother and father want the best for me, and so I know that they would not do anything that would truly cause me harm.”

“It is still quite bizarre,” Emma noted. “If they had found a good match for you, you would think they would be only too happy to tell you who he was.”

“I am considering it my punishment for what I did.”

All eyes turned to her. Dorothy had never dared to do anything improper. Emma was quite certain that she had been born with perfect etiquette and enough politeness to counteract Cecilia’s lack thereof. She couldn’t have done anything warranting punishment, especially not of this magnitude.

“What did you do?” Emma asked, and Dorothy giggled lightly.

“Do you remember that young man that asked Cecilia to dance with him?”

“I certainly do,” Cecilia huffed, her arms folded. “He was so very insistent.”

“And you recall the gentleman I danced with?”

The three ladies nodded in unison.

“Well, I had enjoyed our dance well enough. It was my first time on the dancefloor, and he was quite good at it too. I had truly thought it a nice time, but then when I returned home my father asked to speak with me. It appears that I have made a grave mistake, and danced with a commoner.”

Emma felt her mouth fall open, and she closed it before she could say anything too quickly.

“How did a commoner gain entry to the ball?” Beatrice asked. “He would not have had an invitation.”

“Well, if you can believe it, it was all a plot with the gentleman that asked to dance with Cecilia! They had befriended one another, and the commoner wanted to know what it was like to attend such parties, and so his friend forged an invitation for him.”

Cecilia, at least, found that quite entertaining.

“While they were there,” Dorothy continued, “they decided to place a wager on which of the four of us would be most willing to dance with them.”

At last, Dorothy seemed to enjoy the situation less. She had been describing the antics as if she was almost impressed, but suddenly she did not appear so inclined. She withdrew into herself, her smile fading.

“What is it, Dorothy?” Emma asked.

“According to gossip,” Dorothy said in a stilted voice, “the gentleman that had chosen Cecilia had done so because she was a spinster, and therefore desperate. That was, also, why he had been so persistent.”

Cecilia only laughed.

“Then he made a fatal error, as I have very little interest in a man that is not yet twenty. He could hardly have been called a man at all, if you ask me, more a boy.”

They agreed completely with that, especially given that his actions had only proven

Cecilia's beliefs.

“But,” Dorothy continued, “the man that danced with me had taken a different approach. He said that the round one in the bright orange would be the one that was truly desperate for the attention of a gentleman, even a lowly commoner. A lady had heard those words exactly.”

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Her lip trembled at the comment. Dorothy had always seen herself as the least beautiful in the group, sometimes going so far as to say that she was the ugliest lady in the town, but Emma did not know why she saw herself that way. Emma had always thought that she was beautiful, and that her kindness shone through her and made her radiant. She did not deserve to have heard such a dreadful thing said about her.

“Oh, Dorothy,” Emma sighed, “you mustn’t listen to gossip. It doesn’t mean anything.”

“But it does. I know what the town thinks of me. I am plain and uninteresting, which is precisely why I was so excited to see that a gentleman could show interest in me. I had felt so pretty for the first time in my life. I know it is selfish, but when he looked past Cecilia and Beatrice and came straight to me I thought it meant something. All it meant, though, was that I so clearly do not have any options. In that respect, I suppose that I should be grateful for the arrangement that has been made.”

“You do not need to be grateful,” Cecilia argued. “You must never see yourself as unworthy, especially when you would make a wonderful wife and mother.”

“Motherhood will be nice,” Dorothy nodded, her soft smile returning. “I know that we see ourselves as more than mere wives, but now that it is what I will soon be, I must say that there will be good in it. I have always wanted to be a mother, and now I can be.”

Emma hoped, as she tried to ignore the ache in her chest, that Dorothy’s husband would want children. After all, she had not been so lucky and it pained her to think about. She would never know what it was to hear the rush of feet coming to her, to

then be faced with smaller versions of herself, or to hear a child laugh and find glimpses of her own in it.

She hoped that Dorothy, in spite of her own situation, would.

Emma returned home that evening with a quiet upset in her stomach. She did not want to discuss the matter of children with her husband again. She could face the knowledge that she would never have them, but she at least wanted to know why. As she entered the dining room, however, and saw him waiting for her at the table, she couldn't help but sit beside him in silence. He was trying, and she wanted to be grateful for that and nothing else.

"How is your friend?" he asked.

"She is well, all things considered. She does not know who she is to marry, but there are... some good things too. Things that will make her marriage worthwhile, she hopes."

"And what might those be? I for one cannot feel anything but pity for her."

"Well, you see, she has never liked the marriage mart. She has never enjoyed any of it, especially all of the talking and flirting and having to be the most notable person in the room. She prefers to go unnoticed, and she has always said that she will not fare well with her match but that she did not mind that too much. At least, now that she is to be married, she shall be done with all of that."

"Is that how you felt? I know that you were never a wallflower, that much is easy to see, but were you pleased to be married regardless?"

"In a sense, I suppose so. I had hoped to at least see Sarah married before I was, if that ever happened at all, but with how some matches turn out to be I must admit that

I am pleased that we are the way that we are.”

“As am I. I must thank you, Emma. I know that this has been difficult for us both, what with the circumstances around our match, and my mother, and my expectations, but you have taken to it so well. I admire you for that.”

He truly was being good to her, as best as he could, which made Emma feel emboldened to ask for more. He was right; she had made sacrifices for him, and she hoped that he would be willing to do the same.

“Thank you, Levi,” she said carefully. “I will say, though, that my time with Dorothy today has made me realize something, and I wish to discuss it with you.”

He stopped eating for a moment and looked at her expectantly. Emma took a breath, unsure of how to say it.

“When Dorothy was talking about the life she was now expecting, she mentioned that it would be easier when she had children, and I was wondering—”

“No.”

Emma froze, looking at him. He had been trying, and she had thought they were in a better place than before, and she had thought that because of that he might listen to her. That did not, however, seem to be the case.

“Levi, this must be a conversation, not you telling me something and me simply agreeing. That is not how marriages work.”

“It is how this one does. I gave you my terms before our wedding, and you had the choice to not go through with it.”

“It was hardly a choice. You know I did what I had to do.”

“Did you have to? After all, that Baron was still showing an interest in your sister in spite of the scandal and you knew that. You chose this life, and you cannot expect me to change my mind about something I have wanted for years simply to make you feel more like your friend.”

Emma pushed her plate away, no longer interested in eating, and rose to her feet. She went to walk away, but she turned back at the last second, facing him again with a furious look in her eyes.

“You may conform to what your friends do, but that is not who I am. We all know that your wonderful friend is a rake, and apparently you wish to follow in his footsteps. But you will not claim that I am doing the same. I have always wanted children, but not because it is what is expected of me.”

“Really? Then why do you want them so badly?”

“That is none of your concern, it would seem, as you are unwilling to even talk to me about it being a possibility in the future.”

“Good, then our discussion is done. You feel how you feel, as do I, and there is no changing it.”

“Yes, it would appear so.”

“Now, will you please sit and finish your meal?”

Emma could not believe how uncaring he was about it all, as if he expected to tell her what was happening and in response she would simply accept it and move on. She had never been that way with him, if anything she had been the exact perfect opposite, and she was not going to change simply because he had slipped a ring onto her finger.

“No,” she replied, “and you mustn’t expect a discussion about it, either.”

“You are being ridiculous.”

She snapped, forcing her chair under the table with a force that she had not even known that she was capable of. Even Levi looked at her for a moment in a sort of stunned silence, before leaving his seat and pushing it under in a more controlled manner.

“Do you know what is ridiculous?” she asked, “The fact that you are so willing to put the superstitions about a dead man before the wishes of your living wife. It is not as though I am asking for the world, only for some company while you are away in your gentlemen’s clubs, or your brothels, or wherever it is that you go.”

“Do you honestly believe that I am frequenting brothels? I have been here all week, for a start.”

“Yes, because I was keeping you happy. Now, I am making you angry, so where will you go?”

She was mostly trying to prove a point, but a part of her also wished to test him. She wanted to know what he would do, if given the freedom to do whatever he wanted.

“I will go where I always go,” he nodded, making his way to the door, “and I will leave you to wonder just where that is. You can decide whether you see me as a loyal husband or not.”

He left without another word.

CHAPTER 26

Levi had thought that there was an understanding between himself and his wife, but it appeared that he was wrong.

He never would have thought that Emma could think so little of him that she would expect him to frequent brothels as a married man. He thought he had shown himself to be a good husband, one that was good to his wife at least, and he wondered just what he had done to make her not see him in that light.

He realized, as the carriage arrived at Leonard’s house, that it might have been because he ran at every opportunity. It hadn’t been his plan to leave, but when Emma had accused him the way she did, he did not know what else to do but take time away. He knocked on the door, the butler welcoming him in without question, and then he went straight to Leonard’s study.

“No,” Leonard said the moment he saw him.

“Leonard, please, I–”

“Go home, Levi. I can see that something has happened, and I cannot keep supplying you with alcohol each time you are unhappy. It is not fair to your wife.”

“My wife pushed me to come here. You do not understand.”

Leonard tipped his head back and sighed. “You may stay for an hour and no more.”

Levi nodded gratefully, entering the study and taking a seat. He did not say a word, as he had no real intention of telling his friend about what had happened, but Leonard was already eyeing him carefully.

“So you say your wife sent you here,” he said in a measured tone. “Are you going to tell me what you did to deserve that?”

“Must I have done something to warrant it?”

“Yes. She wouldn’t have been able to remove you from your own home if not.”

“She... she accused me of frequenting clubs and brothels, which I do not.”

Leonard chuckled at that, looking him in the eye with amazement.

“And so you have decided to prove her wrong by leaving her at home at night? What are you hoping that she thinks of you because of this?”

“I didn’t think about that. I simply wanted to be away for a while. She will think less of me because of it, but I couldn’t stand another moment beneath the same roof. I’m trying to be a good husband, but how can I do that when she is always asking more of me? I went to the ball, I am trying to mend things with my mother, and now she is asking for children.”

“Is that such an awful thing to want as a wife? Levi, she knows that you are trying, but what good are you when you cannot simply discuss issues when they first arise? Must you force her for the rest of her life to wait for you to run away and then come home?”

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Levi looked at his friend for a moment and wondered why he had never realized such a thing on his own. He had always admired her spirit, but the very thing he had fallen for had been the same reason he had to pull away. He did not want to cause her any pain.

He couldn't do that to the lady he loved.

He had thought it best that he kept his distance so that he could not destroy her, but the more he thought about it the more he knew that that had never truly been his motive. He had been a coward, running away instead of facing his problems, and he could never be a good husband if he did that. Could he, he thought, ever forgive himself if he continued to run?

"She is sitting there right now," Leonard continued, "wondering where you are and what you are doing, when she could be sitting with you and having a real discussion. You both could have been done with all of this, but now..."

"Now I have made her wait. I am such a bad husband."

"You have things to change, but you are not a bad husband at all. Your father was a bad husband. You are not like that, you simply have to find ways to be better."

Levi nodded, leaving for the door.

"You are yet to finish your hour," Leonard reminded him.

"I do not need it, it appears."

Leonard chuckled, showing him to the door.

“The bachelor life never was for you,” Leonard noted as they said their goodbyes. “I am pleased that you at last can leave your game of pretend behind.”

Levi wanted to believe that he had never been pretending, but he knew that he couldn't lie to himself. He had never been interested in spending all of his time alone, or visiting brothels, or flirting with ladies without thinking ahead. He had always been a natural flirt, but it hadn't been very entertaining for him, more a way of keeping the young ladies away, dragged from him by their mothers who did not wish to be brought into scandal. That was, until he met his wife. She had been fun to flirt with and to fluster, and though he never thought about that at the time he knew it was because he enjoyed spending time with her.

He went home straight away.

Emma was in the drawing room, not looking at anything in particular. It was as though she had fallen asleep with her eyes open, which unsettled him a great deal. Then, as he looked at her more closely, he couldn't help but think about how beautiful she was. His perfect wife, that he had left because he didn't know what to say to her.

He wondered what she was thinking. She could not be blamed if she was sitting in silence, making her plans to leave and live elsewhere; as a duke he owned many estates and she was able to live in any one of them. If she so chose, she could leave that very night and it would be entirely his own fault. He hated the thought of it, and he knew in that moment that he would do everything in his power to stop that.

And so, silently, he sat beside her. To his surprise, she leaned into his shoulder and sighed deeply.

“I must apologize,” he said softly, but she only hushed him in response.

“It is quite alright.”

“No, it isn’t. I want to apologize for how I have been. I have not been the husband that you deserve, and I am trying, you must understand that I am trying, but it is so difficult. I never planned to marry. I never thought that I would have to learn any of this.”

“I know,” she said gently. “I know this isn’t what you planned and that it is an adjustment, but all I ask is that when something like this happens, we talk about it.”

“I would like that too. I promise to never leave you like that again.”

“Good. Now, if it is all the same to you, I should like to talk about what we were discussing. I would only like to say that I understand why you are afraid, and that I will not push the matter anymore. Should you ever change your mind, tell me, but other than that there is no need. I may never know how it felt, but I can understand that it was awful for you. If this is how you want it to be, then so be it.”

Levi nodded, not wanting such an ugly conversation to continue when he was in such a vulnerable state, but he planned to discuss it later. His childhood had been awful, and the curse paralyzed him with the fear that he could force that same fate upon someone else, but he wanted Emma to at least understand the full extent of that. That time would come eventually, but it would have to wait.

He shook his head, trying to think properly. He had been making everything wait, he thought to himself, and it had made everything worse. If he had something to say, he had to tell his wife. There could be no more waiting and hoping that the problem disappeared.

“I want you to know,” he said suddenly, “that none of this was deliberate. I would never want to hurt you.”

“I know. You might not be the best with all of this, but for the most part I can see that you are trying.”

“I am. What makes it difficult is that I never had someone to watch, to learn from. A father— a father is supposed to be a pillar of strength, someone that can be relied on and seen as the best man to be. I could not do what most sons do. I watched him and in my mind I made a list of all the ways I refused to be.”

“I know how you feel,” she smiled softly. “As I lost my mother when I was young, I had to teach myself how to be a lady.”

“Did you not have a governess?”

She shook her head and laughed faintly.

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“Father claimed it would be a waste when he could make an arrangement with a friend. If we were silent, he said, that would be enough for them. Perhaps that is why my sister and I could never be quiet. We were hoping that we would not be thrown to one of our father’s terrible acquaintances.”

“Is that why your sister’s predicament frightens you?”

She nodded, sighing as she closed her eyes and tilted her head back.

“She has always dreamed of a love match, and I had promised to find her one. I hoped that she would find one before my deal with our father came to an end. I still had time, more than a year, before my father should have stepped in, but he was too impatient. This is why I hope she finds love with Lord Rosendale. Of course, of the two suitors, he is undoubtedly the best for her, but if she does not marry for love then I will have failed her.”

Levi shook his head firmly at that.

“You haven’t failed her, no matter what happens. You are the best sort of sister. You put your own life to one side to help her, even if it led to you thinking you would never marry. I know that you wanted a married life, and you were willing to put that aside just so that your sister could have the best possible match. If your sister doesn’t find love, that is not your fault. It wouldn’t be anyone’s fault, except perhaps your father’s.”

She seemed to reluctantly agree with him, and that was enough.

“Fathers,” she sighed, looking at the ceiling with a watery chuckle. “I can see why you dread the thought of being one. Fathers are cruel and mothers are absent. Perhaps that is the real curse?”

“Emma, I know we need to talk about this.”

“We do, but not tonight. I have been enjoying my time with you, and I like to think that you are of the same mind. Perhaps, tonight, after all that has happened it might be best that we do something that we enjoy?”

“And what might that be?”

“We could go on another treasure hunt. I certainly enjoyed the other one.”

“Oh, did you now?” he teased, remembering the flushed look on her face, as though she had wanted to kiss him.

“I did, although it might take too long to create. Another time, perhaps?”

He nodded, and then his face fell. All he could think about was what he had done, and the guilt and shame he felt as a consequence. She could have been so much more than an unloved duchess.

Except she wasn’t unloved, not really. He had been falling for her all along, which he supposed was even worse as nothing could ever come of that. He couldn’t love her, not if he would only hurt her eventually. It had always been better to keep the walls around him piled high, so that she couldn’t break them down and hurt herself. It had been for her sake, he protested, and never his own. It would have been selfish if it had been for himself.

Except he knew better, and that at least a small part of him had been thinking of what

had been best for him. It was all he had ever thought of since becoming duke. Caring for his mother as a boy had never gotten him anywhere, after all.

“Do you think I am selfish?” he asked suddenly.

“No, I don’t. If you were, you wouldn’t have married a spinster simply to save face. You would have known that your reputation would recover, as those of men always do, and left me with my father. You wouldn’t have tried so hard to forget what your mother did to you, either. I can see it, you know. Your mother does too, and I can tell that it makes her feel dreadful.”

“I don’t want her to feel that way anymore.”

“Then there is your answer. You, Levi, are not a selfish man.”

“But one day I might be. I do not know how long it will take, but it is as though this curse is chasing me, and one day I won’t run fast enough and it will catch me and—and you will hate me for the person I become.”

Emma looked into his eyes, and he sat up beside her. She took his face gently in her hands, smiling kindly at him.

“How much life do you suppose you have missed by being so afraid that you’ll eventually be cruel?”

“A good amount,” he confessed. “Especially now.”

“Well then, how much more of your life are you willing to lose?”

A silence fell between them as he thought about what she had said. If he had been right all along, and one day he woke up and was this awful and evil thing that he saw

his future self as, would he regret having lost so much good? Would he wish he had at least enjoyed life while he could?

And what if he had been wrong? Could he afford to sit and wait for a day that never came? His head began to ache with all of the questions that he was asking himself, but when he looked down at his wife everything settled again. She brought him peace, even if she also brought him a great deal of stress too, at times.

She was close to him, agonizingly close, and as he admired her he noticed how her lips were parted ever so slightly, and they drew him in. He wanted desperately to kiss her. Did she want the same? He did not wish to ruin the moment, the quiet stillness of them sitting alone together in the drawing room.

“It is quite late,” she whispered. “I believe we should retire to bed soon.”

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“We should,” he replied, “but I do not wish to stand.”

She laughed softly, placing her head on his chest with a soft sigh of relaxation. Levi stretched across the settee, pulling her onto him and listening to her as she fell asleep. Not wanting to awaken her, he closed his eyes and felt himself fall asleep with her.

It was morning when they awoke, her head still pressed into him. Levi hardly noticed the butler entering with a letter, which had been addressed to Emma, in a strangely scratched form.

“Emma?” he said gently, nudging her awake. “It is for you.”

CHAPTER 27

Nothing could have prepared Emma for what she read.

Emma,

This is goodbye.

Father has summoned me to his study to inform me that not only am I no longer to speak with Lord Rosendale, but I am to marry the Viscount tomorrow. Father had this planned since that awful ball at the party, when I danced with the Baron all night. He told me that I had insulted his friend, and that the consequences would be swift, but they had never come. I had thought at the time that he had changed his mind, or that your situation made him forget about mine, but I was wrong. He simply did not want to give me any chance to escape it.

But he has been mistaken. I will not marry that man, not for anything in the world. I suppose he expects to drag me down that aisle tomorrow, and that I will follow him without protest, but if that is what he wants then he shall have to find me first. The Baron and I are going to Gretna Green, and he and I will run away together. I will be safe, Emma, and very happy, but I know the consequences that this decision will bring. It will mean that I will be an outcast from society, and unable to see you again, and for that I truly am sorry, but I know you will understand that this is how it must be. I cannot be the Viscountess. You know as well as I do that I cannot.

I love you. You have been the truest sister that anyone could ever ask for, and I wish there was another way. I will miss you endlessly.

Yours Faithfully,

Sarah

Emma's hands trembled, and her first instinct was to tear the letter in two and scream. She restrained herself with difficulty, the scream she wished to voice dying in her throat. She simply remained still, clutching the paper and hoping, praying, that it was a forgery.

"Emma?" Levi asked. "What is it?"

"It is... read it."

She thrust the letter to him, and he scanned it quickly. When he was done, he dropped it to the floor and stormed out of the room. At last, Emma felt herself become able to move.

"Levi, where are you going?"

“I am going to do what I must,” he explained, running into his room and slamming the door behind him.

“What are you talking about? You cannot do anything about this.”

“You cannot, but if your father does not want to be the head of a household then I certainly will. I will find Sarah, and I will issue my challenge to Rosendale. It is what must be done. I will return as soon as it is done.”

She wished that she could see his face, but she was on the other side of the door. She pounded her fist against it, willing him to open it, but when he eventually did he walked past her, dressed in black.

“I will be back soon,” he repeated not looking at her.

Emma chased after him, pulling on his arm and demanding that he stopped, and when he did turn back to her she saw that there was no emotion in his face. It pained her to see him so resolved about what he was doing.

“I am coming with you,” she ordered, but he rolled his eyes and shook her off.

“You are not. It is dangerous. It frightens me enough that Sarah is there without putting you in harm’s way too. This is a matter for gentlemen, and so it must be gentlemen that resolve it. You will stay here.”

“I will do no such thing. You cannot force me to.”

“I can and I will. Do not be a fool, Emma. You are better than that. You are not some hero that can resolve this in any way that does not involve bloodshed, and to see a life taken is something that you cannot unsee. Sit here, and wait. If I come back with Sarah, we will think of something together then.”

She swore her heart stopped for a moment.

“And if– if you do not?”

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“Rosendale will be forced into hiding, and I will ensure that Sarah is brought to you. You may keep her here, and tell the Viscount whatever he needs to hear so that he will leave her be.”

“What if we just let them go?” she pleaded. “They will not be harming anyone by simply forging their own lives. They are giving up everything to be together. Why don’t we allow them to?”

“Because that is not how this works. You were never taught any of this, but this is what must happen. I will issue my challenge, and then it is in Rosendale’s hands what he chooses to do. If he has any wisdom at all, he will simply hand Sarah over to me.”

“And, if he does not, you will be willing to die over it. Is that how men are?”

“The good ones, yes.”

He gave her a tight embrace and promised one final time to return before leaving her behind. She followed him out of the door, but he motioned to the footman to block her exit. She called his name, but he did not turn back. He simply walked to his horse, climbed atop it, and rode away at great pace.

Emma felt her knees give way, and she fell down in the hallway. Two maids came to her at once, but she batted them away. She did not want to be helped, she wanted to help others. It was all that she had ever done, and now she could not, simply because the men in her life refused to listen to her.

Eventually, she pulled herself to her feet, running to her own room and dressing

herself quickly. She was vaguely aware of her lady's maid knocking, asking her if she needed any assistance, but she did not respond. She would have to do what needed to be done alone, so it was for the best that she started alone.

She wore her least favorite gown, an old and ill-fitting one, as it was the first she saw. It was too large, which would at least mean more comfort as she rode. Then, she went to the front door and tried to leave, only for yet more footmen to block her way again.

"My apologies, Your Grace," one said, "but we cannot let you leave."

"The Duke made it clear that you are to remain here. We cannot disobey him."

She groaned, turning back and accepting defeat. For a moment. She did not have enough left in her to argue, not when she knew that she would be leaving one way or another. Thankfully, she had paid attention to the tour when she had arrived, and so she knew that there were other doors in the household and she knew precisely where they were, including one small one that was unmanned, as it was well-hidden by vines.

"Where are you off to?" Eloise asked, and Emma turned sharply to her.

"Oh! I was... well..."

"Is this something you would like me not to know?"

"It is."

"Then I will not question it. How long shall I expect you to be gone?"

"I do not know. I am going to find Levi."

“You could be a very long time then. My husband was always so good at remaining hidden, and you know how the saying goes. Like father...”

Eloise turned away and disappeared. Emma wondered for a moment if that was truly what was happening, and that she would be chasing a man for the rest of her life, but she shook the thought from her head. Levi was not the same as his father, no matter what he or his mother thought. He was his own man, one that was doing what was necessary for his family, albeit in a way that disappointed her greatly.

She found the door, and as she left through it the thorny vines scraped at her skin, drawing blood, but she did not care. She pretended not to notice how it stung and instead left for the stables. Levi had taken his prize stallion. She would not be able to reach him before Scotland, but she could meet him there if she left then and there.

And so, she chose another mount that she knew was capable, and left the grounds through another gate. She was as prepared as she could be; she knew the roads which led to Gretna Green, and she knew that she was a good rider, and so nothing was stopping her except time. She had to move, and quickly, if she had any hope of finding them before something tragic happened.

The ride was long, and by afternoon her body had started to ache. She had not eaten anything at all, and felt herself weaken, but she forced herself onward. Mercifully, she had chosen a very hardy horse, one with plenty of stamina that could tolerate the journey. She stroked him gently as they galloped, trying to thank him for what he was doing for her.

By nightfall, she had almost reached the border of Scotland, and she would have been proud of herself were she not so afraid. The time came when she knew she had a chance of finding either her sister and her betrothed, or her husband. Either way, it would mean that she could truly do something of worth, and so even though she was exhausted, she forced herself to move forward.

At her first inn, she slid down from her horse and entered tentatively. There was no sign of Levi's stallion, but that did not mean Sarah was not there.

"Excuse me," she said gently to the owner. "Pardon my asking, but has a young lady that looks similar to me come here tonight? She is with a gentleman."

The owner looked her up and down, and Emma regretted wearing her gown. Sarah likely would have been wearing something nicer, given that she was on her way to a wedding.

"My apologies, ma'am, but no. There are a lot of inns 'ere, too, so you may be in for a long night."

Emma had a feeling that would be the case. With a sigh, she thanked him for his time and went on her way. It was harder to mount the horse when her legs ached the way they did, but she tried not to notice. She hauled herself into position, and continued. She would have to repeat it over and over, and so it was best that she chose not to mind the pain.

After she had searched four more inns, each one as disappointing as the last, she at last found what she had been searching for. There, in the stables of an inn, was Levi's stallion. She took her own horse there in an instant, jumping down with a newfound strength and running to the door, when out spilled three drunkards that eyed her in a way that she did not appreciate.

“Evening,” one slurred. “You come to see the duel?”

The word rang in her ears.

“What duel?” she demanded. “Who is dueling?”

“Two lords or something. An affair of honor, one of them said, but the other was laughing at him. It’s all very odd, isn’t it, John?”

“Extremely,” another man nodded, stumbling slightly. “But it will be entertaining all the same. We don’t see many of these, do we?”

“Where is it happening?” Emma asked, wishing she could have found gentlemen that were capable of speaking and understanding, but grateful that she could now at least know something.

“Come with us, Miss. We can take you.”

“What are you saying, Thomas?” the third man said, hitting his shoulder gently. “We can’t take a lady with us. It’s no place for her.”

Emma groaned, and it was so loud and graveled that the three men actually appeared quite frightened of her. The first man pointed to a nearby hill, his eyes wide and his mouth closed.

“We reckon it will be over there,” another man explained. “Over that hill in the woods. It is no place for you, though. You will see something that you do not want to

see.”

“I would rather see what I do not want to see than hear of it. Thank you for your assistance.”

She ran without a moment’s breath. She climbed the hill clumsily, her tiredness taking over, and as she reached the top she at last saw them. Rosendale and Levi were not yet in position, but they were arguing, and Sarah stood close by, a man she did not recognize holding her back as she fought against him, trying to break free.

Emma, suddenly, could not bring herself to move. The sight of it made her miserable, terrified that something would soon happen and there was nothing that she could do to prevent it if she remained where she was, yet her feet would not move to run. She wished she had never opened her sister’s letter and instead lived in blissful ignorance, or never shown it to her husband and allowed Sarah to do what she wanted and disappear. That way, she would have been having dinner with her husband and then spending the evening together and hopefully find a way through their new marriage, rather than standing out in a cold night watching as two men prepared to kill each other.

Suddenly, Sarah turned and saw her.

“Emma!” she screamed, and both men turned to her. “Emma, help me! Tell this man to release me at once!”

Emma’s strength found her again, and she pushed herself forward, running down to where they were. She could hear the men telling her to get back, but she ignore their pleas and continued on her way. She watched her sister’s face as she approached, clearly expecting her to force the man to let her go, but in actuality she was pleased that Sarah was being held back. At least, that way, she was safe.

Instead, she walked directly between the two men, standing in the way of what would become the firing line. Both men looked furious with her, but it was a fury she met. At last, there was silence, and it gave her the chance to think for a moment. She was exhausted, and angry with them for doing what they had done, but her voice came out barely above a whisper.

“What do the two of you think you are doing?”

CHAPTER 28

Levi had thought he was doing what was right.

Emma was his wife, and regardless of the circumstances, that made her his family. He would have done anything for her, and he told himself that was because she was his wife but he knew that it was more than that. He was falling for her, and no amount of pulling away could bring a stop to it. When she looked up at him, giving him the letter with such fear in her eyes, he realized then and there that he loved her, and he would give anything to make her happy, no matter the sacrifice.

And so, to protect Sarah's honor, he did what he had to do. She meant everything to Emma, and had been her very reason for being for many years, and Levi could not stand by and watch her disappear when there was something that he could do about it. It angered Emma, but he knew that she would one day understand. If he died, at least she would not have to suffer a husband like him anymore. There was no loss in it, not as far as he cared.

But he did not want her to see it.

When he saw her, alerted to her presence by her sister's screams, he was taken aback by just how beautiful she was. Wild, untamed, and unbelievably fierce, she ran towards them and stood in their way. Rosendale almost seemed grateful for the

intrusion, as he had been unwilling to enter into the duel in the first place. He had refused to let Sarah leave with Levi, however, and so he decided that he had no other choice but to also engage in the duel. Levi hated the pain he could see in Sarah's eyes, but it had to be done, and so he asked a gentleman that was hoping to watch the duel if he could hold her back. She had insisted on not keeping away, much like her sister, who was now standing before him with a fury in her eyes unlike anything else he had ever seen.

"Stop this," she commanded. "Now."

"Emma, stand back. This far too dangerous for you to be involved in."

"It is no less dangerous for the two of you, so if you want me to leave you ought to do the same."

"It is different and you know it."

"Beyond my lack of a pistol, I do not honestly see any difference at all. I would actually argue that I am very safe here, as neither of you will shoot me. I know that much."

She was right, of course, but it did not mean he wanted her near them. He wanted her far away, where she would not have to see any of the ensuing chaos and all of the memories of it that she would be left with. It terrified him that she might have to see something so horrific, and he refused to do it in front of her. In that respect, she was indeed safe, but that did not help anything at all and she needed to go.

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“I want this to stop,” she said firmly. “I want all of this to stop. We can all discuss this without the need for bloodshed. I do not know why men have to think of such a thing as the only option.”

“Because it is,” Levi snapped. “This is what must be done in order to protect your honor. This is for your sake. Stand aside, my—Emma. We \ will do what is necessary and then we will do what we must from there.”

“This isn’t necessary!”

“Emma, please. I have to do this for you.”

He saw the way she was searching his face, and he hated what he had done to her, but he couldn’t see any other way. His challenge was issued and they were squaring up to pace when she had arrived. It was too late for such things to be taken back, and this was what had to take place for everyone’s sake.

He only aimed to wound Rosendale, not kill him, as for what it was worth he did not hate the man. He knew that he loved Sarah, but in doing so he was going to ruin her. He had done what was necessary with Emma, and if another man did not want to do the same then he would not hesitate to protect her.

“You do not need to do this,” she said, shaking her head. “We could go home, and pretend that none of this has happened. We can leave right now, and return to the home we share. Do you not want that?”

“Of course, but for your sake—”

“This isn’t for my sake!” she cried. “You are not doing any of this for me, you are doing it to prove that you are a man, which you most certainly are not if this is the only way you know how to handle conflict.”

“Emma, I promise you that I would only ever do this if I thought it would benefit you.”

“Why? Why would you do all of this for me when I have never once asked you to?”

“It doesn’t matter what you want, it matters what you need, and what you need to do is stand aside and allow us to settle things.”

“So that is it?” she asked softly, seeming to give in. “You are going to die?”

“I am willing to do so, yes, if it is for your sake.”

And then, she burst into tears. His heart pounded as he watched her break before him, weeping loudly.

“Why?” she asked. “Why are you so willing to die for me yet so unwilling to live for me? You should be by my side through such things as this, the two of us deciding together what was the right thing to do. You should care what I have to say, but you never have. You simply do as you please and expect me to be grateful for it. Well, Levi, I am not. I am so angry with you, and if you do this then I will never forgive you no matter the outcome. If you follow through with this duel, I will hate you as much as you clearly hate me.”

“Emma, I wish you would listen to me. This has to be done. I am not doing this because I hate you. I am doing this because it is the best that I can do for you.”

But she was inconsolable, and there was no reasoning with her. She steeled herself,

and though the tears continued flowing she managed to look him in the eye and he felt himself shrink slightly beneath her gaze.

“I know you did not want any of this,” she laughed emptily, “but I never would have thought that you would regret our marriage so much that you would rather die or be banished than remain my husband.”

He was floored.

“Emma, I do not regret our marriage and I never have. I would never regret being your husband. Why won’t you listen to me? I do not hate you.”

“Then why are you so desperate to die?”

“Because it will mean protecting you.”

“And why does that matter to you?”

“Because I love you!”

Everything fell silent at his confession. Sarah stopped fighting the man that had been holding her in place, and Emma stopped crying. Even the birds that had been crowing in the trees had stopped. There was no sound at all except for the faint rustling of leaves. Emma looked at him in shock, but not disbelief, and he was content with that. He waited for her to turn on him, and to tell him that she did not feel the same and never could, but she did not. She simply stared at him. Someone had to speak, he thought, and so he cleared his throat and continued.

“Is that what you want to hear from me?” he asked gently. “I love you, Emma. I have been falling more and more in love with you the more time passed, and no matter what I have done nothing has changed. That is why I am so willing to die here and

now. I do not want you to be saddled with such an unlovable man for the rest of your life, not when you deserve so much more.”

“So much more than what?” she asked, her brow furrowed. “More than a man that will do everything in his power to make his wife happy? A man that recognizes his shortcomings and betters himself? What exactly am I supposed to want to avoid in such a man as that?”

“You deserve someone that is not broken, someone that can love you in the way you deserve. I only wish that that man could be me, but it is not possible. I will never be worthy of you, no matter what I do.”

“Stop!” she ordered, and he fell silent. “You will not do this. You will not speak about my husband this way. I will not allow it.”

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He blinked, not knowing what to say to her. She was crying again, looking at him with fury, as if he had not been talking about himself.

“My husband is not a broken man. He is not a bad man, and he is not one that does not know how to change. My husband is a good man, a protecting and caring and wonderful man, in spite of everything that has happened to him, and I refuse to hear a bad word said of him. I may not know how to be the man of a household, but I know how to be a wife, and I know that it is my role to never allow a word to be said against my husband, for he is the man that I love.”

It was Levi's turn to think about what he was hearing. It did not make any sense in his mind that anyone could ever love him, as nobody ever had. His mother was being kinder to him, but that did not mean she loved him at all. It simply meant that she was trying to put on a good showing for herself in front of his wife. He had spent the entirety of his life being unloved and unwanted, and the thought of someone as lovely as Emma loving him did not make any sense. He was a bad man, and even if he was not already, he would be eventually. He couldn't trust himself to be good, let alone good enough for her.

He wanted to turn cold, to tell her to leave again and force her aside and do what he had set out to do, but he could no longer do it. He did not want any harm to come to Emma, and if that meant protecting the husband she cared for so much, then he would have to do it, even if it meant doing the difficult thing and saving himself.

Reluctantly, he returned his pistol to its holster.

He heard the audible gasp of relief from Sarah, and saw Emma crumble before him. It

was then that he realized that she had followed him immediately. She couldn't even have eaten before she rode in pursuit!. He had at least had his meal at the inn before confronting Rosendale, but she was unfed and exhausted, and he had given her no choice but to follow him out into the middle of a duel. He had left because he loved her, and she had followed him because, as she claimed, she truly did love him too.

She tumbled forward, and he caught her in his arms, cradling her gently. She was worn from the day, but even so she was so beautiful that he fell apart. He would fall apart, he swore to himself, and rebuild himself again over and over if it meant that he might one day become a man that deserved someone so wonderful.

He carried her wordlessly over the hill, Sarah following desperately behind them and Rosendale not leaving Sarah's side. The younger sister was still in tears, her white gown stained with grass and dirt at the bottom from her furious attempts to be released. She looked at her sister with fear in her eyes, and Levi realized that she was more afraid than was truly necessary.

"Fear not," he explained kindly. "She is tired, that is all. I will have a meal prepared for her, and then she will sleep, and then all will be well again, I assure you. She will be fine."

She softened at that, and he admired how trusting she was of him, for had he been in her position he was not so certain he would have believed it. Emma stirred as they arrived, and so he placed her down onto her feet and took her inside. They seated her at a table, and she sleepily ate a large meal. He noticed how she slowly came back to her usual self as she ate, though something was still amiss. It was nothing that sleep could not fix, he hoped.

"Shall we leave them be?" Rosendale asked suddenly, and Sarah gave him a look of disgust.

“I am not leaving her side,” she said firmly. “Our wedding can wait. I will not go anywhere without her until I know she is safe.”

At once, Rosendale seemed to regret his suggestion.

“I do not mean that we should go to Gretna Green, not after all that has happened. I only mean that they might like to speak to one another.”

“I would prefer to stay with her,” Sarah nodded, her tone softening. “If that is alright with you, Your Grace?”

“Of course. I will be having rooms arranged. I assume you would like to share with her?”

“If it is not too much trouble, Your Grace, yes. I know that you are husband and wife, but I must speak with her once she is recovered. I have so much to apologize for.”

Levi did not mention that they had never shared a room in spite of their marriage. He was simply pleased that Sarah seemed to regret her decision, and had realized her mistake and wanted to make up for it. He arranged for the rooms as Sarah watched over Emma, Rosendale sitting beside her in case she fell asleep again, and once she had eaten they all made their way to their rooms. He helped Emma into hers, laying her in her bed, and as he pulled away she weakly took hold of his sleeve.

“Where are we?” she mumbled.

“In the inn.”

“Did you duel?”

“No,” he chuckled in spite of himself. “No, you stopped it.”

“Good,” she yawned, and fell asleep in an instant.

He kissed her forehead gently before turning and leaving the room, Sarah sitting on her own bed and staring at her sister. He scolded himself until he fell asleep himself.

All he could think about was how much pain he almost caused the lady he loved.

CHAPTER 29

Emma felt quite foolish when she awoke.

Her body ached all over, and though she had been sleeping for a long time she was still exhausted. She sat up, wincing at the pain she felt, and suddenly she was facing her sister, who did not seem much better than she was.

“At last,” she said gently. “You are awake.”

“What happened?” Emma asked wearily. “Did the duel—”

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“No, you stopped it. We are all safe. You did it, Emma!”

That made the pain that she was in worth it, at least.

Sarah had brought gowns with her, as they had planned to be away for some time, and so Emma was at least able to wear something more flattering than that hideous thing she had thrown onto her body in her haste to leave. She took one of Sarah’s pink gowns gratefully, lacing herself in and then fixing her sister’s corsets for her. They left for breakfast, and when they reached the room they saw that Rosendale and Levi were on opposite ends of the room, not acknowledging one another’s presence.

“Another day of battle, then,” Sarah said quietly. “Good luck, Sister.”

“And to you,” she nodded, heading to where her husband was sitting.

“Good morning,” he greeted gently, as if his voice might break her if it was too loud. “You look better.”

“And I have certainly looked better,” she joked, “but I am pleased that all of this is over with now, and that you and I can return home.”

He looked at her with a very measured way, and it unsettled her.

“What is it?” she asked. “The duel did not take place. They can now go and be married, and we can go home. That is what we all want, is it not?”

He sighed, placing the teacup that he was drinking from gently onto the table.

“There is still much to be done before we can do that. Rosendale must apologize for what he did, and given that he did not join me this morning, I must assume that he does not want to.”

Emma cast a glance over to Sarah, who shared her look, which suggested that their own conversation was going in a similar way. Emma couldn't believe what she was hearing. After everything that had happened, was he truly going to stop Sarah from doing what she wanted?

“Levi, our father will make her marry the Viscount. If she does not run to Gretna Green with Rosendale, she will be forced into a marriage that she does not want, and it will not be like you and me. She will not fall for him in time, and instead she will forever yearn for the man that she truly loves. We cannot allow that to happen.”

Levi truly did seem to be listening to her, but she could see the resolve in his eyes. He knew what was the proper thing to do, and she knew he intended to keep to it.

“I do not want her to marry the Viscount any more than you do,” he replied. “I would much rather return to your father and force him to change his mind, and then Sarah and Rosendale can marry in the proper way. This business with Gretna Green, however, will not be tolerated.”

“Then what do you propose that we do? My father will not listen to reason, and he will certainly not listen to you if you tell him about what my sister wants. He does not care. His interests lie in what he can gain from such things, and a deal such as this with his friend is not something that he will change his mind about, whether you are a duke or a commoner. Believe me, I know my father.”

She could see him thinking, and she wished she knew what such thoughts were. She so desperately wanted to change his mind, as she could not imagine her sister married to an awful man that did not care for her, and that she did not love, but there was only

so much that she could do.

When they had eaten, Emma having still been quite ravenous after the previous day, they met outside. Sarah was ill-at-ease, and Emma wondered just what Rosendale would say. She was terrified that he would declare that he was unapologetic and that he was happy to issue his challenge to Levi if necessary, but instead when she looked into the man's eyes she couldn't help but pity him.

"I know that I cannot change your mind," he began, "and I know that the correct thing to do is apologize and give her back to you, Your Grace, but I cannot do it. I refuse to apologize for loving Sarah, no matter the cost of such a decision. I want her to be my wife, and if returning her to her father means that I will lose her, I cannot do that. If it was what Sarah wanted, I would have let her go without question, but I cannot look the lady that I love so much in the eye and tell her that this is for the best, because it is not."

When the Baron had finished, he took a deep breath. Sarah burst into tears, throwing herself into his arms and crying into his chest. Emma looked pleadingly at Levi, and she could see that he was at war with himself. He couldn't bring himself to allow the match, even if he did believe it was the right thing to do, Emma could tell. His expression was pained, but she knew what had to be done.

"Go," she said gently, looking at them kindly. "Go to Gretna Green, and do what you must do. We will not tell a soul about it, you have my word."

Sarah pulled away from Rosendale and looked at her with uncertainty, then casting her eye to Levi. His mouth was agape, and he struggled to close it again.

"This may be the biggest mistake that I have ever made," Emma continued, "but it is my mistake to make. Sarah, if this is what you want, then you can have it. I would never be able to forgive myself if I did not allow you to do what you felt was right for

yourself, not after I have been in scandals of my own.”

Sarah took her hands tightly, smiling through her tears.

“Oh, Emma, I knew that you would understand. It had been my hopes when I wrote you that letter that you would never hold it against me, and I was right to believe in you. Truly, you are the most wonderful sister.”

“You must visit us, though,” she warned. “Elopement or not, I expect to see you often.”

Sarah nodded profusely, and the Baron took his hand in hers. Levi, however, cleared his throat pointedly.

“I do not mean to ruin all of this,” he said politely, “but I want to ensure that you know the gravity of what you are choosing to do. Thetonn will not look upon this with kindness, and it could lead to the both of you being shut out from theton for the rest of your lives. Is that truly something you are prepared to face?”

“Of course,” Sarah replied firmly. “I knew what I was risking by coming here, but it never made a difference to me because it is what I want. I would rather be in love than be invited to some ball. This is a sacrifice, to be certain, but to me it is an easy one to make. I shall never regret it, as one never should when it pertains to their marriage.”

She smiled at Levi as she said that, and Emma remembered what he had said to her the night before. In amongst all of the fighting, he had confessed that he loved her, and she had told him she loved him too. It was what she had needed to hear for so long, but it was also proof that Levi knew how her sister was feeling.

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“If this match is what you want,” Levi nodded, “then I will not stop you. However, you need not follow through with this elopement.”

“What are you saying?”

“I am saying that there is another way, but we must return for it to happen. Fear not, this is not a trick of any kind, but it is what must be done. Do you trust me?”

Rosendale did not seem certain, but when Sarah looked to Emma for support, all Emma could do was nod. She knew that her husband was an honest man, and that he would not be so cruel as to trick them into pushing Sarah into a marriage with the Viscount. He had traveled all the way to Scotland to protect her, after all.

“I do,” Sarah said gently, and after a moment Rosendale nodded too.

“Wonderful. In that case, we must make haste. I do hope that you arrived in a carriage.”

“We did,” Rosendale explained, “but your horses will not fit with the others.”

“That is perfectly fine. I shall have someone collect them when we return. In the meantime, we must leave, and now.”

Nobody argued with him any further, and they took their belongings and left without any further quarrels. The carriage ride was stilted at first, with nobody knowing quite what to say to one another, but eventually Sarah looked at Emma with a wicked grin.

“I heard something interesting last week.”

“Oh? What was that?”

“Gretchen is furious. She is claiming that she and the Duke were courting when the two of you were seen together at the ball.”

“Surely she should have stopped all of that by now?” Emma groaned.

Fortunately, the two gentlemen seemed to enjoy the gossip, and it was causing the mood to lighten.

“You would think so, given that he is now married and therefore cannot be her husband. However, it would appear that she had it all planned from the start. She seemed to think that if she was seen with a powerful member of the ton, she would then in turn have a powerful husband.”

“That is not uncommon, I suppose.”

“No, but one never talks so brazenly of it. She claims that she was alone with His Grace many times, which though true, only served to threaten her reputation. When that was suggested, she quickly tried to explain it away, in the end saying that she had lied, but it was too late. She is staying with her aunt for a while, until it stops.”

Emma laughed, remembering her old plans. She couldn't fathom the idea of being at her aunt's estate in that moment, as she had grown far too accustomed to her own life as Duchess.

“We will have to spend some time in the town when we are home,” she told Levi. “I have only been there once, with your mother, and it is important to me that they come to know who I am.”

“They will love you,” he assured her. “We shall go when all of this is done.”

“And what is it exactly that you plan to do?” Sarah asked, and all eyes fell on Levi.

“Well,” he began, “Sarah, if you stay in hiding with us for a while, it will give me time to settle a few affairs, and then you may marry properly. I am quite adept with finding information, and I am certain that this will be no exception.”

“And if it is?”

“Then I will accept that there is no other way, and you need only make one final trip to Scotland. I only ask that you give me this chance.”

Sarah nodded, and Emma knew precisely how much his offer had meant to her. They had only ever had one another to help them, as their father couldn’t have cared less for them if he tried, but now that Levi was there, Sarah was every bit as protected as Emma. It was a blessing, and Emma knew that Sarah was grateful for that.

They arrived at the manor, and Rosendale continued on his way. Levi had offered to let him stay, but the man seemed reluctant to do so.

“It is understandable,” Emma nodded, “when you were going to shoot him yesternight.”

Levi chuckled at that.

His mother came to see them, and she had to look closely at the two young ladies to see the difference between them.

“Levi, how many more young ladies do you plan to present me with?” she joked. “I had thought I might need spectacles for a moment.”

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“My name is Sarah, Your Grace. It is a pleasure to meet you.”

“Emma’s sister, I assume?” she asked, to which she nodded. “You may call me Eloise.”

Levi left to prepare some things, and Eloise took Emma’s hand gently, smiling at her.

“You did what I never could. You made him come home.”

“He isn’t like his father,” Emma said gently. “I know that you believe he might one day be, but I cannot imagine it. I do not believe in this curse.”

“And, given how he looks at you, it would appear that you are correct not to. It is time that I stop believing in it myself, and that I take the time to truly earn his forgiveness.”

She left soon after, leaving Emma and Sarah alone. Immediately, Sarah threw her around Emma and held her tightly, thanking her over and over.

“We do not know if Levi’s plan will work yet!” she yelped.

“No, but I want to believe it will, and so I shall. In any case, the two of you have saved my life, and there will not be a day that passes where I am not so grateful for everything that you have done for me. I may have had an awful father, but you are such a brilliant sister that it doesn’t even matter. I love you, Emma. Endlessly.”

“And I love you. Come, I must show you to your room.”

As Sarah was settling into her room, Emma went to visit Levi in his study. He offered a drink, and when she glared at him he laughed.

“I don’t suppose that you will ever want my drinks again?”

“Certainly not. They are awful,” she laughed along before softening. “I want to thank you for what you are doing. I know that it is not what you truly think is right, but I am grateful that you are doing it for my sake.”

“Giving your life away for an elopement is not right,” he corrected her. “A marriage within the ton, however, is perfectly acceptable. I shall have no qualms with that at all.”

She smiled, and he took her in his arms.

“I simply do not understand why you were so assertive about honor. After all, it isn’t as though it has ever been something you cared about. Why were you so willing to risk your life for it?”

He laughed gently, kissing the top of her head.

“It was never about honor. In all honesty, it was because I knew you would be lost without your sister and I couldn’t bear the thought of that because I cannot bear to see you unhappy.”

She looked at him with curiosity, though she had been certain that there had been another reason for his actions herself.

“I meant what I said last night,” he continued. “It may not make any sense at all, but it is true. I love you, Emma.”

“And I love you. In equal measure,” she replied, sighing into his chest.

At last, they pulled apart, and he kissed her with such gentle passion that she had no further doubts if any remained. For a moment, she allowed herself to wish that there was no wedding to plan, so that they could have been alone.

Only for a moment, of course.

EPILOGUE

“Emma, do you think this looks right?”

“You look perfect, Sarah. You mustn’t fuss like this!”

Thankfully, Levi’s plan had worked perfectly. As it turned out, the deal struck between Emma’s father and the Viscount had been more insidious than they had thought. The Viscount had severely gambling debts, and was therefore bordering on destitution. He owed so much money to so many men that it would only be a matter of time before one of them caught up with him. He was not worthy of Sarah, not in the slightest.

It did not matter that her father intended on paying the man’s debts, as even he had not been aware of the extent of it all. Unfortunately for him, the Viscount had already had a contract drawn to say that his debts would be paid by Emma's father, and it had been legally done so there was no escaping it. When Levi learned of this, he went to visit them both, and they mysteriously left town shortly after.

It would have ruined Sarah, if the man she loved had cared for any of that.

“I’m sorry,” Sarah said gently, eyeing herself in the mirror. “I suppose I am simply unable to believe that this is truly happening. I cannot believe that Levi managed to

do all of this!”

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“In all honesty, they have done it to themselves. It is a shame, however, that Father will not be there to walk you down the aisle. I at least had that, even if it is the only faintly good memory I have of him.”

“His absence will give me room for many fond memories indeed. Besides, Levi will be taking Father’s place, and that is far better. You must thank him when you see him, by the way.”

“After you have done so twice each time you have seen him? I do not believe that is necessary.”

Sarah giggled, adjusting her gown one final time before nodding with confidence at her reflection.

“Everything is perfect,” she smiled. “I am ready to be a wife!”

Emma could see, as they traveled to the church, that Sarah wanted the journey to be done with so that she could be married. Emma tried to soothe her, and to tell her to enjoy the moment rather than rush through, but she knew how she had felt on her own wedding day. She had also wanted it to be the end, though for a completely different reason to her sister.

Then again, she had dreamed on a few occasions that they were marrying once again, and she could enjoy it this time. Then, she remembered all that had happened since her wedding, and all that they had achieved, and she changed her mind. Everything had happened as it had for a reason, and it had been worth it in the end.

“I cannot wait to put all of this behind me,” Sarah smiled, turning to Emma with excitement. “All of the trials will be done with, and I can be a wife and mother. It will be so simple at last.”

Emma laughed gently, adjusting her veil.

“Your life will not be easier as a wife, and certainly not as a mother, but the important thing to remember is that, when trouble does come your way, you will not be facing it alone. You will have your husband, and he will help you through everything.”

Sarah nodded, taking one last look at herself in the mirror before turning to the door.

“I believe it is time to go,” she said softly, and Emma could at last sense the nerves in her voice.

They left for the church, and Emma watched as her sister fussed over every aspect of her gown, and though she was trying to smooth the fabric she was creating creases in it. Emma gently took her hands and lifted them from her skirts, placing them gently back down again.

“Perhaps I may be feeling some nerves,” she confessed. “I have dreamed of this day all of my life, and after all that you have done for me I wanted it to be perfect. I owe you that much, at least.”

“Are you marrying a man that you love?”

“Yes, more than anything in the world.”

“Good, then I am content. That is all that I have ever wanted for you, Sarah, and if you have found love then I cannot ask for more. I am simply pleased that you will

have happiness, no matter what happens in the future.”

They arrived, and Emma left to take her seat. She met Levi outside, who caught her arm and kissed her, seeming to revel in the blush that crept across her cheeks.

“Levi!” she gasped. “What if someone were to see?”

“Should our affection for one another cause upset, that gives me all the more reason to show it. They ought to know by now that I love my wife.”

Emma laughed, leaving quickly to take her seat. Rosendale arrived, his excitement of equal measure to that of his bride. As Sarah entered, on Levi’s arm with a smile a mile wide, Emma felt herself breathe a sigh of relief. At last, all of the turmoil of their match would be done with. The scandal might remain, but it wouldn’t be too detrimental to their marriage. Levi had made it well known that Sarah was to be recognized as his sister, and any sister of a duke was to be treated with respect. All that to say, there would be whispers, but they would hardly ever reach Sarah and that was what mattered.

The ceremony passed quickly, Emma thought, and it was clear that Sarah had rushed her way through it in spite of the warning she received. She seemed almost lost, as though she hadn’t been aware that it had even begun. Emma couldn’t help but smile at her; her sister who never seemed to learn but always came away unscathed.

The celebration afterward was what Levi had been most looking forward to. He had watched Sarah rehearse her prepared speech over and over, though it was not customary for a bride to speak at a wedding she had been determined to do just that. Rosendale had prepared one in turn, and when everyone was seated for breakfast he remained standing, commanding attention.

“I would like to thank you all for being here today,” he began. “My wife and I have

been waiting for this day for longer than many know. I met her during an outing with a good friend of mine, and from the moment I saw her I knew she would be my bride. My wife, however, was not as certain.”

The guests laughed brightly at that, Sarah flushing scarlet.

“You see,” he continued, “she had a particular desire to be in love with her husband, and as we had only just met she refused any advances I made, no matter how amiable. Fortunately for me, she came to like me well enough in the end to marry me. Though not entirely certain of what I did to deserve that, I must admit that I am very grateful indeed. Sarah, I love you, and I cannot wait to spend the rest of my life with you.”

There was applause at his speech, and when he sat down Sarah took her turn.

“I would first like to explain myself in regard to what my dotting husband has said. As a little girl—”

She froze. She had always been timid, and she seemed to notice that people were watching her and it made her pause. She looked to Emma, who nodded for her to continue. She steadied herself, and then continued,

“As a little girl, it was my sister that always told me the importance of love, and that a life without it was not a life worth having. I was fortunate to have her for a sister, and I now have even more fortune in that I have a husband that would do anything to make me happy. I may have had to make him wait, but I couldn't be happier to have done so, as now I know for certain that he is the perfect gentleman, and the perfect husband.”

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She sat down again quickly, quite surprised that she had done it. The guests applauded again, but nobody louder than Emma and Levi, and as Emma turned to him she saw that he was bursting with pride. They had been practicing for days, and it had clearly paid off as far as he was concerned.

After the breakfast, the festivities continued, and when the time came for the dances Levi took Emma's waist as if instinctively. He took to the floor with her and twirled her until she was dizzy, and they did not stop there. She felt the most like herself when she was in his arms, safer than anywhere else in the world.

When the wedding had come to an end, and Sarah had left with her beloved to see her new home, Emma left with her own to return to the one place she had ever seen as a home. Levi sat beside her, pulling her close.

“You seem upset,” he commented. “Is something wrong?”

“No, no,” she replied quickly, before thinking about it. “Well, yes, but I do not wish to spoil everything.”

“A day such as this cannot be spoiled. Believe me, whatever your concern, it will be alright.”

She steeled herself, knowing that each time she had mentioned it he had become angry.

“Levi, I—”

Just then, they drove past a family. There was a mother and father, and their immaculately dressed small daughter. She could not have been more than four years old, and at once Emma's breath caught in her throat. It was the one thing that she had wanted that Levi had refused to give her, and she felt selfish for daring to mention it again and so she stopped.

"I told you, it is nothing," she finished, but as she turned to him she saw that he was watching too.

"I have been thinking, for a while now," he explained, "that I am a fool. This curse, it hasn't changed a thing for me thus far. I have always done exactly what I pleased, and no bad has ever come of it. I have begun to wonder if I have been wrong about all of this, and that I may not necessarily bestow a terrible fate upon a child."

She searched his face carefully to try and find the meaning in his words. She felt as though she knew what he was saying, but she refused to give herself false hope.

"I must say," he chuckled, "I was expecting a smile, at least."

"Levi, do you mean— are you—"

"I believe my thoughts on children have been too harsh. I have had such thoughts for a long time now, and I have been waiting for the right moment to tell you. If you still find yourself in want, we will try."

She kissed him without a care as to who might see.

"Oh, Levi, do you mean it? You do not understand how happy you have made me."

"I hope that it is even a fraction of the joy that you bring me, Emma. I love you."

"And I love you."

She was dizzy and breathless for the second time that day, and it hadn't even required a dance.

The End?