



Saved By the Rakish Duke

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Category: Romance, Historical

Description: "Ask me for anything, and I shall repay you."
"Then I want a husband, Your Grace..."

With her awful cousin's threats still ringing in her ears, Penelope takes her mother and escapes to a family friend... only to bump directly into the hostess' infuriating son.

A known rake, Duke Duncan has a surprising code of honor. So when Penelope saves him from scandal, he must offer something in return.

And all she wants is a match.

Not with him of course. Who would want a rake for a husband? Even if he takes her breath away... even if he turns out to be so much more than she ever imagined...

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

Total Pages (Source): 104

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PROLOGUE

A cloudy day in March 1815

Penelope Sutton pushed against the kitchen door with all her weight. “How far along are we Mrs. Booth?”

“Not much longer, Lady Pen,” the cook called out over her shoulder.

“Splendid.” Penelope smiled, breathing in the delicious aromas one more time, she turned on her heels to check on the rest of the staff.

As she trotted up the stairs, the maids were already coming down them, affirming that the guest room was ready.

Upon thanking them, she inspected the aforementioned room herself, ensuring that everything was perfect. Once satisfied, she carried out a similar inspection of the drawing room, entryway, and dining room.

Thankfully, everything appeared to be in order. Well, almost everything.

Penelope heavy-heartedly made her way to Mother’s room and knocked three times.

No response.

She knocked again.

Still no response.

With a sigh, she gently called out, “Mother, I’m coming in.”

It was already a quarter to noon, but one would hardly be able to believe so given the suffocating darkness in which the room was steeped. Mother lay on her side facing away from the door with not an inch of movement acknowledging Penelope’s presence.

“Mother...” Penelope whispered, “Uncle Winston will be arriving shortly. I thought perhaps—if you felt up to it—you could help welcome him.”

No response.

“I can send your luncheon up here when it’s ready if you prefer,” Penelope fidgeted with her hands. “But I’m sure it would make all the difference if you could manage just a few minutes of light conversation. Such exercises are often said to be good for the soul.”

“I’m sorry, darling,” came Mother’s murmured response. “Maybe tomorrow.”

“I understand.” Penelope smiled weakly, reaching for the door. “Rest well, Mother.”

“M-mm.”

Alone in the hallway once again, Penelope wiped her tears on the back of her hand.

“Lady Penelope!” Ruth emerged from the stairs. “He’s here!”

Straightening her skirt, Penelope followed the maid downstairs once more, checking her hair as they passed by the hanging mirrors along the way.

As she awaited Uncle Winston in the drawing room, Penelope wasn't as nervous as she anticipated—after all, she had already done everything possible to ensure he felt welcome.

In fact, Penelope realized she deserved to hold her head up with pride because despite Father's death last week, despite Mother's grief—and indeed despite Penelope's own grief—she held the house together and managed its affairs quite successfully.

Once Uncle Winston's fully settled in, I'll be able to focus on helping Mother recover, she assured herself. We'll be fine. Everything is going to be fine.

At last, her father's distant cousin entered, his cane striking the floors with every step.

Penelope curtsied a greeting and explained what a pleasure it was to finally meet him.

He acknowledged her with a polite nod before examining his surroundings.

“So, this is Puntton Manor!”

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Penelope straightened up. “Yes, Uncle. Mother isn’t feeling too well, so she sends her apologies for not being able to welcome you just yet. But we both hope you’ll find the house to your liking.”

“Quite!” He lumbered towards her, causing Penelope to take a step back in surprise.

“My, you’re even prettier up close, little sweet,” he grinned.

Penelope’s stomach churned as her palms suddenly began to sweat.

“Er, you must be starving after your travels, Uncle Winston.” She stepped backward and gestured toward the dining room. “If you would please have a seat, luncheon will be served shor-”

She gasped as he suddenly lifted his cane to her chin.

“That’ll be quite enough of that ‘Uncle’ business, sweet thing,” he snarled, “I am now the Earl of Punton, and you will address me as such. Do you understand?”

Penelope blinked at him, remaining frozen in her spot. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw the staff similarly paralyzed.

“Y-Yes, Lord Punton,” she finally managed to choke out.

Even after he had lowered his cane and brushed past her into the dining room, Penelope found herself unable to move her feet at all for several moments.

But when she thought about how such a vile man could inherit her father's title, her anger spurred her feet forward.

She clasped her hands together to stop them from trembling.

It's just luncheon, she repeatedly reminded herself as she took her place at the opposite end of the dining table. But as the agonizing meal dragged on, she realized that no amount of goodwill or tongue-biting would enable her to endure this.

As she nodded politely at whatever it was that Uncle Winston was rambling about now, she swore to get her mother as far away from here as possible.

CHAPTER1

Dear Penelope,

Thank you for replying so quickly, I wasn't sure you would remember

me. But after reading your father's obituary in the paper, I simply had

to try. Very sorry to hear about your mother's condition as I still

consider her one of my dearest friends. Please know you are both

welcome to stay with me here at Blackmoore Manor for as long as you need.

Warmest regards,

Gertrude Warson

Penelope Sutton jumped from her chair in delight. A small part of her had been

secretly hoping for this when she replied to the dowager duchess' letter. And because of that, she and Mother were now saved just three weeks after Uncle Winston took over the estate—and their lives.

Leaping on this chance at once, she scribbled a quick reply and had it sent immediately.

She rushed to Mother's bedroom to tell her the good news.

When she was let in, she found Mother staring contemplatively out of the window.

At least that's one good thing to come out of that wretched man moving here, she thought to herself.

When Penelope warned Mother to be careful around Uncle Winston—in case he tried to make advances towards her too—the shock was strong enough to break Mother out of her self-inflicted bedrest.

Of course, Mother's mood remained melancholic, but at least she was eating more these days. In fact, every so often, she even managed to drag herself downstairs to help Penelope endure the excruciating dinners that Uncle Winston insisted they take together.

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“Mother, we’ve been invited to Blackmoore Manor by the Dowager Duchess of Blackmoore!” Penelope squealed, lowering her voice as she took Mother’s hands in her own. “We’ll finally be able to breathe!”

Mother gently squeezed her hands. “That’s nice, darling,” she said with a limp smile.

“In addition, you’ll even get to see the dowager duchess, she’s ever so fond of you,” Penelope reminded her, furrowing her eyebrows. “Aren’t you... relieved, Mother?”

Mother let out a small exhale. “I am, darling. I’m just... so very tired.” She tucked a strand of Penelope’s hair behind her ear. “But tell Ruth to come here and we can start packing my things at once.”

Penelope threw her arms around Mother’s neck, unable to contain yet another squeal of delight. “I’ll send for her right away, Mother!”

With Mother convinced, there was only one obstacle—albeit the more formidable one—that remained in the way of their salvation: the very source of their suffering, Uncle Winston.

Speaking to the servants, Penelope ascertained that he was no more ill-tempered than usual today. But to be extra safe, she had a tray of his favorite sweets prepared and carried it with her to his study.

“Come in!”

“Lord Punton, I’m sorry for disturbing you, but I thought you might be hungry what

with how hard you've been working today." Penelope put on her warmest smile as she set the tray on the study desk.

As usual, he acknowledged her with little more than a grunt.

After he had scarfed down half of the sweets, she carefully began. "Seeing you working so hard on your correspondence has reminded me of an invitation that Mother and I received from my godmother—the Duchess of Blackmoore—just today, my lord."

She extended the letter toward him. Barely glancing at it, he asked disinterestedly, "What does she want?"

"She has generously invited Mother and me to stay at Blackmoore Manor for some time so that she may assist Mother in her grief." Penelope added, "Normally, I wouldn't even bother you with such a matter, my lord. However, it did not seem wise to reject an offer from such a prominent family."

Uncle Winston's ears perked up at this.

"I suppose it would be best to 'play nice' as it were with the duchess," he said as he stroked his beard contemplatively.

"Indeed, my lord." Penelope's palms began to sweat once more. "And it would be a wonderful opportunity to renew ties between our families so that they may be more receptive to any requests or favors we may need in the future."

Penelope fought off the shudder that threatened to run up her spine as she disagreed with every word that left her lips. However, her twisted reasoning seemed to sway her uncle, whose eyes greedily lit up.

“In that case...” he licked his lips to get rid of the leftover sweet crumbs on them.

Penelope held her breath.

“...you and your mother may go visit them.”

She clenched her fists to avoid giving away her excitement.

“However!” he narrowed his eyes at her, “don’t you get any funny ideas or cause me any trouble. If I so much as smell a rumor about you, I shall drag you back here myself. Do you understand?”

“Yes, my lord.” Her heart pounded in her chest as she assured him, “And I won’t cause any trouble, my lord, I promise.”

“And stay away from any of those no-good, frolicking bachelors...” her uncle snarled, “not that they’d take an interest in you at all anyway, but regardless! Remember that you are to be my bride once I have gotten all of these affairs in order.”

Her eyes welled up, not because of his hurtful words, but because she could hardly contain her rage.

“Of course, my lord,” she choked out through gritted teeth, before taking her leave.

“Ah-ah!” he called after her, “didn’t you forget to thank someone for the grace he’s shown you?”

She sucked in a deep breath before turning around to face him once more.

“Thank you for allowing us to go, my lord,” she said with a shallow curtsy.

“That’s better,” he leered. “You just might be worthy of bearing my heirs after all.”

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His ghastly remark echoed in her ears long after she had left him. But as she ran upstairs to begin packing, the words breathed life into a new resolve within her.

There's no other way. I must find a husband before this trip is over.

CHAPTER 2

Penelope and her mother were practically swept off their feet the moment they arrived at Blackmoore Manor. The entire household appeared to be in a flurry of activity as the butler took their bags and explained that their rooms would be ready shortly.

Even before they had stepped into the drawing room, the Dowager Duchess of Blackmoore was already calling out to them.

"Oh, you little dears!" she exclaimed, her hands clasped together in excitement. "Come in, come in!"

Her energy was so infectious even Mother couldn't help but smile. "You look well, Gertie."

Once the two friends had released each other from their hug—still showering each other in compliments—their vibrant host turned her attention to Penelope, pulling her in for cheek kisses.

"My, my, what did I do to have such a lovely goddaughter?" the dowager duchess' kindly eyes beamed.

“Oh, Your Grace, I’m sure you say that to everyone.” Penelope chuckled.

“Not so!” The older woman shook her head fervently, “Honestly! You and your mother are one and the same—always doubting the compliments paid to you.”

She lightly pinched Penelope’s cheek. “Youarebeautiful, my dear. AndI’mno liar. Now! Sit yourselves down and we’ll have them bring in a fresh pot of tea. I want to hear everything!”

Penelope stole a concerned glance at Mother but was surprised to see that she actually seemed somewhat enthused.

I can already feel the weight in my chest easing.

The servants arrived with tea, biscuits, cake slices, and fruits galore.

“I’m so sorry I couldn’t come to John’s funeral, especially afteryouwere so wonderful to me when my Barry died,” the dowager duchess sighed, filling their teacups. “But as I explained in my letter, we happened to be in South Bridlar at the time.”

“There’s no need to apologize,” Mother squeaked out. “In truth, I hardly knew where my own hands and feet were the entire time. The only reason we got anything done at all is because Penelope has been so wonderful.”

The duchess reached for Mother's hand. “Thank Providence for our children, no?” she smiled. “I don't know what I would have done after Barry’s death if it wasn’t for—Oh, but this isn't about me. Carry on, my dear, I’m sorry.”

Penelope sipped her tea, inevitably noting the stark contrast between the two older women before her. Yes, they both had full heads of white hair done up in neat little buns and laugh lines around their eyes, but Mother looked ever so frail next to her

gregarious friend.

The dowager duchess did a wonderful job of steering the conversation towards more lighthearted topics: the newest fashion styles, upcoming parties, new recipes learned, and so on.

However, Penelope noticed one main aspect of conversation that had yet to surface: the gossip. Any tidbits could prove vital in helping Penelope accomplish her goal.

Returning her cup to its saucer, she waited for an opportunity to nudge the conversation in that direction.

“Oh, we simply must go together!” beamed the dowager duchess. “The Marchioness of Oakhurst took me right after we got back from our trip, and I haven’t been able to get the songs out of my head since.”

Ah! There’s my chance.

“The opera sounds lovely, Your Grace,” Penelope chimed in. “And did you mention the Marchioness of Oakhurst? I thought I read something the other day about her daughter-”

“Oh, I’m sure those reports were greatly exaggerated,” the host cut her off rather uncharacteristically.

Penelope did her best to hide her confusion at this peculiar reaction—but she evidently didn’t hide it well enough because the dowager duchess suddenly apologized,

“I hope you’re not offended, pet.” She fidgeted with her hands. “Most gossip is just—it’s not even worth paying any mind to.”

“You are quite right, Your Grace.” Penelope smiled, somewhat surprised that the dowager duchess was evidently quite fond of the Marchioness of Oakhurst’s family.

It seems I shall have to find another source to learn of new prospects.she sighed to herself.

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The discussion once again resumed its original course, but Penelope found it more difficult to focus this time.

In our rush to come here, I haven't even had the chance to read today's paper.

She discreetly scanned the room for the paper—silently hoping that it was within reach—but to no avail.

Suddenly, the drawing-room door swung open.

“Mother! Do you need me to pick up any- Oh, good morning.”

Leaning against the frame with one hand on the doorknob, stood an attractive man with dark hair. His well-built physique would normally render him quite intimidating, but this effect was immediately countered by his warm smile.

He blinked his bright blue eyes at them. “Very sorry, I didn't realize our guests had already arrived.”

The women rose from their seats as he sauntered towards them.

“You're even more handsome than I remember!” Mother exclaimed.

He kissed her hand in greeting. “Please, there's no need for such flattery between friends, Lady Punton.”

The dowager duchess clutched her son's arm. “Dearest, this is Countess of Punton's

daughter: Lady Penelope. I've never been able to properly introduce you two what with your schooling, traveling, gallivanting, and who knows what else."

He playfully rolled his eyes at this remark, before bringing a hand to his mouth as he pretended to whisper, "Don't believe a word! She always exaggerates." He winked at Penelope.

Penelope had always known that Her Grace had a son. But their family moved away from Pelshead when she was very young, so she didn't remember meeting him at all.

However, being formally introduced to him now, she wondered whether that was a blessing in disguise. Perhaps she was being too harsh, but based on the arrogance with which he carried himself, the duke seemed like the sort who expected everyone to bend to his will.

He reminds me so much of-

She gasped as he took her hand and added with a flirty smile, "I look forward to us becoming... better acquainted, Lady Penelope." Penelope remained unimpressed, but offered him a polite smile regardless. "It's nice to meet you, Your Grace."

Upon hearing this, his expression faltered—just for an instant. But he quickly resumed his smiling, easygoing manner.

Penelope couldn't help but scoff.

What? Was he expecting me to swoon?She sighed.Well, he certainly seems like the type that's used to that sort of attention.

With greetings and introductions properly exchanged, everyone returned to their seats. To Penelope's surprise, the duke sat himself down in the armchair right across

from hers.

“So... what are we talking about?” he asked, reaching for one of the biscuits.

“With all due respect, Your Grace...” Penelope raised an eyebrow, “we were discussing the upcoming events for this Season while you were evidently on your way out.”

He leaned forward amusedly, dusting his hands. “My, my, you’ve been here for all of what, perhaps an hour? And you’re already kicking me out of my own house.”

Penelope shrugged innocently. “I was merely answering your question, Your Grace.”

“Must you really go out today, dear?” interjected the dowager duchess. “Wouldn’t you much rather save your energy for tonight?”

“The ball doesn’t start until nine o’clock!” He waved a dismissive hand. “What’s the harm in running a few quick errands while I have the chance?”

Penelope almost choked on her tea.

“Something to add, Lady Penelope?” He lowered his eyes at her.

“Nothing, Your Grace.” She smiled sweetly. “It’s no surprise to me that you are a gentleman who makes the most efficient use of his time.”

He scoffed, “Are you implying that I don’t actually intend to run the errands?”

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“Oh, I’m sure you will, Your Grace.” She lowered her voice, “I just doubt that’s all you’ll be doing.”

“With such conviction, even I am inclined to believe you,” he folded his arms, “but you hardly know me.”

“We may have only just met, Your Grace.” Penelope let out a deep exhale. “But I am—unfortunately—all too familiar with your sort.”

As she said this, her eyes began to well up, but Penelope mustered the strength to fight the tears back.

His eyes widened in intrigue, making her immediately regret her words.

“Oh really?” He glanced at her hand. “Is that why a captivating lady as yourself still doesn’t have a wedding band?”

Penelope clutched her left hand.

“Duncan!” his mother exclaimed.

But Penelope wasn’t backing down either. “That’s a good question, Your Grace. But perhaps you would care to explain the wedding band missing from your own hand first.”

“I would, but it’s a boring story.” He shrugged, leaning forward once more. “A much more interesting one would be how you and I could amend each other’s lack of

wedding bands—”

“No!” Penelope cut him off, mortified.

“Duncan, that’s enough!” the dowager duchess chastised. “I suggest you apologize to our guests and take your leave now.”

“All right, Mother.” He held both hands up in defeat. “I shan’t tease her any longer.”

As he pushed himself up from the armchair, he flashed Penelope another smile. “I’m sorry to cut our lovely chat short, my fair lady. But maybe you would care to continue it tonight at Ashfordshire’s ball?”

“Mother and I won’t be attending, Your Grace.” She returned his smile—albeit sarcastically. “But I’m sure you’ll manage just fine without us.”

After he had finally left them, Penelope felt her shoulders relax, realizing for the first time just how tense he had made her.

“I really do apologize.” The dowager duchess rubbed her temples. “Please know that he doesn’t mean any of it, he’s a good man.”

Penelope did her best to conceal her skepticism at this remark. After all, of course, the rakish duke’s own mother would be the first to overlook his behavior.

Even so, Penelope felt sorry for her. At least now she understood why the dowager duchess was so averse to any gossip at all—her son was probably responsible for half of it.

“I understand, Your Grace,” Penelope sheepishly answered, “and I apologize for provoking him in the first place.”

“In truth, he would have found a way to tease you regardless,” her host sighed, “but at least he made one good point while he was here: perhaps you should come with me to the Duke of Ashfordshire’s ball tonight, I assume you also received an invitation, yes?”

“Er...” Penelope looked over at Mother hesitantly, “yes... we did get invited, Your Grace but Mother is still in full mourning, and it’s been quite the journey to London so-”

“I shan’t force you, my pet,” the dowager duchess assured her, “but even if your mother cannot come, I would be more than happy to chaperone you myself. You might find it refreshing!”

Or I might find a potential suitor. Penelope realized suddenly.

“On second thought, Your Grace, that sounds like a wonderful idea.”

CHAPTER3

Penelope discreetly straightened her skirt as she stuck close behind the Dowager Duchess of Blackmoore. She recognized most of the faces but wished she had done a better job remembering their names.

Thankfully, however, it appeared that her chaperone for tonight had impeccable memory, so all Penelope had to do was wait for her to say the other guest’s name or title before she also chimed in to the conversation.

As the dowager duchess reminisced with the Pembrokehams about how they had run into each other on a past trip to Saint Leys, Penelope felt a gentle tap on her shoulder.

“Rebecca?” she exclaimed upon turning around.

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“Penny!” her friend squealed in return, pulling her in for a tight hug.

Excusing herself from the group, Penelope accompanied Rebecca to an empty table—still making sure to stay near to the dowager duchess.

“How are your girls?” Penelope smiled, gently stroking Rebecca’s hand. “In your last letter, you mentioned getting them a new governess.”

“Yes, they absolutely love her now.” Rebecca chuckled. “I meant to write you to ask if you were coming tonight, but seeing the state that Lady Puntton was in during the funeral, I presumed it would be rather unlikely.”

“You still know me so well.” Penelope chuckled. “I really had no intentions of attending, but Her Grace suggested it would be a good idea. Besides...”

“Besides?”

Penelope hesitantly chewed her lip. While it was true that she and Rebecca had known each other since they were children, it was still quite embarrassing to reveal her plan.

But as she gazed into Rebecca’s kind eyes, Penelope realized that being able to speak to someone about the plan would offer her some respite.

“I’m... here to look for some prospects,” she admitted, looking down at their hands.

“What?” Rebecca gasped, “but you swore you’d never get married!”

“I don’t have a choice,” Penelope grimaced, going on to explain her and Mother’s suffering at the hands of Uncle Winston.

“Pen, why didn’t you mention this in your letters?” her friend asked, mortified. “There’s no way you’re staying with that wretched creature any longer. Both of my parents-in-law are presently staying with us so it will be a bit cramped, but I can speak to William about putting you and Lady Punton up at our countryside manor at least-”

“Thank you, Rebecca,” Penelope smiled, “but there’s no need, the Dowager Duchess of Blackmoore graciously offered to let us stay with her for the rest of the Season right here in London. Besides, I don’t even want to think of what my uncle would do if he found out that we were staying somewhere other than where he had allowed us to.”

Rebecca’s expression changed yet again. This time she was the one chewing her lip hesitantly.

“What?”

Rebecca looked around to see that no one was within earshot, “I know your parents have always been close to the Blackmoores, but if I were in your shoes, I wouldn’t reveal this new accommodation arrangement so freely, Pen.”

Her friend leaned close, “For you see, we were never introduced to him when we were children, but the present Duke of Blackmoore is-”

“A no-good rakish bastard?” Penelope raised an eyebrow. “Indeed, I had the pleasure of discovering that for myself earlier today.”

Rebecca’s eyes grew even wider. “You mean... he’s presently staying at Blackmoore

Manor as well? But I've always heard he has a separate townhouse—you know, for his... exploits."

Penelope shuddered upon hearing this. "The dowager duchess mentioned that it's currently being renovated. So, he's staying at Blackmoore in the meantime."

"Then you must be extremely careful, Pen," Rebecca urged her. "He's a ruiner of reputations with no limits to his depravity."

"Goodness," Penelope shook her head, "and with such an angelic face too."

"It's his most effective weapon." Her friend nodded seriously, "besides his powers of smooth talking."

"Don't worry," Penelope assured her, "men of his sort hardly spend any time at home anyway, which means my other problem is far more pressing."

"Indeed..." her friend sighed, "if I wasn't so busy with my in-laws and the children, I would be helping you in your search every day, Pen. But I'm afraid my domestic responsibilities are just so-"

Penelope squeezed her hand. "It's all right, Rebecca. You have more than enough on your plate as it is. I shall find a way to take care of it." She nodded toward the other guests in the room. "But if you still want to help, perhaps you could direct me to some good prospects while we're here." Rebecca raised a mischievous eyebrow as she scanned the other guests in the room, "Admittedly, I've been out of the loop since my last pregnancy but- Ah! I know for a fact that the Earl of Willowdale is available! A very kind gentleman, I believe he's about twenty-and-seven, with strong connections in the navy."

Penelope followed Rebecca's line of gaze, which led to a smiling gentleman on the

other side of the room, who was engaged in a lively conversation with the Viscount of Ivybridge.

“Handsome too, yes?” Rebecca giggled. “The dowager duchess and I can introduce you two.”

Penelope’s heartbeat quickened. “Oh, but with prospects like that, he’d certainly be interested in fresher debutantes. Isn’t there anyone with a little less competition? I just need to get engaged and married as quickly as possible.”

Rebecca lightly tapped her chin. “In that case... you won’t mind someone who’s... say, a widower, for example?”

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“Of course not!” Penelope smiled, reiterating, “I just need to get Mother and me as far away from him as possible.”

“In that case, what about the Viscount Gloushire?” Her friend’s face lit up. “He’s kind, and patient, I think you’d get along splendidly.”

Penelope swallowed, “I trust your intuition, Rebecca.”

“Fantastic!” squealed her companion. “Wait right here and I’ll go find him!”

As her friend separated from her, Penelope’s leg started bouncing up and down of its own accord. She placed a hand on her knee in a futile attempt to stop it.

It’s just an introduction. Penelope silently chastised her leg. There’s absolutely no need to be so nervous. However, despite knowing this, she couldn’t seem to get her leg or her heartbeat under control.

It had been years since she had last spoken to a gentleman as a potential suitor. And now Rebecca has suddenly decided to set this on her out of the blue.

Small talk, warm smiles, and other pleasantries. Penelope assured herself, That’s it. There’s nothing to be so worried about now. It’ll be all right. But the longer she waited, the greater her nerves grew. Unable to bear it for a second longer, she rose from her chair and marched herself out of the ballroom.

No doubt, she must have drawn some attention from the other guests as she did so, but she didn’t care. She simply allowed her restless feet to carry her.

Eventually, she found herself standing in the manor's garden, the night breeze soothing her cheeks. At twenty-and-five years old, Penelope had already made peace with her standing as a spinster.

So having to suddenly dive back into the search for a husband was proving more formidable of a challenge than she had initially realized.

She paced around the garden, a part of her wondering whether the chirping crickets around her understood her plight.

But she quickly realized that the crickets weren't the only thing she could hear. Besides them and the faint music coming from within the house, she could hear... giggling?

She followed the sound. But just as she rounded the corner, she was forced to immediately step back.

Did they see me?

The unceasing giggling and hushed voices told her no.

Carefully, she peeked around the corner.

"I said good night, Lady Jane," the exasperated Duke of Blackmoore snarled.

Presently, he stood with his back flat against the house's east face as the woman he called Lady Jane blocked his path.

"So impatient, Your Grace." She placed a hand on his chest. "You're fortunate I'm not so easily offended."

“Please take all the offense possible if it’ll finally get you out of my way,” he drily returned.

Penelope felt the urge to rub her eyes in case she wasn’t seeing clearly. Was the notorious rake before her actuallyrejectingan opportunity for depravity?

This Jane is practically offering herself up on a silver platter, so why wouldn't he-

Her eyes widened in realization.

She looked over her shoulder to be doubly sure that no one else had arrived yet. Despite the fact that she was standing up, once again, her leg began to bounce nervously.

Come on, Your Grace, save yourself. Don’t make me do this.

But when she returned her attention to them, Lady Jane was attempting to lay her head on the duke’s chest, who in turn was frantically attempting to pry her off of him—a task that was especially challenging as he was apparently trying to do so without hurting her too much.

Penelope groaned to herself.

Looks like I shall have to step in after all.

With a deep breath, she rounded the corner and feigned surprise. “Oh! I’m very sorry to interrupt, but by any chance have any of you noticed my snuffbox? I believe I dropped it somewhere here earlier.”

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Two bewildered heads looked her up and down.

“We didn’t see anything,” scorned Lady Jane. “Now if you’ll excuse us-”

“But of course!” Penelope held up both hands in defeat. Adding as she turned to go, “Oh, Mother’s going to be so upset I lost another- Ouch!” she yelped, throwing herself to the ground.

“What’s wrong?” the duke called out, still pinned to the wall.

“My ankle!” Penelope pretended to cradle her foot, before pointing to the other woman. “Help me get to the powder room, quickly!”

“Why?” Lady Jane scoffed. “Your clumsiness is no fault of mine.”

“Well, I wouldn’t have tripped, if you hadn’t abruptly shooed me away.” Penelope tutted, before pretending to cry out in pain once more.

The other woman scanned their surroundings expectantly—her movements confirming what Penelope had already suspected: Lady Jane had been hoping to get caught with the Duke of Blackmoore.

But why?

Growing visibly more irritated at Penelope’s pleas for help, Lady Jane begrudgingly helped Penelope up and supported her as they slowly made their way into the house.

Annoyed at her newfound companion's slyness, Penelope made sure to put all her weight on the other woman's shoulders.

After all, she didn't care for the duke, but he was clearly innocent in this case. So, she felt justified in her endeavors to get a rise out of his would-be framer.

As they turned to leave, Penelope locked eyes with the duke one more time. Initially, he appeared confused—maybe even concerned, but when she gave him a reassuring nod, the corners of his mouth turned upwards.

He mouthed a thank you and she felt the urge to roll her eyes, after all, what use was his gratitude to her at this moment?

But thinking that he'd suffered more than enough tonight, Penelope settled on returning his thanks with a discreet smile. When they finally arrived at the powder room, Penelope thanked Lady Jane and asked if she could find one of the servants for her.

To Penelope's surprise, she actually did so before disappearing into the sea of guests. With the servant's help, Penelope was able to inform the Dowager Duchess of Blackmoore of her present whereabouts.

"Oh, you poor thing!" her chaperone exclaimed, barging into the powder room. "What happened?"

Penelope lowered her gaze. "I'm so sorry, Your Grace. I wasn't feeling well and attempted to get some fresh air, and well..." she gestured to her foot.

"I'm so very sorry, pet," the older woman exclaimed. "It's no wonder you felt out of sorts, what with it being so soon after your father's passing."

Although that was far from the reason Penelope had become overwhelmed, she held her tongue anyway as it was also far less embarrassing than the truth.

“Can you stand? We’ll go straight home and find you a doctor, pet,” the dowager duchess kindly offered.

A pang of guilt struck Penelope—it didn’t seem right that her fake injury should prevent the dowager duchess from enjoying the rest of the ball.

“That won’t be necessary, Your Grace,” Penelope assured her. “I believe I just twisted it. But as long as I keep off my feet, it should be manageable for the rest of the evening.”

“Are you sure?” the dowager duchess gasped. “Because there’s no need to bear it for—”

“I’m very sure, Your Grace.” Penelope smiled, unable to add that she wasn’t ‘bearing’ anything at all given that she was simply feigning her injury.

To Penelope’s chagrin, she would have to lie to quite a few more people, such as the servants who brought ice for her ankle, the Duchess of Ashfordshire—who felt awful that one of her guests was injured, and any other sympathetic faces that drifted in and out of the powder room.

After what felt like an eternity—but in reality, it was probably closer to an hour or so—Penelope managed to convince the dowager duchess that she was ready to return to their table.

With assistance from the servants, Penelope and her chaperone were escorted to their seats. This time, Penelope made sure to not limp as heavily, thus giving the impression that her foot really was doing much better.

After ten minutes of nodding back at the sympathetic glances being thrown her way, the root of her predicament strolled up to her.

“Lady Penelope,” the Duke of Blackmoore raised an eyebrow, “may I have this dance?”

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The dowager duchess smacked her son's hand away. "Duncan! Stop taunting Lady Penelope about her injury."

"But I'm not teasing, Mother." Evidently perplexed at her assumption, "I really do wish to dance with her. Based on how she walked to her chair earlier, she'll be able to manage this song—it's rather laidback."

The dowager duchess exhaled deeply, "Duncan, I don't know what's gotten into you today but—"

"He's right, Your Grace." Penelope placed a hand on her chaperone's arm, "I should be able to manage."

Naturally, Penelope suspected that His Grace was always up to something. But after the most boring hour of pretending to nurse an injured ankle, Penelope decided the risk was worth it so she could satisfy her curiosity.

"As long as you're certain, pet," the dowager duchess finally acquiesced. "But be very careful about your injury." Turning to her son, she warned, "And that goes double for you."

"Yes, Your Grace."

"Yes, Mother."

Taking his hand, Penelope followed him towards the other dancers on the ballroom floor and took their places.

“I wanted to thank you,” he cleared his throat, “for your help with Lady Jane earlier.”

Penelope raised an eyebrow amusedly. “You’re welcome, Your Grace.”

“About a minute or so after you two left me, Lords Shawstead and Ponstonbrooke emerged as they ‘just so happened’ to be taking a leisurely stroll with a journalist from the Daybreak Chronicler,” the duke explained.

Penelope sucked in a deep breath through her teeth. “Oh dear, if someone hadn’t arrived in time to pry Lady Jane off of you, then one imagines that tomorrow’s headline would have been quite devastating for you.”

He smiled at her, but somehow this smile was different than the ones he had thrown her way back at Blackmoore Manor. In fact, it appeared his entire demeanor towards her had shifted since then.

“I had the situation well under control.”

Penelope flashed him a look, prompting him to add, “Although I suppose I underestimated how quickly those snakes were going to arrive.”

“Exactly.” Penelope lifted her chin triumphantly, “But if you don’t mind me asking, Your Grace, what did you do to deserve such extreme measures being taken against you?”

“Who says I deserve any measures against me at all?” He grinned, “I could be a man of honor for all you know.”

She snorted, “Please, Your Grace. A lady can’t guffaw in public.”

“What? It’s true!” His grip on her waist tightened. “You just haven’t had the chance

to know-”

But he gave up halfway through his sentence upon seeing Penelope wipe a tear of laughter from her eye.

“I’m not as young as the other debutantes you toy with,” she reminded him, “so I’m not so easily deceived, Your Grace.”

“There you go again acting as though you know me,” the duke smirked. “But can I let you in on a secret?”

“What is it?” She apprehensively raised an eyebrow.

He leaned close, so close that his breath tickled her ear. “If I was toying with you, I can wholeheartedly assure you that we’d be...elsewhere by now.”

The blood rushed to her face, but Penelope was not backing down so easily. “Then I suppose I should let you in on a secret too, Your Grace.”

She nodded for him to come closer once more. “You’re not the only wolf in sheep’s clothing here.”

He straightened up with an amused but somewhat skeptical expression. “A bold claim, Lady Penelope. But though you may not be a sheep, I highly doubt you’re a wolf.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” She furrowed her eyebrows.

“You clearly dislike me but still helped me out earlier, didn’t you?” he reminded her. “Face it, Lady Penelope, you may not be a sheep, but you’re no wolf either.”

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Penelope scoffed, "Such a bold assumption, perhaps I merely took pity on yo-"

Completely ignoring this remark, he cut her off. "I'd say you're more comparable to a deer? No! A fox in sheep's clothing."

"A fox?" she exclaimed incredulously.

"Yes, not nearly as powerful or ferocious as a wolf, but still quite perceptive and shrewd in their own right." He chuckled. "See? You even have the reddish-brown hair to go with it."

"I'm afraid that you're taking my use of the old adage a tad too literally, Your Grace." She drily added, "I was simply reminding your smug, self-assured self that you will not always succeed in misleading people. There are those of us who see right through you."

"You think you see through me," he retorted, giving her a prime example of the very self-assured smugness she had mentioned.

But before she could express her irritation, he cleared his throat and added, "At any rate, regardless of what you really think about me," he met her gaze, "the fact remains that I am now indebted to you."

Penelope blinked at this. After all, who would expect a self-centered rake to actually appreciate those around him?

"Ordinarily, I would say there was no need to repay me. But given your talents in

particular areas,” she thought out loud, “I can think of the perfect way you can pay me back.” She smiled.

“How’s that?”

“Later,” she drily answered. “I’d prefer we discuss it away from the sea of prying eyes and ears we are currently swimming in.”

“Oh?” He raised an eyebrow. “Given your reticence, I can’t help but wonder if it turns out even you couldn’t resist my charms and begui- Ouch!” he yelped, shaking his foot out.

“Oops.” Penelope smiled innocently. “Watch your step, Your Grace.”

CHAPTER4

Penelope finished stifling a yawn as she returned the hairbrush to its place on the dresser. The clock in the corner told her it was now four o’clock meaning that they had arrived home from the ball no more than forty minutes ago.

The latest their family had ever gotten home from a ball was five o’clock or so, with the sun just about to rise. But that was during happier times when Father and his carefree spirit were still around.

She slowly climbed into bed.

Even I’m beginning to wonder whether my injury was real because why am I so tire-

Two quick knocks on her door interrupted her thoughts.

“Mother?” she called out, concerned.

No response came to affirm her guess, but who else could it possibly be at this time of the night?

Leaping out of bed, called out, “I presumed you were asleep when we arrived, so I didn’t come to say good night. Is something wro-”

But upon pulling the door open, she found—not her mother, but—the Duke of Blackmoore.

“Your Grace!” she gasped, lowering her voice. “What do you think you’re doing?”

“What else? I’m here to discuss the favor I owe you,” came the nonchalant reply.

“At this hour?” she hissed.

“Well, there was nowhere private for us to discuss the matter during the ball, so I figured discussing it at home would be the best option.” He shrugged. “Now do you want my help or not?”

“All right, all right!” Penelope grabbed his arm. “Just get in before someone sees you.”

She checked the hallway one last time before closing the door.

“This couldn’t have waited until the morning?” She turned around to face him.

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“I’m not known for my patience,” he confessed. “Besides, with my schedule, you should consider yourself fortunate I’m bothering to make this time at all.”

With his hands in his pockets, he let his eyes wander around the room, her dresser, the books on her nightstand, and so forth. Penelope suddenly realized that letting him in was a huge mistake.

“Stop looking at everything!” She jumped in front of him, arms spread. “I can see the judgment in your eyes.”

But her reprimand appeared to fall on deaf ears as he was too busy amusedly looking her up and down.

The blood rushed to Penelope’s cheeks, she had completely forgotten that she was in her nightgown. With a gasp, she turned away from him.

“So shall I take this armchair?” he asked.

“Yes,” she answered through gritted teeth, throwing on her robe.

She took her place on the bed, making it a point to sit as far away from him as physically possible.

At last, he broke the silence. “Right then, what’s this favor that you seem so sure my ‘skills’—whatever you mean by that—would enable me to successfully carry out for you?”

Penelope straightened her back.

There's no need to be embarrassed. she reminded herself. After all, he owes me a favor.

Lifting her chin, she declared, "You must find me a husband."

His eyebrows shot up in surprise. "Er... that's- well, I have so many questions, but perhaps it would be best to save them for after you've elaborated."

"What's there to elaborate on?" She shrugged. "It goes without saying that he needs to be kind, of good social standing, not too-"

"No, no." He waved a hand. "Not that, I mean, why the sudden interest in finding a husband?"

"I don't believe my reasons bear any relevance to your success in repaying your debt," she answered drily. "Just know that I need a husband who's permissive and kind and will take in and my mother as well, preferably before the end of this Season. Do you think you can handle that?"

"It's straightforward enough." He shrugged. "But why enlist my help at all? You're pretty enough to turn heads all by yourself."

Penelope felt her face grow hot once more, so she stared at her hands to hide it. "It'll be faster this way," she replied, before meeting his gaze again. "Please?"

Perhaps he could hear the desperation in her voice, or maybe he noticed it in her eyes, or maybe it was even in the way she sat. But for whatever reason, to her relief, he said, "All right. I'll get started tomorrow."

Penelope clasped her hands in delight. "Thank you, Your Grace! I know someone as

well-connected as you are will-”

“On one condition...” He cut her off, bringing his hands together as though he were deep in thought.

“All right...” She hesitantly nodded, “what is it?”

“You’ll follow my lead, and do exactly as I say,” he smirked.

“In that case, I don’t think I will be requiring your help after all,” she retorted.

He sat up in disbelief. “What? You don’t even know what I might ask for!”

“Exactly.” She narrowed her eyes at him. “Hence my response.”

“Relax, Lady Penelope,” the duke chuckled, “I just meant that you better not embarrass me in front of the gentlemen I recommend you to.”

“How could I possibly embarrass you?” Penelope scoffed, “You’re the one with a reputation so ghastly that you quite literally have people conspiring against you,” she reminded him.

He waved this remark away. “Clearly, we’re starting to lose sight of why we’re here. I owe you a favor, and you want the favor done, yes?”

She nodded.

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“Then regardless of everything else, we shall work together to ensure my debt is repaid so that I don’t have it looming over me, yes?” he added.

“That sounds reasonable enough,” she concurred, “then I shall adhere to your condition of following your lead—within reason, mind you!” She wagged a finger. “I intend to wed as quickly as possible, so I won’t have any time or patience for your senseless games.”

“Then it seems we understand each other, Lady Pen.” He winked, rising from the armchair. “That’s my first stipulation, by the way. ‘Penelope’ is absurdly long to say all the time, besides ‘Pen’ suits you.”

She rolled her eyes, also rising from her spot on the bed to see him out. “Usually only very close friends are allowed to speak so familiarly, but fine. I suppose you could have asked for worse, so...”

He paused, one hand on the doorknob. “Surely we’re friends now, aren’t we?”

“I’ll consider it,” she chuckled.

“Oh, woe is me!” He dramatically clutched his chest. “I presumed after everything we’ve been through tonight that-”

“Yes, all right,” she yielded, lifting a finger to her lips to remind him to keep his voice down. “We’re friends, Your Grace.”

He flashed her a triumphant smile before turning the doorknob. But just as she

thought that she was finally rid of him, he stopped in the doorway to ask, “And do friends get a kiss good night or...?”

“Ugh, just leave!” She impatiently shoved him in the chest before slamming the door shut.

Despite her heart beating so loud, she could still hear him chuckling through the door. She touched a hand to her face, which—annoyingly—had grown hot once again.

He truly is unbearable!

* * *

Duncan kicked off his boots and threw himself onto his bed. But only when he landed face-first into a pillow did he realize how much he was smiling.

He turned onto his back, staring at the canopy above his bed as he racked his brain endeavoring to remember the last time a woman made him laugh like this.

Well, there was Lady Kingsbrook the other day...

But no, he realized he hadn't used his real laugh. Instead, it was one of the laughs he had developed to perfect his flirting technique.

Ah! Lady Crestwell did make that clever quip about the final number in the opera the other day, and that was-

He furrowed his eyebrows in frustration.

In hindsight, it was more likely that she had rehearsed that joke beforehand—not that there was anything inherently wrong with that, of course. Providence knows that

Duncan had done the exact same thing himself.

However, none of those instances were comparable to Lady Penelope's authentic, spontaneous quips and wit. Her honest responses were a refreshing change from the calculated, convoluted maneuvers that flirting usually entailed.

To his dismay, he heard the familiar sound of a pebble hitting his window. After a long night of dancing, flirting, small talk, and cardplaying, didn't he deserve some peace and quiet alone with his thoughts?

The tap of another pebble hitting the window answered his inner question with a resounding "No".

Dragging himself out of bed, he let out a deep exhale as he lifted the window open.

Directly below stood none other than Philip Oakley—Marquess of Harlington—and Matthew Leeson—the Duke of Fairhaven.

"To me, fair friend, you never can be old..." Harlington declaimed.

"Shut it!" Duncan hissed.

But his best friend paid no heed to this, plowing ever onwards in his Shakespearean quotation, "For as you were when first your eye I eyed, such seems your beauty still—"

"Keep it down, buffoons!" Duncan waved his arms. "We have house guests with us!"

"Three winters cold!" Both friends simultaneously erupted below, throwing their arms around each other's shoulders, "have from the forests shook—"

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Realizing that they weren't going to stop on their own, Duncan reached for whatever was closest to him—a combined volume of the Iliad and Odyssey that he had been skimming through whenever he got the chance—and hurled it at them.

The pair separated with a series of yelps and choice words thrown in his direction.

“As expected, you're broody as usual,” tutted Fairhaven—at least this time with the decency to lower his voice, “and that is exactly what we're here to fix!”

Reaching into his coat, he pulled out not one, but two whiskey bottles and held them above his head.

Duncan shook his head. It was a long-standing practice between the friends that at least one of them should remain sober during important events to keep the others out of trouble—tonight had been Duncan's turn.

Naturally, the sober friend would be rewarded for his valiant efforts after the event was over, which was what his two companions were attempting to do right now.

“With how I had to practically fold you into your coaches, I thought I wouldn't see either of your faces until early next week.” Duncan crossed his arms.

“Howdareyou!” slurred Harlington as he stooped over to pick up the volume that Duncan had hurled. “We were just resting our eyes.”

“Sure you were.” Duncan chuckled. But his smile faded upon seeing Fairhaven trip over his own feet.

They're in no condition to be out here, let alone to carry out their intentions of taking me out and about. He sighed.

"Hurry up, Blackmoore!" Fairhaven called out, stumbling to his feet. He suddenly gasped in realization and slapped a hand on Harlington's shoulder. "It'll be faster if he leaped out the window and we caught him!"

"I can't seem to find my coin purse," Duncan lied. "Come upstairs while I search for it."

His friends scoffed at his plight but agreed nonetheless to come upstairs and perhaps even help him search for his coin purse.

When they were finally inside the room, Duncan casually reminded them to remove their boots.

"But then we shall have to put them back on again when we leave." Harlington waved a dismissive hand. "Just gather your things already so we can be on our way."

"And you call me the grouch." Duncan chuckled, pretending to search through his personal effects. "It's been a long night, why don't you 'rest your eyes' while I conduct my search? It might improve your mood."

"Perhaps I shall," His friend stifled a yawn. "But only because you're so absurdly slow."

Duncan rolled his eyes. "You're far less annoying when you're sober," he mumbled.

"Pardon?"

"Nothing, Harls." He smiled innocently. "Use my bed, and will you take your boots

off?”

CHAPTER 5

Penelope kicked her sheets off of her. The ball had completely exhausted her. But for whatever reason, she had an irritatingly shallow sleep the entire night.

As she rubbed her eyes, they landed on the very armchair that His Grace had so unabashedly dropped himself into hours ago, immediately prompting her to roll onto her other side.

It's not because of him, she told herself. It's only natural that I would struggle to fall asleep on the first night away from home.

Now that she was lying facing this side, she could see from the clock that it was about a quarter past ten. Given the late night they had all had, it would be excusable for her to lie in for another hour or so.

But given her restless night, forcing herself to lie still for the next hour sounded like torture.

With a heavy sigh, she swung her legs over the side of the bed and began to get ready for the day. But as she walked to the dresser, the cursed armchair loomed in the corner of her eye once more, prompting her to wonder if the duke had already left to start his day.

That's it! She grabbed the armchair and began pushing it towards the door. His presence alone was torturous enough, but now even his absence is affecting me!

Once the armchair was halfway through her door, she checked the hallway to see if anyone was around to-

“Oh, good morning!” She greeted a pair of maids dusting the console table and its contents. “I know this is a most peculiar request, but I was hoping to free up some room. Is there someone I can talk to about safely putting this armchair away for the remainder of our stay?”

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With the cursed piece finally out of her room, she was already breathing easier. But before heading to breakfast, she paid Mother's room a visit in the hopes that her first slumber away from home had been more restful.

"Mother?" Penelope softly knocked. "Are you awake?"

No response, as usual.

To be safe, Penelope decided not to attempt to let herself in—just in case Mother was only just now getting some proper sleep.

As she walked downstairs, she ran into Mr. Rowley.

After greeting the butler, she inquired, "Did my mother take her dinner last night, Mr. Rowley?"

"She did indeed, Lady Penelope," he answered.

"But did she eat well?" She fidgeted with the pendant around her neck.

"One hesitates to comment on such matters, Lady Penelope. But unfortunately, Lady Punton touched very little of her portions."

I knew it.

Penelope sighed. "And for breakfast?"

“Lady Puntton hasn’t rung for breakfast yet, I’m afraid.” The butler pursed his lips sympathetically. “Though such an aversion to food is not out of place for those in grief.”

“So they say.” Penelope smiled weakly. “Thank you, Mr. Rowley. Will you please inform me once she’s awake?”

“Certainly, Lady Penelope.”

She continued to the morning room, where she found the dowager duchess breaking fast by herself, the morning paper lying untouched at her elbow.

“Already up and about, Lady Penelope?” chirped the older woman. “Well, I’ve never had a daughter, so I have no clue how quickly they can recover from a ball.”

“But surely you remember your days as a debutante, Your Grace,” Penelope chuckled.

“Heavens! That was so long ago I fear reaching so far into my memories will knock me out on the spot!” the older woman joked, before gasping. “Speaking of poor memory, I almost forgot, how’s your ankle, darling?”

“In truth, I had almost completely forgotten it myself,” Penelope replied, as a pang of guilt struck her heart.

I mean, it’s still somewhat true. Penelope looked down at her plate. I simply neglected to mention that the reason I had forgotten about it was because it wasn’t a real injury.

The next few minutes passed in comfortable silence, but Penelope couldn’t shake the feeling that Her Grace was watching her.

Sure enough, as she lifted her teacup to her lips, she immediately met the dowager

duchess' gaze.

"Is something wrong, Your Grace?" Penelope's heartbeat quickened, worried that the older woman suspected her of lying after all.

"I wanted to ask you the very same thing," came the kind reply. "Once again, I've never had a daughter, but I doubt the crumbs you're inhaling are enough to keep up your strength."

Confused, Penelope looked down at her plate and realized that she too had been unintentionally mirroring her mother's own lack of appetite.

"Oh." She smiled sheepishly. "I suppose I could have another slice of toast and butter... and perhaps an egg."

The dowager duchess lowered her cutlery and dabbed her lips with a napkin. "If you don't mind me asking, pet, is this because of your father or your mother?"

She widened her eyes in response, pleasantly surprised by how insightful her host was. "In truth, Your Grace, I suppose I'm more worried about Mother than anything else."

"I thought so." The other woman nodded. "When we were younger, your mother was quite the morning person. So, you can imagine my surprise when I found out from Rowley that she has yet to leave her room at all today."

"I'm afraid the grief has practically paralyzed her, Your Grace," Penelope confessed. "I've tried to help, but nothing seems to be working."

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The dowager duchess reached out to gently pat her on the hand. “You’ve already done everything you can, pet. The rest is up to Providence and time to heal.”

Penelope let out a disappointed exhale. “Of course, I too miss Father. But that’s different because he was actually a quite loving parent!”

“Are you implying that he wasn’t a loving husband?”

Penelope hesitated to answer for a moment but then remembered the closeness shared between the dowager duchess and Mother. Besides, someone so averse to gossip was unlikely to go around announcing whatever Penelope told her.

“He was... to an extent,” she mumbled. “He was kind, diligent, and generous, but he wasn’t... loyal.”

The dowager duchess nodded. “Ah yes, I believe your mother mentioned an incident in one of her letters many years ago.”

“There weremany more incidents,” Penelope added through gritted teeth. “After everything he put her through, I sometimes wonder how she can find it in her heart to mourn him so deeply.”

Her Grace sat back in her chair contemplatively. “I still remember when your father first started courting her,” she smiled, “With the tenderness he showed, none of us could have imagined he would turn out that way. But I do believe that no matter what transgressions he committed, he always reserved a special place for your mother.”

“Perhaps.” Penelope acquiesced, her eyes welling up. “But it would be better for everyone’s sake if she would just forget him and the pain he brought as quickly as possible.”

“But how can she do that when she was married to him for almost thirty years?” reasoned the older woman. “I’m sorry, my pet, but speaking as a widow myself, I can safely say it will probably be years before she feels any semblance of normalcy return once more.”

Penelope clenched her fists. Everything that Her Grace was saying was perfectly reasonable and sensible. But it was unbearable to think that Mother still had several years’ worth of heartbreak ahead of her.

“Or perhaps she won’t have years left,” Penelope fretted out loud. “I thought she was getting better these last few days, but now she’s back to barely touching a morsel.”

“I’m afraid the roadway out of grief is meandering and torturous,” answered the dowager duchess. “In my case, it seemed like the grief would come and go in waves. People are very complicated, pet.”

She reached for Penelope’s hand once more. “But don’t worry, your mother will get better, especially if we have anything to say about it, yes?”

Penelope mumbled a quiet thank you, grateful to have someone to share the burden with.

But a loud thump above them disrupted their heartfelt moment. The two women shot each other concerned looks. A few moments later, the sounds of a scuffle and commotion came from the staircase.

“Give it back!” the duke’s voice called out.

Both women rose from their chairs to see what was happening, but before they could take a step, a tangle of arms and legs burst through the door and rolled onto the floor.

“Let go!” exclaimed the red-haired gentleman. “This is your penance for lying to us!”

Another gentleman with dark hair appeared in the doorway but seemed in no hurry to stop the brawl.

The dowager duchess cleared her throat, halting the fight in its tracks. Both men immediately shot up, straightening their clothes and hair. Penelope suddenly recognized that the man His Grace had been struggling with was none other than the Duke of Fairhaven, yet another bachelor of questionable repute.

“Shame on you both for behaving like children first thing in the morning!” Her Grace glared. “And in front of our guest, no less! This is highly unacceptable!”

“I couldn't agree more, Mother. But if only it weren't for this imbecile-” the Duke of Blackmoore elbowed his companion in the side.

“I want to hear no excuses!” tutted Her Grace. “And what could possibly be worth this disturbance in the first place?”

Both men lowered their heads before the Duke of Fairhaven sheepishly held up a boot.

Before she could stop herself, Penelope let out a snort, earning a deadly glare from the Duke of Blackmoore.

“I intended to confiscate it to teach him a lesson, Your Grace,” the red-haired duke bleated. “For you see, last night, he tricked us into-”

“I don’t want any excuses from you either, Fairhaven!” boomed the dowager duchess, turning to the doorway, she continued, “and what are you smiling about, Harlington? I expected better from you.”

This stern telling off immediately wiped the grin off of the dark-haired gentleman’s face.

“We’re very sorry, Your Grace,” the Duke of Blackmoore’s friends mumbled.

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“Apology accepted, but only just barely,” the older woman snapped. “For the disruption you’ve caused, I shan’t offer you breakfast. Be on your way now!”

With that, the two men bade everyone a good morning and bound out the door.

“I’m so very sorry about all of that, pet,” the dowager duchess turned to her, hands still on her hips, “but I’m afraid I’ve been fighting a losing battle against their mischief since they were schoolchildren.”

“There’s nothing to apologize for, Your Grace.” Penelope grinned. “With all due respect, His Grace’s friends seemed exactly as I would imagine them.”

“And what, pray tell, do you mean by that?” The duke raised an eyebrow, taking his seat at the head of the table.

“It means she’s hardly surprised that a troublemaker like yourself is friends with other troublemakers.” The dowager duchess sighed.

“Hardly!” objected the duke, slicing into his eggs. “Last night I was doing nothing but keeping them out of trouble.”

“Oh really, Your Grace?” Penelope teased. “Because I could have sworn that I thought I saw you in a bit of a scrape in the-”

He shot her a look, halting her mid-sentence.

“In a scrape in the...?” prompted his mother.

“She’s only joking, Mother,” he answered, still not taking his eyes off of Penelope. “By the way, how’s your injury, Lady Pen?”

Now it was Penelope’s turn to narrow her eyes at him.

Mr. Rowley knocked on the door. “I’m so sorry to disturb you, Your Grace. But you asked me to remind you about answering Lady Musebridge’s latest correspondence before the afternoon mail gets collected.”

“Oh yes, thank you, Rowley.” Her Grace rose from her seat, and with a stern finger reminded her son, “Behave yourself.”

Once the dowager duchess left them alone, His Grace leaned forward. “Were you just about to double-cross me by mentioning the incident with Lady Jane?”

“Not at all, Your Grace.” Penelope folded her arms. “You almost sounded disappointed when you mentioned how you did nothing except oversee your friends last night, so I thought it worthwhile to remind you of some of last night’s highlights.”

He swallowed his food before retorting, “Is that so? Because I’m beginning to get the impression that you weren’t serious about wanting my help after all.”

“I am serious!” she huffed.

“Then it’s time to prove so.” He stretched his hands above his head stifling a yawn. “Thanks to your chosen deadline, we must get to work right away. Let’s go out for a promenade this afternoon.”

Penelope nodded slowly. “Very well, Your Grace. Although, we might have to ask the dowager duchess to fill in for my mother as chaperone.”

He furrowed his eyebrows. “Why? Wouldn’t your mother care to join us?”

“At the moment, she doesn’t even care to join us in the waking realm.” Penelope exhaled, keeping her eyes on the table.

But the duke appeared unfazed by this. “Leave it to Mother and me. We shall get her out for the sake of fresh air.”

Penelope narrowed her eyes skeptically. “But how, Your Grace? She won’t even-”

“My family’s always been a most persuasive bunch,” he answered vaguely. “In the meantime, carry on with your day as usual.” He waved her away with one hand while using the other to signal to the maid to retrieve the newspaper from the other end of the table.

With that, Penelope took her leave, but just as she reached the doorway, the duke snapped his fingers as he suddenly remembered, “Ah yes! I hope you like the present I had the servants deliver to your room.”

She tilted her head. “Present?”

“You’ll see,” he smirked.

Great...she groaned, What’s he up to now?

CHAPTER6

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“To be clear, do you intend to ignore me for the entirety of this promenade? Because if so, you’re wasting precious time that we simply can’t spare.”

Penelope simply lifted her chin higher. She didn’t care if doing so risked attracting attention from the other Brydon Park visitors because she needed to let His Grace know that he had crossed a line.

When she returned to her room after their discussion at the breakfast table, she discovered that the ‘present’ he had alluded to was the return of the armchair that she had asked the servants to put away, plus a second armchair crammed in next to it for good measure.

Naturally, she confronted him about this at once. And upon doing so she learned that His Grace and his friends happened to run into the servants as they attempted to put the armchair in the attic and decided that perhaps if one wasn’t enough to please her, then two ought to do the trick.

After much debate, both armchairs were eventually removed from her room. But even so, Penelope announced that she no longer had any intention of joining him and the dowager duchess for a promenade.

But when they informed her that they had somehow managed to convince Mother to agree to promenade with them, well, Penelope could hardly say ‘no’ then, could she?

Presently, she looked over her shoulder and found Mother and the dowager duchess contentedly meandering behind her and His Grace.

In the meantime, His Grace endeavored to get her to break her silence, but he was also clearly losing patience. “Very well, then! But don’t expect me to answer your questions about any potential suitors you might be interested in today.”

Penelope rolled her eyes, content to stroll with silence for the remainder of their promenade.

Besides, even if I ‘waste’ today’s opportunity, there’s still tomorrow, she assured herself.

But just as they came towards the central collection of water fountains, Penelope locked eyes with a familiar face and waved giddily.

Jerome Campbell—Earl of Graystone—jogged up to them wearing a giant grin. “A very good afternoon, fair Lady Penny!”

“Jerry Gray!” Penelope exclaimed, clasping her hands together. “Aren’t you supposed to be running up some mountain in Scotland?”

“Up until last week, I was, actually!” His smile faded to be replaced with a somber expression. “I’m so sorry for missing the funeral, Pen.”

“It’s quite all right.” She pursed her lips. “The church was already overflowing as it was. Besides,” she tilted her head, “if you had shown up in that state, you’d have received a stern scolding from Father’s ghost.”

Her friend shuddered. “You jest, but your father might have actually done it though.”

“What did he threaten you with that one time?” Penelope giggled. “Oh yes! That he was going to harvest-”

“-harvest my hair to make a new broom.” Jerry chuckled, “It worked though, I ran straight home and demanded that my father take me to get my hair cut to ensure your dad wouldn’t benefit from it.”

“Graystone!” Mother called from behind them, pulling him in for a hug. “Good heavens! Did they run out of food in Scotland? You’re all skin and bone!” she exclaimed, pinching his cheek.

The irony of this remark coming from Mother given the state of her own eating habits was not lost on Penelope.

“Lady Punton...” Jerry groaned, playfully rolling his eyes.

But Mother paid little mind to his complaint, taking him by the arm and adding, “I’m certain you remember Her Grace, the Dowager Duchess of Blackmoore, and her son—the Duke of Blackmoore.”

“But of course!” Jerry bowed. “Good afternoon, Your Graces! I believe my father was acquainted with the late Duke of Blackmoore, that is, before your family moved away from Pelshead.”

“Why, of course!” replied the dowager duchess. “You were only about this high when we sold that estate, which—I believe —was around when Duncan started at Winsling Academy.”

After several minutes of pleasantries, Jerome asked Penelope if they could speak more privately. With Mother’s approval, they chose a bench in front of one of the fountains—in full view of their chaperones.

Leaning on his palms he asked, “Did you get my last letter or have I somehow managed to arrive before it?”

Penelope shook her head. “Haven’t received it yet, I’m afraid. Why? Any exciting news?”

“Not really.” His expression grew more serious. “It was a response to everything you said about...” he lowered his voice and scanned their surroundings, “...the situation with your Uncle Winston.”

Even just hearing that wretched monster’s name immediately caused her shoulders to drop. “Yes... that situation.”

Jerome twiddled his thumbs. “You didn’t mention it in your letter, but I feel like you already know what must be done.” After a sharp inhale, he looked straight into her eyes and stated matter-of-factly, “You need... a husband, Pen.”

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“She’ll have one soon enough,” boomed a voice behind them.

“Your Grace!” Penelope jolted upright, a hand on her chest as she flashed him an irritated look. “With all due respect—which is very little, mind you—this conversation is none of your business.”

“You dropped this,” the duke returned, his hand holding out Penelope’s fan—which she accepted, “and now that it is safely in your possession again, you two are free to gossip to your hearts’ content.”

After this interruption was dealt with, Penelope had the chance to explain that she and Jerry had arrived at the same conclusion and that she was currently in the process of executing the plan while staying at Blackmoore Manor.

“I’ll help out as much as I can,” Jerry assured her. “Not that you’ll need it, of course.” He winked. “In the few minutes we’ve sat here, you’ve turned heads already.”

Penelope punched his arm. “Thank you, Gray—not for the blatant lie dressed up as a compliment—but for being so willing to help.”

“Of course.” Jerry helped her up off the bench. “But I hope you’re properly safeguarding yourself from all monsters.” He discreetly nodded in the duke’s direction.

“I am,” Penelope assured him, “but he’s less a ‘monster’ and more a thorn in one’s side.”

Jerry immediately clicked his tongue in objection, “Whatever you want to call him,

the fact is he devours and destroys, Penny.” Jerome looked her straight in the eyes. “Promise me you'll never let your guard down.”

“Of course, Gray. I promise.”

Shortly thereafter, he departed from them with a spoken invitation to dine at Blackmoore Manor soon.

About seven minutes after resuming their promenade, Penelope realized that the duke hadn't done anything to annoy her, which was most uncharacteristic of him.

Her curiosity thus prompted her to set aside her intentions of ignoring him for the promenade.

“I knew you would tire yourself out eventually,” she grinned.

“Hmm?”

“Similar to how parents allow their children to expend all their energy,” Penelope explained. “Now you have none left to bother me with.”

The duke stretched his arms above him. “I'm merely enjoying a relaxing stroll to the park since you appear to have concluded the husband hunt yourself. Though I would warn against deciding too hastily for-”

She held up a hand to stop him. “I'm afraid you've lost me, Your Grace. What on earth are you rambling about now?”

He let out a dry laugh.

“What's so funny?” she asked, growing more irritated by the second.

“Please...” He rolled his eyes. “How much of an imbecile do you take me for?” He lowered his voice to mimic Jerome’s. ““You need a husband, Pen.””

So sudden was the disbelief that overcame Penelope that she stopped dead in her tracks.

“He wasn’t offering to become my husband, Your Grace,” she explained, incredulous that she had to do so at all. “Jerry’s happily engaged to Lady Isabelle, Lord Riverton’s daughter.”

He blinked at her upon hearing this, also stopping in his tracks. But his typically stoic expression returned once more as he spun on his heel and quickened his pace. “Is that so? I must have missed the paper that day.”

Penelope tilted her head in confusion and opened her mouth to ask him to elaborate. But then she remembered that most of the duke’s actions didn’t make sense to her anyway. As a result, by the time she had caught up to him, she had already resigned herself to dropping the matter entirely.

“I need to gain a clearer understanding of what you’re looking for,” His Grace muttered under his breath. “Tell me who you recognize here and what appeals to you most about them.”

Her cheeks grew pink, which he must have noticed because he instantly assured her, “We’re not jumping straight into choosing candidates. This is more to see what characteristics you want to prioritize.”

With this, Penelope examined the families, friends, and courting couples around them on this breezy April day.

“Well... I always thought Lord Crowsbrook was very nice,” she beamed.

The duke shook his head. “He’s certainly a good man, but aim higher. I thought you wanted someone who could afford to take in both you and your mother?”

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“And I thought you said we were simply examining people’s characteristics?” she fired back.

He held up both hands innocently. “I’m only trying to refine your thought process. Who else?”

Penelope tapped her chin in thought. “Oh! See, someone like Lord Clayspeak would be nice. Obviously, he already has a wife, even so, he’s both kind and well-to-do, so a similar gentleman would be-”

“-would be too weak-minded,” the duke drily cut her off. “Who else?”

Penelope carefully pondered over her next choice, not very thrilled with how His Grace was so readily snubbing each one. But then she snapped her fingers. “The Earl of Bellfrost! Admittedly, he’s not here right now. But I’ve heard-”

“No,” snarled the duke.

“Why?” Penelope returned smugly. “Because you can’t find anything wrong with him to complain about?”

When the duke didn’t answer, she shot him a glance to prompt him but only found his jaw clenched as he looked straight ahead.

“No,” he repeated through gritted teeth. “And I think it’s time we drew this exercise to a close, Lady Pen.” His expression softened. “You’ve given me much to think about.”

And he did indeed appear to think over it deeply because even when they ran into other acquaintances, even when they concluded the promenade, and even when they arrived home, he appeared to be lost in thought.

As she climbed the stairs, she stole one last glance at him as he handed Mr. Rowley his coat in the entryway.

A most interesting man indeed.

CHAPTER 7

“Come in!”

Philip Oakley stuck his head through the doorway. “Fancy meeting you here.”

“Harlington,” Duncan acknowledged his friend with a nod, as dipped his quill in the inkpot, “as my note said, I can’t join you tonight, I’m busy.”

“That’s exactly why I’m here,” his friend answered, dropping himself into the chair opposite him. “How can I help?”

Duncan hastily gathered the papers together. “It’s nothing I can’t handle myself, Harls. I’m certain you and Fairhaven can survive a night without me.”

“What’s really going on, Blackmoore?” Philip crossed his arms. “Sure, there are the daily responsibilities we can’t avoid, but we always make sure to finish our significant work early in the week to-”

“What’s your point, Harlington?” Duncan mindlessly twirled the quill in his fingers.

Philip leaned forward. “My point is that I’ve known you twenty or so years now, and

I know when you're not yourself."

Duncan mindlessly tapped his finger on the desk. "And are these just your observations, or does Fairhaven agree with you too?"

The marquess let out a snort. "I don't think he's even noticed that I have yet to arrive at the club."

Duncan couldn't help but smile, stretching his arms above his head. "Don't you sometimes wish we were more like him?"

"Don't try to change the subject, old boy." Philip pointed a finger at him before his eyes widened in sudden realization.

Both men dove for Duncan's notes. One shove, grunt, and yelp later, Duncan secured his papers while Philip looked up at him from the floor.

"Blackmoore, please tell me you didn't..." His friend looked up in dismay. Jumping to his feet, he leaned on the desk and whispered, "Did you get someone pregnant?"

"What?" Duncan bellowed, "Of course not, dimwit!"

His friend screwed up his face. "Then what on earth could possibly have you in this state?"

Duncan rubbed his temples.

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Who else can I trust if not Harlington and Fairhaven?

With only some hesitation, Duncan slammed the notes down on the desk, nodding for Harlington to take a look.

Philip snatched one of the sheets and squinted to read his scribbles. “Lord Bayshear... too old? Viscount Eastglen... possible?” He flashed Duncan a look. “This is doing absolutely nothing to assuage my concerns as I somehow have even more questions now, old chap.”

“All in due time,” Duncan assured him, grabbing two glasses from the decanting table with one hand and a bottle of gin with the other.

With the conversation grease sliding down his throat, Duncan finally managed to explain the favor he owed Lady Penelope and how he was working to pay it back.

“So, these lists...” Philip gathered the papers together once again and gestured to the other stack on his desk, “...and these newspapers are your research? Any luck?”

“I have two or three candidates in mind.”

“Do you?” Philip turned the pages over in his hands. “Because it seems to me you’ve written something terrible down about all of these gentlemen.”

“Naturally, no suitor is perfect.” Duncan shrugged.

“And is that the only reason you’re being so severe in your assessments?” His friend

raised an eyebrow.

“Of course.” Duncan downed the final swig in his glass. “If I’m going to pay Lady Pen back, I must do so in full.”

Duncan glanced at the clock, which told him it was a quarter past eight., “I know Fairhaven’s quite adept at entertaining himself, but he’ll surely be missing you by now.”

“First the dowager duchess kicks me out without a crumb for breakfast,” Philip lazily pushed himself up from the chair, “and now you’re sending me away without a bite of dinner.”

Duncan rolled his eyes. “Don’t act like you aren’t pleased to be leaving me behind.”

“Then come along!” Philip threw an arm around him. “You could conduct your research ‘in the field’ and report your findings to Lady Pen.”

“Lady Penelope,” Duncan corrected him.

“But ‘Lady Pen’ is much easier to sa-”

“Lady Penelope,” Duncan said one last time.

Harlington acquiesced and bid Duncan a good night as the latter returned to his place at his desk. But the former lingered just long enough in the doorway to say, “You don’t have to worry about sharing your latest puzzle, Blackmoore.” He winked. “She’s all yours.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Duncan called after him but to no avail.

* * *

Penelope set her book aside and rubbed her eyes. As she reached over to put out her candle, the clock in the corner told her it was half past nine.

It had been a good night so far, although His Grace hadn't joined them for dinner, at least Mother did—possibly an effect of getting her fill of fresh air.

Tomorrow, I must remember to thank the dowager duchess and the duke for persuading her.

She inhaled as she got ready to blow out the candle, but a knock on the door interrupted her. She narrowed her eyes suspiciously.

It couldn't be him again, could it?

Penelope shook her head. For yes, His Grace was a rather unconventional man, but he wasn't a halfwit by any means.

He isn't dense enough to come back here, is he?"

But to be sure, she threw on her robe this time before answering the door.

"Your Grace?" she gasped, only opening it partially. "What is it this time?"

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The duke stood before her with papers tucked under his arm and a small lamp in his free hand. He looked left and right before whispering, "Get dressed, we have much to discuss."

Penelope considered slamming the door shut and telling him to return at a more sensible hour. Her eyes returned to the papers under his arm once more and she wondered if they had to do with their secret undertaking.

"Where are we going?" She raised an eyebrow.

"At this hour? Nowhere," he answered matter-of-factly. "But I'm worried that if I touch anything else in your room, you'll have it thrown out or sent away, so let's use the library instead."

She looked down at her robe before nodding, "All right, Your Grace. I shall get changed at once and meet you there."

"But then you'll have to change again once we're done." He shook his head. "Just throw on any old cloak or shawl, and let's go."

Soon, the pair were quietly inching their way down the darkened hall, led by the small lamp His Grace carried.

"I don't know if this is a good idea," she whispered to him.

"We'll be fine," he assured her. "The servants are already in their quarters, and our mothers went to bed almost an hour ago."

Even so, Penelope chewed her lip nervously, her eyes flitting to every object that loomed towards them out of the darkness. At last, they reached the stairs, but even these were only barely visible in the diminished candlelight.

“Here.” He handed her the papers to hold so that he could free up his right arm, which he then proceeded to offer her. “I’ll help you down.”

She took his arm but then dropped it almost immediately with a gasp.

“What’s wrong?” he whispered, the concern in his voice evident.

“N-Nothing.” She cleared her throat. “It was nothing.”

Penelope suddenly found herself grateful for the lack of light because at least he wouldn’t notice how hard she was blushing at that moment.

With a deep breath, she took his arm again.

Even though she knew what to expect this time, she still couldn’t believe how muscular he was. Hidden beneath his soft linen long-sleeve was an arm that felt as solid as a steel beam. As they slowly descended the steps, she caught herself thinking about what else he was hiding under his shirt and immediately pinched herself to stop.

“Ouch,” she whispered, just as they reached the end of the steps.

He glanced at her, but she silently waved a hand to indicate that it was nothing important. She dropped his arm once more as they crossed the hall.

When they finally stood outside the library’s door, she pointed to the light seeping out from underneath it, raising her eyebrows in concern.

To her surprise, he chuckled at this and reached for the doorknob. No one was inside, but all of the lamps had been lit and a stack of newspapers waited for them on the center table.

Even though she had never entered their library before, she knew for a fact, that the furniture had been rearranged because at either end of the center table were the two armchairs that he had tried to put in her room.

She narrowed her eyes at him.

“What?” he smirked. “You didn’t want them, so I found them a new home. Or would you prefer that we remain standing for the entirety of this discussion?”

She rolled her eyes and dropped into one of the chairs. “Speaking of which, I suppose we might as well get started now. What did you want to speak about, Your Grace?”

Settling into the other armchair, the duke set down the small lamp he had been carrying and gestured for her to hand the papers back to him. She obliged.

His Grace spread them out on the center table and leaned back. “After some careful research, I have narrowed down your list of prospects, Lady Pen.”

Lifting one of the sheets, he explained, “Here are your best three choices.”

Penelope extended a hand to take it, but he quickly pulled away and added, “But you’re not ready for them just yet.”

“What do you me-”

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“If you go straight to them whilst unprepared, well, you’ll be rejected outright.” He nodded to the remaining sheets on the center table. “Instead, you are to practice winning over these gentlemen first.”

Penelope let out a mortified gasp. “Heavens no! I shall never become a wily, pleasure-seeking- er, whatever you are!” she sputtered.

“Thank you for rewarding my hard work with insults.” His Grace rolled his eyes. “But I didn’t say you’d have to seduce these men or whatever else you’re thinking, just use them as practice. Once you’ve mastered the technique, you’ll be able to try your hand at any of the main three I have in mind for you.”

“And those main three are?”

“None of your business for now.” He wagged a finger at her. “Focus on improving your flirting technique and maintaining your composure. Only then can I safely reveal their identities.”

He slid the remaining papers towards her.

With a sigh, she began skimming through them. To her surprise, there were only five names on these sheets; the remaining pages were a detailed summary of their families, interests, and traits.

“How did you even learn all of this?” she asked incredulously.

“The usual way,” he answered vaguely.

Penelope narrowed her eyes at him suspiciously. “Oh sure, I think I remember reading in the Herald how...” She brought the paper closer to her face. “Lord Steepwharf’s favorite fruit is the orange.”

“His sister happened to mention it,” shrugged the duke.

Penelope shook her head. “How much of this information did you glean from your trysts and exploits?”

The duke smirked amusedly at her. “Are you sure you want me to answer that?”

She averted her gaze, earning a laugh from him.

“I’m afraid you greatly overestimate the extent of my trysts,” he chuckled. “I simply make it a point to observe the people around me, so don’t worry your pretty head, Lady Pen. Much of the knowledge and tidbits in your hands right now was gathered through my own research.”

“And you would now have me study all of this?” She raised her eyebrows.

“Yes, not all at once, of course.” He stifled a yawn. “But since you mentioned Steepwharf, I suppose we could start with him and his family.”

“This is all very thorough and generous of you, Your Grace.” Penelope found herself stifling a yawn of her own, thanks to him. “But with all due respect, I don’t know if this will be much help with actually sharpening my flirting ‘technique’ as you called it.”

“Do you really believe that or are you simply looking for an excuse to get out of studying?” he teased, somewhat accusatorily.

“Why would I bother to get out of it?” she laughed. “You’re not my tutor, so you can’t exactly punish me for failing a test.”

“Well... let’s agree to disagree on that point.” He propped his head up with an elbow.

Her face grew hot. Looking down at the documents once more, adding, “Yes, well, even so. Isn’t flirting supposed to be spur-of-the-moment as opposed to well...this?”

“Baby steps, Lady Pen.” He smiled. “You’re trying to run before you’ve even learned to crawl. The more you practice your technique, the less you’ll need to study. But seeing as your technique right now is—frankly—abysmal, you shall have to rely on your studies as a crutch.”

“Abysmal?” she scoffed. “Such a confident assessment when you’ve never even observed me flirt.”

He pushed himself up from his armchair and walked to the back corner of the room, reaching for a water jug.

“What was it that you said to me when we first met?” he mused, filling up two glasses. “Ah yes, ‘I am—unfortunately—all too familiar with your sort’.” He winked.

He returned with two glasses of water and offered her one.

“You truly are a dangerous man, Your Grace,” she sighed, accepting her glass.

His eyes lit up with intrigue. “How so?”

“You’re observant, intelligent, and crafty,” came Penelope’s matter-of-fact reply. “It’s no wonder everyone says to be wary of you.”

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“By ‘everyone’, I presume you mean the Earl of Graystone,” he scoffed, moving his glass in circles to swish the water that remained inside.

“He’s just one of several, actually,” Penelope huffed. “As such, there’s no reason to single him out.”

“Yes, well, it isn’t wise to believe everything one hears,” the duke reminded her drily. “Graystone might have said such things to accomplish his own agenda.”

“Jerry would never!” Penelope snapped.

“Is that so?” The duke leaned forward. “I say he would, especially since he’d be encouraged by the way you—not only entertained, but—reciprocated his advances.”

Penelope’s jaw dropped. “He wasn’t flirting, and neither was I!” She set her glass down on the center table. “If you actually made friends with the women around you instead of only using them for pleasure, the bond that Graystone and I share wouldn’t be so difficult for you to grasp.”

He tapped his chin contemplatively. “If that wasn’t how you flirt, then prove it. Flirt with me now.”

“Absolutely not, you lunatic—”

“Let me see what we’re working with,” the duke egged her on. “First, you called my initial assessment of your technique inaccurate and now you claim that I can’t distinguish flirting from friendly banter.” He lowered his eyes. “So go on, then. Show

me.”

Penelope could hardly believe that she was agreeing to this. But determined to prove him wrong, she set aside her discomfort and pressed onward.

“It’s good to see you here, Your Grace,” she began with a smile. “Interested in a little... fun?”

Clearly amused, he leaned forward in his seat, his sultry eyes met her gaze head-on. “Perhaps...” he asked in a low growl, “What did you have in mind for me?”

Taken aback by his bold rejoinder, Penelope faltered. “Well, I- It’s-”

His sultry gaze disappeared as he laughed at her agitation and tutted, “You didn’t even last ten seconds.”

Unable to take any more of this, Penelope jumped up from her seat and sprinted towards the door. But the duke was faster and managed to grab her wrist just as she reached for the handle.

“Wait!” he said, the warmth of his hand wrapping around her wrist, “it wasn’t that bad, you just need to work on keeping your composure.”

But Penelope couldn’t even bring herself to speak, let alone face him again, so she attempted to silently shake her wrist free.

He pulled her back towards him and a gasp escaped her lips as she found herself mere inches away from his face. Shadows and flickering candlelight danced across his face, drawing her eyes to his lips.

His other hand found its way to her waist, stirring up butterflies in her stomach. The

corners of his lips turned upwards as he slowly closed what little distance remained between them.

For a moment, Penelope let her eyelids drop, bracing herself for the collision. But thankfully, her better judgment won over and she shoved him away.

“Nowthatwas much, much better,” he smirked.

Penelope opened her mouth to protest, but a knock at the door startled them both.

“Duncan, is that you in there?” the dowager duchess’ muffled voice came through the door.

CHAPTER8

Penelope stifled a yawn, barely able to keep her eyes open. Not only was she exhausted, but even the bright morning sun that she usually loved to bask in was quite irritating at the moment.

“What’s wrong, darling?” Mother asked from across the table. “Weren’t you able to sleep last night?”

“It was... an uncharacteristically restless night, Mother,” Penelope confessed. His Grace let out a snort at the other end of the table, causing her to glare at him.

“It’s nice to see that you find my suffering so amusing, Your Grace,” she snapped.

“Not at all, Lady Penelope.” The duke solemnly shook his head. “In fact, I happened to run into Mother late last night because she was suffering from a similar case of restlessness. Isn’t that right, Mother?”

“Indeed,” sighed the dowager duchess. “Whatever the cause, it appears to have somehow affected us both, Lady Penelope.”

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Penelope flashed a supportive smile at the older woman.

“You see, Lady Pen?” shrugged the duke, “I am, in fact, most sympathetic to your plight. And I do hope that whatever is causing your restlessness soon resolves itself.”

“I thank you,” she mumbled sarcastically, poking at the eggs on her plate, “but somehow, I have a feeling that is highly unlikely, Your Grace.”

In fact, as she recalled last night’s events she knew for certain that it would be practically impossible.

Last night at the library, the pair had exchanged looks of dismay when the dowager duchess knocked.

Grabbing her hand once more, the duke—inexplicably—led Penelope close to the library door instead of away from it.

Panicked, she whispered, “What are you doi-”

With his free hand, he urgently raised a finger to his lips.

“Yes, Mother!” he called back, gesturing to Penelope to stay behind the door. “I just needed to look over a couple of treatises for my meeting with Ashfordshire tomorrow.”

From her spot, Penelope watched as he quickly hid one of the glasses behind one of the armchair’s cushions and hastily gathered the papers together.

She scoffed internally, His Grace has clearly found himself in similar situations before.

After taking a moment to fix his hair and regain his composure, he opened the door fully, thus completely covering Penelope with it.

“I thought you went to bed,” she heard him say innocently.

“I certainly attempted to do so,” his mother sighed, “but I couldn’t stop worrying about Lady Punton. How did she seem to you on the promenade earlier?”

The duke leaned against the doorframe as he contemplated his answer, but it moved the door and slightly squeezed Penelope even tighter against the wall.

Now on her tiptoes, Penelope breathed as slowly and silently as possible. Past the door’s hinges, she could see the dowager duchess in her own robe and carrying a lamp.

After a brief moment of consideration, His Grace answered, “She seemed all right to me, Mother. Still melancholic, but that’s to be expected, of course, given how early it still is.”

Penelope looked upward, silently praying they would cut their discussion short.

The older woman sighed. “This morning, I explained to Lady Penelope that at this point, there's little else to be done apart from waiting for time to work its healing powers. However...”

“However, it wouldn’t hurt to do as much as possible to speed up the process.” His Grace finished her sentence. “I couldn’t agree more, Mother. I tell you what...”

Through the gap, Penelope watched him throw an arm around his mother's shoulders and slowly walk with her into the hallway. "I still need to prepare for my meeting. However, once that's done, I shall contemplate the matter in-depth."

"I don't know what I would do without you." The dowager duchess beamed, reaching up to lightly pat his face. "But don't stay up too late now. Otherwise, you might find yourself snoring in the Duke of Ashfordshire's office."

"Of course, good night, Mother." He planted a kiss on her forehead. "Do you want me to escort you back upstairs?"

"Nonsense!" She waved a hand dismissively. "I got myself down here, didn't I? Focus on your work now."

He watched her depart for a few seconds before slowly closing the library door. Penelope heaved a sigh of relief, which he appeared to mirror because his shoulders relaxed considerably.

Presently, at the breakfast table, as Penelope recalled the depth of Her Grace's concern for her and Mother, she felt even guiltier about lying.

Last night, she had voiced a similar sentiment to His Grace after the dowager duchess had left them.

"How can you lie so casually to your own mother?" Penelope had asked with a shudder.

"Out of necessity, one finds the strength for anything and everything," he returned. "What? Would you rather that you and I opened the door together and given her a heart attack? Don't we have a right to keep some secrets? For example, you're still extremely secretive about the reason you suddenly want to find a husband, yet I'm

here covering for you regardless.”

Penelope wrung her hands together. “I know. I was just... pointing out that you make it look so easy.”

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He sighed, running a hand through his hair. “To be honest, that’s because it is easier. It is much preferable to lie and shield the ones we love than having to rebuild them once we’ve allowed the truth to shatter them.”

She felt her expression soften upon hearing this.

Naturally, she completely disagreed with his twisted rationale. But Penelope also realized that he did not develop such a distorted view overnight.

“I understand, Your Grace,” she simply replied, before adding, “You may be a bizarre and rakish gentleman, but you’re certainly a good son to her.”

“You’re too kind,” he sarcastically retorted, before adding—in a more sincere tone, “But thank you, Lady Pen. Your mother is fortunate to have you as well. I mean, the fact that you’re adamant about finding a husband who would agree to take her in too, that’s rather admirable as well.”

The two stood across from each other in comfortable silence. Penelope mused whether this was the first time they had complimented each other without any traces of irony or passive aggression.

“I’m glad we found at least one common ground to stand on, Your Grace.” She flashed him a smile.

“Grief and tragedy have an odd way of doing that sometimes.” He returned her smile, but weakly, and wearing an expression that she had never seen on him before.

“Are you all right, Your Grace?” She hesitantly reached out to touch his arm.

His expression lit up as he winked. “As long as I’m with you, of course.”

“Ugh!” She rolled her eyes exasperatedly. “It’s utterly impossible to have a serious conversation with you.”

“What makes you so sure that I’m not serious about my remark?” he asked, both palms facing upwards.

But she didn’t answer, folding her arms to show her irritation.

“Better yet,” he folded his arms in return, “let me ask you this, why is it impossible to have a playful conversation with you?”

Penelope furrowed her eyebrows. “What are you talking about? I’m not impossible to-”

He clicked his tongue. “I didn’t mean any offense, Lady Pen. After all, no one’s perfect. You should be grateful that Providence gave you a flaw that can be easily overlooked.”

Penelope raised an eyebrow. “What was it that you said earlier? Oh yes, ‘let’s agree to disagree on that point’.”

Retrieving the documents from the center table, he offered them to her before pulling his hand back once more. Removing a single sheet, he folded it and inserted it into his pocket.

“Dear me, I almost accidentally gave you the main three names,” he tutted, handing her the remaining sheets of paper. “Get some rest and study well. I shall test you on

your knowledge when I return from my errands tomorrow.”

She accepted them from him with a nod. “Thank you and good night, Your Grace.”

He handed her one of the lamps so she could make her way back upstairs. However, once she stepped out into the darkened hallway, her feet felt as heavy as stone.

He cleared his throat, “Lady Pen, are you... afraid of the dark?”

“No!” she hissed. “I was just considering whether to stretch my legs for a bit before retiring to my room for the night.”

“Is that so?” He raised an eyebrow. “Very well, then. I’m sure you don’t want me staring at you as you try to decide, so I’m just going to close the door now and-”

“Wait!” she exclaimed, before remembering to lower her voice. “What time are you going to bed?” she asked over her shoulder. “Perhaps I shall wait until you’re done working and then escort you upstairs.”

“Oh, that won’t be necessary, fair lady,” he answered with a mischievous grin. “I’m quite used to working late into the night by myself, so please do go ahead without me. Good night!”

He began to close the door again.

“Your Grace!” she called out once more.

The duke partially reopened the door. “Yes?” he asked, clearly enjoying torturing her.

“You were right,” she mumbled.

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“I’m sorry, did you say something? I couldn’t quite hear-”

“You were right!” she hissed, averting her gaze. “I- I’m afraid of the dark.”

The duke pretended to gasp. “Really? But you conceal your fear ever so well!”

She gave him an annoyed look, prompting him to laugh even harder. He held up a finger and asked her to wait for a moment. The next thing she knew, he turned off the rest of the lamps and closed the library door behind him as he joined her in the hall.

“Oh, are you done working?” She blinked at him.

“Several hours ago.” He took the lamp from her hands. “I was simply making excuses to Mother to preserve her sanity earlier.” he offered her his arm once again, “Shall we, Lady Pen?”

Penelope wordlessly locked arms with him once again.

As they carefully ascended the staircase, he whispered, “If you’re so afraid of the dark, how on earth did you find the strength to go on late-night escapades?”

She scoffed at him, “I know it’s hard to see my face on account of the darkness surrounding us, Your Grace. But in case you’ve forgotten, I am alady, and proper ladies don’t sneak out for late-night escapades.”

“I don’t mean for anything vulgar,” he tutted. “I just mean killing time in the garden late at night when you can’t sleep. Or perhaps sneaking down into the kitchen when

you suddenly wake up with an appetite, you know, that sort of thing.”

They neared the top of the stairs.

“It’s never really been a problem before.” She shrugged, whispering to him, “I’m usually a good sleeper.”

They ambled down the corridor and despite the fact that it was still darkened, Penelope felt much more at ease the closer they drew to her room.

“Well, as long as you’re in this house, expect your nights to get much more interest-” he stopped himself midsentence. “Before you jump away from me screaming, I don’t mean it in that sense.” He cleared his throat. “Just that I’m usually awake quite late, so if you ever need to make a midnight trip to the garden, I’d be more than happy to fight back the darkness for you.”

She squeezed his arm. “Goodness! Be careful, Your Grace, for a moment you actually began to sound like a real friend there,” she teased.

He let out a snort.

At last, they arrived at her door. She had to remind herself to release his arm this time. But perhaps that was to be expected since, given the surrounding darkness, his presence was a comfort—rather than the nuisance that it normally was.

“Good night, Lady Pen.” He winked at her one last time.

“Good night, Your Grace,” she replied, rolling her eyes at him one last time as well.

Little did she realize, however, that she’d barely get a wink of sleep—yet again. This time, every attempt to close her eyes was met with flashes of the excitement that had

transpired earlier.

She attempted to lay on her left side, flashes of his self-satisfied smile filled her mind. When lying on her right, her mind flashed back to her embarrassing attempt to demonstrate her flirting prowess. And lying on her back, she got flashes of their lips almost touching.

When she had had her fill of this torture, she sat up and kicked the covers off of her.

If I'm not going to sleep, I may as well study, she huffed to herself.

At least this undertaking proved considerably more successful. By sunrise, she practically knew Viscount Steepwharf better than he knew himself.

With her mind exhausted, it was no longer capable of tormenting her with flashes of the previous night. However, instead of being tortured in her dreams, she found herself being tortured while awake by the glaring sun and the smug air with which the duke carried himself as he appeared completely unaffected from the night before.

As breakfast drew to a close, she asked Mother to pass her this morning's paper in the hopes that it would perk her up. Instead, His Grace rose from the head of the table, grabbed the paper, and floated over to where she sat.

“Here you go, Lady Pen.”

“Thank you,” she mumbled, accepting it from him, irritated by the sheer abundance of vigor and liveliness he possessed despite it all.

He turned to one of the maids. “Cynthia, would you please pour Lady Penelope some more tea?”

“Yes, Your Grace.”

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She stared daggers at him for showing off so blatantly. But the duke wordlessly fired back with a completely innocent expression, almost as if to say: What? I'm just being a good friend.

Penelope thanked the maid and took a big gulp of her tea, making a note to kick His Grace as hard as possible the next time she got the chance.

CHAPTER9

“What about here, Mother?” Penelope gestured to the stone bench.

“Yes.” Mother nodded with a smile. “This has just the right balance of shade and sunlight.”

For the first time since Father had died, in fact, for the first time since Father had fallen ill, Mother and Penelope had finally resumed their afternoon garden strolls.

As the two women took their places on the bench, Penelope retrieved her book from the basket before sliding it towards Mother, so that the latter could retrieve her needle and threads.

Penelope did her best to read but couldn't help but sneak worried glances at Mother out of the corner of her eye every now and then.

After breakfast, the rest of the morning passed by rather quietly and uneventfully, which Penelope had been most grateful for as it allowed her to make up for the sleep lost last night.

By the time luncheon rolled around, she finally felt back to her usual self. It was actually the dowager duchess who brought up the idea of an afternoon garden stroll.

Penelope concurred at once, presuming that Her Grace was addressing her alone. However, to her surprise, the dowager duchess took a moment to swallow her cake before turning to Mother to add, “Make sure you put on a shawl, Sophia, dear. As pleasant as the spring breezes are, you would do well to guard yourself against them in your weakened state.”

Even more unexpected was the way that Mother had hardly protested at all.

His Grace wasn't exaggerating when he alluded to how persuasive his family can be.

The three women had agreed to give each other some time to get dressed, grab their personal affects, and meet near the rear entrance of the house. However, when the time came, Mr. Rowley informed Penelope and Mother that Her Grace would run a little bit late as some urgent correspondence had suddenly arrived.

In hindsight, it was also entirely possible that Her Grace was doing this as a way of giving Penelope and Mother a chance to converse privately. She couldn't help but chuckle to herself at this thought because it appeared like the exact sort of orchestration the Duke of Blackmoore would be guilty of himself.

Like mother, like son, I suppose.

And now that she had been given this opportunity, Penelope had to make sure to take full advantage of it.

“It's so good to see that you're embroidering again.” Penelope smiled softly.

“Darling, you know I wouldn't have slowed down at all if it weren't for my joints.”

The older woman sighed, momentarily putting down her embroidery to examine her hands. “Truthfully, they’re still a bit painful, but I’ve missed embroidering so very much.”

“I’m not surprised at all.” Penelope chuckled. “I distinctly recall numerous picnics and tris where you were perfectly content with your embroidery while Father and I played in the grass.”

Mother exhaled slightly through her nose. “Your father used to always tease me, saying that I might as well have stayed at home if I wasn’t going to so much as touch the grass.”

She met Penelope’s gaze, her eyes now wet. “Now that he’s gone, I wish I had listened. I wish I had spent more time with-”

Penelope furiously shook her head. “Mother... if there is anyone to be blamed for you and Father not having spent enough time together, it would be Fathe-”

“Penelope!” her mother snapped, her eyes welling up even more so now. “How dare you say something so heartless about your own-”

Penelope leaped up from her spot, “But it’s true! If he had spent more time at home instead of gallivanting with-”

Mother didn’t let her finish, jumping up from the bench with a sob and running towards the house, pushing past the Dowager Duchess and the Duke of Blackmoore as she did.

“Sophia?” the dowager duchess called after her, but to no avail.

Only just now realizing that they were here, Penelope blinked her tears away, but new

tears came to replace them. The dowager duchess sent Penelope a sympathetic look before turning around to follow after Mother.

For her part, Penelope threw herself back onto the bench and buried her face in her hands. As she sobbed, she felt something soft touch her fingers.

Lowering her hands, she found His Grace offering her his handkerchief wearing a limp smile. She silently accepted it from him and began dabbing her eyes.

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As she did so, she met his gaze accidentally and sighed, “Just say whatever it is you want to ask.”

“Hmm?” The duke blinked at her. “I wasn’t thinking of asking you anything, Lady Pen. Aside from whether you’d like me to have some water brought for you, of course.”

Her hand froze mid-air when she heard this. “It’s a most uncharacteristic thing for you to be poking your nose where it isn’t wanted, Your Grace. Did something happen to you as well?”

The duke let out a snort. “Always so suspicious of me.”

Gesturing to the bench, he asked whether he could join her. Leaning back comfortably, he continued, “In truth, I don’t need to ‘poke my nose where it isn’t wanted’ because I’ve had quite a few arguments with my mother in the past and well, I’d recognize the looks in both your eyes anywhere,” he sighed, looking skyward.

“It just came out of nowhere.” Penelope clasped her hands together. “I didn’t mean to upset her, but I was just so tired of watching her bear the blame for everything that was his fault to begin with.”

Penelope stopped herself, but realized that it was most probably too late; she shared too much—that is, assuming that the dowager duchess hadn’t already told him what Penelope had shared in confidence before.

Likely sensing her apprehension, the duke awkwardly cleared his throat, “For what

it's worth, I think you're completely right."

Intrigued, Penelope shot him a perplexed look but when he didn't meet her gaze, she followed his line of sight and realized that he was watching a family of sparrows happily use the bird bath.

"After all, I'm sure you've noticed that I'm rather protective of my own mother as well," he exhaled.

Penelope's eyes drifted to the cloth mother had been embroidering as she replied through gritted teeth, "I should have protected her better when he was alive."

"How do you mean?" The duke furrowed his eyebrows in worry. "Was he... a violent sort of man?"

"No, thank Providence." Penelope scowled, looking down at her hands once more. "His problem was that he was too...friendly. I never confronted him about it because well, Mother never did. And even now that he's gone, she's doing exactly what she did when he was alive—locking herself away in her room to drown in her tears and sorrow."

Turning her body a little away from him, Penelope angled her head to lean against the bench's backrest. "I just wish I could understand why she would put herself through so much for all those years."

The duke let out a deep sigh. "For love, one can withstand even the most torturous of pains."

She looked over her shoulder to find the duke had also similarly laid his head on the backrest and was looking straight into her eyes.

“Have...you been in love before, Your Grace?” She blinked at him.

With a snort, he answered, “Heavens no! And I thank Providence for that every day.”

Penelope rolled her eyes. “Then how do you know about withstanding ‘even the most torturous of pains’?” She turned to face him. “Come now, Your Grace, I’ve told you so many of my secrets, isn’t it fair that you share at least one of yours?”

He scanned their surroundings before finally letting out a sigh, “It’s not really a secret, but when I was younger, I called off an engagement with the Duke of Hollowston’s daughter.”

Penelope’s eyes widened, this must have happened either before or just immediately after she was out because she didn’t remember hearing about this at all. “Which one? Lady Amelia?”

“The very same,” he answered with a bitter smile. “Her father—understandably—took great offense because the engagement had already been announced four months prior and the wedding was barely two months away, so he made it his duty to warn the ton about me.”

“But surely you didn’t call it off for something trivial, Your Grace,” Penelope gasped, “Didn’t you give him your reason?”

“I had one, of course,” His Grace averted his eyes, “but I knew explaining myself wasn’t going to make a difference, so I figured it would be smarter—and far less humiliating—if I kept it close to my chest instead.”

“What was it though?” Her curiosity prompted her to slide a little closer to him.

He cleared his throat, “Love, well, more accurately, the fear of love.” He also

adjusted his posture, putting even less space between them now. “You see, my parents never had eyes for anyone other than each other. So, when I saw my mother being torn apart from her grief,” his voice began to sound constricted, “well, I decided to spare myself the pain while I still could.”

“Wasn’t it still painful to lose Lady Amelia, however?”

“No.” He shrugged. “Our fathers arranged it, and I went along out of convenience, but the longer you stay, the higher the risk of growing to love someone. So, I called it off.”

As he sat before her, bathed in speckles of the afternoon sun’s golden rays that found their way through the canopy of leaves, Penelope wished she could do more than sit here sympathetically.

If it were Graystone telling me this, I’d have no problem pulling him in for a hug.

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“But you’ve somehow still managed to find yourself in pain, Your Grace,” she reminded him. “I know you’re more self-assured than most, but the deadly glares and hushed whispers that get thrown your way at events must sting even just a little bit.”

“A little, yes.” He chuckled, before his eyes darkened once more. “But then I remember that it doesn’t hurt nearly a fraction as much as it does to lose someone you love. I mean, you’re seeing it now with your own mother, right?”

Penelope looked at the clouds lazily drifting above them. “Yes,” she choked out.

“And aren’t you worried about suffering the same fate after you’re remarried?” inquired the duke.

Penelope shook her head confidently. “After having witnessed all the terrible things she put her through? There is absolutely no chance I would ever allow myself to be so weak. I simply need a means to get away from-”

She stopped herself again.

He held up a hand reassuringly. “Like I said, I won’t pry, Lady Pen. But since you’re still determined to continue in your quest for a husband, we shall conduct your first official lesson in my study at nine o’clock tonight.”

“Lesson?” She tilted her head.

But he was already stretching his arms above his head as he walked away. “I hope you studied well,” he called over his shoulder. “I don’t like to waste time.”

She watched him walk away for a little bit before chuckling under her breath, “I know, Your Grace. I know.”

CHAPTER 10

Penelope debated whether to bring all of the sheets His Grace had given her or just the ones that concerned Viscount Steepwharf. The clock in the corner showed that it was five minutes to nine.

Not wanting to be mocked for her tardiness, Penelope took one last look in the mirror before folding the papers—just the ones about Lord Steepwharf—and slipping them into her cloak’s pocket.

Pulling her cloak’s hood over her head, she grabbed a lamp and then turned the doorknob.

But when the door swung open she squealed upon finding a shadowy figure standing before her.

“Shh!” His Grace placed a hand over her mouth. “Are you trying to get us caught?” he whispered, his face mere inches away from hers.

She smacked his hand away in irritation. “I could ask the same of you!” she hissed, one hand on her chest. “Why are you trying to give me a heart attack?”

He rolled his eyes. “Did you think I’d force you to walk to my study by yourself, Little Miss Afraid-of-the-Dark?”

“That’s-” she blinked at him, “That’s actually quite considerate of you, Your Grace.”

“Well, I didn’t want to spend the rest of the night waiting for you to crawl your way

to the study,” he chuckled, prompting her to punch his arm. “Out of curiosity, what would you have done if I hadn’t come to get you?”

“What else?” She raised her lamp higher. “I would have used this lamp and my own two legs.”

“Ah yes, because your last attempt to do so went ever so well,” he teased. Before she could protest, he offered his arm once more. “Now let’s be on our way before we really do get caught.”

Not another word was said until the pair had reached the duke’s study. To Penelope’s surprise, there were even more lamps and candles present than when they had met in the library.

“Is my fear of the dark spreading to you, Your Grace?” she teased, gesturing to the room broadly.

“Don’t flatter yourself,” he answered drily. “I told you I’m used to working late, didn’t I? I always keep so many on hand to avoid damaging my eyes.” He cleared his throat to add, “But perhaps I may have added one or two more lamps for your benefit.”

“Why, thank you, Your Grace,” she half-sarcastically joked, walking to one of the chairs at his study desk. “I can tell by your tone that you were most thrilled to make such a sacrifice.”

Rolling a quill between his fingers as he sat behind the desk with his broad shoulders and confident air, Penelope couldn’t help but wonder how many hearts of noblemen His Grace had struck fear into as they sat in this very spot.

But instead of fear, Penelope found herself filled with a sense of ease and comfort as

the duke flashed her a mischievous smile, “Nervous?” he asked.

“Not at all,” she rejoined.

Upon fishing the sheets out of her pocket to return to him, she remarked, “Based on everything I've learned about Viscount Steepwharf, he seems like a great match, I'm surprised he didn't make it into your final three picks for m-”

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“But he’s of low rank and only a small fortune.” His Grace pointed to the sheet where he had written that same remark down. “Are you saying you would have considered him regardless?”

“Why, certainly!” Penelope shrugged. “From your notes, I received the impression that he may not have much, but he’d have enough for Mother and me, which still makes him ideal.”

His Grace clicked his tongue. “This isn’t the main point of tonight’s lesson, but I once again feel the need to beseech you, Lady Pen: Please do raise your standards.”

“You’re one to talk, Lord Rake.” She narrowed her eyes at him. “And by the way, weren’t you warning me against wasting time earlier? Yet here you are bringing up points that—by your own admission—bear no relevance to tonight’s ‘lesson’.”

“Very well!” His Grace chuckled, gathering the papers together.

Penelope straightened in her chair, ready for her test. But to her surprise, the duke simply placed the papers under a stack of books on his desk and rose from his chair.

“Where are you goin-”

“Your test shall be as realistic as possible, Lady Pen.” He gestured for her to get up. “I shall pretend to be Lord Steepwharf, and you may utilize everything you’ve studied about ‘me’ while also applying the main principles of your first lesson: body language.”

As he spoke, the duke led her towards the center of the room. Hearing about what he had in store for her, she suddenly regretted saying that she wasn't nervous.

Standing opposite her, he explained, "Body language in relation to flirting consists of three main aspects: proximity, eye contact, and physical touch. Is that clear?"

Penelope nodded her head.

"With these three alone," her instructor continued, "one may communicate everything in their heart and mind without uttering a single word."

Penelope nodded once more, but this time with some hesitance. "You truly have a penchant for exaggeration, Your Grace. Surely it wouldn't cover everything on one's mind?"

In response to her skepticism, a mischievous grin spread across the duke's face. He slowly raised her hand to his lips and kissed it softly, causing a tingling trail to shoot up her arm.

Locking his eyes with hers, he slid his hand up to her forearm, and with a gentle tug, he pulled her close. His other hand found its way to her waist as he whispered hoarsely, "How else would you like to be persuaded?"

A deep shiver rippled through her and Penelope had no choice but to shove him away from her.

"Do you believe me now?" he laughed, straightening his jacket.

"That hardly counts." Penelope pretended to scoff. "You still had to ask me a question in the end." she reminded him, desperate to distract him from the blood that had rushed to her face.

He shrugged. “Even so, I trust you now understand the potency that body language holds when wielded correctly.”

Still irritated, Penelope couldn't bring herself to look at him.

I can't take his 'test' while so scatter-brained. I must find a way to delay it for the time being.

“My throat feels a little itchy,” she lied. “May I please have some water, Your Grace?”

“Of course, you should have said so earlier.”

Penelope watched him walk towards a decanting table tucked away in the far corner of the room. But to her surprise, when the duke turned around, he had a tray carrying tea, biscuits, and yes, a water jug.

After setting the tray down on his study desk, he began pouring her a glass. “I noticed you didn't eat much at dinner earlier, so I had these prepared just in case.”

“T-Thank you, Your Grace,” she stuttered, accepting the glass from him.

“Again, don't flatter yourself.” He wagged a finger at her, before tossing one of the biscuits in his mouth. “If you collapsed from hunger on my study floor, it'd be rather difficult to explain to the rest of the household.”

Penelope swallowed her water before replying, “If you warn me to not flatter myself one more time, I shall march back upstairs without a second thought—regardless of my fear of the dark,” she warned him.

“I'm just making sure!” He raised both hands innocently. “I know women who have

gotten their hopes up for much less.”

Penelope returned her glass to the tray. Having regained most of her composure, she explained that she was ready to get properly started this time.

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With a nod, the duke began their rehearsal.

“Ah, Lady Penelope,” he said in a pretentious voice—prompting her to roll her eyes, “It’s lovely to see you here, how are you finding the Season so far?”

“It’s lovely to see you too, Lord Steepwharf,” she answered, seeing an opportunity to work in one of his interests she had read in the sheets. “The Season has been wonderful. I’m personally looking forward to the opera this year. I hear it has been exceptional.”

“It is!” came ‘Lord Steepwharf’s’ eager reply. “I can’t even count how many times I’ve been to see it this month alone.”

This lighthearted conversation carried on for about two more minutes or so and appeared to be going quite well seeing how Penelope was able to weave in more and more about what she now knew about the viscount.

But the duke soon raised a hand to stop everything. “Lady Pen, why aren’t you using any of the body language tenets I gave you?” he asked bewilderedly.

“I beg your pardon?” She blinked at him. “Lord Steepwharf and I have been talking for two minutes! I can’t just suddenly jump into-”

“Two minutes is an eternity!” he exclaimed, spreading his arms wide for emphasis. “You should be using your body language to draw him in before you even greet him.”

“But that’s so-”

He let out a deep exhale and gently grabbed her wrist. “You want to get married, right?”

“Y-Yes.”

“Then act like it,” he urged her, gently tapping her wrist. “You aren’t shopping at the grocer’s, you are hunting,” he reminded her. “Watch for signals he may be giving you, and be deliberate in the manner in which you return them.”

In hindsight, it seemed very much like common sense. But in truth, his words were eye-opening.

“I understand, Your Grace,” she answered with a nod.

“Very well,” he exhaled, releasing her hand, “then let’s begin again.”

“Turn away for a second,” she demanded, shaking out her hands. “I need to compose myself.”

With a chuckle, he obliged, allowing Penelope a chance to loosen her limbs and set her apprehension aside,

“All right, I’m ready,” she called out.

She closed her eyes and sucked in a deep breath to help her concentrate. Once she opened them, ‘Lord Steepwharf’ stood before her again.

“Ah, Lady Penelope, it’s lovely to see you here. How are you finding the Season so far?”

His greeting was exactly the same, but this time Penelope noticed the upturned corner

of his mouth and responded in kind. “The Season has been going well enough, Lord Steepwharf.” She lowered her eyes. “But I’m hoping it gets even... better.”

“I’m sure that could be easily arranged.” He stepped towards her, running a hand through his hair. “Personally, I’ve been rather enjoying this year’s opera.” His eyes flitted away for a second before he asked, “Have you been to it yet?”

“Not yet,” she sighed, stepping closer towards him as well, “I’m afraid such things are never as enjoyable without...” She reached a hand out to pick a speck off his coat, “...the right company.”

Before she could retract her hand, he took it in his own and brought it up to his lips. “A lady so lovely should never be lonely.”

Almost like it had a mind of its own, Penelope’s hand freed itself from his grasp only to then cup his face. “I’m inclined to agree,” she whispered, “...Lord Steepwharf.”

Hearing this, the duke appeared to essentially snap out of a trance, practically jumping away from her.

“That was-” he cleared his throat, “Of course, it wouldn’t progress quite so quickly, but I think you- well, you know-” he quickly crossed the room to his study desk, “you now clearly understand just how er, crucial body language is.”

“Yes, of course, Your Grace,” she answered, still in the same spot where their little rehearsal had taken place. After a moment of hesitance, she opened her mouth to apologize, “Your Grace, I’m sorry if I pushed it too far-”

“Not at all.” He waved a dismissive hand. “The accelerated pace of our rehearsal was necessary since it’s hardly practical to reenact several hours’ worth of conversation to arrive at the same conclusion.”

“I see,” she managed to squeak out.

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Just before the awkward silence overpowered them, the duke reached for the teapot and asked whether she would like a cup.

Even though she was worried about not being able to sleep for the rest of the night, she would also be grateful for anything to calm her down after all the excitement.

Accepting the cup from him, she gently blew the rising steam away. She caught him staring at her and froze up, wondering if she was doing something wrong again. “What?”

He shook his head. “Nothing, it’s just- you’re quite the menace, Lady Pen.”

Her face fell.

“It’s a good a thing,” he added, raising his cup to her. “The real Lord Steepwharf won’t stand a chance.” He grinned.

Penelope couldn’t help but let out a delighted squeal. After all, it was high praise from someone so... adept at this sort of thing.

He nudged the plate of biscuits towards her, “But don’t let your guard down,” he tutted, “Like I said, remain observant and deliberate. If you do, your wedding bells might ring sooner than your friend Jerry’s.”

She chuckled, grabbing one of the jam-filled biscuits. “Please tell me you see the irony in someone like yourself telling another person to ‘not let their guard down’.”

He clicked his tongue in annoyance. “Don’t make me kick you out to the hallway.”

CHAPTER 11

“Well, well, well... Look who finally brought himself to leave the house.” Matthew Leeson—the Duke of Fairhaven—puffed through his pipe.

Duncan retrieved his own pipe from his coat before handing it to the servant. “At least I go home every once in a while,” he retorted, accepting a lit match from the servant to start his pipe. “You, on the other hand, have practically melted into that armchair.”

Duncan thought the lads should consider themselves rather fortunate that Gillingham’s still tolerated them after all the stunts they pulled—collectively and individually—within it. And something about the air in this particular gentlemen’s club always made it stick to you.

As a result, when Duncan was younger, one of the easiest ways for his parents to tell whether he had snuck out during the night or hadn’t been carrying out his errands would be to smell his hair—and if it smelled like rosemary and cigars, well, it could only mean Gillingham’s.

His friend exhaled deeply, dangling his free arm over the chair’s side. “What do you expect, old bean? When one’s heart is broken, even standing upright feels impossible!”

“Or apparently, even sitting upright,” Duncan retorted, nodding to his friend’s slumped posture. “So which unwilling lady have you imposed your heart on this time?” He blew out a puff of smoke.

“Hmph! As usual, you display no sympathy for my plight!” his friend lamented.

“That’s because most of your ‘plights’ are self-inflicted.” Duncan rolled his eyes, taking the armchair next to him.

“Someone without a sliver of romance in his bones couldn’t possibly understand,” the red-haired duke huffed. “And for your information, I really did love Lady Beatrice.”

“Just as much as you ‘loved’ Lady Augusta?”

“That was different!” Fairhaven snapped. “We had a rather unfortunate series of irreconcilable differences in-”

“Her father asked you if and when you were going to propose and you took offense,” Duncan reminded him. “While she was also present and while you were in their house, mind you.”

“If he hadn’t rushed me, I would have proposed... eventually,” his friend returned. “But no, his impatience ruined everything!”

Duncan opened his mouth to protest his friend’s skewed reasoning but decided against it in the end.

After all, there’s only so many times we can have the same conversation—albeit in slightly different variations.

“Has Harlington arrived yet?” Duncan asked, changing the subject.

“Billiards,” mumbled the other duke. “He too had no sympathy to spare for my anguish.”

Duncan sarcastically bowed his head. “O Caesar, forgive our transgression! We were but fools to assume the world revolves around anything or anyone other than your

resplendent self!”

“If I’m Caesar, then that makes the pair of you Brutus and- who was the other main fellow that led that dastardly ploy?” inquired his friend.

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“Why would I aid you in insulting us?” Duncan chuckled, signaling for the servants to bring them a fresh teapot. “And speaking of fellows who don't get along, is Steepwharf in today?”

This question was apparently intriguing enough to finally get Fairhaven to straighten up in his chair. “I think I saw him in the Upper East lounge when I passed it earlier.” he answered. “Why? Does he owe you or something?”

“Nothing like that.” Duncan scanned their surroundings before leaning in. “I presume Harlington filled you in on my latest quest on Lady Penelope's behalf.”

“He did, indeed.” Fairhaven nodded, leaning forward to grab a tart. “Are you looking for Steepwharf to take the fall, then?”

Duncan began to answer, but froze—after twenty odd years of friendship, Duncan knew better than to ignore an askew remark from Fairhaven, no matter how small.

Slowly turning his head towards his friend, “What exactly do you mean, Fairhaven?”

“You know,” his friend lowered his voice, “Steepwharf shall marry Lady Penelope at once and no one need ever find out that you er,” he looked down at the pastry in his hand, “put a bun in her oven.”

Duncan lightly slapped a hand across Fairhaven's forehead, eliciting a surprised yelp in return.

“Lady Penelope isn't that sort of woman,” he hissed, “nor am I that empty-headed or

depraved!”

“You’re dead, Blackmoore!” roared his friend, jumping onto his armchair with so much force it fell backward and took both of them with it. As they rolled onto the floor, Duncan spit out his pipe, lest it cause some damage to the roof of his mouth during this scuffle—he remembered something similar happened to the Marquess of Southvale a few years prior.

“Get off of me, you fool!” Duncan called out, prying his hot-headed friend’s hands off his collar. “Don’t make me hit you! Or else you shan’t be able to show your face to Lady Beatrice for the next month!” he warned.

But his friend only proceeded to tighten his grip and shake him even harder. “You’ll be sorry for that you-”

Suddenly, Duncan felt Fairhaven’s weight lift. He raised his head to see Harlington with his hands in his pockets, wearing a wide grin after having kicked their friend off of him. “After all these years, I still can’t trust you morons to go ten minutes without my oversight.”

Duncan rolled his eyes, but accepted Harlington’s hand to help him get up. “How was your billiards match?” he asked.

“How do you think?” Harlington replied with a glint in his eye as he waved his coin purse in the air triumphantly.

The friends helped the servants re-erect the fallen armchair. And Duncan thanked one of the men for returning his pipe to him and apologized for the commotion. “Next time, I’ll be sure to sit as far away from Fairhaven as possible,” he joked, fishing out his handkerchief to wipe down his pipe.

A chorus of lighthearted chuckles and “It’s all right, Your Grace’s” rang out before the servants dispersed. In truth, given Fairhaven’s foul mood and Duncan’s stubbornness, they had probably been expecting something like this to erupt.

At least now Fairhaven had gotten it out of his system, they could finally enjoy the rest of their stay in peace—or so Duncan thought.

Presently, Fairhaven was quickly striding towards the door.

“Where do you think you’re going, Lees?” Duncan called after him.

“Wherever you’re not!” he angrily declared.

Once Duncan had explained to a confused Harlington everything that had transpired in his absence, the marquess could do nothing but shake his head and sigh,

“I meant to warn you that Fairhaven hasn’t been acting like himself lately either.”

Duncan raised an eyebrow in surprise, “How could you possibly tell when even Fairhaven barely understands what ‘acting like himself’ even is?”

“I can tell because I don’t spend every waking second endeavoring to rile him up.” Harlington rolled his eyes. “He says it’s because of Lady Beatrice, but I’d bet good money that there’s much more to it than that.”

“You better go make sure he doesn’t find a way to get himself thrown out—even Gillingham’s patience has its limits.” Duncan suggested, “I’ll come find you once I’ve spoken to Steepwharf.”

“Perhaps I should accompany you first—”

“No need,” Duncan assured him. “He’s less likely to be hostile if I approach him alone.”

With that, the friends went their separate ways for the time being.

As Duncan ascended the steps to the next floor, he passed one of the servants who confirmed what Fairhaven had claimed earlier—the Viscount Steepwharf was indeed in the Upper East Lounge.

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“Is he with anyone else?” Duncan asked.

“I believe he was discussing matters of business with Lords Penswaithe and Tresney,” replied the servant.

Duncan swore under his breath.

Wonderful...he sighed to himself. Each of them is barely tolerable on their own, but together, they’re utterly insufferable.

But Duncan reminded himself that the success of Lady Penelope’s quest for a husband depended on this, so for her sake, he would stomach their company.

Even as he entered the room, he could already feel the wretched party’s eyes on him.

He approached their cluster of armchairs with the most convincing smile he could muster. “Good afternoon, gents. I trust all is well,” he greeted cordially.

“Did you hit your head, Blackmoore?” Penswaithe immediately taunted, “Or has your eyesight become so bad that you’re mistaking Tresney’s red hair for Fairhaven’s?”

“Come now, lads.” Duncan felt his smile constrict. “I know everyone says that Louxbridge and Midlington graduates don’t mix, but such conflicts have always consisted of nothing more than good-natured—albeit somewhat spirited—jabs.”

Naturally, Duncan was addressing the table, but his eyes remained trained on Steepwharf, who took a big gulp of his coffee before finally breaking his stony

silence,

“What do you want, Your Grace?” his tone dripping with venom.

Seeing that his audience’s patience was somehow already wearing thin, Duncan cut straight to the point. “I heard you were having a garden party this Saturday and was wondering if you had space on your guest list.”

“Not a chance,” the viscount scoffed. “Why would you even care to come anyway? I don’t know what you and your debased friends are planning, but there’s absolutely no room for your sort of—”

Duncan raised a hand to stop him. “Actually, I’m asking on behalf of my mother and her goddaughter,” he clarified. “Why on God’s green earth would Fairhaven and Harlington be so desperate to get into a garden party of all things?”

“The dowager duchess wishes to come?” Steepwharf raised a skeptical eyebrow. “But why?”

“Why else?” Duncan shrugged—feeling a twinge of guilt for using his mother as an excuse. “You know how she is, always endeavoring to keep up with everyone—that’s why there isn’t a soul in the world that wishes her ill.”

“Which is more than can be said for her rake of a son,” Lord Tresney chimed in.

But Duncan held his tongue, he wanted Steepwharf to say yes.

“It’s true that I hold nothing against Her Grace,” Lord Steepwharf contemplated out loud, tapping his chin as he did so. “In fact, I’d go so far as to say that I’m still rather fond of her, so for hersake, it would be—”

He raised his eyes towards Duncan, “And you shan’t be bringing any of your wretched bedfellows with you?”

“Not at all,” Duncan assured him. “Just my mother and the goddaughter that she’s endeavoring to cheer up. She’s just lost her father you see.”

Duncan silently apologized to Penelope for using her as an excuse as well.

“Yes, but what exactly are you trying to do, Your Grace?” The Marquess of Penswain eyed him up and down. “You aren’t really known for your noble intentions.”

Duncan let out a deep exhale. “Gentlemen, I promise you that you’re reading far too much into this. How am I supposed to prove that to you?”

Lord Tresney’s eyes suddenly lit up. “That’s a wonderful question, Your Grace. Now that you’ve mentioned it, I might know just the thing.”

CHAPTER 12

It was a somewhat warm day for a garden party, but otherwise, everything seemed to be going well.

Penelope straightened her skirt as she listened to the Dowager Duchess of Blackmoore make pleasant conversation with Lord Steepwharf’s sister—now the Countess of Belmere.

The party itself was a rather cozy affair with no more than twelve or so other guests present. As a result, the only people she recognized here were Lord Larkspur and another lady whose face looked familiar, but whose name escaped Penelope for the time being.

“How wonderful that you’re enjoying married life!” exclaimed the dowager duchess, gently fanning herself in the shade of the large oak tree they currently stood under. “If you get the chance, do ask Lord Belmore to see if he can try to talk some similar sense into Duncan’s head as well.”

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I wish Lord Belmere all the very best with that futile endeavor. Penelope chuckled to herself. His Grace has made it perfectly clear that he's somehow even more opposed to the idea of marriage than even I am.

Speaking of whom, Penelope spotted His Grace out of the corner of her eye confidently striding towards them with another dark-haired gentleman in tow.

She straightened her shoulders at once, realizing what was about to happen. Sure enough, His Grace arrived with a larger-than-usual smile. "Sorry to interrupt your discussion, Mother, but Lord Steepwharf is rather keen to say hello."

Penelope listened attentively to the pleasantries they exchanged. From what she gathered, Her Grace and Lord Steepwharf's parents had been on rather good terms—perhaps as close as Penelope and Graystone's families had been.

However, when she glanced over at Lord Steepwharf and the Duke of Blackmoore standing side-by-side, she thought she sensed an air of tense discomfort between them.

"And Lady Penelope, please allow me to introduce the Viscount Steepwharf." His Grace gestured with an open hand. "Lord Steepwharf, this is Lady Penelope, daughter of the late Earl of Punton, and my mother's goddaughter."

Be observant, alert, and deliberate. Penelope hastily reminded herself as she and Lord Steepwharf exchanged greetings.

"We're so pleased that you could join us, Lady Penelope," beamed the viscount.

Penelope noted the laugh lines around his eyes crease. “It’s a pity it took so long for us to be introduced.”

“Indeed.” Penelope let out a nervous chuckle—suddenly keenly aware that His Grace was observing this entire exchange.

But realizing that this fact should be spurring her onwards rather than holding her back, Penelope sucked in a deep breath to renew her conviction.

As the group continued to converse about the Season so far, Penelope had no choice but to rely on body language alone to get Lord Steepwharf’s attention.

She pulled out her fan in the hopes that the movement would draw his eye to her—and it did indeed. When she ‘caught’ him looking at her, she coyly averted her eyes, ensuring to slightly turn her lips upwards to appear embarrassed.

“Now that your sister’s happily married, you can finally focus on fixing your own marriage, Steepwharf,” the dowager duchess teased.

“Oh, it is most unwise to rush into such matters, Your Grace,” rejoined the viscount. “Regret is a rather heavy burden to carry for the rest of one’s life.”

Penelope leaped at this chance. “But surely if you met the right person, Lord Steepwharf...” she interjected breathily, tucking a lock of hair behind her ear, “...you would hardly regret it then, right?”

“O-Of course,” he sputtered in response. “A rather excellent point, Lady Penelope.”

“The Season is still young,” chirped Her Grace. “You very well might meet the right person sooner than you think.”

This time, Penelope didn't have to use her fan to draw his attention. Discreetly checking out of the corner of her eye, she noticed him steal a curious glance at her upon hearing the dowager duchess' reassurance.

She couldn't help but smile to herself upon realizing just how well this was going and wondered if His Grace had noticed it too.

Partially hiding her face with her fan, Penelope shot an eager look in the duke's direction, hoping to find him showing even a hint of pride at her success thus far.

But to her bewilderment, she was instead met with an uncharacteristically cold expression from the Duke of Blackmoore.

Am I doing something wrong? she worried.

But this inner question was soon answered by Lord Steepwharf politely asking, "Would you care for a stroll, Lady Penelope?"

It took all of her strength to not jump in celebration. Naturally, she still remembered that flirting with the viscount was just supposed to serve as practice. However, she could hardly believe that she had even managed to get this far.

She stole another glance at His Grace thinking that he must surely acknowledge this milestone. But this time, he appeared to be paying no attention to the discussion whatsoever, evidently distracted by something—or perhaps someone—on the other side of the garden.

Not allowing her annoyance with His Grace to dampen her spirit, she answered the viscount with a chipper, "Most certainly, Lord Steepwharf!"

With the dowager duchess' permission, the two began meandering down the garden

path, politely greeting other guests as they passed them.

“Your grounds are impeccable, Lord Steepwharf,” Penelope remarked politely.

“Thank you, Lady Penelope,” he chuckled in reply. “Now that we’re acquainted, perhaps one of these days we shall get to pay a visit to your family’s estate.”

“But of course-” Penelope began, but then remembered the wretched monster of an uncle that awaited her back at home and found herself disheartened.

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Her companion shot her a look of concern. "I'm sorry, was I being too forward, I didn't mean to--"

"Not at all," Penelope hastily clarified. "I merely happened to lose my train of thought," she said with a sheepish smile.

"Perhaps it's a sign that we should get you some food soon." Her companion grinned. "Everything should be ready within the next few minutes."

As they carried on with their walk, the pair shared more about their lives with each other. But it wasn't long before Penelope slipped up.

"Yes, I've heard. For you see my father also attended the University of Midlington. So, I endeavor to kee-" she gasped, catching herself too late.

"Oh." The viscount blinked at her. "Did I already tell you that I went to Midlington?"

Penelope froze with her mouth open as she scrambled inwardly for a response.

"Ah!" Lord Steepwharf snapped his fingers, "The Duke of Blackmoore must have told you, didn't he?" He shook his head, "He really is a typical Louxbridge man."

Penelope let out a sigh of relief. "His Grace may have mentioned you once or twice on the way here," she lied.

"You must have a heart of gold, Lady Penelope." Lord Steepwharf lowered his voice. "In truth, I admire you for being so willing to acknowledge the Duke of Blackmoore

so openly.”

Penelope furrowed her eyebrows in confusion. “But of course, I mean, His Grace and I were only very recently formally introduced, but our families have always been-”

“Yes, that much I understand, but...” The viscount shifted his eyes, ensuring that no one else was close by, “to be perfectly honest, our family was rather close to His Grace’s parents as well.”

“Oh, is that so?” Penelope raised an eyebrow in surprise. “I didn’t realize that you and His Grace were that clo-”

“We aren’t—at least, we haven’t been for a while,” the viscount clarified, “and even if he hadn’t-” he sighed, “Never mind.”

Penelope decided not to pry further. “At least you both still have one thing in common, Lord Steepwharf.” She gently elbowed his side. “You’re both rather mysterious.”

Her attempt to lighten the discussion’s mood worked and they managed to make perfectly pleasant conversation until Lady Belmere announced that their food was served.

As Penelope rejoined the dowager duchess and His Grace at their assigned table, she noted that the latter was still behaving somewhat strangely.

For public events like this, he usually puts on an unbearably bubbly and affable temperament. What on earth is he even thinking about now?

* * *

The garden party had been going smoother than Duncan had initially expected—but of course, it was still far from perfect.

As he conversed with Lady Amelia and her mother, the Viscountess of Haybrooke, his eyes kept wandering towards the desserts table where Mother and Lady Penelope stood conversing with Tresney and Larkspur.

What could they possibly be saying to make Lady Penelope laugh so much? He narrowed his eyes suspiciously.

Snapping himself out of his daze, he attempted to return his full attention to Lady Amelia, who had been dropping some rather conspicuous hints of her interest.

Ordinarily, he would have jumped at the opportunity for some fun—after all, with her rosy cheeks and pretty curls, Lady Amelia would be quite the catch.

But after a handful of half-hearted attempts to reciprocate Lady Amelia's attention, Duncan decided to stop wasting the poor lady's time and excused himself.

Looking over his shoulder one last time, he confirmed that Mother and Lady Penelope were content where they were. So, he slipped away, hands in his pockets, and searched for a quiet spot for a smoke.

Thankfully, he discovered that the western gardens of the house appeared deserted—at least for now. Taking refuge beneath a sturdy tree, he retrieved his spare pipe and a match to light it.

He hummed to himself as he raised a hand to strike the match, appreciating the stillness he was surrounded by—the trees, the battered stone wall, the-

“Trying to burn our house down?” a voice joked behind him.

Duncan spun around quickly but relaxed upon seeing that it was only Steepwharf.

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“Come now, we don’t hate each other that much,” Duncan returned with a dry laugh, scanning their surroundings. “Were you... following me? Or is it somehow customary for you to smoke at this exact tree at this exact hour?”

The viscount huffed, “Naturally, I had to follow and make sure you weren’t up to anything.”

“Seriously?” Duncan rolled his eyes. “I gave you my word and something for security, didn’t I? What was the point of all that if you were still going to worry regardless?”

Steepwharf didn’t answer, he just reached into his coat’s inner pocket and pulled out Duncan’s primary pipe, the one that Tresney and Penswaithe had been holding as ‘security’ since their encounter at Gillingham’s.

“Take it,” the other man urged, holding it out to him.

“But that wasn’t the deal.” Duncan furrowed his eyebrows, his spare pipe still in his hand. “The party’s still far from ove-”

“Just take it, Blackmoore,” sighed the viscount. “We, or rather, I changed my mind.”

With only some apprehension, Duncan accepted his pipe back. “Dare I ask why the sudden change of heart?” he queried, inspecting the returned article.

Steepwharf’s lips tilted upwards. “If you want to thank someone, it should be Lady Penelope.”

Duncan froze. “What did you-”

“Relax,” the viscount grunted. “Why would any of us tell her that the only reason your family was allowed to come at all is that we confiscated something dear to you?”

His muscles slackened. “Of course. But then, why should I be thanking her?”

As he asked this, Duncan slipped his preferred pipe into his pocket to ensure its safety, he struck the match and lit up his spare pipe. “By the way, I have more matches, so you don’t have to limit yourself to merely watching me smoke.”

Steepwharf exhaled slightly through his nose before retrieving a cigar and joining Duncan under the tree’s shade.

One puff of smoke later, the viscount answered, “She had nothing but high praise for you.”

Duncan scoffed, leaning against the trunk, “Are you sure this is Lady Penelope we’re talking about?”

“I’m serious,” Steepwharf answered. “With a reputation like yours, one of the quickest ways to form a connection to someone else who’s met you is by bonding over how much of a wretch you are.”

“So honored to be of service,” Duncan sarcastically replied, this remark barely surprised him as he had heard similar sentiments from others before.

“But when I tried to do the same with her, she leaped to your defense at practically any chance she got.” Steepwharf smiled to himself. “In hindsight, I’m not entirely sure if she even realized what she was doing. I had initially assumed that it was

because you had tricked her into loving you but—”

“But...?” Duncan prompted him, barely able to contain his curiosity.

“I’ve seen your effect on the women you leave behind, Blackmoore,” shuddered the other gentleman, “but based on her demeanor and genuine fondness for you, I believe you’ve spared Lady Penelope. So, I started to wonder if perhaps—by some miracle—you really have changed.”

His quandary was so potent it prompted Duncan to question himself as well. First Harlington claimed that he was behaving differently, now even Steepwharf was expressing the same thought.

Is it really possible that I have changed so drastically in so short a time?

Duncan hesitantly began, “It’s not that I’ve changed as much as you think, Steepwharf.” He blew out a drag of smoke. “The truth is that while I have certainly been a scoundrel and a fiend towards certain women. Many stories of my exploits have been greatly exaggera—”

“Here we go again!” the viscount exclaimed in irritation. “Why do you have to do this, Blackmoore? Just when things between us were starting to go—”

“Why do you have to do this, Steepwharf?” Duncan rebutted, “Why do you have to assume the worst about me every time? You know me better than that, we were friends, damn you!”

“It’s precisely because I know you so well that I can hardly believe you,” the other gentleman spat out, backing away from him. “You’re a brilliant liar, Blackmoore, always have been. And I didn’t mind when it was the small things, but when it came to Henrietta—”

“I didn’t lie about Henrietta!” Duncan placed his free hand on his chest. “I swear it! Her family took advantage of my terrible reputation to cover up who the real culprit was. But I swear I would never do that to your fiancée—or to you. Deep down, I think a part of you still knows that.”

Steepwharf’s expression wavered, but only for a moment. “Then why would Henrietta herself say it was you?”

“Because being ensnared by a cunning and ruthless rake is a much more palatable story than having to publicly admit that she was unfaithful to you,” Duncan pointed out, “And maybe- maybe that’s why you still choose to believe her over me.” His shoulders slumped.

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As Duncan strode away, he looked over his shoulder one final time. “Thanks for returning my pipe. I know you probably remember that it was a gift from my father.”

Upon rejoining the garden party, Duncan completely immersed himself in polite conversations, slices of cake, and cups of tea.

Every once in a while, he stole a glance at Lady Penelope, but she seemed to be handling herself quite well with the other guests.

Not wanting to disrupt the rapport that she was building, Duncan decided to keep his distance for the remainder of the party—lest his wretched reputation ruin it for her.

CHAPTER13

“We’re off now, darling!” his mother excitedly announced, sticking her head through the study room’s door. “Now it’s my turn to ask you if you’d like us to get you anything before we return.”

Duncan looked up from the documents he was reading and shook his head. “No, thank you, Mother. You three just enjoy your day.”

“The two of us certainly will,” his mother corrected him. “Lady Penelope pulled me aside earlier and said that perhaps she would be able to speak and behave more freely if she wasn’t around. Naturally, I tried to assure her that that couldn’t possibly be true but-”

“Are things between them still... awkward?” Duncan furrowed his eyebrows

worriedly.

Mother ducked her head out to check that no one was in the hallway before answering, “As you know, Lady Punton is hardly speaking at all these days, including to her own daughter. Even so, I’ve just about managed to persuade her to help me pick out some sewing supplies and material.”

“I wish you well on your endeavor, Mother.” Duncan smiled.

“Thank you, darling,” she replied, “and I trust you’ll stay out of trouble until we return?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” he chuckled, raising an eyebrow.

“Well, at Lord Steepwharf’s garden party the other day, I spied you glancing over at Lady Penelope quite often. Were you perhaps... uncomfortable with all the attention she was getting?”

“Mother...” Duncan rolled his eyes, “if I didn’t know you, I’d be inclined to say that you’ve begun reading gossip pages now.”

“It was just an observation, darling.” She shrugged. “Either way, there’s no harm in a mother reminding her son to be careful.”

Duncan waited for their coach to depart before he leaped up from his chair and began making his way upstairs.

“Ah, Rowley!” he exclaimed, passing the butler in the hall. “Could you please have a tray of tea and biscuits prepared and have it brought to the drawing room? Ah! Some fruits as well would be nice and whatever else we have on hand.”

“Certainly, Your Grace.”

Upon reaching Lady Penelope’s room, Duncan knocked three times. “If all you’re going to do is sob and sulk, I have a suggestion for a much more productive way to spend your free time.”

A few moments later, the door swung open to reveal a red-nosed Lady Penelope.

“How did you know?” she sniffled.

“With your heart of gold and consuming fear of hurting those around you?” He shrugged, “It just seemed like the sort of thing you would do.”

She let out a dry laugh at this remark. “I see. So, what did you want to suggest instead?”

“How about another lesson?” He offered her his arm. “I mean, the exercise at the garden party went splendidly, but there’s still much more to learn—and four other gentlemen to get through.”

Lady Penelope contemplated his suggestion.

Now that he had spent so much time with her, he recognized the way her rosy lips pursed whenever she was deep in thought, the way she tilted her head to the left—and ever so slightly backward—when she was struggling to decide.

“Come on, Lady Pen.” He winked. “Give me an excuse to step away from my work for a little bit.”

Her eyes softened, letting Duncan know that he had successfully convinced her.

“All right then, Your Grace,” she chuckled. “Where shall we hold our next lesson?”

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In a few short minutes, they found themselves in the drawing room, where the servants had set up the refreshments as Duncan had requested.

Lady Penelope offered to pour both of them some tea.

He thanked her as he accepted his cup. “Have you been studying?” he grinned, leaning back into his chair.

“Of course,” she scoffed, lightly blowing the steam off her cup. “You’re the sort of person who likes to spring surprises on the unsuspecting. So, I wanted to be as ready as possible at all times.”

“A wise choice,” Duncan commended her, “and before we begin, do you have anything to add about our previous lesson? I don’t like to assume, but based on my observations at the garden party, you seemed to find my pointers quite useful.”

“It isn’t gentlemanly to gloat.” She clicked her tongue at him, “But yes, it’s a good thing we rehearsed beforehand as it helped me steady my nerves. Why? Did I do something wrong at the party?”

“Not at all,” he assured her, reaching for a biscuit. “Though now that I think about it, I was wondering what on earth you, Tresney, and Larkspur were laughing so hard about.”

“Oh yes!” she gasped in realization, already starting to giggle. “But I don’t know how to tell it exactly like Lord Tresney did.”

“Ah... was it a joke?” Duncan swallowed before adding, “Was it the one about the musician in Bechdalla?”

Lady Penelope laughed harder at this. “Yes! So, you’ve heard it already?”

“Many times,” Duncan replied, dusting his hands. “That’s one of Tresney’s signature gambits when attempting to woo someone. So at least we know he was genuinely interested in you,” he nodded, “Well done!”

His companion furrowed her eyebrows in disappointment. “Oh. Is Lord Tresney also a bit of a rake?”

“He tries to be.” Duncan grinned. “I think he just hates me because I’m apparently far more effective.”

“No, I wouldn’t say that he hates you.” She fervently shook her head. “Why, I don’t think he even mentioned your name.”

“He probably didn’t want to remind you that a far superior gentleman than him was also present,” Duncan joked, “But enough with these trivial matters, let’s begin our lesson,” he declared.

Lady Penelope set aside her cup of tea and prepared to stand, but he stopped her.

“No, no, we can stay where we are.” He cleared his throat. “Last time was all about the physical, this lesson is all about the spoken word.”

She let out a deep exhale. “Perfect... And my instructor so happens to love the sound of his own voice.”

“Just because I’m charming and confident, doesn’t necessarily mean I’m vain,” he

retorted. “Besides, as the student, you shall be doing most of the talking.”

“Very well, Your Grace. Where would you like me to start?”

Duncan tapped his chin in consideration. “Since it worked so well for Tresney, why don’t we start with using humor as a means to draw the other person in?”

“All right,” she concurred, seeming undeterred by his challenge. “Oh, but who are you supposed to be?”

“Hmm?”

“Which of the four remaining gentlemen on my list are you pretending to be?” she asked, “So that I can better tailor my approach.”

“I see. Well, have you studied the Earl of Direpeak?”

She nodded.

“Then I shall be him.” Duncan gestured, signaling for her to begin.

“So, Lord Direpeak...” she opened, leaning forward in her chair. “I hear you’ve won quite a few fencing tournaments.”

Duncan pushed out his chest as he answered, “Why yes, Lady Penelope, I often advise-”

“Don’t do a pretend voice!” she laughed slapping his arm.

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“Why not?” he grinned, “Oh! Because when you finally met him, you realized just how accurate my impression of Steepwharf was, didn’t you?”

“That’s beside the point!” She shook her head. “I thought you wanted me to take my lessons seriously?”

“I am being serious!” Duncan exclaimed, seizing this opportunity to reach for another biscuit. “This is exactly how Lord Direpeak sounds, I’m telling you.”

“Your Grace...” she groaned, “Please!”

Yielding to her wishes, Duncan repeated himself but in his normal voice. “Why yes, Lady Penelope, I often advise parents of unruly boys to send them for fencing lessons. I truly believe it is good for the soul.”

She tucked her hair behind her ears. “If you ever need a new sparring partner...”

Now it was Duncan’s turn to interrupt.

“That’s enough!” he guffawed, throwing his head back in laughter. “While I appreciate the direction you were attempting to take, I don’t know if it would have produced the results you were looking for.”

She laughed along. “In isolation, I’ll admit that it is a rather jarring jump to make, but that’s only because we dove right into it instead of letting the conversation flow naturally,” she huffed.

“It was a valiant attempt, Lady Pen,” he concurred. “And while you are an excellent conversationalist, flirting is a different sport entirely. For flirting, focus less on making the conversation pleasant, and more on making it intoxicating.”

His companion blinked at him. “But how exactly does one do that?” she asked, refilling her teacup.

“It’s all about the details,” he explained. “Take your mention of fencing for example. You noted that it requires a partner, that’s a good start. But did you note what else is involved in the sport that you could have drawn attention to instead? Like the exertion, the sweat, the intensit-”

“Your Grace!” she exclaimed in horror, “I couldn’t possibly employ such obscene language!”

“Certainly not while my mother is chaperoning you.” He shuddered, “But I’m sure Lord Direpeak or another gentleman wouldn’t object at all if similar sentiments were conveyed through a letter or-”

“Absolutely not!” She shuddered, jumping up from her seat.

“I’m not saying you have to use those exact terms.” He waved both hands gently in an attempt to calm her down. “That was just one possibility. There are far less extreme ones for you to take, of course.”

“For example?” she asked, both hands on her hips.

“For example...” He cleared his throat, looking around the room for anything he could use.

His eyes landed on the pianoforte. “Do you play, Lady Penelope?” He gestured

towards the instrument.

“Yes, I do, Lord Direpeak.”

Duncan stood up. “Then may I see your hands?”

She obliged, allowing him to take both of her hands in his. “Are you inspecting my fingers to see whether I’m lying?”

“Admittedly, I don’t know how to do that at all.” He smiled, meeting her gaze. “I just wanted an excuse to hold your hands.”

Lady Penelope laughed once again—it was a sound he found himself appreciating every time he heard it. And was he imagining it or were her cheeks slightly pinker as well?

“See? A far less extreme example.” He straightened up, gently releasing her hands. “But the principles remained the same, through humor and a focus on the right details involving her interest—that is, her hands and the pianoforte—I engaged my listener and endeared her to me. Now you try.”

His student sucked in a deep breath to steel herself—which Duncan already found endearing in itself.

After a brief pause, she began her attempt.

“If you don’t mind me asking, Lord Direpeak, what literature have you been reading lately?”

Duncan paused to consider how the earl himself would have probably answered, “I’ve been working my way through a number of botanical treatises given my interest

in the subject, but I wouldn't want to bore you with the details, Lady Penelope."

"Ah, so you enjoy gardening, then?" she beamed. "So that means you're a man who knows how to cherish and nurture, then?" she teased.

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He grinned, wanting to commend her for her simple—but effective—use of humor and detail to flirt.

But since she was already on a roll, he decided to keep their rehearsal going. “You flatter me, Lady Penelope. But truth be told, that is somewhat of an idealized view of gardening.”

“How so?”

Duncan cleared his throat. “Well, it’s difficult work, you see. There’s much more heavy lifting and frustration involved than most people realize.”

“Well, for someone so... robust, I’m sure everything you carry must feel as light as a feather,” came her breathy reply as she tucked a lock of hair behind her ear.

She’s including points from our lesson about body language. he silently noted. Well, two can play at that game.

“Now be honest,” he tutted, taking a step toward her, “are these repeated attempts to flatter me all because you’re hoping to get me to do some gardening for you?”

“Perhaps,” she said with a coy smile. “Or perhaps I’m simply looking for an excuse to invite you to our estate.”

With every syllable that left her lips, Duncan found himself inexplicably drawn to her.

The next thing he knew, his hand was sliding around her delicate waist. “All this was in search of an excuse?” he asked, his voice sounding hoarser than he meant it to, “I can offer you several more if you like.”

Her cheeks turned rosy-pink, causing his heart to race. Standing so close, he couldn’t help but notice just how much smaller her figure was compared to his, it was almost unbearable.

His grip on her tightened, inevitably drawing them closer together. With his free hand, he lifted her chin but was immediately caught off-guard by her large, innocent hazel eyes.

Worried his heart would give out if he stared into them any longer, Duncan attempted to divert his attention but then his gaze landed on her lips, causing him to wonder. Suddenly, Mother’s voice echoed in his head, warning him to be careful.

He dropped his hands and took two large steps backward. “I’m sorry,” he blurted, shaking his head to clear it, “I- I sometimes get carried away and-”

“There’s nothing to apologize for, Your Grace.” She frantically waved a hand, “It was just a demonstration, so-”

“Exactly!” He awkwardly rejoined, “And I presume you now understand how to-”

“Yes, most certainly.” She cleared her throat, “Well, that was a most productive lesson, and I thank you for it, Your Grace. But I’m suddenly feeling rather tired, so if you don’t mind, I might just-” She pointed towards the door.

“Please go ahead,” he nodded.

Normally, he would have offered to get the door for her, but he had barely even

gotten the words out before she had bolted through it and slammed it behind her.

Deflated, he let out a deep exhale and threw himself onto the sofa.

This time, Steepwharf's voice echoed in his head: "Here we go again! Why do you have to do this, Blackmoore?"

As he stared up at the ceiling, Duncan racked his brain for an answer. But upon finding none, he stretched an arm out for another biscuit and bit into it.

Maybe Steepwharf was right, he mused. Maybe I am as bad as they say.

CHAPTER 14

Penelope adjusted her skirt a final time before turning away from her dresser.

She chewed her lip contemplatively as she stared at her bedroom door. Much like her mother, she had spent the better part of the last two days confined to her room.

For the incident in the drawing room had served as a cautionary lesson, a reminder that Penelope had done the very thing she swore she never would—she had let her guard down.

She didn't necessarily blame the duke for this. After all, it was hardly his fault that he was so naturally alluring.

No, this was her fault. She knew better, but still allowed herself to get swept up. As a result, things between them were now unbearably awkward.

Penelope had been doing everything she could to avoid him, but she didn't want to worry the dowager duchess unnecessarily, so she still had to show up for meals and

pretend that everything was normal.

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She glanced at the clock.

Ten minutes to seven. She smiled, I still have plenty of time.

Penelope made her way to the morning room, where the only person who it wasn't awkward for her to converse with now sat.

"Good morning, pet!" greeted the dowager duchess.

"Good morning, Your Grace." Penelope smiled, taking her usual chair. "Is there anything of note in today's paper?"

The dowager duchess shook her head. "Not this morning, I'm afraid. Except for how Magliozzi's understudy had to take over for her last night and surprised everyone with how well she did."

"Is that so?" Penelope acknowledged, spreading butter on her toast. "Well enough to possibly star in her own opera soon?"

"The Herald certainly thinks so." The dowager duchess nodded to the paper. "After all, there is no way Magliozzi's loyal supporters would ever allow her to be ousted as such."

"I don't think anyone would ever wish for Magliozzi to retire," Penelope answered, biting into her toast with a satisfying crunch. "I still remember the first time I ever saw her perfor-"

Penelope's voice caught in her throat when, to her dismay, the Duke of Blackmoore waltzed through the door—despite it being about forty minutes earlier than when he usually took his breakfast.

“Good morning,” he greeted the room.

“Good morning, darling!” cooed his mother. “Are you in a rush today?”

“Not really.” He smiled, taking his place at the head of the table. “Just thought it would be nice to get an early start to my day.”

Penelope let out an annoyed sigh as she bit into her toast once again.

Up until this point, she had been successfully running into him at breakfast by arriving early and finishing her food as quickly as possible.

But now that he was here, she couldn't simply get up and leave.

“Sorry, my pet, what were you saying earlier about Magliozzi?” asked the dowager duchess.

“Oh, it wasn't anything important, Your Grace,” Penelope answered sheepishly, “I was merely recalling the first time I caught one of her performances.”

“Poor Magliozzi,” tutted the duke. “They say she collapsed in her dressing room last night.”

“Good heavens! The paper said that she couldn't perform, but not that she had collapsed!” exclaimed Her Grace. “What happened?”

“No cause has been confirmed as yet,” shrugged His Grace. “I myself only heard it

from Harlington, who in turn heard it from a friend of one of the understudies. But perhaps London's favorite opera angel has been pushing herself too hard."

As he kept talking, Penelope seized the chance to finish the last of her toast and polish off her tea.

By the time the dowager duchess had begun warning her son about the dangers of working himself too hard, Penelope was ready to excuse herself.

"Finished already?" gasped Her Grace.

Penelope grinned. "His Grace has inspired me to also endeavor to get an early start to my day."

As she turned to leave, the duke casually called after her, "Be sure you don't strain yourself, Lady Pen. We wouldn't want you falling asleep on your plate at tonight's dinner party."

His reminder stopped her in her tracks. "Dinner party...?"

The duke clicked his tongue, "Did you forget? Surely Rowley must have reminded you at some point yesterday."

Penelope let out a gasp in realization, Ah... so that's what he was talking about.

To clear her head of the embarrassment that haunted her since the drawing room incident, Penelope had been pouring herself into her paintings.

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She had informed the staff ahead of time that she would be taking her tea in her room yesterday. But Rowley happened to deliver her tea at the worst possible moment—right as her frustration boiled over because despite her best efforts, her paints refused to produce the particular shade of ombre she needed.

As a result, when the butler arrived and set the tray down for her, she barely heard a word he said and mumbled a hasty thank you as she continued the battle against her palette.

Now that I think about it, Mr. Rowley did seem perplexed when he left my room yesterday.

“Of course, I didn’t forget,” she chuckled—though her voice sounded a little less convincing than she had hoped.

“Wonderful,” smiled the duke, “because there are quite a few fascinating people who were also invited tonight. Including one or two friends we may have discussed the other day.”

For the first time since he had entered the room—perhaps even since they had parted ways in the drawing room—Penelope met his gaze.

Lord Direpeak?she asked wordlessly.

He also answered wordlessly by means of a smug smile and a shallow nod.

“Oh, are you expecting to see someone you know there?” chirped the dowager

duchess. “How lovely.”

“Yes, Lady Pen should have a lovely time indeed,” winked the duke.

She narrowed her eyes at him suspiciously once more before she finally got to leave.

What are you up to this time, Your Grace?

* * *

No sooner had they finished greeting and thanking their hosts—the Marquess and Marchioness of Inglesfield—did the duke nudge Penelope in the side.

She shot him an annoyed look, but instead of his usual mischievous expression, his face appeared quite serious.

He nodded slightly, indicating that they take a few steps away from the small group that was forming around the dowager duchess and their hosts as they fawned over each other’s clothing.

“So, I managed to pull a few strings,” the duke whispered urgently, “and you’ll be seated next to both the Earl of Direpeak and the Marquess of Newshore.”

Penelope’s heart dropped.

The Marquess of Newshore was the third gentleman on the list of practice suitors that the duke had provided her with. But since being reminded about the party this morning, Penelope had poured all her energy into brushing up her knowledge on Lord Direpeak and none of the others.

“Your Grace!” she hissed, “Why didn’t you say something sooner?”

“I was looking for a way to let you know during breakfast,” he answered drily, “but you were out the door before I could even smell my tea.”

Penelope wrung her hands in guilt. “But even so! Why did you have them seat both of them next to me? Why not just Lord Direpeak?”

“Think of it as killing two birds with one stone- Good evening,” he said with a forced smile as a guest walked past them. “I didn’t even know Newshore had been invited until yesterday evening when I spoke to Inglesfield.”

Penelope shook out her hands in an attempt to dispel her nerves.

“Don’t worry,” the duke assured her, “I’ll be sitting right across from you. If the conversation starts to get too dry or overwhelming, just touch your nose to let me know I should intervene, and I’ll do my best.”

“Touch my nose?” she furrowed her eyebrows. “Shouldn’t we choose a more subtle signal?”

“No...” His Grace waved a finger, “because a subtler signal would tempt you to call on my help more often than may actually be necessary. This way you’ll be forced to call on me only as a last resort.”

“Oh, darling, look!” Her Grace waved, locking arms with her son. “Lady Wrenslot and her whole family are here. Let all three of us go say hello.”

The next hour proceeded in much of a similar manner, with Her Grace recognizing a familiar face or two and then dragging Penelope—and when he could be found, His Grace—along with her to engage in polite conversation.

Indeed, by calling this a “dinner party”, the Marquess of Inglesfield and his family

were being rather modest.

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If Penelope wasn't so worried about the seating arrangements, she could have probably taken advantage of the introductions and acquaintances Her Grace made for her here tonight to add to her family's repertoire of connections.

At last, dinner had arrived and just as His Grace had said, Penelope found herself between Lords Direpeak and Newshore.

Penelope knew it would be easier to start with Lord Direpeak, but the marquess was the first to offer to replenish her bowl of soup.

"Thank you, Lord Newshore," she just about managed to squeak out, earning a glare from His Grace.

Perhaps sensing her discomfort, the marquess offered her a reassuring smile. "Isn't this spread rather impressive, Lady Penelope?"

"Indeed, Lord Newshore." She cleared her throat, "We're practically up to our eyes in food."

"If you want to speak about drowning in food..." Lord Direpeak finally joined them, "then you simply must hear about my visit to Saint Leys."

"Not this again, Dee," groaned the marquess.

Penelope was surprised to hear them speak so familiarly with each other.

"If this story bothers you so much, then look the other way, Newshore," huffed the

earl. “I’m addressing Lady Penelope.”

“Now that’s not fair,” tutted the other gentleman. “Anyone can see from her demeanor that Lady Penelope is far too kindhearted to turn down your boring stories.”

Penelope let out a chuckle. “Your kind words are much appreciated Lord Newshore. However, I fail to see how any story about ‘drowning in food’ could be boring.”

As their spirited discussion carried on, Penelope—once again very aware that she listened attentively for the next few minutes for opportunities to apply everything she had learned.

However, she barely had to exert herself as the conversation flowed freely. Yes, it was somewhat challenging having to balance her attention between the two gentlemen.

But whenever she did manage to get a quip in, Penelope could swear that His Grace’s face lit up every time, which only added to her elation.

Duncan also had a lady sitting on either side of him, but the one on his right didn’t seem as interested in speaking to him. However, he didn’t seem to mind because Lady Cecilia appeared to be more than enough to occupy his attention.

With so many guests present—and with two bubbly gentlemen to pay attention to—Penelope couldn’t hear everything His Grace and Lady Cecilia were saying, but she did hear the other lady giggle as she let out a, “Your Grace, you’re just too much!”

What was even more fascinating was how His Grace managed to elicit such a reaction seemingly without breaking a sweat. As his companion giggled, sighed, and

twirled her hair, the duke's smile remained easy, his shoulders relaxed, and his expression polite.

It seems His Grace has a fondness for blondes. Penelope quietly noted, not knowing why she felt a twinge of disappointment as she thought this.

No, I'm not disappointed, I'm grateful that I have reddish-brown hair instead.

"...rather preposterous!" Steepwharf declared, snapping her out of her daze, "But then again, perhaps a woman's insight would serve us better. What do you think, Lady Penelope?"

Both gentlemen looked at her expectantly.

"Er..." Penelope answered slowly, "I... believe both sides make excellent points, perhaps it's all simply a matter of... timing?" Her inflection rose a little higher towards the end of her remark, betraying her uncertainty.

It was unclear how long Penelope had allowed her mind to wander, but it was apparently long enough that she now didn't have even a crumb of a clue of what they were talking about.

But her listeners didn't seem to mind. Lord Newshore even appeared impressed. "Now that is a fascinating point about timing." He looked past her at Lord Steepwharf. "For example, in Somberley's case, my suggestion be preferred to-"

This was her chance to catch up on whatever was going on, but Penelope simply couldn't stop her eyes from wandering across the table once more.

What could he possibly be saying to make her laugh so much? she wondered.

CHAPTER15

“More brandy, Your Grace?”

“Yes, thank you, Lord Orstenbridge.” Duncan smiled, holding out his glass.

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“Quite the night, no?” the older gentleman asked. “My legs feel as though they shall give out after a dinner likethat.”

Duncan let out a chuckle. “Then we shall have to roll—as opposed to walk—ourselves home tonight.”

With a heartfelt laugh, his listener slapped a hand on his shoulder and informed him, “I hope you don’t mind me stealing that to use in the future.”

“Please go ahead,” Duncan assured him, taking a swig out of his glass. “In truth, I stole it from my father.”

Another gentleman approached them to express similar sentiments about how filling the dinner was.

After all, as far as Duncan was concerned, dinner party conversations often rotated between three main topics: the party itself, the current biggest scandal in the ton, and whoever the ton’s favorite darling presently was.

The door to the drawing room remained somewhat ajar, so he discreetly angled his head in the hopes he could catch a glimpse of how Mother and Lady Penelope were doing along with the rest of the women, but to no avail.

Mother will make sure that they’re both all right, he reminded himself.

As he scanned the room for someone—or something—to distract him from his worry, he spotted Lords Direpeak and Newshore on the other side of the room.

Before tonight, Duncan had only spoken to either of them a few times at the races after Fairhaven had introduced them.

But even after those few exchanges, it was immediately clear that they were both capable gentlemen who came from well-established families with plenty of assets.

As a result, Duncan compiled everything he knew about them thus far, gleaned as much additional information about them as he could from Fairhaven, and included them on the list he created for Lady Pen.

But he hadn't had the chance to properly speak with them yet tonight, what with the way they had completely devoted their attention to Lady Penelope. So, Duncan made his way through the crowd towards them.

To his annoyance, however, the pair didn't appear to notice that he was trying to reach them, and they slipped out through one of the banquet hall's other doors, cigars and glasses in hand.

By the time Duncan joined them in the hallway, the pair had their backs turned to him as they admired a magnificent handwoven tapestry at the end of the hallway.

It depicted the War of the Roses that had clearly been passed down through the generations of Lord Inglesfield's family.

Just as Duncan opened his mouth to call out to them, he heard Direpeak say something that was mostly inaudible from this far, but Duncan could have sworn it included Lady Penelope's name.

Wanting to ensure he hadn't misheard, Duncan decided to delay making his presence known. He sidled along the wall until he was covered by a set of large wooden cupboards containing various other tokens and trophies passed down through

Inglesfield's family.

"Are you certain you're fine with me being the comforter this time?" asked Newshore, "Because I thought you did quite well with..." he lowered his voice, "our last endeavor."

"Toowell, I'm afraid," Direpeak lamented, blowing out a cloud of smoke. "She's still writing to me, you know."

The marquess inhaled sharply through his teeth, "Dear, oh dear. Didn't I warn you that you were being too nice?"

The earl only offered a grunt in response.

Duncan clenched his jaw. But as someone who was used to people passing judgment on him far too quickly, he listened to their discussion further to ensure that he hadn't misunderstood.

"So, then it's settled." Newshore stifled a yawn. "Once you're done with Lady Penelope, I shall comfort her."

"Excuse me, Newshore." Duncan tapped his shoulder, causing the marquess to turn around.

"That's better, thank you." Duncan smiled, placing his glass of brandy down on the rug to free up his right hand, which he then swiftly landed on the wretch's face.

"What the hell, Blackmoore?!" Direpeak thundered, cigar still hanging from his mouth as he grabbed the front of Duncan's shirt.

"How dare you become enraged after spewing your degeneracy!" Duncan snapped,

raising his knee to the earl's stomach, causing him to double over and sink to his knees on the floor.

“Don’t act like you’re any better than us, Blackmoore!” Newshore barked. “If anything, you’re more depraved than we are!”

Duncan let out a scoff as he closed the distance between himself and the marquess. “You know, treacherous worms like yourselves deserve worse...”

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He backed the other man up against the wall. “But your blood isn’t worth the price it would take to clean it off this tapestry.”

Newshore let out a yelp as Duncan put out his cigar on the front of the brute’s shirt, burning a hole through the white linen.

“Enough, Blackmoore!” Direpeak boomed, pulling Duncan off of the marquess. “If this is about competition, there’s plenty of women to go around for-”

The earl didn’t get the chance to finish his sentence as Duncan had already grabbed his shoulders, thrown him against the wall, and pinned his throat with his left arm.

“Every time you open your mouth, Direpeak,” Duncan growled, “you incentivize the rest of us to shut it for you... permanently.”

“The-en what do-o yo-ou want, you ba-stard?” Direpeak choked out, clawing at Duncan’s arm in vain.

“For you two to leave those poor women alone, especially Lady Penelope,” Duncan answered, leaning on his arm harder. “Is that clear?”

The red-faced earl frantically nodded his head. Duncan waited just a moment more before finally releasing him.

“Enjoy the rest of the Season, lads,” Duncan remarked, before retrieving his glass of brandy off of the rug and returning to the banquet hall.

He spotted Inglesfield in the far corner conversing with a few others, so pulling him away would draw too much attention. Instead, Duncan asked a servant if he could borrow a pencil and a sheet of paper.

Once he had finished his note, he had the servant pass it along to Inglesfield, who upon reading it narrowed his eyes at Duncan from across the room.

Sorry!Duncan mouthed at his former classmate and infrequent fishing partner,And thanks for everything!

* * *

“...and so, I wish you both a good night, my darlings,” the dowager duchess stifled a yawn as Mr. Rowley helped her amble up the stairs.

“Good night, Your Grace!” Penelope called after her.

“Good night, Mother,” His Grace chimed in.

Under ordinary circumstances, Penelope would have marched right behind Her Grace, eager to get some sleep after such a long, exhausting night.

But with the excitement still running through her, Penelope wanted to stay back and pick His Grace’s brain on the evening’s proceedings.

He met her eyes while in the middle of taking his coat off and flashed her a smile, “What?”

Penelope craned her neck to check that Her Grace and Mr. Rowley were out of earshot. “What do you mean ‘what’?” She let out an excited squeal, “Didn’t our dinner go splendidly?”

His Grace cleared his throat, folding his coat over his arm. “Did you get the chance to speak to either Direpeak or Newshore after dinner?”

“Well... no.” Her shoulders dropped. “They seemed quite busy with other matters for the rest of the night, and I didn’t want to disturb them but-”

“Don’t waste your time with those lowlives,” the duke simply remarked, turning on his heel as he walked towards his office. “Don’t go near them, don’t greet them, don’t accept any correspondence from them.”

“What’s got you in such a sour mood?” Penelope frowned, following him down the hallway. “You saw for yourself, that Lords Newshore and Direpeak were perfect gentlemen all-”

“I know what you’re thinking.” His Grace spun around on his heels. “You’re thinking that perhaps you could settle for one of them.” His expression darkened. “But neither of them is fit to stand next to you, let alone become your mate.”

Penelope crossed her arms. “Need I remind you, Your Grace, my father was a nearl, not a duke like you. You keep telling me to raise my standards, but this is about as high as I am allowed to raise them given my family’s station.”

“No, it isn’t,” he firmly returned, lowering his voice. “Be careful not to rush into anyone’s arms, Lady Pen. You must choose wisely, both for your own sake and your mother’s.”

Penelope began to protest his pickiness, but her eyes caught something on His Grace’s left sleeve. “Is that blood?” she gasped.

The duke inspected his arm in a much calmer manner than expected and mumbled something, she couldn’t quite hear it clearly, but it sounded like he said “...it must

have dripped from his nose.”

Bewildered, worried, and annoyed, all Penelope could do was heave a giant sigh and ask, “Your Grace, what's going on?”

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“Absolutely nothing at the moment,” he answered, turning away from her once again. “I made sure of it. Just get some rest and forget about the pair of those wretched-”

Penelope chased after him and grabbed his arm. “Where else are you hurt?”

His blue eyes looked back at her in confusion. “I’m not hurt.” he insisted, rolling his sleeve up to prove it, “See?”

She looked at his arm closely and suddenly remembered how shocked she had been by its muscularity the first time she had locked arms with him.

It’s no wonder he doesn’t have a scratch on him, she mused, looking up at the duke. Punching him must be like trying to punch an ash tree’s trunk.

“Satisfied?” he asked, dropping his arm.

“I suppose so,” she sighed, “but your demeanor isn’t typically what one would expect from the unscathed victor in a fight. You still seem... angry somehow.”

He let out a bitter laugh and then confirmed her hunch was right as he shook his head, “Am I really so transparent?”

“Not at all,” Penelope assured him, “but friends can always tell.” She nudged his side attempting to lighten his mood. “And friends stick together. So, tell me who it is that’s upset you and I’ll go give them a piece of my mind as well.”

His Grace had been rubbing his neck as she said this, but paused as he tilted his head,

“Are you saying that you... would side with me? But you don’t even know what the conflict’s about.”

“But I know that whatever it was, it was disturbing enough that you saw it fit to draw blood.” She nodded at his sleeve. “I still disagree with you on many things, Your Grace. But I also know you’re not the type who resorts to violence at the first chance he gets.”

“How can you be so sure?” What about that scrap you witnessed between Fairhaven and I in the morning room?” he reminded her with a grin.

“Please...” Penelope rolled her eyes, “you clearly weren’t trying to hurt him, otherwise you would have knocked a tooth out before he had the chance to drag you to the floor with him.”

He acquiesced with a nod.

A short pause followed before he began again, “Do you know what I just realized?”

“What is it, Your Grace?”

“If someone ever asked you to put together a list of practice suitors for her and—for whatever reason—you chose to include me on it along with everything you knew about me...”

“Yes?” Penelope prompted him, unsure where he was going with this.

“I’d guarantee that you would be the only person in this world—besides Harlington and Fairhaven—who’d get it right.” He smiled to himself, before looking directly into her eyes, “And for that, I thank you, Lady Pen.”

Penelope couldn't explain the warm sensation she felt knowing that he trusted her so. She wished that she could reciprocate by expressing equally meaningful sentiments.

But she found herself slightly embarrassed by his sudden sincerity and settled on teasing him instead, "Goodness, just how much brandy have you had, Your Grace?"

"Not nearly enough." He grinned, "If you want, I have some in my- Oh. That's right."

Penelope placed a hand on her chest as she feigned shock and horror, "Your Grace! Were you trying to invite a lady to drink with you in your study?"

"That's not how I meant it!" he shot back defensively. "The only other people I usually spend this much time with are Harlington and Fairhaven, so obviously offering them a tipple wouldn't-"

"I know what you meant, Your Grace." Penelope chuckled, "And..." she fidgeted with her hands, "I trust your counsel, so I shall do as you have advised and stay away from Lords Direpeak and Newshore."

"Thank you." The duke exhaled. "Believe me, you won't regret it at all. Say, I'll be out all of tomorrow, but what if we had our next lesson the day after? How does that sound?"

Penelope chewed her lip as she contemplated his offer. After all, the previous two lessons hadn't exactly gone as either of them had expected.

But I trusted him enough to agree to forget about Direpeak and Newshore...she reminded herself, So I should be able to trust him enough for another lesson.

"That sounds lovely, Your Grace," she said and smiled.

CHAPTER16

“Come in!”

Penelope pushed the door open to find His Grace standing in the middle of a—mostly—empty ballroom. As she entered, His Grace bowed dramatically.

“Is there a reason we’re having our lesson here, Your Grace?” she chuckled, returning his bow with a curtsy.

“Tsk, ts, Lady Pen.” He clicked his tongue. “You should know by now that I prefer that our rehearsals be as realistic as possible.”

The duke strode towards one of the windows and finished pulling back the last of the curtains, allowing the golden sunlight to flood every corner of the room.

Penelope stretched her arms above her head, bathing in the comforting warmth of the yellowish-orange glow.

“Is Her Grace going to host a ball this Season?” she asked, inspecting the ornately decorated walls.

“Oh, we haven’t hosted a ball since Father passed away,” explained His Grace. “We still attend them, of course, but he and Mother used to revel in their hosting duties rather seriously, so planning a ball without him is too unbearable.”

His reply reminded Penelope of her own mother, who still seemed to be avoiding her.

“Right.” He clasped his hands together signaling that they were ready to begin. “Any

guesses as to what today's lesson shall cover, Lady Pen?"

She looked around the room once more for a clue, but the only one she had at the moment was right where they stood—in the center of the ballroom floor. "Er... is it dancing?" she asked half-jokingly.

"Well, dancing does fall under it, yes," the duke shrugged, "but based on the events of the dinner party, I thought it would be best if we covered how to differentiate between viable prospects and unsuitable ones."

"Your Grace..." Penelope let out a sigh, "I appreciate the sentiment, but don't you think this lesson would be better suited for younger women with prospects queuing out the door for the—as opposed to a spinster like me with very few options to begin with?"

"Whether you have two suitors lined up or a hundred, you still need to learn how to discern the best option," he reminded her. "And stop being so hard on yourself. Yes, you may technically be considered a spinster, but you are first and foremost a noblewoman of good standing and breeding. As such, it is your birthright to marry well."

"Very well, Your Grace." She smiled, "But you'll forgive me for worrying that I'll be able to get married at all at this rate."

He scoffed at this remark. "If our combined strengths somehow fail to land a husband for a lady as fair and intelligent as you, then it means you really were destined by Providence to be a spinster."

She folded her arms. "So generous with the compliments today, Your Grace. I presume you had a rather profitable day at the Stock Exchange?"

“At the races yesterday actually,” the duke sheepishly answered, “but let's not get side-tracked. What is the first thing you notice about a gentleman who approaches you?”

Penelope paused to think her answer over. “Er, I suppose I tend to look at his face?”

“That is, of course, the move that comes most naturally to us.” He raised a finger. “But it is, however, a mistake to rely on this as your main source of a person's intentions.”

“I see.” Penelope tilted her head, unable to stop herself from smiling at how seriously His Grace was taking this.

With both hands behind his back as he paced to and fro, her instructor continued, “For you see, when a gentleman addresses you directly, most of the movements on his face are calculated: his polite smile, extra attentive eyes, and so on and so forth.”

“So then where else am I supposed to look?” she asked, furrowing her eyebrows.

“Everywhere,” His Grace answered. “The uprightness of his shoulders, what direction his feet are pointed in, how carefully—or carelessly—he grips his glass. These actions shall tell you the truth because he himself isn't thinking about them, and therefore can't use them to lie to you.”

“In other words...” Penelope interjected, “there's intentional body language that people use for flirting—as covered in our first lesson. But then there's unintentional body language, that is, behavior that people themselves aren't even aware of?”

“Now you're getting it.” Her instructor beamed at her.

“As fascinating as this sounds, Your Grace...” Penelope allowed her shoulders to

slump, “I have an inkling it will be rather tedious to execute.”

“It won’t be if you focus on one target at a time,” he assured her. “If we try it out, you’ll be able to see what I mean. Let’s say you have just arrived at the ball and the host introduces you to a gentleman. See what you can learn about me from our ‘first’ exchange.”

Humoring him, Penelope did as she was told and exchanged greetings with this ‘new gentleman’.

“So how do you know the host and hostess?” he asked, prompting her to make something up.

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“Oh, the hostess and I have known each other since we were children,” Penelope answered, noting that her companion stood casually, one hand in his pocket while the other nursed a pretend drink. “What about you, my lord? How do you know them?”

“The host and I go hunting together every Season,” he answered, puffing his chest out—a possible sign of his arrogance or perhaps that he was attempting to appear more important than he really was.

Their pretend conversation carried on for another minute or so before His Grace finally stopped the rehearsal to ask, “So... viable prospect or an unsuitable one?”

“Unsuitable, most certainly,” Penelope huffed.

“Good.” He gestured invitingly. “And how, pray tell, did you arrive at that conclusion?”

Penelope repeated whatever details she had picked up on, even though she was sure that there were probably others that she had missed.

“Ever the fast learner,” he remarked with an approving nod. “Naturally, in this case, I was being deliberate with most of those undesirable signals, so some of them may have come across as slightly exaggerated but the principle still stands.”

Penelope couldn't help but tilt her chin upwards upon receiving such a favorable assessment, but it turned out that His Grace wasn't quite done.

“But you forgot one thing,” he added with a mischievous grin. “While you are

observing your companion, you can be sure that they are observing you too.”

“Come now, Your Grace,” Penelope despaired, “you can’t seriously expect me to hold a conversation with a gentleman, observe the minutia of his movements and mannerisms, and keep track of my own unintentional mannerisms as well?”

“It certainly wouldn’t hurt to try.” He shrugged, “Besides, I thought you wanted to do everything in your power to improve your chances of landing a husband. Paying attention to such minutia would serve you well.”

Penelope threw her head back in frustration. “Out of all the people I could have asked help from regarding this quest, why did it have to be you?” she groaned.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” he huffed, crossing his arms. “And after I graciously shared such precious insights with you as well.”

“I’m sorry, Your Grace.” She offered him a weak smile. “You’ve been so wonderful in this endeavor. But in truth, when I asked for your help, I didn’t expect it to be this... intensive.”

This elicited a snort from the duke. “As the old adage goes, one must be careful about what one wishes for.” He waved for her to follow after him. “Perhaps some refreshments will help renew your resolve.”

Unsurprisingly, His Grace had had a tray of tea, biscuits, small fruits, and pastries prepared for their lesson, but this time he had added a pitcher of orange juice and slices of blueberry pie.

“We’ve come quite some way from plain glasses of water in the library,” she laughed, accepting a glass of orange juice from him.

“Perfection may be out of reach, but that shouldn’t stop us from getting as close as we can to it.” He winked, raising his own orange glass towards it. “Besides, I had a hunch you might not enjoy being pulled away from your afternoon nap.”

“Afternoon nap?” Penelope scoffed. “Your Grace, need I remind you that I am neither seven nor seventy years old.”

He squinted at her suspiciously. “Are you sure you’re not simply denying it because you’re embarrassed? It’s not that embarrassing of a habit, you know-”

She shook her head. “I use my afternoons to paint,” she clarified, turning towards the nearest window, “The golden afternoon light is simply divine.”

Penelope felt the duke step closer toward her, joining her in looking out of the window, a biscuit in hand.

“It’s easy to see why.” He gestured to the window, his right hand still holding a biscuit. “The afternoon sun is much gentler than its morning counterpart.”

“Exactly!” she beamed, turning her head to look up at him. But without any warning, she felt her heart stop in her chest.

At this moment, everything about him seemed at ease. The golden-orange rays lit up his carefree smile, the waves of his hair, and gentle eyes. She had always known he was handsome, but right now he looked almost celestial.

Surprised to find her staring at him, he let out an awkward laugh, “What’s the matter? Are there any crumbs on my cheek?” he asked, touching his cheek with the back of his hand.

“N-Not at all.” Penelope averted her gaze. “I was just thinking about my paintings,”

she lied.

“Ah.” He raised an eyebrow. “By any chance, were you considering asking me to pose for you?”

Penelope rolled her eyes. “With your proclivity for boredom? Not a chance! I’d have to reposition you every five minutes.”

“But I’d make an excellent subject!” he protested, striking a dramatic pose. “I’d certainly be more exciting than whatever fruits or animals you usually paint.”

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She nudged his side. “For your information, I paint landscapes, Your Grace.”

“Then paint me into one of them,” he teased. “People are always the most interesting elements of a painting.”

Penelope pretended to sniff her glass, “Just how much sugar did they put in this?” she joked.

“Thanks to our intermission, you’ve clearly regained some of your fire, Lady Pen.” He returned his glass to the tray. “Shall we put that energy to productive use?”

With only some hesitance, Penelope returned her glass as well and followed him to the center of the room.

“You expressed concerns that this is overwhelming.” Her instructor resumed their lesson. “But you don’t have to worry about controlling every tiny movement all the time because certain details are more likely to stand out to your suitor depending on the activity.”

“Er.... All right, Your Grace. Though I feel as though this remark contradicts your earlier statements.”

The duke tapped his chin as he thought of an alternate way to put it. “How about this, let's say we're dancing at the ball...” He gestured for her to step closer.

She obliged, albeit somewhat nervously.

“...so, as we dance,” he continued, holding her hand and waist in position, “you’ll be observing your suitor’s behavior, of course. But can you clearly see everything when we’re positioned like this?”

“Of course not.” She shook her head. “The first rule of dancing is to never look down at one’s feet, so for now, I can’t really observe his entire body, just the top half.”

“That’s right.” The duke nodded, beginning their dance despite the lack of music. “And the same is true vice versa. As we sway and step, your suitor will also be limited to focusing on your face and the top half of your body. Meaning-”

“Meaning that I only have to be extra vigilant about what my upper body is doing—both intentionally and unintentionally!” she interjected, finally getting the point. “Even so, that still sounds like a lot of work.”

“The more you practice, the easier it’ll become,” he promised, suddenly deciding to twirl her around. “But if I were to simplify it even further, I’d say you could be more careful with your eyes.”

“My eyes?” she frowned, returning her hand to his shoulder after her twirl. “What’s wrong with them?”

“It’s not that there’s something wrong per se,” he laughed at her concern. “I’ve simply noticed that yours are far more expressive than those of any other lady I’ve met. As a result, I’d advise you to be more-”

He froze so suddenly that he almost tripped Penelope up. She looked over her shoulder in search of the cause and was horrified to find both the dowager duchess and Mother standing by the door.

She practically leaped out of His Grace’s arms, abashedly tucking her hands behind

her back.

“Excited for the upcoming Duke and Duchess of Sunbourne’s ball, are we?” grinned Her Grace.

“As usual, it’s been predicted to be one of the biggest events of the Season,” the duke answered. “I suggested to Lady Penelope that it would be prudent to be as best prepared as possible and she agreed, hence our little rehearsal.”

“How prudent indeed, darling,” the dowager duchess replied with a knowing smile. “Please don’t let us hinder you. I shall have Rowley retrieve chairs for the two of us and we could watch you pra-”

“Oh, that won’t be necessary, Mother.” His Grace hastily cut her off. “We were practically already done anyway, right, Lady Pen?”

“Yes, Your Grace,” Penelope answered, a little unsure whether she should be addressing the duke or his mother. Regardless, she found it necessary to keep her eyes trained straight ahead lest she accidentally meet her own mother’s gaze.

“In that case, are you two ready to take tea?” Her Grace suggested.

Penelope heaved a sigh of relief at this subject change while His Grace accepted the offer on both his and her behalf.

As they left the ballroom, she locked eyes with him one last time. With a wink, the duke pretended to wipe sweat off his forehead with the back of his hand.

Penelope grinned, raising her hand to copy and return his gesture.

Being friends with someone so persuasive certainly has its strengths.

CHAPTER 17

“Graystone!” Penelope exclaimed in delight. “Goodness, I suppose they weren’t exaggerating when they said the entire town would be here.”

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Once Jerry had exchanged greetings with both Penelope and the dowager duchess, he inquired at once about Mother's welfare.

“She’s still in the full-mourning period, of course,” answered Penelope, “but at least she no longer confines herself to just her room. In fact, every so often, Her Grace even persuades her to go shopping.”

As Jerry expressed his elation at the good news, a pang of guilt struck Penelope’s chest. She didn’t have the heart to tell him that aside from an awkward “Good morning” or similar sentiment, Mother wasn't currently speaking to her.

The master of ceremonies declared the next figure and Jerry suddenly straightened up. “I believe that’s my number.”

He turned back to her with a giddy smile. “May I have this dance, Little Penny Puntton?”

“Why yes, you may, Jerry Gray,” she laughed, putting her gloved hand in his.

As they danced, Penelope couldn’t help but appreciate how their hosts had managed to maintain a consistent level of orderliness, elegance, and high spirits on such a grand scale.

When she expressed this sentiment to Jerry, he agreed wholeheartedly. “I didn’t think it was possible, but the Sunbourne’s somehow outdid themselves this year, didn’t they?”

“It’s incredible!” Penelope concurred, gazing at the chandeliers above them.

The sound of Graystone chuckling called her attention back to him. “What?” she huffed.

“Don’t worry, Penny,” he assured her, “It wasn’t a laugh of derision, but of delight.” His expression softened. “I can’t put my finger on exactly why, but you seem... different somehow. You never used to laugh or smile so easily.”

“Jerry Gray! I hope you aren’t implying that I was miserable company,” Penelope joked, “because if so, it would be quite tragic to find out after so many years of friendship.”

“That’s not what I’m saying at all.” Her dance partner squeezed her hand reassuringly. “Only that you are even more pleasant company than before.” He leaned closer to ask, “Am I to assume that this is because you’ve managed to secure a fiancé?”

“Not yet, I’m afraid,” Penelope sighed. “I thought I had come rather close a handful of times. But knowing that this ball was coming up, I decided it would be easier to catch someone’s attention here.”

Her old friend’s smile faded. “Penny, I know it’s hardly my business, but aren’t you worried that leaving it until now is quite risky?”

Of course, I’m worried!she wanted to yell. But if she had said so, she would then inevitably have to explain that it was actually His Grace’s advice to hold back for so long.

“I never thought the day would come whereIwould be saying this toyou, Jerry Gray,” she smiled, “but you’re worrying a little too much.”

Her friend opened his mouth—likely to protest, but evidently changed his mind. “As you say, Penny. Just promise me you’ll get it sorted out soon.”

“Of course,” she nodded.

After their dance, he escorted her back to the dowager duchess, thanked them both, and left to mingle with the other guests.

Soon after Jerry had separated from them, Lord Steepwharf happened to pass by. As usual, greetings and inquiries about the other person’s welfare were made.

Thanks to her latest lesson with His Grace, Penelope now noticed just how much gentler the viscount’s demeanor was towards the dowager duchess, who in turn showered him with praise and sincerely reminded him about how proud his parents would be if they were here.

When other guests approached to speak with the dowager duchess, the viscount asked Penelope about how she was enjoying the ball so far.

After she gave her positive reply, Lord Steepwharf asked another question, “And what of the Duke of Blackmoore? How has he been keeping these days?”

“He’s well, Lord Steepwharf,” Penelope smiled, scanning the room, “but if you’re looking for him, I think I spied him talking to-”

“No need to send for him.” The viscount waved a hand. “I’m glad that he’s doing well. I also hope you’re not too disappointed that he’s flitting around the party instead of staying by your side.”

“Why would I be disappointed?” Penelope chuckled. “Such behavior is perfectly characteristic of His Grace. If he was staying put, now that would be cause for

concern.”

The viscount let out a polite laugh upon hearing this, but something about the way his eyes shifted told her that he wasn't fully satisfied with her answer.

Perhaps he meant something else?she worriedly asked herself.

But Lord Steepwharf didn't pursue the subject any further and after bidding her and the dowager duchess to enjoy the rest of the ball, he separated from them too.

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She fidgeted with her thumbs as she patiently waited for His Grace. He had promised to introduce her to the fourth and fifth names from her practice list: the Marquess of Wayshell and the Duke of Montguard respectively. But it had been over an hour since they had arrived at the ball, and she still hadn't been introduced to either of them.

With Jerry's words still gnawing at her—in addition to her own worries—Penelope decided she needed to be more active in seeking out new prospects.

With so many guests present, it would be practically impossible to catch the attention of someone on the other side of the room, so she would have to aim closer.

Stealing a discreet glance to her left, she spotted a trio of gentlemen several yards away. Two of the men seemed deeply engrossed in whatever the discussion was about while the third appeared to only be listening half-heartedly.

He looks to be about my age and with an unassuming air despite being tall.

True, Penelope knew absolutely nothing about him. But she needed the practice so she decided to push forward.

With these many guests present, it would take more than an exaggerated movement with a fan to draw her target's eye—even though the technique had served her well at the garden party.

Instead, she carefully scanned her surroundings so that no one was watching her just yet. On the chair to her right, the dowager duchess was making pleasant conversation with another chaperone.

As discreetly as she could, Penelope tossed her fan under the table next to her, where the draped tablecloth proceeded to hide it. She then slowly rose from her chair under the guise of wanting to stretch her legs.

Pacing back and forth near her chair, she knew this alone still wouldn't be enough movement to get her target's attention.

So, she walked around the table's circumference—putting as much distance between her and the dowager duchess as she could—before pretending to frantically search for her fan.

She made sure to lower herself to the floor as swiftly as possible, hoping that the movement she had created would have been just enough to capture even the peripheral vision of her target.

Lifting the tablecloth, Penelope made sure to heave her shoulders up and down to indicate clear relief as she reached for her fan and rose to her feet once more.

Now to see if all of that effort worked.

Resuming her guise of wanting to stretch her legs, Penelope paced back and forth once more. But when she faced the trio's direction this time, she caught her unassuming target watching her.

Before she celebrated inwardly, Penelope made sure to flash him a sheepish smile, as though she were embarrassed that he had happened to see her mishap with the fan.

He smiled back.

Yes!she squealed inwardly.Now it's simply a matter of stealing glances at him until he decides to make a move.

But her plan was foiled almost at once—albeit for a happy reason—as Rebecca and William approached with a chestnut-haired gentleman in tow.

Penelope was so pleased to see her childhood friend again that she set aside all other plans. The dowager duchess evidently already knew all of them.

So it was only to Penelope that the chestnut-haired gentleman was introduced as the Viscount Gloushire.

“Oh!” Penelope snuck a glance at Rebecca realizing that this was the gentleman she wanted to introduce Penelope to that fateful night at the Duke of Ashfordshire’s ball. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Lord Gloushire.”

This match appeared to be a good ten years or so older than Penelope, but based on his stance and kind smile, she already felt at ease with him.

“The pleasure is all mine, Lady Penelope,” he answered. “The Duke and Duchess of Danton have had nothing but lovely things to say about you.”

“Oh, Rebecca tends to exaggerate,” Penelope replied sheepishly, “so it would be wise to take anything she says about me with a grain of salt.”

“Now, Pen!” tutted her friend, “If anyone’s exaggerating, it’s you with regards to how harshly you put yourself down. Fortunately, I warned the viscount you would try to do this.”

“It’s true,” chuckled Lord Gloushire. “I’m glad that we have finally been introduced so that I can ascertain the truth myself.”

Penelope felt her spirits lift—perhaps tonight wouldn’t be fruitless after all. With her chaperone’s permission, Penelope spent the next dance with Lord Gloushire and had

a perfectly pleasant time.

She somehow felt even more at ease with him than she had with Lord Steepwharf despite having known the latter for longer. He wasn't as excitable or spirited as any of the other gentlemen Penelope had encountered since beginning her quest, but she didn't mind. His more laidback yet sensible demeanor felt more natural to her.

After the dance, Lord Gloushire escorted her back to her seat where they found the dowager duchess conversing with His Grace and two other gentlemen.

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After barely acknowledging Lord Gloushire, His Grace immediately began introductions between Penelope and the gentlemen who turned out to be Duke of Montguard as well as the Marquess of Wayshell—whom Penelope had been waiting for and anticipating since arriving at tonight's ball.

She attempted to keep herself interested in the discussion, but when Lord Gloushire excused himself and began walking away, she couldn't help but feel that she was now wasting time as well as an opportunity that held any real promise of bringing an end to the seemingly endless hunt.

With this in mind, she also excused herself—much to His Grace's visible shock and bewilderment—and began searching through the crowd for him.

Just when Penelope thought she had spotted him again, she was caught off-guard by the dowager duchess locking arms with her and whispering, "Pet, this lovely gentleman has just asked to be introduced to you."

Penelope couldn't hold back her exasperated sigh as the dowager duchess herded her back towards their table. "I thank you, Your Grace, but I was hoping to visit the powder- Oh."

Evidently, the gentleman who had requested the introduction was none other than the very one whose attention Penelope had worked so hard to catch with her fan.

"Lady Penelope, it is a pleasure to introduce the Viscount Fernside," Her Grace chirped. "The very moment he saw that you had finished your conversation with the others, he bolted over to request that I introduce you both."

“Your Grace...” the viscount half-heartedly protested, before bowing towards her. “How do you do, Lady Penelope?”

Penelope couldn't help but smile at his nervousness. From this close, it was easy to tell that he was either exactly her age—or perhaps a year or so older. His skittishness very much reminded Penelope of herself when she was first learning how to flirt.

“I'm very well, thank you, Lord Fernside,” she chuckled, attempting to put him at ease. “I do hope you can say the same. Are you enjoying the ball so far?”

“Yes, thank you.” He awkwardly cleared his throat. “But it would be more enjoyable if I could perhaps have a dance wit-”

“Lady Pen!” hissed the Duke of Blackmoore, grabbing her arm. “Can I speak with you?”

“In a moment, Your Grace.” She shook her arm free. “As you can see, I am busy at the moment.”

The duke turned to her companion unsmiling and bemused. “Fernside, you may leave us now.”

“Yes, Your Grace, of course,” the younger man hastily answered, flashing Penelope one last sheepish glance as he left.

“What wasthatfor?” she asked indignantly.

“Please...” His Grace rolled his eyes, “A scoundrel like Fernside isn't even worth practicing on.”

“He was perfectly sweet!” she protested, causing him to raise his eyebrows.

The duke clicked his tongue. “Did you learn nothing from our latest lesson? Fernside is far from ‘sweet’, he’s a gambler who latches onto anyone and everyone who could potentially lend him money.”

Penelope’s eyes widened in surprise. “I beg your pardon? That bundle of nerves couldn’t have possibly been-”

“It’s true,” His Grace drily insisted. “It’s rather unfortunate, but he got into races and cards when he was quite young. He’s one of the few who managed to get barred from Gillingham’s for a reason, you know.”

He whispered even lower, “But never mind that now, what on earth has gotten into you? Do you know how long it took for me to pry both Montguard and Wayshell out of the other guests’ palms just to have you dismiss them without even giving them the time of day?”

Penelope exhaled, “I’m sorry, Your Grace. I didn’t mean to embarrass you, but I believe I was making real headway with Lord Gloushire.”

“Gloushire?” His Grace frowned. “As in the Viscount Gloushire? Didn’t you say you were going to aim higher?”

“That’s what you advised.” She took out her fan, feeling her blood growing hotter the longer they spoke. “And look at what we have to show for it! I might actually stand a chance with Lord Gloushire—who’s perfectly agreeable and upright—but somehow even he isn’t good enough. So then tell me who is?”

He pinched the bridge of his nose. “Maybe we should discuss this elsewhere. Tell my mother that you’re going to the powder room, then meet me in the West Gardens, near the hanging wisteria archway.”

Penelope shot him an annoyed look, incredulous that immediately after she had lamented where following his orders had led them, he was now giving her even more to follow.

“Please...” he gave her a small smile, “trust me just one more time.”

CHAPTER18

Only once Duncan had finally caught sight of her did he finally feel like he could breathe again. Despite her irritation with him, Lady Penelope presently stood next to the archway—wringing her hands in nervousness—just as he had requested.

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As he jogged towards her, he noticed that she began hugging her arms. This hardly surprised him as now that they were no longer swimming in a sea of guests inside an overflowing ballroom.

“Here,” he called out to her, beginning to take his coat off, “I take it that your cloak is still in our coach, yes?”

“It’s all right.” She shook her head dismissively. “I take it we shan’t be out here for long, correct?”

He rolled his eyes, wrapping the coat around her shoulders anyway. “You know, at times like this I suspect that you oppose me simply out of habit rather than because there’s a good reason to.”

She shot him a defiant look, but her eyes softened—likely because the warmth from the coat finally hit her—and she mumbled a reluctant “Thank you” under her breath.

“There’s a bench inside the archway,” he explained offering her his arm. “The vines and wisteria will help conceal us from any eyes who might misunderstand.”

“I’m almost too afraid to ask how you’re so familiar with the layout of another family’s estate,” she half-joked, accepting his arm.

“Why would you need to ask?” he smirked. “You’re already well aware that I’m an observant person.”

The moonlight shone through the gaps in the wisteria as they strolled under the

archway. Thanks to the full moon, it was still bright enough for them to see each other clearly even here—another big relief because otherwise Duncan would have needed to somehow procure a lantern for the sake of Lady Penelope’s fear of the dark.

“You really are a most bizarre gentleman, Your Grace,” she sighed next to him. “For upon hearing my complaints that I wanted to speed up the hunt, instead of helping me do so, your first recourse has been to lure me away from the party and any potential suitors—thus slowing down our hunt for my future husband even further.”

“I have good reason to believe that this momentary setback will be worth your time, Lady Penelope,” Duncan assured her. “Besides, even the most dedicated hunters need to take breaks.”

When they arrived at the bench, Duncan gestured towards it, encouraging her to take a seat.

Without meaning to, his feet started pacing back and forth the moment he began speaking. “I understand our... quest has become increasingly frustrating for you, Lady Pen—understandably so. Thus, I believe there’s no better time than to reveal that you’re actually closer to your goal than you think.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well...” Duncan cleared his throat, “the truth is that your list of ‘practice gentlemen’ is actually... the five best prospects I could find for you.”

“But what about the other list you hid from me containing the three-”

“The three additional names? It was a blank sheet of paper,” he confessed. “I led you to believe that you were simply ‘practicing’ your techniques because I had hoped it

would make this ordeal less nerve-racking for you.”

She stared at him speechlessly for a moment before finally shaking her head, “In truth, you were right,” she admitted. “In fact, you managed to put me so at ease with the idea of ‘practicing’ that I even attempted to do so earlier. But in that case, why did you stop me from pursuing Lords Direpeak and Newshore further?”

“That was my fault,” he sighed, dropping onto the bench next to her. “I should have gotten to know them better before letting them near you. I was hoping to find other—more suitable—candidates to replace them tonight, but to no avail. But if you focus on either Lord Wayshell or the Duke of Montg-”

“I don’t think that will be necessary, Your Grace,” she cut him off with a weak smile. “I... appreciate all of the thought and time you’ve given this endeavor, but maybe it would be better if I continued it alone from here.”

Duncan’s heart dropped in his chest. “Did I do something to upset you, Lady Pen? I do apologize that Direpeak and Newshore turned out to be wretches, but I know for sure that Wayshell and-”

“It’s not that at all, Your Grace,” Penelope sighed. “I’ve simply noticed that I have developed the bad habit of relying on you too much. Now that you have provided me with the necessary skills and methods to proceed on my own, it is time I took responsibility for-”

“Have I upset you in some way?” Duncan frowned, sliding closer to her on the bench.

She pulled his coat tighter around herself. “No,” she turned away from him, “you’ve been wonderful, Your Grace, and I’ve taken advantage of that kindness long enough.”

“Nonsense,” Duncan insisted, inching even closer. “We’re friends, aren’t we? Such sacrifices and lengths are expected.”

Did one of the other guests warn her about me yet again?he worried.

But then he remembered Steepwharf’s remarks regarding how Lady Penelope instinctively jumped to Duncan’s defense whenever given the chance—so that couldn’t possibly be the reason.

His eyes widened in concern. “Did someone hurt or threaten you? Just say the word and-”

“Your Grace...” she sighed, “I have already disclosed to you the reason for my decision, there is no need for you to keep guessing.”

But Duncan wasn’t convinced. The restrictedness of her voice and her unwillingness to look him in the eyes told him there was clearly more to what she was saying.

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With the aid of the moonlight streaming in through the leaves, he scanned her face for any hints of why she was suddenly closing herself off from him.

“I can’t even remember the last time you went this quiet around me,” he teased, gently nudging her in the side. “You’re starting to scare me.”

His companion still refused to budge, but Duncan also refused to give up.

“I hope you know that you can tell me anything, Lady Pen,” he reminded her, gently tucking a lock of hair behind her ear so he could better see her face. “I’ll always endeavor to return the same degree of understanding and compassion that you have always extended to me.”

At last, she turned to face him, her almond-shaped eyes locking with his. Duncan couldn’t help but smirk because even with her lips pursed and eyebrows furrowed, she was still rather charming.

“When you say ‘anything’, Your Grace...” she hesitantly began.

“Anything,” he reaffirmed, taking her gloved hand in his. “Whatever it is, you’ll know that I—of all people—am certainly in no position to judge.”

Her eyes moved down to their hands as she sucked in a deep breath. “You truly are dangerous company to keep, Your Grace,” she breathed. “I think that’s why I’m afraid that I’m beginning to-”

His ears perked up at the sound of giggling and hushed whispers. He jumped to his

feet urgently, pulling her up with him.

With his free hand, he brought a finger to his lips.

This way, he mouthed, leading her deeper into the archway's path. He had just managed to pull his companion behind a statue several yards away when the other couple was finally close enough to identify.

"It's Lord Shawstead and Lady... Rose, I believe?" he whispered to Lady Penelope, as the other couple replaced them on the bench. "And thank heavens for that because with his red hair, I was slightly worried it was Fairhaven."

His companion carefully peeked from around the statue, but let out a gasp as the other couple grew more feverish and excited in their endeavor.

He moved quickly to shield her eyes and pull her behind the statue once again—perhaps with a little more force than he had originally intended.

"I take it that this is a popular spot for rakes to lure their prey to?" she huffed under her breath.

Duncan nodded. "And it's not difficult to see why. It's quite the feat to find a spot that's easily accessible yet still secluded enough to afford a measure of privacy. Ouch!" he grunted, as she removed his coat and shoved it into his torso.

He checked to see whether the other couple had heard him, but thankfully, they were too preoccupied to notice anything around them.

"I take it that if I follow the path, it will eventually rejoin the main path on the other side of the West Gardens?" she asked coldly, nodding to the path behind them.

“That is correct,” he answered, putting his jacket back on. “Come, I shall escort you to the-”

“No need,” she hissed. “Good evening, Your Grace.”

“Lady Pen?” he whispered after her bewilderedly.

But she didn’t so much as turn round, upping her pace to where she was practically jogging away from him.

He watched her until she turned the corner.

She didn’t even give me the chance to wish her well on the remainder of her endeavor.

CHAPTER19

Penelope steeled herself, annoyed at how much her palms were sweating at the moment. The wind tugged at the painting in her hands, threatening to make her drop it.

And there was a very real risk that she would as Penelope had been unable to sleep since their return from last night’s ball. As a result, she found herself walking unsteadily as her head swam with last night’s developments.

But she pushed all of that away for now, tightened her grip on the painting, and pressed onwards towards the gazebo, where Mother presently sat, taking tea by herself.

“Good afternoon, Mother,” she greeted awkwardly, accidentally jolting the older woman upright.

“Penelope, dear?” Her mother returned her teacup to its saucer, “What’s wrong?”

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Her question caught Penelope by surprise. “N-Nothing, Mother,” she lied. “I just wanted to bring you this.”

With just a glance, she was able to tell I was upset. I need to be more careful lest she deduce how crushed I am after...

She passed the canvas to her as she asked, “Please consider it an apology offering. Out of all the trips Father took us on, I believe you enjoyed our visit to East Brentmoor the most.”

“Oh, Penny!” Mother exclaimed. “You captured the sea exactly as I remember it!”

Penelope let out a dry chuckle at the obviously biased remark, “I can still hear the panic in your voice when Father picked up that crab with his bare hands and began showing it off.”

“Oh, don’t remind me!” shuddered her mother. “He was waving it around as though it were some sort of toy while I was completely terrified that he would blind either you or himself!”

Penelope grinned, settling into the chair next to her. “I’ve had a lot of time to think since our last discussion, Mother.” Penelope fidgeted with her hands. “And I wanted to apologize for losing my temper when you’re already going through so much.”

“Hush now, dear!” Her mother gave her hand a squeeze, “I know this has been an especially difficult time for you as well. I should be apologizing for being such a burden.”

Penelope shook her head fervently, “You have never been—and never will be—a burden, Mother.” She squeezed her hand in return, “These last few weeks have merely been... complicated—much like your marriage with Father had been.”

“I don’t know if ‘complicated’ is exactly how I would describe it...” Mother thoughtfully returned, reclining in her chair. “Yes, he had his flaws, but he had lots of wonderful qualities as well.”

“He did,” Penelope nodded in agreement, “but even you must admit that Father’s unfaithfulness did complicate your marriage to an extent...”

“It hardly felt that way to me.” Mother smiled. “He was my husband, and I loved him... imperfections and all.”

“But you deserved so much better, Mother. Can’t you see that?” Penelope frowned, but attempted to restrain herself—not wanting to start another fight. “You were the most wonderful wife to him to the end, while he betrayed your trust countless times over the years.”

“In that sense, I suppose... itwassomewhat unfair,” Mother finally admitted, “but what else could I have done? No husband is perfect, so no marriage ever will be. Sometimes, one must simply be grateful for what she can get.”

Penelope mulled her words over.

“So, in other words,” she refilled Mother’s teacup for her, “you do not regret marrying father at all... despiteeverything?”

“Of course not, dearest.” Her mother gently cupped her face. “After all, our marriage brought usyou.”

Penelope thanked her mother for being so lovely as she returned her teacup to her. “In that case, you have greatly helped me to make up my mind.”

“About what, dear?” Mother sipped her tea.

“I have decided to get married,” she blurted out, her leg suddenly beginning to bounce as she did so.

“That’s so wonderful to hear!” Mother exclaimed in delight. “I know we haven’t had the chance to discuss much these last few weeks. But I always thought that you and the Duke of Blackmoore made such a wonderful-”

“Er, I wasn't speaking with regards to the Duke of Blackmoore, Mother,” Penelope sheepishly confessed, eliciting a confused frown from the older woman.

“I beg your pardon?” Mother blinked.

“He’s not the marrying type, Mother,” Penelope reminded her with an eye roll.

“Well, neither were you,” retorted the other woman, “so you can see why I thought he would be the best person to change your mind about the subject.”

Penelope’s hand tightened into a fist. “He’s nothing but a rake,” she silently added, Last night proved that.

Even though Penelope had vowed to be more open and forthcoming with Mother, she still couldn’t bring herself to admit out loud that she had almost confessed her attraction to His Grace under the archway last night.

That hadn’t been her initial plan, of course. Initially, she simply wanted to inform him that she intended to keep her distance from him—both because of their diverging

approaches to her hunt for a husband as well as because Penelope didn't like how comfortable she had allowed herself to grow around him since she and Mother began their stay at Blackmoore Manor.

But she faltered when he tenderly wrapped his jacket around her, as he despaired and pleaded for her to tell him what was bothering her, as he gently caressed her hands in his own—mindlessly stroking the back of her hand as they spoke.

She had almost fallen for it, almost allowed him in, almost allowed herself to admit that-

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But thankfully, Lord Shawstead arrived just in time to remind her that she had foolishly walked into a trap. It was entirely possible, of course, that His Grace had no malicious intentions towards her last night—after all, he may be a rake, but it was quite unlikely he would be interested in Penelope in that way.

But as she listened to his remark on the advantages afforded by that particular bench, it reminded her how likely it was that His Grace had utilized it himself for similarly illicit exploits and it irritated her unexpectedly.

Am I jealous? she had worried, and that's when it dawned upon her just how much danger she had carelessly put herself in—but no longer.

For even though she had thrown some of the blame on His Grace for 'slowing down' her quest for a husband. But upon realizing just how much she had allowed herself to fall for him, Penelope wondered whether she had been unknowingly working against herself or unintentionally holding back because a part of her revelled in the comfort that his company provided.

These and various other concerns had been rushing through her mind for most of last night, preventing her from getting the rest that she so desperately needed.

"If not the Duke of Blackmoore, then who did you have in mind?" Mother pressed, snapping Penelope out of her thoughts.

Penelope recounted how Rebecca had introduced her to Viscount Gloushire the night before. "And I don't want to get ahead of myself, but Lord Gloushire did very clearly indicate his interest," she added with a sheepish grin.

Mother let out a squeal of delight—the happiest noise to come out of her since Father’s passing. “Oh, Penny! My heart feels as though it might burst from excitement! What is he like? I believe I met the late Viscount Gloushire years ago, but as for his successor—”

“He’s sweet.” Penelope shrugged contentedly. “He’s still quite handsome—though I can’t help but wonder how much more so he was during his prime. And... yes. That’s really all I can say for now, he’s polite and rather respectful.”

“Interesting how you don’t sound too excited about him,” Mother mused, “as opposed to whenever we discuss a certain other gentleman instead—”

“Mother...” Penelope groaned.

In response, the older woman gently patted her hand in reassurance. “I am only teasing you, Penny, dearest. Besides, love is not a ‘necessary’ requirement in the beginning. If you and Lord Gloushire really are a good match, then over time, you two may grow to love each other once you’ve settled into your marriage.”

“I suppose you’re right, Mother.” Penelope smiled.

But in truth, she did not mind if Lord Gloushire would ever grow to love her—or vice versa—all that mattered at this point was that he was willing and able to marry her.

As their conversation drifted to more mundane matters, Penelope found herself simultaneously resigned to her fate, while also relieved that she would no longer have the dread of her self-serving monster of an uncle hanging over her.

A part of her worried that she had been too harsh towards His Grace last night, but she pushed him out of her mind—she had more than enough problems as it was.

* * *

“I have enough problems as it is,” Duncan grunted, dodging Harlington’s lunge, returning with a parry of his own.

“Come now, Blackmoore!” Fairhaven whined from the sidelines of their friendly fencing spar. “You can be so selfish sometimes!”

His red-headed friend flinched as the book he had been attempting to read slid off his chest and fell onto the grassy patch next to him.

With a clang and the sound of their clothes shuffling, Duncan and Harlington’s swords disengaged. “You don’t need both of us!” Duncan gritted out. “Harls is more than capable of keeping the other guests occupied by himself.”

Harlington flashed him a smirk through the mesh of his saber mask. “I appreciate the faith, Blackmoore.,” his blade moved quickly—but Duncan’s was quicker, “but wouldn’t you agree that the original plan of three gentlemen and three ladies is a much more satisfying balance?”

Duncan saw his chance and lunged forward. But his footing faltered, and Harlington landed his final blow, bringing their bout to a rather anticlimactic end.

“You’re distracted today,” his friend remarked as Duncan tore off his mask—the gentle breeze hitting his face—only offering a low, affirmative grunt in response.

“You seemed fine at Sunbourne’s last night,” Fairhaven added, adjusting himself against the tree bark. “Meaning whatever’s bothering you must have happened afterward.”

“If that were the case...” Harlington chimed in, setting his sword and other gear next

to Fairhaven on the grass, “it would have to involve someone outside of the ball... perhaps a particular lady who also happens to be staying at Blackmo-”

“It’s nothing,” Duncan growled, accepting a glass of water from a footman and swallowing a huge gulp. “I just don’t see why we must spend every waking second together, that’s all.”

“You’ve never complained before,” Harlington retorted, also accepting a glass from the footman. “Once again reinforcing my suspicions...” he added in a sing-song tone while putting on a kissing face.

Duncan let out a dry chuckle. “Why are you giving me such a tough time when Fairhaven is the one who was pining so miserably over Lady Beatrice he almost got us thrown out of Gillingham’s?”

“A-ha!” Harlington pointed an accusatory finger at him, “So you admit that you are pinning, after all!”

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Duncan joined his friends on the picnic blanket they had spread on the grass and let out a sigh. “It's not that,” he insisted—though his tone was less convincing than he would have liked.

He gradually recounted his final conversation with her from last night while his friends listened with utmost seriousness, “...she seems irritated with me, but I can't for the life of me figure out why. How am I supposed to apologize if-”

“You fool!” Fairhaven propped himself up on his elbows. “We told you to be more careful! She's probably fallen for you and is heartbroken that you won't return her-”

“No.” Duncan cut him off—did he sense a hint of bitterness in his own voice? “Lady Penelope has always been well aware of my rakish nature and has chastised me for it from the very moment we met. She could never—would never—see me that way.”

His friends exchanged silent looks with each other—clearly disagreeing with Duncan, just not out loud. His lips parted to protest, but Fairhaven beat him to it.

“We could find out for sure.” Fairhaven pushed, “What if we invited her to the opera with the rest of u-”

“Don't bother her,” Duncan warned, “She made it clear that she wants absolutely nothing to do with me from this point onwards—and that certainly extends to you lot too.”

But his objections fell on deaf ears.

A familiar mischievous glint shone in Harlington's eyes. "If we convinced her to join us, then we could practically guarantee Blackmoore's presence."

"Don't even think about it," Duncan warned.

"You are neither her father nor her husband." Harlington clicked his tongue as he reminded him, "If it turns out that she does indeed want to join us in the end, who are you to stop her?"

"She will not want to join us, this much I can assure you," came Duncan's firm reply. "You're both out of your minds if you think I will let you bother her."

"What about a race?" Fairhaven flashed them a giddy grin. "If you get back inside before us, we'll drop it. But if either of us beat you to it..."

A moment passed as the friends exchanged silent glances. In the next moment, all three friends had leaped to their feet and were sprinting back towards the house.

CHAPTER 20

As they crossed the opera entrance's threshold Duncan lightly tugged at his cravat—which happened to be annoying him considerably more than usual.

When his eyes adjusted to the warm light from the chandeliers that hung above them, he snuck a peripheral glance at Lady Penelope and Mother to his right side. The entire building felt alive and abuzz with excitement, which was hardly a surprise now that the Season was in full swing.

Out of the corner of his eye, Duncan eyed Lady Penelope's throat swallow, causing him to clench a fist.

She never seemed comfortable around large crowds. He bit his lip, wishing he could offer his arm or a word of encouragement to help ease her into this.

If it were up to him, she wouldn't have to go through any of this. But he had lost the race when Harlington tackled him to the ground just a few yards away from the manor's backdoor, thus allowing Fairhaven the opportunity to run inside and search for Mother.

Duncan shoved Harlington off and sprinted to the drawing room, but by the time he sunk against the doorframe panting, Mother was already chirping about how the opera sounded like such a splendid idea.

A part of him held onto the hope that Lady Penelope would decline Mother's invitation. But on the other hand, he was hardly surprised that she had ended up accepting because well, she clearly had a soft spot for Mother and didn't want to disappoint her.

He had considered warning her about what lay in store, warning her that this was all just an elaborate conspiracy to give Fairhaven an excuse to get closer to Lady Beatrice.

A hand landed on Duncan's shoulder as Harlington greeted them all. Once pleasantries had been exchanged, he dragged them across the room towards where Fairhaven chatted with Ladies Beatrice and Madalene along with their families.

Lady Georgina's family must be running late. Duncan noted silently.

Lady Georgina was the one he had been 'assigned' to keep busy the entire night. And ordinarily, he wouldn't have minded. In fact, under different circumstances, he probably would have relished the opportunity.

He would have showered the unsuspecting debutante with attention and praise, laughed at everything she had to say, offered to show her around the opera house whilst spewing facts about its history and decor he had committed to memory, and so on and so forth.

But none of that appealed to him in the slightest now and Duncan couldn't help but wonder whether the people who claimed that he was behaving differently now were right after all.

"Your Grace!"

The excited exclamation cut through the fog of his thoughts, and he quickly mustered his best smile for Lady Beatrice's mother, "Lady Thornlowe!"

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Lord Thornlowe, however, did not appear as thrilled to see them—clearly wary of the reputation that the three friends had.

Once the necessary introductions were made between the two groups, Fairhaven suggested that they slowly begin looking for their seats.

As their combined parties meandered through the winding corridors, Duncan placed a hand on Harlington's shoulder and whispered, "What happened to Lady Georgina?"

"Oh dear..." Harlington smirked over his shoulder, "I sent them a note to confirm that we were looking forward to seeing them. But I am just now realizing that it may have mentioned the... wrong date."

Duncan's eyes widened in bewilderment. "You did? Why?"

Harlington's eyes fell on Lady Penelope and Mother as they conversed with Lady Madalene and her parents. "You were right," he shrugged, "You have more than enough problems as it is."

"Have you had the chance to speak to her yet?" Duncan cleared his throat, his eyes resting on the low chignon that hung on the back of Lady Penelope's neck. "I know I was adamant about you leaving her alone, but on second thought, perhaps she'll be more open with you two than she has been with me."

"We'll do our best." Harlington nodded firmly. "Or at least I will, Fairhaven looks like he's forgotten that the rest of us are still here." He gestured with his chin towards their giddy friend as he basked in the light of Lady Beatrice's sheepish smile even as

she hung on her father's protective arm.

When they eventually took their seats, Mother insisted on sitting next to Lady Madalene's mother—Lady Whitewood—which put Lady Penelope on Duncan's righthand side, while Fairhaven sat on his left.

The poor creature kept her eyes focused straight ahead, without throwing even so much as a nod of acknowledgment Duncan's way.

His heart pounded wildly at the unbearably awkward air between them, but he had already decided that he wasn't going to be the one to initiate even a temporary truce.

He had given her more than enough opportunity to explain what was wrong and how he could help when they were under the archway. So, Duncan saw no reason for him to be the one who-

"Your Grace?"

Duncan grimaced as he realized that for the second time already tonight, he had flinched thanks to someone's voice interrupting his thoughts—he really needed to stop allowing his mind to wander.

"Yes, Lady Penelope?" he croaked, his throat suddenly dry.

Duncan also had his gaze fixed straight ahead, but he could see her shift in her seat slightly as she whispered, "Is Lord Harlington... an upstanding gentleman?"

Duncan snapped his neck to her in an instant. "Of course. Why? What did he say to you?"

She reached into her reticule and pulled out a folded note, "Before we took our seats,

he asked me to pass this to Lady Madalene for him when I got the chance.”

Duncan felt the tension in his shoulders melt away, immediately understanding what his friend was trying to do.

“Did he now?” he chuckled drily, “What does the note say?”

“I haven’t read it, of course!” she huffed in response. “But by now you also must have noticed the attention he’s paying her tonight, so it isn’t too difficult to guess what it might contain.”

Duncan felt his chest tighten as he fought back the urge to tell her everything—that Harlington’s behavior towards Lady Madalene was quite calculated, as was this entire excursion, and as was the note that he had put in Lady Penelope’s hands.

“You’ve never even spoken to Lady Madalene before tonight,” Duncan mused out loud, “and you’re already being so protective of her.” He smiled.

“Naturally, of course!” scoffed the lady at his side. “And I know that Lord Harlington is a close friend of yours, but you’ve always been honest in your criticisms of other gentlemen. And I cannot, in good conscience, pass this note on to Lady Madalene until I am certain that Lord Harlington won’t hurt her.”

“He won’t,” Duncan promised with utmost sincerity. It was true, but perhaps not for the same reasons that Lady Penelope was thinking of. “But if you’d prefer, I could pass the note along instead?” he offered, “Perhaps that would be easier on your conscience?”

She bit her lip for a moment, causing Duncan to wonder if she couldn’t trust him even with a matter this trivial. But to his relief, Lady Penelope eventually held out the note towards him with only the slightest hint of apprehension.

The lights dimmed shortly after accepting the paper and the pair resumed their initial forward-facing stances. A few minutes into the first number, Duncan checked to ensure that Lady Penelope wasn't watching him.

Upon confirming that her gaze remained steadfastly transfixed on the stage and its spirited performers, Duncan stealthily unfolded the note to confirm his suspicions.

Evening, Blackmoore!

-H

It simply read.

Duncan chuckled to himself—his hunch had been right after all, Harlington had only given Lady Penelope the note as part of a ploy to get her to speak to him again.

As he settled back into his seat, Duncan had no doubts that Harlington likely had several other similar schemes ready to draw the truth out of Lady Penelope.

For a brief moment, he once again considered warning her about them. But upon stealing yet another glance at her delicate features in the bluish, low light—eyes wide with anticipation and a smile tugging at the corners of her lips, Duncan held back.

He needed to know what had pushed her away from him so suddenly. And if this was the only way to do so, then guilt be damned, he was going to find out.

* * *

Duncan welcomed the intermission with open arms and practically leaped at the opportunity to stretch his legs.

Ordinarily, the prospect of making mundane conversation about an opera he had already seen a few times this year would be the last thing he would want to do in the world.

But he didn't know how much more of the awkward tension he could take. Although Lady Penelope appeared completely indifferent—possibly even forgetting that Duncan existed at all—he found his breath hitching every time she let out an

impressed gasp or adjusted in her seat.

It had been agony.

Finally!he sighed to himself as he accepted a glass of brandy from one of the servers before they carried on attending to the other attendees that were pouring back into the entrance hall.

The way he had practically dashed out on Mother and Penelope was a far cry from what could be considered ‘good form’ or ‘gentlemanly’. But he did not chastise himself for it too much as he watched Harlington take care of them—Mother on one arm with Lady Penelope on the other.

Duncan ducked into the crowd to avoid catching their eyes, he knew that the best thing he could do for now was to give Harlington ample opportunity to learn as much as he could.

In the meantime, Lady Madalene must be wondering why Harlington’s attentions have wavered. I should probably distract her in the meantime.

He found their family with ease, remembering how her father—the Earl of Delmar—was always keen to discuss the murals that lined the opera house’s West Gallery in particular as it focused on Ancient Egypt.

Sliding next to Lady Madalene, he flashed the debutante a polite smile as he listened to Lord Delmar once again explain to the small group of peers the intricate details about the bust before them.

“At this rate, I hope the impresario is compensating your father handsomely for his zeal and dependability,” Duncan joked in a soft whisper.

“On the contrary, I believe he would pay the impresario for the opportunity to stay here full-time,” came Lady Madalene’s dry reply, but she continued to watch her father’s enthusiasm with softened eyes.

“Or perhaps the impresario should be compensating you for your patience.” Duncan smiled, his voice coming out slightly sultrier than he had intended. “I’m certain that you have memorized every detail about every piece in here by now.”

The longer their conversation carried on, the more Duncan gradually eased them towards the edge of the crowd. It was an old trick he employed whenever he wanted to ensure a lady’s undivided attention—taking small, almost imperceptible steps backward every few minutes.

In this case, however, he employed it more for the sake of ensuring that their lighthearted and inconsequential discussion did not interrupt Lord Delmar’s more informative one.

As the intermission neared its end, all of the guests—including Duncan and Lord Delmar’s family—began slowly pouring out of the West gallery and into the entrance hall.

A hand landed on Duncan’s shoulder, the suddenness startled him, but the sensation was a familiar one.

“Harls.” Duncan acknowledged with a nod as the hand slid off his shoulder. “How did your quest go?”

“She was quite wary of me at first, but the conversation eased up eventually,” Harlington recounted under his breath. “She did not get the opportunity to state outright why she suddenly wants nothing to do with you. However...” his voice trailed off.

“However?” Duncan prompted impatiently.

“In our search for the answer, it appears that it has found us first.” His friend directed his eyes to a group at the far end of the room.

Duncan followed his line of sight until his eyes landed on Lady Penelope along with whatever Viscount Gloushire was saying.

“It would appear that Lady Penelope has cast you aside in favor of allowing Lord Gloushire to occupy her time,” remarked Harlington.

“Be that as it may.” Duncan pushed out a breath as he felt the fire of protectiveness stir within him, “I still don’t see why she would deem it necessary to push me away. It isn’t as though she is replacing one lover with another. We were... friends. You can still remain friends with someone.”

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“But how long do you think Gloushire’s interest in her would last if he realized she was close to the infamous Duke of Blackmoore?” Harlington reasoned, giving him an apologetic look. “We get to have our fun, Blackmoore, but it does come at a price.”

Being spurned by the people around him was nothing new to Duncan. But after how Lady Penelope had stood up for him time and time again, how she sided with him against Direpeak and Newshore with almost no questions asked, after the way she-

No, there must be a deeper reason. Duncan reasserted to himself as it was more in line with what he knew about her, wasn’t it?

“It doesn’t matter now,” he finally answered—both to Harlington and himself as he nudged his way through the crowd, “The next session is about to begin.”

CHAPTER 21

The wind was so strong it almost knocked the easel over the second time in the last ten minutes. On days like this, Penelope would have spared herself the irritation and done her painting indoors.

But the air in Blackmoore Manor felt heavier these days. Every time His Grace would walk into the dining room or pass her in the hallways, her breath would catch in her throat and seemingly stay there until sufficient distance was put between them once again.

So, Penelope continued to throw herself into her paintings. However, the dowager duchess expressed some concern at how long Penelope locked herself away in her

room, so she tried to carry on in the rear gardens of the manor, under the cloudy skies, occasionally being teased and tormented by the wind.

Setting her palette down, Penelope reached for the top of the easel and pushed it deeper into the dirt—with a tad more vexation than she would like to admit even to herself.

“Are you all right, Lady Penelope?” asked a man’s voice, momentarily deepening the frown on Penelope’s face.

“Oh!” her eyebrows relaxed when her eyes landed on the Viscount Gloushire and the footman behind him. “Good day, Lord Gloushire. What a pleasant surprise!”

The gentleman returned her greeting before explaining, “Her Grace mentioned that you would be out here and advised that I join you.” He cleared his throat sheepishly.

Penelope looked past him, squinting her eyes to better focus on the house. Sure enough, she caught sight of Mother and the dowager duchess eagerly waving to her through one of the corridor windows—enthusiastically indicating their approval for this match.

So that’s why they sent a footman to chaperone instead of joining us themselves, she chuckled to herself.

“Please have a seat, Lord Gloushire.” She gestured to the bench to her left. “Would you care for any refreshments? I can send for them right away.”

“The dowager duchess actually said they would already be on the way.” He beamed at her, accepting her offer and dropping himself onto the bench. “Your work looks lovely. May I ask what place this is?”

“Pelshead,” she answered, picking up her palette and brush once again. “At least, this is how I remember it while I was growing up. I’ve been in a more sentimental mood these days,” she confessed.

“I read in a treatise once that such moods are often brought on by one’s desire to escape the present,” remarked her companion. “But it is my sincerest hope that that isn’t the case right now?”

Penelope’s brush hovered over the canvas as she breathily asked, “What if it were?”

“Then I would offer my sympathies and ask if there was anything I could do to help change that,” the viscount replied matter-of-factly.

Penelope gave him a smile of thanks for his compassion.

Marrying me tomorrow would be the best way to change everything, she Thought.

As promised, two maids arrived bearing their refreshments. But to Penelope’s dismay, so did the Duke of Blackmoore.

“Good day, Your Grace!” Lord Gloushire leaped to his feet, extending a polite hand towards the other man. “Awful weather we’re having, isn’t it?”

The duke returned his greeting with a firm handshake and an unreadable expression. “Quite right, Lord Gloushire. But pleasant visitors are a bright spot wherever they go,” came his cordial reply. “To what do we owe the pleasure of welcoming you today?”

Without waiting for an invitation, His Grace sat down on the bench and gestured for the viscount to do the same before he answered the former’s question.

“I had some free time today and thought I would make the most of it by speaking to the most wonderful lady in theton,” Lord Gloushire answered with a wink.

Penelope rolled her eyes. “You’re so polite that I’m certain you say that to all the women to whom you speak, Lord Gloushire.”

“Preposterous!” the viscount clicked his tongue before jovially bringing a hand down on His Grace’s shoulder. “If anyone’s a smooth-talker to the ladies, it’s the Duke of Blackmoore. Isn’t that right, Your Grace?”

Penelope felt the smile drop from her face at this uncharacteristically backhanded comment.

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If he was offended, the duke did an impressive job of concealing it as he calmly retorted, “I don't blame you for assuming as much, Lord Gloushire. But such tactics are unnecessary for those of us who possess natural charm...”

Penelope exhaled in relief.

“...not that you would know what that's like, of course,” the duke tacked on at the last second, causing the knots in Penelope's stomach to tighten once again.

She opened her mouth to change the subject, but the viscount was too quick.

“If that were true,” he huffed, “then I wouldn't have been able to get married in the first place, would I?”

Penelope's eyes widened in surprise and confusion. “Are you married, Lord Gloushire?”

His gaze snapped to meet hers, his eyebrows shooting upwards as his own words washed over him.

“I was married,” he clarified hastily, brushing away the hair that the wind had pushed into his eyes. “I am... a widower.”

Penelope nodded slowly as she processed this revelation. “Oh... I see, Lord Gloushire. My condolences, I had no idea at-”

“I thought perhaps the dowager duchess may have mentioned it at some point.” The

viscount fidgeted with his hands awkwardly. "But even so, I do apologize if I surprised you with this information."

"No, no," Penelope waved his remark away awkwardly, "but I suppose it does make more sense that a gentleman as courteous and agreeable as yourself isn't a bachelor."

A movement on the edge of her periphery momentarily caught her attention and she found His Grace carefully studying her expression. Perhaps he wondered whether Penelope truly was as unbothered as she appeared.

Did he plan on causing Lord Gloushire to slip up and reveal this prematurely? she wondered.

Almost as though he had heard her thoughts, His Grace rose from the bench and patted the dust off his pants. "Well, I believe I have intruded long enough, I suppose it's about time I get back to my duties."

"Already leaving us, Your Grace?" The viscount stood up as well. "Surely the bulk of your activities don't even begin until sundown?"

His Grace exhaled slightly through his nose at the insinuation. But instead of a retort, the duke simply nodded as he offered, "Have a wonderful day, Lord Gloushire. Ah, and you too, Lady Pen." He added, "I am certain you two have plenty to discuss."

She shot him a final glare as he walked past, but it did nothing to wipe away his smirk. When the duke-shaped nuisance had finally departed, Penelope offered to pour Lord Gloushire a cup of tea in the hopes of pressing onward and salvaging what she could.

"It appears that you and His Grace are well-acquainted," she handed the cup and saucer to him, "so I hope that means I do not have to apologize for his conduct?"

“You shouldn’t have to apologize regardless.” The viscount reminded her, “You are neither his sister nor his mother. But indeed, I am well aware of His Grace’s exploits. I do sincerely hope he isn’t burdening you with them.” He flashed her a knowing look.

“We’ve had our differences, but His Grace has been treating me much better than expected,” came Penelope’s honest answer.

Flashes of her late-night lessons with His Grace appeared in her mind’s eye. Not only was she aware of his exploits, but she had directly benefited from them as he shared everything he knew and even orchestrated events to better enable her to speak with their targeted prospects.

“How relieving to hear that His Grace has even a small measure of decency, despite how well he hides it,” joked Lord Gloushire.

Penelope felt the urge to object, to explain that he was actually quite loyal to his friends, family, and even to her.

But she held her tongue in the end.

After all, how could she ever expect to gain control over the strange feelings she harbored for him if she did nothing but praise him?

Almost as though on cue, Lord Gloushire moved to change the subject to more lighthearted matters, including the book he had mentioned the other night when they were at the opera house.

Once again, Penelope found herself sinking into a comfortable—almost bored—back and forth with the gentleman.

As they spoke, the thought crossed her mind that if she somehow did end up marrying him, then she would have to spend the rest of her life holding similar monotonous discussions.

It'll be fine,she told herself.It will certainly be much more preferable than marrying Uncle Winston.

* * *

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“Absolutely not,” Duncan managed to hiss out, despite the whiskey’s sting.

“Butwhynot?” whined Fairhaven, downing the last of his own glass. “You never indulge me!”

Duncan barely managed to push himself upright in his seat as he reached for the bottle and poured his friend another glass. “On the contrary, I believe it is precisely because Harlington and I have indulged you far too much for far too long that you think you can continue to take advantage of us.”

Fairhaven scoffed, but nonetheless tipped his glass towards him in thanks for refilling it. “Then you shouldn’t have a problem indulging me in this as well!”

Duncan let out yet another exasperated sigh. He usually had quite a lot of patience for the nonsense that Fairhaven spouted, but he found himself more short-tempered these days.

The drunken haze hovering just above his eyebrows was a familiar sensation.

What is Lady Penelope doing right now while we’re busy making complete fools of ourselves?he silently asked the glass in his hand. When no answer came, he brought the glass to his lips with one hand while the other reached for a refill.

“I shall do it if you give me something in return,” Duncan offered, feeling a little bit more generous after his most recent swig. He reached a hand out to shake Harlington’s shoulders. “Are you still with us, Harls?”

“Just about,” groaned his dark-haired friend as he lifted his head from the table. “But I’m afraid that my ears stopped working on their own accord about two glasses ago. What are you two arguing about again?”

Duncan gently massaged his eyes. “Fairhaven has made a promise he can’t keep to Lord Thornlowe, and he’s desperately trying to save face.”

“It’s not about saving face!” the other duke protested. “It’s about love! My very future with Lady Beatrice hangs in the balance and you’re refusing to lift so much as a finger to help!”

“I changed my mind slightly, didn’t I?” Duncan grinned. “I said I’d help if you’d do something for me in return.”

Fairhaven scoffed yet again. “In that case, why’d I even bother coming to you? I could have just asked any other nobleman and received the same apathetic offer.”

“So, you admit, then, that the main reason you came to me for this matter is because you didn’t want to repay the favor?” Duncan raised an eyebrow in an attempt to appear stern, but the chuckle that escaped his throat betrayed him shortly thereafter.

“How heavy of a favor is it?” Fairhaven worriedly asked.

“That’s what is making this so irritating!” Fairhaven’s drink sloshed in his glass as he frantically waved it around. “Blackmoore simply has to put me in touch with the tradesmen and sailors his family uses down at the Port of Kenstone, and I shall worry about procuring the materials Lord Thornlowe asked for.”

“And in return for this simple request, what would you like, Blackmoore?” prompted Fairhaven.

Duncan opened his mouth but closed it again sheepishly.

“You don’t even know what you want to ask of me yet?” Fairhaven thundered, his hands shooting across the table to grab at Duncan’s collar. “Scoundrel!” he slurred.

“I’m more concerned with the principle of the matter. We’ve always managed to get away with various carryings-on over the years, but perhaps it’s time to rein it in, so to speak,” he justified in return. “Maybe it’s about time that you—er, all of us—stopped being so thoughtlessly juvenile.”

“Good heavens!” shuddered Harlington. “I never thought I’d live to see you turn into your father, Blackmoore.”

All Duncan could muster was a shrug. “And I never thought I’d live to see Fairhaven concern himself with a lady for longer than two weeks, yet here we are.”

“I told you I loved her, didn’t I?” the red-haired duke piped up angrily.

“Yes, but in my defense, you have also said the very same thing about Lady Augusta, Lady Diana, Lady Sophi-”

“Point taken,” Fairhaven mumbled, taking another swig out of his glass before swishing what little content remained, “but it’s different this time because, well... I have been thinking about having children,” he confessed.

Duncan and Harlington’s jaws practically fell onto the floor at this confession.

“Children?” Harlington exclaimed in disbelief. “When you yourself still act like a child?”

“I only behave that way when I’m around you imbeciles,” their friend defensively

huffed. “Otherwise, I am—and have been for some time—quite ready to settle down and start a family.”

Harlington pressed his glass to his lips. “First Blackmoore was acting bizarrely and now this? What’s next? Will I suddenly have the urge to stop drinking?”

The rest of the night passed by in a hazy blur as the three friends jumped back and forth between such sobering subjects and giving into intoxication.

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By the time Duncan awoke and pushed himself up off of Harlington's sofa, his recollection of the evening had all but been broken into jumbled fragments that barely fit together no matter how hard he attempted to piece them.

On the other sofa, Fairhaven let out a soft snore, face-down in a cushion as one of his arms spilled down the sofa's side and onto the floor.

I don't even remember the coach ride that got us here,Duncan sighed.

He swore under his breath when the grandfather clock's face told him that it was already eleven o'clock. However, he could have guessed as much by the blinding rays that streamed in through the edges of the curtains.

Our drinking bout must have extended well past sunrise.

After gathering his belongings and unceremoniously shoving his boots on, Duncan asked a servant to convey his thanks to Harlington for letting him spend the night.

His head, the sun, and the loudness of the bustling streets all continued to punish Duncan even on the coach ride home.

He felt a measure of relief wash over him as he pushed the front door open and entered the comforting shade, mumbling thanks as Rowley took his jacket.

"I take it that you didn't get much sleep last night, Your Grace?" a man's voice called out from the drawing room.

Duncan angled his head slightly and found Mother, Lady Punton, Lady Penelope, and Viscount Gloushire curiously watching him through the partially opened door.

He pushed the door open the remainder of the way and leaned against the frame. “My, my, calling on us again, Lord Gloushire? Isn’t this the third time this week alone? We may have to start charging you for boarding and food,” he retorted.

Mother shook her head in irritation at this ‘joke’, but the other man maintained an innocent expression. “Come now, Your Grace, you know that’s unfair. The dowager duchess was just explaining that you’re barely home these days, so I am simply eating what would have been your portion of the meals here.”

“I can’t say I’m surprised,” Duncan let out bitterly, the heaviness of the alcohol still lingering in his throat. “After all, you already have a history of taking what’s mine.”

“What on earth is that supposed to mean?” glowered the viscount, his politeness faltering for a brief moment.

Duncan froze. In truth, he himself didn’t know what he meant by it, nor why his eyes flitted over to Lady Penelope when he said it.

The parchedness of his throat burned so harshly Duncan wondered if he had somehow managed to swallow literal pins and needles in his drunken stupor—if he had, it would have hardly been the stupidest thing he and the others had gotten up to in their revelry.

Bewildered eyes watched his own tired ones, waiting for an answer to Lord Gloushire’s inquiry.

“Tired,” was all Duncan could mumble before turning his back on them, his eyes meeting Lady Penelope’s one last time as he did so. “So tired.”

His wobbly legs dutifully carried him up the stairs but gave out at once when he reached his bed. Tumbling onto it, Duncan sighed into the unused sheets and pleaded with his brain to stop torturing him so.

His brain apparently took pity on him as sleepiness began to fog his vision once again.

So... tired was the last thought to cross his mind before he allowed himself to fall into the abyss of unconsciousness.

CHAPTER 22

“Here we are!”

Lord Gloushire’s voice startled Penelope in her seat.

“Good heavens, dear! You’re as pale as a ghost!” he gasped, leaning on the edge of his coach seat across from her, reaching a hand to cup her face.

“I’m all right,” Penelope assured him, before intertwining her hands with Mother’s. “But as you can imagine, I am... more than a little nervous,” she confessed.

“While that is completely understandable, there is no need to be so overly anxious. I’m certain they’ll absolutely love you both!” assured the viscount, before turning to Mother. “I do hope you’re less worried, Lady Punton.”

“In fact, I’m quite excited, Lord Gloushire.” Mother beamed. “It has been a while since I heard the pitter-patter of little feet.”

Penelope separated her hand from Mother’s so she could place it on her bouncing leg. Despite the reassurance, she was still hesitant to disembark.

It had now been more than a month since Lord Gloushire began officially courting her and everything had been going smoothly. As they grew more comfortable around each other, he eventually revealed that he had two young children.

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“I would completely understand if this puts you off seeing me any further,” Lord Gloushire had said, taking an awkward sip of his tea after his revelation, “but my selfish side does cling to the hope that this doesn't have to be the end of our involvement.”

Penelope had then explained at the time that of course, she didn't mind—for which the viscount profusely thanked her as he planted chaste kisses of gratitude on her hands.

However, after he had left, the full weight of what she had agreed to finally hit her. Based on the rate at which everything was progressing, not only was Penelope anticipating being married by the end of the Season, but suddenly being a mother as well.

The viscount continued to assure her that she would fulfill the role well. But she found it difficult to take his words to heart since he always treated her kindly.

Would His Grace be more honest with me? She found herself remembering his relentless teasing and torment whenever Lord Gloushire would pay her a compliment.

She never expected to one day miss the duke's irritating smugness. But in addition to having pushed him away, she also rarely got to see him even in the hallways.

Perhaps he was sleeping somewhere else these days? Or perhaps he had already found a new debutante to occupy his time. Her hands trembled of their own accord every time that thought crossed her mind.

It's no longer any concern of yours,she would remind herself harshly.You have enough problems as it is.

It had now been a full week since Lord Gloushire revealed that he had children, but the dizziness and weight of it all had not yet left her.

It was sudden and overwhelming, but what choice did she have? If she spurned Lord Gloushire now, there was no way she could secure a new match before being forced to go home to Uncle Winston at the end of the Season.

Now here she sat, in a coach just outside Willowdale Manor, just about to meet her imminent step-children.

At Lord Gloushire's recommendation, Penelope wore a pink dress this morning as it was his daughter Lucy's favorite color.

"We can try this another day if this is still too much for you," her suitor offered considerately.

"N-No!" Penelope choked out, "I'm all right, really. If Lucy and Reggie have even a fraction of their father's charm and kindness, then I know that there's nothing to worry about."

She tried to sound as confident as possible, both for his sake and her own. And it appeared to work because, with a quick nod, he signaled to the servant and allowed him to open the coach door for them.

Penelope's eyes adjusted to the sunlight as she and Mother were helped down. Willowdale Manor was smaller than their own property, but it still had a rather charming air to it.

Linking arms with Lord Gloushire as he led them into the house, Penelope began reminding herself how to breathe.

In... out...she told herself, In... out... Big smile, shoulders straight, it'll be all right.

When they entered the parlor, both children—along with the small number of household staff—had lined up to greet them.

“Lucy, Reggie...” the viscount cooed, his tone even gentler than usual. “This is Lady Penelope and her mother—Lady Punton. Do you remember we talked about them the other day?”

The children nodded in unison, their wide eyes shyly avoiding direct contact.

Lucy had precious blonde curls that reached her shoulders, her small fingers unable to conceal her sweet features. She was slightly tall for a child of only six years old and bore little resemblance to her father, meaning that she must have resembled her late mother instead.

Reggie, however, looked like an almost perfect copy of his father, with his chestnut hair and large round eyes. At three years old, he only came up just past his older sister's stomach. He had been named after his late grandfather Reginald, who Penelope suspected the boy also must have resembled quite closely.

At their father's silent beckon, both children stepped forward, their hands clumsily joined together at the base of a bouquet that they bashfully raised towards Penelope.

“For me?” She placed a hand on her chest, kneeling forward to bring herself closer to their eye level. “Why, thank you both so much! You shouldn't have gone through all the trouble though.” She smiled, before flashing her suitor an appreciative look.

“I like your dress,” Lucy breathed, reaching to touch Penelope’s sleeve. “It’s pretty.”

“Thank you, I very much like yours too.” Penelope grinned, nodding to the bow in her hair. “It’s nice to find someone who also likes pink.”

Taking care to not leave the other child out, Penelope turned her head to ask, “And what about you, Reggie? What’s your favorite color?”

“Yellow!” he beamed.

“Ah! Is that why my bouquet has these lovely daffodils in it?” Penelope smiled, holding the arrangement between them.

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“I like yellow!” the boy exclaimed, a stubby finger poking at one of the daffodils.

As the conversation progressed, the children appeared to become more relaxed, which in turn relaxed the adults around them.

Just as the discussion was on the cusp of turning sour as the children began to debate whether ponies are preferable to lions, Lord Gloushire lowered himself onto a knee and placed hands on each child’s head,

“Given that we have some very special guests today, we should ensure that we treat them as such.” He raised two mischievous eyebrows. “What do you say about taking Ladies Punton and Penelope to the ice parlor?”

The children erupted into squeals of delight, prompting their father to hastily raise a finger to his lips. But even after they attempted to lower their voices to a more polite volume, the tip-taps of their feet gave away their boisterous excitement.

Soon enough, the family found themselves squeezing back onto the coach as they set off for Lesnall Street. Now that summer was well on its way, it was no surprise that the parlor was filled to the brim with patrons looking to escape the glare.

Even so, the sudden shift in temperature as they entered the parlor sent a shiver down Penelope’s spine. She and Mother followed right behind Lord Gloushire as he carried Reggie in his arms while holding onto Lucy with his other hand.

If this is how supportive and involved he is as a father, then perhaps he was right about me not having to worry too much about my imminent responsibilities as a

mother.

“-Lady Penelope?” his voice jolted her out of her thoughts.

“I beg your pardon?” she stuttered in reply.

He nodded towards the menu in front of them. “I said, what flavor would you like?”

“Oh! Just vanilla is perfectly fine for me.”

Mother explained that she only wanted to share Penelope’s iced vanilla, but Lord Gloushire refused to hear it. Soon, their ices arrived, chocolate ones for the children, vanilla scoops for Penelope and Mother, and strawberry for the gentleman.

“I wouldn't have guessed strawberry was your preferred flavor, Lord Gloushire.” Penelope smiled. “It looks delicious.”

“In truth, I normally also quite enjoy vanilla,” he confessed. “But I thought I would keep with the adventurous spirit of the day and try something new.”

Penelope chuckled, “And what, pray tell, is the final verdict?”

The viscount looked around them before lowering his voice, “It tastes a little bit like they simply mixed ice and strawberry jam. Here...” he raised the spoon towards her, “would you like to try?”

A blush crept onto Penelope’s cheeks—perhaps the first time since Lord Gloushire began courting her—as she leaned towards his hand.

“I want to try, Father!” Lucy squeaked, tugging his sleeve.

He almost jolted away from Penelope, clearing his throat awkwardly before giving his daughter a smile. “Of course, dearest. Here you go.”

“Me too!” whined Reggie.

Penelope and Mother shared a laugh as they watched the children’s faces scrunch up in disappointment.

“The chocolate is much better!” the young girl exclaimed, eagerly shoving her own spoon back into her mouth.

Lord Gloushire grinned as he brushed a lock of her golden curls away from her face. “The next time we visit, I’ll be sure to stay on the safe side and get my usual vanilla.”

Even as the discussion drifted forward, the viscount’s ‘safe side’ remained with Penelope.

After all, was she not doing the very same thing? She clung to the safe choice of potentially marrying Lord Gloushire rather than taking a risk with someone more excitable or appealing to her.

Her eyes fell to her own bowl.

Iced vanilla was far from the most exciting flavor, but at least it served its purpose of pacifying one’s hunger in a cooling manner.

Iced vanilla isn’t so bad...she silently remarked, scanning Lord Gloushire’s face.

In the back of her mind, she could hear His Grace’s voice disagree with her assessment. He was probably the sort to order a different flavor every time he visited the ice parlor.

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If Lord Gloushire is vanilla, what flavor would His Grace be? Penelope sighed, slowly playing with the tiny ice mound that remained in her bowl.

Perhaps iced lemon. She chuckled to herself. As he is both a sweet and a sour companion.

Regrettably, the duke wasn't present to approve or refute her conclusion, but knowing him, he'd likely argue against her for the sake of doing so.

Once everyone had had their fill and Lord Gloushire declared that it was now time to go home, he was met with whiny protests from both of his children.

"Please, Father?" Lucy whined, "We're having so much fun!"

"Yes, dearest, but I'm afraid that I still have some urgent errands to run," he grimaced, "and Ladies Punton and Penelope need to go about the rest of their day as well."

"We could watch them on your behalf if you like, Lord Gloushire," Mother suddenly offered.

Penelope looked at her in surprise—it wasn't that she didn't enjoy spending time with the children, but it was the first time in months that Mother had decided against rushing straight home.

"Oh, I wouldn't want to trouble you both, Lady Punton." The viscount waved a sheepish hand. "I've taken more than enough of your time already."

“It’s no bother,” Penelope piped up. “Perhaps you can drop us at the park for a short stroll and then come collect us once you’re done with your errands.”

“Yes! The park! Let’s go to the park!” Reggie exclaimed.

“Are you absolutely sure, Lady Penelope?” he double-checked with worried eyebrows. “These rascals can be quite the handful.”

“I’ll have Mother here to help,” Penelope answered. “My only request is that you leave a footman at our disposal in case anything comes up.”

The viscount’s hazel eyes flitted around the table between his children’s pleading eyes to Penelope and Mother’s reassuring ones.

After a moment, he acquiesced with a limp smile. “Very well, then, to Brydon Park we go.”

As they rose from their chairs, he immediately scooped Reggie up in his arms once more and held onto Lucy with his other hand.

Penelope raised an amused eyebrow as she realized that this time he appeared to be doing so because he needed to stop them from scampering off down the street rather than because he wanted to be affectionate.

After allowing the children to board first, the viscount extended a hand towards Penelope to help her up onto the coach. “I promise I’ll make it up to you,” he whispered to her as she ascended the steps.

“There’s no need,” she whispered back. “They’re wonderful.”

Brydon Park was just a short trip away and soon enough, Lord Gloushire was

reminding his children to behave themselves with Penelope and Mother.

“I won’t be long,” he promised—though it was unclear whether he was assuring his children or their keepers for today. “I shall do my best to be back in two hours or less.”

Fueled by the ices they had just consumed, the children eagerly pointed toward the water fountains and begged to get closer.

And how could she possibly deny such an innocent request?

“Don’t touch the water!” she gently warned as Reggie attempted to lean forward into the fountain, earning a hurt look from the little boy.

“Sometimes the birds and other animals use it to take baths,” she added, hoping he would understand.

The small boy let out a disappointed huff as he settled his chin against the fountain’s stony edge, contenting himself with simply observing the water’s shiny surface.

In the meantime, Mother carefully trailed behind Lucy, whose fascination was now captured by the colorful, blossoming flowerbeds.

“Don’t wander too far!” Penelope called after them, but the young girl didn’t seem to hear them.

Hoping she would have better luck with the younger child instead, Penelope extended a hand towards him, “Reggie, why don’t we go have fun with Lucy? Hmm?”

But the boy stubbornly shook his head and returned to remaining transfixed by the water.

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“Could you please go make sure they’re all right?” Penelope asked the footman that Lord Gloushire had left with them.

“Right away, Lady Penelope.”

As the footman chased after them, Penelope tried once more to persuade Reggie in case the others began to get too far away.

“Reggie...” she cooed once again, gently placing a hand on the boy’s shoulder. But to her surprise, the boy aggressively shook her hand away.

Taking a step backward, Penelope worried that she had upset the child in some way. “Is something wrong, Reggie?”

But the boy refused to face her, choosing instead to focus on the surface of the water as he sulked. Bewildered by the suddenness of the change in his mood, Penelope thought it best to let the boy do as he pleased for now.

Her plan seemed to work just fine until she noticed a few minutes later that he was sniffing. “Reggie...” she cautiously began again, “is there anything I can do to help?”

The boy shook his head, wiping his tears on the back of his hands. Digging into her reticule for her handkerchief, she lowered herself and attempted to bring the cloth to the child’s face, but he squirmed at her touch and began to shriek.

Penelope raised a panicked finger to her lips. “Reggie! Please don’t cry,” she begged, using her other hand to bring the handkerchief closer to his face. “Here, let me-”

With another ear-piercing wail, strangers and passersby began to whisper and stare.

Penelope began to feel the sting of her own tears in her eyes as the embarrassment and frustration at her own ineptitude and inexperience began to overwhelm her.

But just as the dam was about to break, Mother swooped in—seemingly out of nowhere—and began pacifying the boy, wiping his tears away with her thumbs.

“What happened?” Mother asked over her shoulder.

“I don’t know.” Penelope swallowed, “I merely suggested that we follow after you both and then he-”

“He probably wants Mother,” explained a wide-eyed Lucy, “She really liked sitting next to these fountains.”

Penelope nodded slowly. “Oh, I’m so sorry, Lucy.” She cupped the little girl’s hands to squeeze them. “May I ask how long it has been since your mother passed away?”

“Ten months,” the girl answered quietly, her gaze fixed on her teary-eyed brother. “I miss her too.”

“Of course you do.” Penelope pulled her into a hug, unsure of what else to say except to simply repeat how sorry she was for her loss.

CHAPTER 23

Duncan let out an exasperated sigh.

“Not now, Rowle-” A cough cut off his yell, prompting him to reach for the glass of water on his nightstand.

“Are you all right, Your Grace?” the butler’s muffled voice called through the door. “Her Grace recommends that you take another bowl of-”

“I’m fine, Rowley!” Duncan called back. “Tell the cook that while her work is always impeccable, I truly cannot stomach another drop of chicken soup without the risk of going mad.”

The onset of Duncan's illness had been sudden and quick. As expected, poor Mother’s mind had immediately jumped to a rather harrowing conclusion. But mercifully, a quick physician’s visit revealed that this was nothing more than a cold.

“It could be due to the changing weather!” assured the doctor, “Or perhaps you have been working far too hard, in that case, it is natural that your constitution and strength would falter.”

Duncan didn’t want to admit it then, but he knew the true reason he had fallen sick—his drinking had increased almost five-fold in less than a month.

It was difficult to pinpoint exactly when it started, but Duncan had realized that he was becoming increasingly distracted and agitated during work.

He found himself on edge, uneasy, and short-tempered, and he was concerned that it could only get worse. To make matters worse, the Viscount Gloushire continued to call on the house, prancing around as though he actually had a right to be there.

In the hopes of relieving even a sliver of his own tension, he allowed himself one night of unrestrained drink and woke up the next day with an aching head, but a much more relaxed body.

Having found a solution, Duncan eagerly took full advantage of it. But as usual, Harlington had been the first to notice and the first to worry.

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“I thought we were endeavoring to be more responsible these days?” his dark-haired friend had reminded him the other night, having intruded on Duncan’s personal drinking bout.

“I am being responsible,” Duncan had growled back. “I’m not drinking for fun, just for some reprieve. After this, I can get some rest and then get back to the paperwork. Besides, we used to drink far more than this back at Louxbridge.”

“Yes, but we only drank so much perhaps once or twice a week,” Harlington had rejoined. “Whereas you’re drinking as much every night.”

“I am well aware of my limits,” Duncan scoffed at his friend, “Do you know yours?”

Harlington eventually acquiesced, leaving Duncan to do as he pleased. But the latter never did get around to his paperwork that night, falling asleep slumped on the sofa of his office instead.

His work did not suffer much during the day, but in the late afternoons, his hands reached for the bottles with practiced ease.

The next to speak up had been Fairhaven. Duncan had been in his favored armchair in Gillingham’s smoke room, attempting to hide the scowls that flashed across his face whenever a discussion got too loud, or a presence became too irritating.

When Fairhaven approached, Duncan had been expecting the other duke to pull up an armchair to join him. But instead, his red-haired friend snatched Duncan’s glass out of his hand.

“We are getting you home,” Fairhaven stated matter-of-factly, almost as though remarking with enough confidence would will it into coming true.

The right corner of Duncan’s lips pulled into a smirk. “I know you said you were excited to become a father. But isn't this a tad too early to be practicing?”

Yet another argument ensued between the two friends as Duncan failed to see how he was doing anything wrong.

“We've always drunk heavily,” he reminded Fairhaven. “And rather than stumbling through the fields of Bechdalla, I am merely enjoying a quiet drink in an armchair where I can’t possibly hurt myself. How is this any worse or any different than our usual custom?”

“It’s different because we used to drink to relax-”

“That’s exactly what I’m doing-”

“No. Given the volume, frequency, and severity, your drinking is clearly not about relaxing from your woes,” Fairhaven cut him off. “You’re trying to drown them.”

His remark cut through the haze and sobered Duncan momentarily, but it was a fleeting sensation. “What can I say? The manifests and reports have been quite concerning as of late.”

“But-”

“I know what I’m doing, Fairhaven. I can more than handle it.”

And he had handled it quite successfully for a good share of the past few weeks. His new routine suited him well—spending his days consumed by work and then

spending his nights consuming the drink.

But on a particularly 'fruitful' evening, Duncan had arrived home and decided he wanted to enjoy the cool evening air before going to bed. He had hobbled to the nearest garden bench with the intention of staying for fifteen, perhaps twenty minutes before he'd go upstairs to get ready for bed.

He had settled onto the bench with his hands in his pockets and his heavy eyelids had fallen shut as he relished the crisp air on his cheeks.

A huge mistake.

Duncan was awoken—not by the gentleness of the rising sun or the prettiness of the birdsong that surrounded him but—by a sneeze so powerful and loud it almost shook him off the bench.

That was two days ago. And, as expected, with the loss of his new routine, the unease, and short temper returned but this time coated in a layer of snot.

He was still plagued by constant headaches but now without the pleasure of having downed his drinks from the night before.

Another knock at the door irritated him further.

“I said not now, Rowley!” he thundered. “Just tell Mother I’ll take the soup later!”

He expected to hear Rowley’s usual “Very good, Your Grace!” or “Most certainly, Your Grace!” but no response came through the door this time—highly uncharacteristic for the butler.

Even more uncharacteristically, the voice that came through the door several

moments later was higher-pitched and less self-assured, “May I come in, Your Grace?”

Rowley, why do you suddenly sound like Lady Penelope? Duncan almost called out before his lids flew open in realization.

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“Your Grace?” her voice sailed into the room again. “I promise I don’t have any chicken soup with me.”

Duncan’s eyes looked down at the state of his covers, wrinkled and miserable against the shape of his sick form. He propped himself up onto his elbows with a groan.

“Just a moment, Lady Pen!” he called out, running a hand through his hair, which—even without getting up to look in his dresser mirror—he could tell was beyond salvaging at this point.

He dragged a hand over his face, his fingers flinching in surprise at the stubble that cropped up since he was last well enough to shave.

Resigning himself to the fact that there was no way he could resolve two days’ worth of unkemptness in the span of the few seconds he had left, he finally called for her to come in.

The door opened slowly to reveal Lady Penelope. She stood healthy, composed, and pristine, the opposite of everything Duncan was right now.

“My apologies for intruding, Your Grace,” she said.

“It’s hardly an intrusion if you’re just going to stand in the doorway,” Duncan teased, “but I suppose it’s better that you stay safe rather than catch my cold as well.”

“No!” the young woman exclaimed. “I mean, it’s not that.” She looked down at her restlessly fidgeting hands. “I know we haven’t been on the best terms of late and was

unsure whether you'd even want to speak to me."

Duncan reached for a handkerchief and covered his mouth with it as he coughed. When he was done, he gave her a weak smile. "I agree that things have been awkward between us, but not to the point where you have to act as though I'd bite your head off. You can come in if you want."

She raised her hazel eyes to him, knocking the breath out of his already tortured lungs.

"Alternatively..." he added, "you can return to my mother and let her know that you did as she asked you to and that I'm all right."

Duncan broke their eye contact as he asked drily, "That's why you're here, isn't it? Because Mother's desperate for someone—anyone—to get through to me."

"Her Gracedidask me to come," her voice answered.

Duncan scoffed softly, placing both hands under his head as he stared straight up at the underside of the canopy that hung over his bed.

Her footsteps drew closer. "But I was already worried. I just didn't have the courage to—"

Duncan turned his head to face her, biting back the surprise at the sight of her form standing so close to his bed.

"Worried?" He raised an eyebrow. "Pardon me, Lady Pen, but I find that very difficult to believe."

"Why?" she asked, her tone neither mocking nor teasing—but honest. "Is it not

expected for friends to want to help each other?"

"I presumed our friendship ended that night under the archway," he stated matter-of-factly, avoiding her gaze again. "At first, I worried and worried about what had pushed you to act so abruptly. But I eventually let it go once I realized that I have never been privy to your motivations."

"That's not true!" she protested.

Duncan reached for the half-filled glass of water on his nightstand once more and downed its contents in a giant gulp. The tasteless juice giving him the strength he needed to meet her gaze again.

"Isn't it?" He rubbed his temples to soothe the dull heaviness around them. "Even when things were going well between us, you still never even explained why a spinster like you suddenly decided that you wanted to get married—and by the end of this Season no less!"

She opened her mouth to answer but closed it again.

Duncan sat up straighter than before, his mind now gathering together all of the thoughts that had been plaguing him about Lady Penelope and pushing them out of his tongue.

"Do you see?" He gestured with both hands. "Even after everything we've been through, you still refuse to give up even a hint of the reason. Perhaps you never considered me a friend and that is why you pushed me away with such ease."

"No!" she choked out forcefully.

Duncan was taken aback to see her eyes filled with tears, her eyebrows creased in

frustration and maybe... pain?

Her hands balled into determined fists by her sides, she answered, “I would tell you! I want to tell you! I only pushed you away because-” her voice faltered, her pained expression plunging an invisible knife into Duncan’s chest. “If you only knew how much I- You-

She wiped a tear away on the back of her hand. “After burdening you with so much already, I saw no reason to burden you further with my family's problems.” Her lips pulled into a sarcastic smile. “I’m sorry for wishing to avoid troubling you more than necessary.”

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“Your family’s problems?” he echoed cluelessly. “Do you mean Lady Punton’s grief? Because if so, that’s not a burden by any-”

“No, not her! But my-” Lady Penelope buried her hands in her face. “Never mind. Like I said, it’s my family, my problem.”

“I don’t understand...” Duncan admitted, his voice just barely above a whisper. “How is this related to your search for a husband? Is Lady Punton forcing you to get-”

But it didn’t seem like Penelope heard him, wrapping her arms around herself as she turned around to leave. “This was a mistake,” she huffed.

“Lady Pen!” His arm extended towards her, but she was already out of reach. “Wait.”

The next thing he knew, the covers hit the floor as Duncan leaped to his feet, wrapping his arms around her to keep her here. To his surprise, it worked.

She didn’t squirm or shove him away, but she also didn’t turn around to face him. Her gaze remained transfixed on the half-opened door.

“I said wait,” he whispered into her hair, his voice cracking slightly. “Please.”

“Wait for what exactly, Your Grace?”

His eyes ran over her delicate frame, dwarfed by his own.

“I- I don’t even know,” Duncan confessed, his chest tense. “Please just... don’t cry.”

From this close, the faint smell of her perfume teased his nostrils, reminding him of their late-night escapades to the library downstairs or his study.

The exposed side of her porcelain neck caught his eye and a small part of him wondered whether that was the primary source from which the scent came. It took all his strength to hold himself back from sating his curiosity by crashing towards the ivory shoreline headfirst.

“Easier said than done,” she sighed. Duncan watched her shoulders drop as she spoke. “I’m afraid I have been crying quite a bit lately.”

His eyebrows drew together in a frown as his arms urgently tightened around her of their own accord,. “You have? Why? What did Gloushire-”

“He didn't do anything.” She cut him off, even without seeing her face he could tell from her voice that she was chewing her lip contemplatively again. “In fact, he... might even propose soon.”

Her words burned his hands off of her waist, and he kicked himself for having them there in the first place.

“That’s... great news.” Duncan cleared his throat, stepping back from her. “So I presume you’ve been crying tears of joy,” he teased, a feeble attempt at levity while also endeavoring to hide his own embarrassment.

She finally turned to face him, her cheeks tinged pink. “He’s... kind to me. But I think it’s too soon for him and his children, it has barely been a year since his first wife passed and I don't know if I can-”

“Don't you dare compare yourself to her,” Duncan growled, a hand reaching up to cup her puffy cheek. “Gloushire should be courting you for, well, you. And while I am

sorry for his loss, if he is simply trying to use you for selfish indulgence, then I shall tear him apart with my own two hands—”

He choked on a cough, forcing him to withdraw his hand to cover his mouth.

“You’re not tearing anything or anyone in this state,” Lady Penelope chastised him, raising a hand to his forehead to check for a fever. “Sit down,” she urged, her other palm pressing gently into his chest.

Doing as he was told, Duncan sank onto the edge of his bed, reaching for the pitcher of water on his nightstand to refill his glass.

“I’ll do it,” she insisted, her tone almost scolding. “Your ego was always too big for your own good, so at least this cold is a good reminder that you are not indestructible.”

Duncan rolled his eyes—an action he regretted immediately as it only served to intensify the haziness in his head. “Please, this cold is nothing more than an irritating obstacle to my work.”

He accepted the refilled glass from her with thanks, their fingers brushing momentarily.

She waited for him to finish the glass before she began again. “It would seem I’m not the only one harboring mysterious motivations and secrets in this friendship.”

Duncan knew perfectly well what she was referring to.

Much like Harlington and Fairhaven, Mother had made her stance on his new drinking habits abundantly clear. It was not inconceivable, then, that she had also expressed her concerns to Lady Penelope before sending her up here.

But pondering the reasons for his altered conduct was the last thing he wanted to do right now.

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“Are you sure you even have the stomach to handle my secrets?” he asked with a sly grin.

His deflection worked. Lady Penelope brought a hand down to lightly smack his shoulder. “You’re terrible!” she groaned.

“Not anymore,” he grinned, leaning back on his palms after returning the glass to its place on the nightstand. “I feel much better.”

CHAPTER 24

Penelope knew she should have listened to her first instinct.

She shouldn’t have let His Grace convince her to wait. She should have freed herself when he hugged her close.

True, he was considerably stronger than her—as his muscled arms around her waist had reminded her—but he would have let her go quite easily if she had insisted, if she had spoken up, if she had protested even slightly.

But she didn’t.

She gave in to the warmth of his hands, the tickling of his breath over the shell of her ear, the intoxicating gruffness of his voice—which his sickness had rendered much deeper than usual.

Now here she was, a chair pulled up to his bedside with a heavy combined volume of

the Iliad and the Odyssey sitting on her lap.

“Didn’t you claim to be feeling ‘much better’ just ten minutes ago?” She raised a skeptical eyebrow as she thumbed through the pages. “In that case, I see no reason to—”

“Is it not expected for friends to want to help each other?” he smugly interrupted, weaponizing her question from earlier against her. “Besides, I thought you said that you wanted me to get some rest?”

He annoyed her, he truly did.

Even when he wasn’t speaking, the smugness of his current stance alone—casually lying on his side, head propped up on an elbow to face her as the covers bunched up around his waist—was irritating enough.

How was it possible that even when he was sick, he exuded such easy confidence that overwhelmed and washed over her?

But Penelope wouldn’t allow herself to get lost in it, not this time.

“So, your first response is to ask me to read to you as though you’re a child who needs a bedtime story?” She let out a chuckle, pinching the bridge of her nose to feign disappointment. “You truly are one of the most preposterous men I have ever had the displeasure of meeting.”

“Perhaps.” His body shuddered as he attempted to stifle a yawn. “But it’s been weeks since I’ve gotten to properly hear your voice, I might as well take full advantage while I have the chance.”

“Careful, Your Grace,” she teased. “If I didn’t know any better, I’d posit that you

missed me.”

His ocean-blue eyes rose to meet hers, his gaze so strong it pinned her to her seat. She swore she saw his eyes flicker downwards before locking with her own once again, his expression completely—and annoyingly—unreadable.

Unable to take another moment of whatever this was, Penelope took it upon herself to break the spell. “I- I was merely joking, Your Grace.”

He let out a soft “Hmm!” before dropping his head onto the pillow. “Well?” he asked, now lying flat on his back with his eyes shut, “I’m waiting.”

The sun had been hanging low in the sky when she first entered the room, but now it had completely set, and she suspected she would soon be called for dinner.

But none of that seemed to cross the duke’s mind. Besides, his own sleeping and eating schedule were likely quite erratic now that he had fallen sick.

She took another moment to examine his features—sharp, rugged, handsome.

Even with the dark circles under his eyes that betrayed the late nights he had been putting himself through these last few weeks, even with the stubble that had crept up his pronounced jaw over the last few days, even with his hair unbrushed, he was handsome.

To her dismay, a curious eyelid flew open to silently ask why she hadn’t started, catching her in her examination of him.

“When I asked you to read to me...” he smirked, “I thought it was obvious that I clearly meant that you do so out loud.”

Penelope huffed, adjusting the book on her lap as she thumbed through it once more. “What page did you say you were on?”

“Any page will do, just make sure it’s an interesting one,” he answered. “We all know how it ends, so I like to jump back and forth between chapters.”

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Eager to put him to sleep so that he would finally stop torturing her, Penelope stopped turning the pages and just started reading.

She recognized this part of the story at once, it was when the sorceress Circe had tricked Odysseus' men and turned them into pigs, forcing him to devise a plan to rescue them.

"You sound almost delighted at their plight," His Grace accused, his brows frowning over his closed eyes.

"Of course not!" Penelope assured him, before resuming her reading.

In the next section, Hermes gifted Odysseus a portion of the herb moly so that he could resist Circe's powers and charm.

"If only it was so easy," the duke mumbled under his breath, interrupting her once again.

Penelope flashed him an amused smile, even though he wasn't looking at her face. "You say that like the moly actually worked, Your Grace."

"It did, didn't it?" He frowned. "Odysseus escapes being turned into a pig like the rest of them."

"True..." Penelope sighed, turning the page, "but I just meant that she charms him anyway. Here!"

She ran a finger below the words as she read. “‘A year with Circe all remain, And, then their native forms regain.’ She still becomes Odysseus’ lover, even if only for a year.”

“Ah... that’s right,” sighed the duke. “And then his men had to beg him to continue the journey homeward afterward, correct?”

“Exactly.” Penelope nodded, skimming over the rest of the page. “It’s not mentioned in this edition, but I remember reading it in Sir Alexander Pope’s translation that one of my tutors lent me. If it weren’t for his men’s outcry, Odysseus would have happily lived the remainder of his life with Circe without sparing a second thought for the wife that awaited him at home.”

A twinge of bitterness crept into Penelope’s words, and it did not go unnoticed. A movement in the upper corners of her eyes told her that the duke was propping himself up on his elbows.

“I take it that you are one of the few people who lament that Odysseus managed to get home in the end, then?” he asked, his eyes carefully searching her face.

“I wouldn’t say that I lament it.” She gently dragged her fingers against the book’s ragged edge. “But I wouldn’t have been too heartbroken if he hadn’t gotten home in the end. After all, I am quite sympathetic to Odysseus’ wife given how my father was a-”

She stopped herself in time.

His Grace shuffled towards the edge of the bed before swinging his long legs down so that his feet met the floor with a dull thud. “Do you... resent him that much?” he asked gently.

“No! Of course not!” Penelope answered immediately, making it sound as though she was certain. But as she wrung her hands together, she felt the need to clarify. “I don’t resent him, I just resent that part of him, if that makes any sense at all,” she mumbled.

“Of course it does.” A moment of silence passed before he continued, “It was—and please excuse my frankness—absolutely abhorrent behavior from your father. If he were still here, I would have no problem telling him to be ashamed of the agony he brought to you and your poor mother.”

“Thank you.” Penelope sighed, “But Mother would never forgive you if you ever did such a thing. Her willingness to excuse his behavior used to infuriate me to no end, but she made a very good point when we reconciled that love isn’t a necessary requirement for a marriage to succeed, but at least Father had some measure of it for her even if he-”

“I’m sorry.” The duke raised a hand to stop her. “Are you... saying that you’re beginning to agree with her point of view?”

“Well...” Penelope shrugged, “It wasn’t a perfect marriage, but she says she still doesn’t regret it at all. I think she understands that we must make do with the cards we are dealt and I’m beginning to see that that is a rather... practical view of the world.”

“It’s practical, but that doesn’t make it right,” pushed the duke, his features now devoid of the air of drowsiness that had hung over them earlier. “If you love someone enough to marry them, then it means that you love them enough to remain steadfast, loyal to them and only them.”

“I agree, of course, Your Grace, but-”

“But what?” he asked, his shoulders and back straightening, “Are you saying you’d

tolerate the same contemptible treatment from Gloushire if he ever dared to pull it?"

"If he did, what other choice would I have?" Penelope challenged, her voice rising unexpectedly, surprised to find herself echoing her mother's sentiments. "Sometimes love is settling for-"

"That isn't love." His Grace cut her off. "Love isn't 'settling'. Love is-" His eyes searched around the room, even as he inwardly searched his mind for the right word, "Love is... all-consuming."

Penelope held back, curious to see where his argument was leading.

"Love is when nothing and no one else in the world matters," he continued, a fist clenching the covers by his side. "Love is when you get the breath knocked out of you when they look at you, and then it's struggling for air again the moment they leave."

The sincerity of his words caused Penelope's breath to hitch in her throat.

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“Love is-” His fury faltered when his eyes clashed with hers. “It’s just- It’s a lot of things,” he concluded. “But it isn’t settling.”

A myriad of questions swirled inside Penelope’s mind.

Where did those tender assertions come from? How was it possible for someone to be a rake while clinging to such naive notions of love and attachment? How much of this was just his illness talking?

In the end, Penelope won the battle against her curiosity and decided against asking any of them.

“You’re right, Your Grace,” she acquiesced with a nod. “And of course, who wouldn’t want to be loved as you say? But given the circumstances, I would be perfectly all right in a more... cordial—less romantic—marriage.”

“Aren’t you certain that Gloushire loves you?” The concerned inquiry hung in the air.

“I... honestly don’t know.” Penelope flashed him a weak smile, “But I also want to be careful that I’m not expecting too much of him. After all, it hasn’t even been two months since we started courting.”

He gave her an understanding nod. “But he treats you well, yes?”

“He’s a perfect gentleman.” She nodded in return.

The duke exhaled what appeared to be a sigh of relief, warming Penelope’s heart that

he had been so concerned for her despite it all.

He rubbed the back of his neck. "If he ever, erm..." he cleared his throat, "If he ever hurts you, be sure to tell me, all right?"

"I will," Penelope promised. "But I don't think he would. He isn't exactly the adventurous type."

"Even so, make sure you're always careful," he warned her regardless. "Don't you remember Fernside from the Sunbournes' ball? It isn't uncommon for the timid ones to turn out to be some of the biggest troublemakers."

"Yes, but Lord Gloushire has the advantage of being somewhat older. He's got the adventure and mischief out of his system by now."

His Grace placed a hand on his chest, pretending to be hurt. "I beg your pardon? I'll have you know that he's only about five or six years older than me, but you're making him sound like some kind of tired old man."

Penelope laughed along, the long-forgotten book shaking in her lap as she did so. "I meant in comparison to Lord Fernside, who I believe is around my age, which would make him about ten years Lord Gloushire's junior."

She stifled a yawn before continuing, "Besides, one can hardly blame Lord Gloushire for being a bit worn out. By your age, he was already married and had a daughter. While you on the other hand..." her voice trailed off teasingly.

"Just because your own marriage is imminent doesn't give you the right to heartlessly bully the rest of us lonely souls," he tutted, pretending to be hurt once again.

"But didn't you say you never wanted to get married at all?" she reminded him. "You

said you didn't want to get hurt.”

“That is still true.” He pursed his lips, falling onto his back against the bed. “But it’s only natural for one’s mind to sometimes wander to scenarios—no matter how incredulous or impossible they might seem.”

“So, you’ve imagined yourself married then?” Penelope asked, propping her head up with her elbows as she leaned forward on her lap.

“Many times,” the duke sighed lazily, eyes towards the ceiling. “And then I thank Providence that I’m not because otherwise, I would only end up spoiling her.”

“Is that so?” Penelope raised a disbelieving eyebrow. “So I take it that you wouldn’t torment her the way you tease and torment me, then?”

“I’d torment her double.” He tilted his head to face her, a mischievous glint in his eye. “Then I’d have an excuse to make it up to her and smother her in everything she could ever ask for.”

“Perhaps you should get married, after all, Your Grace.” Penelope smiled. “Because that sounds absolutely wonderful.”

“Do you know what else I’d do?” he asked, his voice airy, his gaze direct and unyielding.

“What else, Your Grace?” her voice taking on the same breathless quality.

“I would make sure she knew everything.” He raised a hand to run through his hair as he clarified. “I would spend every waking moment telling her—showing her—exactly how much she deserves, exactly what she does to me, exactly how terrified I’d be to ever lose her. On my life, there wouldn’t be an ounce of doubt left

in that beautiful mind of hers.”

Penelope faltered under the steadiness of his gaze, unsure why it was causing her cheeks to flush a deep red and her knees to buckle beneath her—thankfully, however, she was sitting so he hopefully wouldn’t have noticed.

Penelope mustered the little strength she had left to say, “Your wife would have been a very fortunate woman, Your Grace.”

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“Not nearly as fortunate as I,” he answered, a lazy smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. “But as we said, it's all just... wishful thinking.”

“Not necessarily,” Penelope urged. “You’re young enough to get married if you wanted to. It's not like you would be short on willing prospects to-”

“No,” he resumed absent-mindedly running his hand through his hair again. “Too much risk of pain—for either of us. It’s... easier this way.”

His handsome features suddenly scrunched together into a sneeze. “Curses!” he exclaimed. “This cold is utterly insufferable!”

Seeing her chance, Penelope closed the volume on her lap and slipped it onto his bedside table, so she could get up.

“I really should be letting you get some rest, Your Grace.” She straightened her skirt.

“Very well.” He nodded, before rising from his place on the edge of the bed along with her. “Thank you for your reading, Lady Pen, and for listening to the ramblings of an ill gentleman.”

“Do your best to recover as quickly as you can.” She smiled. “Lord Gloushire has recommended a picnic in Old Grove and has even invited the dowager duchess. It would be nice if you were well enough to join us by then.”

“I shall gladly pass up the opportunity,” he said through pursed lips.

“Come now, Your Grace.” She landed a light punch on his arm. “I need to get you two on as civil grounds as possible soon, otherwise how am I going to convince him to invite you to the wedding—if he proposes, that is?”

“You would want me there?” He cocked up an eyebrow in surprise.

“For certain!” Penelope smiled. “After all your help with my quest for a husband, it should only be fair that you get at least a slice of cake for all your efforts.”

His Grace exhaled slightly through his nose at this remark, “I shall do my best, Lady Pen. I take it that we’re friends again, then?”

Penelope hesitated for just a moment. There was no doubt that he still had such a dangerous effect on her. The wise and prudent step would be to continue avoiding him unless absolutely necessary—as today had been.

But this one afternoon with him made her feel more alive than the countless excursions with and morning calls from Lord Gloushire over the last few months.

His presence was like an intoxicating fragrance, and she wanted—no, needed—to breathe him in as much as she could, even if it was only at arm’s length.

“Of course, Your Grace.” She offered him a weak smile. “Friends.”

CHAPTER 25

“This seems like an all right spot, doesn’t it, dearest?”

“It’s perfect,” Penelope answered the viscount, who at once reached into one of their several baskets to retrieve their picnic blankets.

“Father, may we please swim now?” Lucy asked, pointing to the river just a few yards away from them.

“We haven’t even properly set up yet, Lucy,” he grunted, flapping the first picnic blanket open.

“Please!” whined the two children.

He looked into their pleading eyes and then at Penelope to wordlessly ask her thoughts. With a chuckle, Penelope set down her basket. “I’d be happy to help you get changed into your swimming-”

“I’ll do it, darling,” Mother cooed from behind her. “That way you young ones can focus on setting up our spot.”

Penelope planted a kiss on the older woman’s forehead. “I don’t know what I’d do without you, Mother.” Penelope was unable to contain her joy that Mother had agreed to join them at all instead of hiding away in her room.

“What a splendid choice of a spot!” exclaimed the dowager duchess, leaning on His Grace’s arm. Her knees had been giving her a harder time than usual today, so she had encouraged the rest of the party to walk ahead.

“Have you used this spot before?” asked the duke, eyes on the ground as he aided his mother.

“No, Your Grace,” answered the viscount, his tone civil but dry. “But I doubt we’ll be seeing any bears here in Old Grove, so we’re perfectly safe.”

“It’s not that.” The younger man shot him a glare. “I meant have you checked the strength of the current in this part of the river before you send your young, delicate

children to giddily splash around in it?”

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At this remark, Lord Gloushire dropped everything he had been holding to dash towards the water's edge. In the meantime, Penelope shot His Grace a tired look.

“What?” he asked innocently, “I’m only trying to help.”

Penelope looked towards the river to find Lord Gloushire and Mother holding the children back while the former rolled up a sleeve to check the current.

Even from this distance, she could see his shoulders relax with relief before he made some final remarks to the children, no doubt warning them to be careful and avoid going too far.

Once he returned, he, Penelope, and His Grace continued to spread out the blankets and brought out the food.

“Thank you, dear,” breathed the Dowager Duchess as His Grace helped lower her onto the cushion he had brought for her. “Will you be swimming as well?” she joked, nodding towards the children splashing each other in the river.

His Grace pretended to check his pockets and then the basket nearest to him. “How unfortunate! I seem to have forgotten my swimming costume,” he grinned, eliciting light laughter from Penelope and Her Grace.

“A pity,” mused Lord Gloushire. “It would have been a wonderful opportunity to spend time with your intellectual equals.”

“Lord Gloushire...” Penelope elbowed his side, “with childish jabs like that I have

half a mind to declare you as Lucy and Reggie's intellectual equals."

"It's all in good humor, my love," answered the viscount, pressing an apologetic kiss to her hand. "Besides, the Duke of Blackmoore doesn't mind my joke, isn't that right, Your Grace?"

"Not at all," the duke answered, his expression stiff. "My uproarious laughter should be more than enough proof as it- Ouch." He yelped as the dowager duchess pinched his arm.

"What has gotten into you two today?" tutted the older woman.

Penelope grimaced at the question, knowing that it was her idea to attempt brokering a truce between the men. But in her defense, each one had separately promised her that he would put in his best effort to achieve peace.

"Are you absolutely sure that you want to let him tag along, dear?" Lord Gloushire had asked when Penelope had informed him that His Grace was well enough to join them after all. "In truth, I only invited him out of courtesy to his mother, who I know is very dear to you."

"They're both dear to me," Penelope had explained. "As my godmother, the dowager duchess has done so much for us this year, but His Grace has also been a wonderful friend. Not to mention, this Season has been quite taxing on him as well. So, it would mean ever so much if you would let him-"

"Very well," acquiesced the viscount. "How could I deny those pretty eyes anything? But he better not ruin my surprise."

"Surprise?" she had gasped. "For me?"

“Don’t you dare try to pry it out of me.” He wagged a finger at her. “Especially not when this weekend is so close already.”

“Is there no way I can convince you?” she pouted, playfully batting her eyelashes at him. “Even for just a hint?”

The viscount raised a hand to shield his eyes. “Begone, you doe-eyed enchantress! I refuse to gaze into the depths of your hazel eyes any longer.”

Penelope let out a chuckle. “All right. I promise I won’t force you to reveal what it is as long as you promise me something in return.”

Her suitor peeked at her through his fingers. “And what would that be, my beloved?”

“That you’ll be nice to His Grace during our excursion.” She folded her arms. “I don’t know why you two are so hostile towards each other in the first place, but like you, I want to have as pleasant of a picnic as possible.”

The viscount had groaned, before dropping his hand to squeeze hers. “For you, my dearest, I promise I shall do my best.”

Penelope had then received a similar promise from His Grace once she conveyed that Lord Gloushire was looking forward to having him join the excursion.

“Friends aren’t supposed to lie to each other,” the duke had tutted. “So tell me what you’re leveraging against Gloushire in order to convince him to let me join?”

Penelope had rolled her eyes. “All right, I may have rephrased his words slightly,” she admitted, “but the fact remains that he himself said that you should be there.”

His Grace let out a scoff of disbelief, “You know, I only accepted the invitation

because I had full confidence he'd make up some feeble excuse at the last minute to turn me down."

"I still don't understand why you both dislike each other so strongly!" Penelope sighed exasperatedly. "What could you two possibly have disagreed about? Was it something pertaining to business?"

But instead of receiving a direct answer, His Grace merely flashed her an amused look. "I'll join you all, but only to assist Mother."

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“And you promise you won’t provoke him?” Penelope prompted, narrowing her eyes.

“I promise,” he mumbled, before dropping his gaze to return to the morning paper in his hands.

“What was that?”

“I said, I promise!” he snapped.

Some promise. Penelope sighed to herself presently, as she watched both men give each other the cold shoulders from their respective picnic blankets.

“What book is it today?” Lord Gloushire asked as Penelope carefully lowered herself onto the other side of the blanket he had claimed and began going through her basket.

“An abridged collection of the works of John Donne,” she answered, successfully retrieving the volume. “Shall I read it out to you?”

“Please do,” her suitor encouraged.

“I shall go check if Lady Punton requires any assistance minding the children,” the duke declared as he suddenly jumped to his feet.

Penelope bewilderedly watched him leave. Wasn’t he excited to hear her read just the other day? Why did he suddenly look as though he couldn’t wait to get away from her now?

“Sit closer so I can hear you better, dear.” The viscount patted the spot next to him, before turning to the dowager duchess. “That is, of course, if our acting chaperone would be so kind to allow it?”

“I’m not that strict,” chuckled Her Grace, “and far be it from me to get in the way of young love.”

Penelope flashed her a polite smile of thanks and crossed the blanket to sit next to the viscount, but still at a respectable distance, of course.

Opening the volume, Penelope let out a delighted squeal, “Oh, ‘The Good-morrow!’” she excitedly exclaimed,. “Certainly one of my favorites from him!”

Despite having developed a rather... bitter view of love and marriage, even she could not resist the pure love that overflowed and shone forth in every line of the poem.

“It was certainly an early marker for the talents that Donne possessed,” smiled the viscount. “Even if it was just a tad fanciful.”

“Fanciful?” Penelope frowned. “On the contrary, Lord Gloushire, Donne clearly meant every word he wrote. Can’t you feel the awe for his partner dripping off of his words? The yearning and-” she paused to find the right word, “-and hunger his soul harbored for hers?”

“Oh, I’m certain that he loved his partner very deeply, Lady Penelope,” chuckled her companion. “I suppose it is just that such passions are more commonly found among the young, whereas people my age are inclined to a more... realistic view of such matters.”

“I beg to differ, Lord Gloushire.” piped up the dowager duchess. “I’m more than happy to share that my husband and I were giddily in love—almost maddeningly

so—right until he was taken away from me.”

She continued with a sentimental smile, “While you are right that such devoted acts of passion are normally tied to the young, I can wholeheartedly attest that we do not lose them even when we grow old.”

Her words reminded Penelope of the conversation she had had with His Grace the other day and her eyes wandered to land on him as he playfully splashed water onto the children.

Would he understand The Good-morrow's appeal?

Perhaps that was why he was able to speak so confidently about the properties of love as well as the tender affections he would show if he were married—he had witnessed it in his parents.

“I shall take your word for it, Your Grace,” chuckled the viscount. “I’m afraid I’m more serious than romantic.”

“Everyone has their strengths,” the dowager duchess assured him. “Besides, Lady Penelope doesn’t seem to mind one bit, isn’t that right, pet?”

Penelope tore her eyes away from the river’s edge to meet her suitor’s eyes once more. “Not at all! Especially since Lord Gloushire is quite sweet in his own way.”

“I’m the most fortunate man in the world.” He beamed, kissing her hand once again.

“Not nearly as fortunate as I,” Penelope answered.

The duke’s voice from the other night echoed in her head. “Not nearly as fortunate as I,” it said.

With one more chaste kiss on her hand, the viscount released it as he urged, “Right, well, I’ve delayed your wonderful reading for more than long enough. Please do carry on, my beloved.”

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Penelope looked down at the page before her.

A small part of her had been looking forward to hearing Lord Gloushire's thoughts on the classic work—similar to how His Grace had offered his thoughts, albeit unprompted, as she had read the Odyssey to him.

But she had already heard more than enough of his—somewhat disappointing—sentiments regarding this particular piece and doubted it would get any better than what he had already offered.

"I'll tell you what," she began flipping through the volume, "why don't we find a poem that we would both like? Something less... fanciful."

"Goodness, how considerate you are today, dearest Lady Penelope," the viscount chirped happily. "What is the next poem in the collection?"

"'Death Be Not Proud'," she answered.

"Ah!" His eyes lit up. "Now this is a most interesting piece. Please do read it for us, my beloved."

Penelope did as she was told and began right away. He was right, of course, the poem itself was a rather thought-provoking piece.

And in fact, Penelope had happily discussed the work with party guests several times before. But for whatever reason, the usual eagerness that welled up inside her as she read each line was absent today.

When she had finished reading it, her suitor was quick to share his fascination regarding the very last line: “Death shall be no more; death, thou shall die.”

“Isn’t the first half of the line from a Bible verse?” the dowager duchess asked—like Penelope, she most certainly already knew the answer to her question, but asked it regardless to indulge the viscount.

Penelope made sure to interject with a comment or two of her own, lest Lord Gloushire notice her sudden surliness.

Once every possible discussion point regarding the poem had been exhausted, her suitor politely urged her to do another one.

“Forgive me...” Penelope flashed a sheepish smile, “but given the irresistible weather and the immaculate spot that you had chosen for us, Lord Gloushire, I have the sudden urge to sketch instead.”

“There’s nothing to forgive, dearest Lady Penelope.” He extended a hand toward her. “If you’d like, I can hold onto the volume and read to you instead while you work away?”

His kind offer elicited a pinch of guilt in Penelope’s chest as she was only using her painting as an excuse to avoid discussing the poems any further—lest she find herself disagreeing with more of his views.

But turning down his well-meaning offer would be far too cruel.

“Thank you, Lord Gloushire.” She nodded, passing the volume to him. “That would be quite lovely.”

“Oh, you two!” the dowager duchess beamed.

All Penelope could do was flash another sheepish smile as she retrieved her drawing materials.

Yes... us two.

CHAPTER 26

“You’re doing it wrong!” Reggie whined, stomping his foot so hard that the splash almost reached Duncan on the river bank.

“That’s not a nice thing to say, Reggie!” his older sister tutted, already bending down into the coursing river for another smooth pebble. “Perhaps you should try it yourself instead of being so bossy!”

Duncan raised a hand hesitantly. “I’m sorry to be the one to tell you so, little Miss Lucy, but you can only skip stones across still water.”

“Are you sure, Your Grace?” Her shoulders drooped disappointedly, the river’s current coursing around her shins. “Have you tried it?”

“Many times, back when I was your age.” He smiled, absent-mindedly etching circles into the dirt with the stick he was holding. “It is with a heavy heart that I must report that all my valiant efforts ended in vain every time.”

“Let’s play tag!” the younger of the children suggested. “I want to be it!”

“No, I shall be ‘it’ first!” Lucy declared. “After all, I’m the eldest.”

“No fair!” Reggie wailed.

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Already sensing another potential argument beginning to brew, Duncan stepped ahead of the situation with a recommendation, "How about this? The first one to find a smooth black pebble can be the first to be 'it'?"

The children's eyes widened in excitement at this new challenge, forgetting their disagreement at once.

"Found one!" Reggie exclaimed, proudly waving the pebble in the air as he giddily danced. "I'm 'it'! I'm 'it'!"

Accepting her fair defeat, Lucy agreed and began splashing through the water at once.

"Please be careful!" Lady Punton—who had been resting on a large rock to Duncan's right—called after the children before turning to Duncan, "They already seem rather at ease with you, Your Grace. Perhaps it's time you considered becoming a father yourself."

Duncan flashed her a weak smile, thinking of Fairhaven's confession from the other day. "Perhaps one day, Lady Punton. Naturally, I shall have to find a wife first."

"A fine young man like yourself should have prospects lined out the door!" the older woman chuckled, her sentiments similar to the ones Lady Penelope had voiced in his room the other night.

"Perhaps one day," he repeated half-heartedly.

Turning to the side so he could sneak a glance out of the corner of his eye at the happy couple sharing a picnic blanket, his chest suddenly tightened. “The truth is that some things simply just aren’t meant for us.”

He allowed his gaze to linger a little longer on Lady Penelope, shoulders relaxed as she sketched the brighter section of the river further downstream.

“That is true for some things...” Lady Punton answered, snapping his attention back to her, “...but certainly not everything.”

A squeal from behind them caused them to perk up in alarm. Duncan turned his head just in time to see Gloushire on a knee as Lady Penelope cupped both hands over her mouth in surprise.

The older woman next to Duncan seemingly regained all the vigor of her youth as she jumped from her spot and rushed to embrace her daughter.

For a fleeting moment, Lady Penelope locked eyes with Duncan, and he swore that instead of the glee and jubilation he had expected, he was instead met with compliant resignation.

His heart pounded in his chest, desperately pleading to confirm whether this was actually the case or if his imagination was running away with him once more.

But it was too late, Gloushire was already cupping Lady Penelope’s face and pressing his lips onto hers, the bouquet he had been holding during the proposal laying by his side.

Inwardly, every fiber of Duncan’s body screamed for him to turn away from the sickening sight. But he felt too heavy to even lift a finger, remaining stiller than the statues that lined the opera house’s gallery. In fact, if the wind was strong enough, it

would probably be able to knock him over and shatter him into pieces.

When Lady Penelope was finally released from the kiss, her eyes landed on Duncan once more, thus sending a shudder that ripped through him so forcefully that he spun on his heels.

Facing his new direction, he quickly realized that he wasn't the only party who was less than thrilled about the news. Lucy and Reggie had stopped their game of tag and were presently the newly engaged couple with polite smiles and apprehensive curiosity.

They don't appear to be as surprised as one might expect, Duncan mused. So it's very likely that Gloushire warned them of his plan ahead of time.

"Come here, darlings!" the viscount called to them, motioning with his hands, an elated smile stretching across his face. "Come hug your new mother!"

The children did as they were told and began wading towards the river bank. Duncan snapped out of his gaze just in time to help them out of the water and then followed a few paces behind them to rejoin the remainder of the party.

Despite still dripping with water, the children obeyed their father and took turns limply wrapping their arms around Lady Penelope's neck.

"Congratulations, Lady Pen," Duncan's lips said before he could stop them.

"Thank you, Your Grace." Her voice came out just barely above a whisper—perhaps she was too stunned by her good fortune to speak.

Duncan knew that, from a completely impartial point of view, he should have been more excited—the goal that he and Lady Penelope had both been working towards

since practically the moment they met had now been recognized.

But instead, he was met with an emptiness so vast that he worried he would collapse into himself. The next thing he knew, he was mumbling something to Mother about suddenly remembering some urgent business that he needed to tend to.

His eyes watched Mother's lips move, but his ears couldn't quite seem to catch what she was saying.

"I'm sorry, but I have to go, Mother," he muttered again.

As he stalked away, he got the vague sense of his name being called and voices asking where he was going, but he didn't turn around.

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He pushed forward on the beaten path until it turned into a paved walkway. Duncan's feet didn't stop or summon the coach when he got to the gates. Rather, his feet carried him down the busy streets.

His walk had been aimless at first—his mind too aggravated to plan where he wanted to. But he still somehow found himself at the gates of Harlington's estate.

"Blackmoore?" his friend muttered bewilderedly. "Good heavens, you're as pale as a ghost!" He stuck out an arm to stabilize Duncan as he stumbled through the front door.

"Water," Duncan managed to mumble. "Need water."

Feeling his legs begin to give out from under him, Duncan threw an arm around Harlington's shoulders, further deepening the other man's concern.

Harlington repeated Duncan's request much more forcefully, sending a servant to dash down the hallway.

Leaning against the nearest wall for additional support, Duncan placed a hand over his own pounding heart, its beat growing louder and louder.

"What's going on, Blackmoore?" Harlington's voice sounded strained with concern.

Duncan looked up at him, pushing through the difficulty he had breathing. "I wish I knew."

* * *

Penelope opened a groggy eye to check the clock, which told her it was now a quarter to six.

As she reached up to rub the sleep out of her eyes, it suddenly dawned upon her that this was her first morning waking up as an engaged woman. Tilting her head slightly, her eyes landed on the bouquet of flowers that Lord Gloushire had proposed to her with, now happily resting in a vase.

Based on the way her friends had reacted when they had gotten engaged, Penelope knew she should have been more elated—gleeful. But besides the sense of relief that she no longer had to worry about Uncle Winston, she felt what could only be described as a hollowness.

You should be more grateful, she chastised herself. In this case, Lord Gloushire is a savior—a very kindly one at that. Be happy.

Bearing this in mind, Penelope pulled herself out of bed and decided to do something she had never done before—she was going to send a love-sick note.

She had seen her friends do something similar before, spraying the notes with their perfume, pressing kisses to the paper before sending it on its merry way. But Penelope had never been compelled to do such a thing.

But sending a love-sick note to your fiancé the morning after your engagement felt like the right thing to do. So, she pulled her hair into a low chignon, settled into her favored chair at the breakfast table, and picked up her quill.

The trembling quill in her hand hovered just above the paper as Penelope racked her brain for what to write. She began by addressing the note to him, at least that was a

start.

But she found herself stuck once more. After all, she couldn't just thank him for proposing, could she?

A thought barged into her mind and Penelope pushed away with all her might. But the longer she sat staring at the blank piece of paper before her, the more her resolve failed her.

By the end, she had surrendered to the notion and for the next few minutes, the only sounds to be heard were her own steady breathing and the scratching of her quill against the paper.

Suddenly, she found herself quickly running out of space on the paper as reflections about his eyes, his smile, and his touch filled the page. The trembling in her hand only grew more intense with every line she wrote until she was forcefully snapped out of her fervor when she almost wrote "Your Grace" instead of "Lord Gloushire".

She dropped the quill onto the table as though it had betrayed her when in truth, it was her own fault that the only way she could bring herself to compose the note was by thinking of His Grace.

The note turned out well in the end, but could she really send it to Lord Gloushire knowing its origin?

It'll be better than not sending him anything at all, she reasoned, so she tied it up and asked a maid to send it off for her before preparing to go downstairs for breakfast.

"Good morning, Your Grace," Penelope greeted the dowager duchess as she entered the breakfast room.

“Good morning, pet.” The older woman smiled. “Did you get any sleep last night or were you too excited?”

It took a moment for Penelope to fully comprehend the question.

“Surprisingly, I managed to sleep quite well, Your Grace,” she answered with a sheepish smile. “Perhaps the excitement was so overwhelming that it tired me out.”

“Even so, that is rather fortunate seeing that we have quite a lot of work ahead of us!” the dowager duchess exclaimed with a gentle squeeze to Penelope’s hands. “A few of the guests may be surprised to be receiving the invitation this late into the Season but it will be a simple matter to explain that it simply couldn’t be helped given the suddenness of the courtship and subsequent engagement.”

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Just after Penelope muttered her agreement, Mr. Rowley entered carrying a note for Her Grace. Penelope looked up from her cup of tea in time to see the dowager duchess' smile drop.

“Are you all right, Your Grace?”

“It's from Duncan,” explained the older woman. “It seems the urgent business he left to attend to yesterday is taking longer than expected and he shan't be home for the next few days.”

“Oh.” Penelope swallowed, attempting to conceal the shakiness in her voice, “I see.”

CHAPTER27

“You're so wonderful for helping me with this Rebecca.” Penelope smiled, shaking out her wrist now that the last invitation had been signed. “I know you're busy enough as it is with-”

“None of that now, lovely!” Rebecca cooed, reaching across the table to squeeze Penelope's hand. “My heart is just overflowing with joy—both for you and for Lord Gloushire. William will tell you that I've been saying nothing but what a wonderful couple you are since we heard the news.”

The two of them had made quick work of the stack of invitations, all that was left now was for Lord Gloushire to sign them too, and then they would be ready to be sent off.

There was a sense of finality brought on by sorting out the invitations that had been missing during the flurry of activity these last few days that Penelope had been subjected to. Seeing her name in writing next to Lord Gloushire's just below the wedding date, it all suddenly felt very real.

Penelope ran a finger over the dried ink on the invitation.

"What are you thinking about, Penny?" Rebecca smiled. "Is something the matter?"

Yes, Penelope wanted to answer. I'm worried that I'm making a huge mistake.

But Rebecca appeared to be more excited about the wedding than Penelope herself. So instead, she concealed the true reason for her dismay. "It's nothing more than the typical nervousness one expects when planning a wedding," she lied, before throwing in a truth as well. "I suspect these nerves will only worsen the closer we draw to the ceremony."

Rebecca exhaled a dreamy sigh. "I went through a similar thing for our wedding as well. But chin up, my lovely, it shall all be worth it in the end."

Almost on cue, the dowager duchess and Mother sauntered into the room, gleefully announcing that they had almost finalized the menu for the wedding breakfast.

The older women joined them at the morning room dining table, closely followed by Rowley, whose arms bore drafts, recipe books, and newspapers that they had evidently been using for reference.

The discussion picked up a rather dizzying pace. And despite Penelope's best efforts to keep up, the best she could do was muster an occasional polite nod whenever she was spoken to.

“Do you think Lord Gloushire would prefer lemon or strawberry tarts?” asked the dowager duchess.

Penelope hesitated, thinking back to how Lord Gloushire had complained about the strawberry ices from before.

But that could have meant that he simply disliked strawberries as ices, not that he disliked them in general, right?

Evidently noticing her hesitance, her friend spoke up on Penelope’s behalf, “Why not both? After all, I doubt Lord Gloushire will have much appetite or opportunity to eat given all the excitement.”

“You just reminded me of my husband.” Mother chuckled, her eyes almost sparkling with fondness. “I could hardly see the altar because of how much I was crying and when I finally took my place across from him, he was as pale as a ghost.”

“Father was?” Penelope asked to confirm.

“Indeed.” Mother smiled. “If only you could have seen the way his fingers trembled as I tried to slip his wedding band onto him. All I could do was pray that I wouldn’t drop the ring in front of everyone.”

The dowager duchess delicately stifled her laugh. “I can still see him in my mind’s eye. We were all so worried he would collapse.”

“I hope your wedding wasn’t as nerve-racking, Your Grace,” Penelope interjected, still smiling at the notion of her usually self-assured father being reduced to a trembling mess.

The dowager duchess’ smile widened even further as a hint of pink tinged her cheeks.

“Oh goodness, I’m afraid that my husband and I were hardly ‘present’ for our wedding. I was so busy staring into his eyes, I almost forgot to say, ‘I do’ when my turn arrived.”

Another round of airy laughter poured forth from all sides of the table. Penelope hoped that she could have memories even half as fond as her companions’ when she looked back on her own wedding day.

However, the other three women had one key advantage—they had each been completely head over heels for their grooms at the time.

Mother said that love isn’t a necessary ingredient for marriage, Penelope reminded herself, but her resolve weakened again when the other side of her heart bitterly retorted: It’s an easy assertion for Mother to make given that her marriage was full of love.

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Eventually, the discussion returned to its original topic of the wedding breakfast menu, but just as they were beginning to make progress, another interruption arrived.

“My apologies for interrupting your hard work...” Lord Gloushire grinned, “but may I steal my lovely fiancée for just a moment?”

With both mothers’ blessings, a footman accompanied Penelope and Lord Gloushire on their impromptu stroll around the gardens.

Their conversation began in the exact manner that all of their other conversations had been going recently: with him questioning about her day, followed by her informing him that she had been focused on the wedding preparations, then followed by her inquiring about this day so far, and so on.

“I am pleased to inform you that I received confirmation that the first reading of the Banns was successful in your parish as well, dearest,” chirped her fiancé. “Everything is proceeding as required.”

Penelope made a happy noise of acknowledgment, but her palms grew sweaty at this news—despite the fact that it was favorable—since this was where her plan to marry before Uncle Winston could stop her was most likely to fail.

But then again, in the brief period that she shared a roof with that monster, he hadn’t attended church with them even once. She just needed to hope that he wouldn’t attend the next two Sundays either and her freedom would practically be guaranteed.

“I know it's been busy, busy, busy these days,” Lord Gloushire gently patted the arm

that she had linked with his, “but what if we held a small dinner between our families? It would allow us some well-deserved respite and we could even invite your uncle, the present Lord Punto-”

“No!” Penelope exclaimed before she could stop herself, bringing them to a halt where they stood.

Withdrawing her arm from his, she stuttered, “M-Mother and I intend to surprise him with the news of our wedding. He’s much advanced in years and we want to avoid troubling him with any of the wedding preparations as much as possible.”

Lord Gloushire scanned her features in puzzlement. “But won't your uncle count it as a mark of disrespect against him if we do not involve him in the-”

“Not at all!” Penelope reached for his hands again. “We were never close, you see. So, involving him as little as possible would actually be the kindest thing we can do.”

“However-”

“Please...” Penelope cut him off with a plea, swallowing the lump in her throat, “...my love.”

His eyes widened at her appeal, not just because of how wholehearted it was, but also because she had never once called him ‘my love’ before. Certainly, he had employed it on her several times over the course of their courtship, but she had only ever repaid him with a light blushing of her cheeks or a playful punch on his arm.

That is, until just now.

Penelope knew it was an underhanded tactic. But she was so fearful of Uncle Winston finding out that she had no choice but to stoop this low.

Based on the way Lord Gloushire's gaze softened, Penelope already knew she had persuaded him.

"Very well, my love." He affectionately returned the term of endearment, bringing her hand to his lips. If she had truly been in love with him, the sweetness of Lord Gloushire's gesture would have been enough for Penelope to melt into his arms.

Penelope barely comprehended everything else her fiancé said during the remainder of their walk, distracted by concerns about whether—apart from the remaining two Sundays for reading of the Banns—there were any other occasions that put her plan at risk.

"-personally believe it to be nothing more than a waste of time," Lord Gloushire continued to drone on, "but you know how stubborn Lord Cedarvale is, almost as bad as the Duke of Blackmoore."

The mere mention of His Grace snapped Penelope back to full attention—and she silently prayed that the viscount hadn't noticed.

"Stubborn," she echoed, her mind flooding with flashes of the duke's self-satisfied smile, his playful taunts, the tuft of hair that bounced every time he moved his head just a tad too fast, the weight of his arms on her waist-

Penelope discreetly pinched her own arm—the only truly effective method of prying herself free from the clutches of the meddlesome thoughts that seemed determined to suffocate her.

His Grace hasn't even been home in three days. She reminded herself, He should be the furthest thing from your mind right now!

The dowager duchess didn't seem to know when her own son would return, nor

whatever business it was that he needed to tend to. But the older woman didn't seem to mind, having thrown herself into assisting Penelope and her mother prepare for the wedding.

“Unbelievably so!” Lord Gloushire hummed in agreement in the present, continuing to ramble, “But we’ve reached somewhat of a shaky compromise, not that we have much of an alternative, of course.”

“Of course,” Penelope echoed, flashing him a weak smile upon realizing that he was really talking more to himself rather than her.

The viscount eventually escorted Penelope back indoors, deposited her in the morning room with the other women where he had initially found her, and then bid them a cheery farewell before he carried on with his day.

“It has been a few days since his last visit,” Mother remarked as she peeked through the curtain to watch his coach leave. “So he must be rather busy these days.”

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“And yet...” Rebecca interjected, playfully elbowing Penelope in the side, “...he found a way to come visit our lovely Penny even if only briefly.”

“The mark of a good man.” Mother beamed, lithe fingers releasing the curtain to allow it to fall back to its original place. “Pardon me for stating the obvious, but every visit of his reminds me of what a dutiful husband he shall be.”

She was right, of course, Penelope had no doubts about it. But Penelope worried that she wouldn't be as dutiful of a wife, especially not when her thoughts continued to drift towards-

“-isn't that right, Penny?”

“A-Absolutely,” Penelope blurted in response in the hopes that if she replied quickly enough, they wouldn't realize that she hadn't been listening at all.

“It's settled, then!” Rebecca squealed. “I shall speak to William at once! Once you return from your honeymoon, we shall be the very first to invite you to dinner!”

During a previous visit, Penelope's fiancé had recommended a brief, quiet honeymoon in the countryside while Mother watched the children on their behalf.

“We could also bring Mother and the children along,” Penelope had offered. “That way, we won't have to cut the honeymoon short.”

“No, no, dearest!” the viscount had opposed. “The honeymoon will be one of the rare chances we'll have to bask in each other's company. After that, you shall be very

busy in your maternal duties, and I in my paternal and patriarchal ones.”

Over the course of their discussion, Penelope had quietly pondered whether Lord Gloushire’s insistence was borne of genuine love for her or borne from the fact that he knew it to be the right thing to do.

“Love is all-consuming.” His Grace’s voice echoed in the walls of Penelope’s mind.

‘All-consuming’ was not how Penelope would define Lord Gloushire’s feelings for her or vice versa.

As she resumed her place at the table, attempting to appear interested in the proposed plans for the wedding breakfast’s seating arrangement, Penelope’s mind showed her some mercy and finally stopped wandering.

But she knew that once all had fallen quiet, it would get right back to tormenting her once again.

All-consuming.

CHAPTER 28

“I’m ever so sorry, pet,” sighed the dowager duchess as she passed the note that had just arrived to Penelope, “but it appears that something unexpected came up and the seamstress will only be able to do your fitting tomorrow.”

Penelope skimmed through the note as she spoke. “That’s quite all right, Your Grace. At least we no longer have to rush home after doing our shopping today.”

Even though the wedding was still about three weeks away, the dowager duchess had suggested conducting rehearsals of the wedding breakfast—more to the point, she

wanted to ensure that all of the dishes were made to perfection and thus arranged for the cook to create practice dishes until she was satisfied.

Penelope had expressed her concerns that the dowager duchess was generously spending far too much on ingredients and materials for the rehearsal dishes, but the older woman was quick to hush her protests.

“It’s no bother at all, my pet,” answered the dowager duchess. “Besides, given Duncan’s aversion to marriage, this may very well be my only chance to properly plan a wedding, so please do not deny an old woman this pleasure.”

Indeed, after everything that Her Grace had done for them, who was Penelope to get in her way? Today, the women found it necessary to get as early of a start as possible because, in addition to stocking up on ingredients, the dowager duchess desired to get in touch with a cheese-making family rumored to be the best in London.

The gentle morning breeze danced between the women's skirts as they left the house. Mr. Rowley helped Her Grace descend the steps while Penelope similarly assisted Mother.

They had been so engrossed in their conversation that they didn’t notice a coach pull up to the gates.

“Duncan?” the dowager duchess breathlessly exclaimed.

Penelope’s head snapped to follow her line of sight.

Sure enough, the Duke of Blackmoore was climbing out of his coach, his eyes alert and his smile bright as he gave everyone a cheery wave.

Before she could catch herself, a giant smile spread across Penelope’s face, an

instinctive response as her heart shamelessly fluttered upon seeing him.

Something about him had changed, however.

When His Grace jogged towards them with his usual cocky smile, he seemed more at ease, and even more confident than before—a feat that Penelope didn't even realize was possible.

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Pleasantries and greetings were exchanged as His Grace allowed his mother to pull him down for a quick kiss on the cheek while she fussed over him.

“Where on earth did you disappear off to this time?” she lovingly complained as she stroked his cheek. “You had us ever so worried about you.”

“I’m sorry, Mother, but I had very little choice. I shan’t bore you with the details,” came the duke’s elusive answer, “but I promise that it’s all taken care of now.”

He was smiling, but not in the way that Penelope had grown accustomed to. His smile didn’t reach his eyes, betraying its insincerity.

Even when his eyes met hers for a fleeting moment, there was a difference. The familiar warmth that they usually carried was absent, replaced by a barrier of cordiality that caused Penelope’s knees to slightly buckle underneath her.

Just as her mind scrambled for what to say to him, the duke declared that he didn’t want to keep them from getting on with their day and wished them well before hastily entering the house.

Over the last few days, Penelope had slowly grown used to His Grace’s absence—save for the occasional wandering thought or two that she would immediately quell. But his return now opened the floodgates of her mind, distracting and swallowing her whole as she and the other women flitted between various shops and market stalls around town.

Penelope’s agitation only increased on the coach ride home and became absolutely

unbearable when she stood on the front door's threshold, almost shivering at the thought of entering the house knowing that His Grace was now inside.

So, she bowed away from the door, muttering something to Mother about wanting to stretch her legs.

The last thing she heard as she strolled away from the front door was the slight commotion in the entrance hall as the servants collected the wrapped parcels of shopping while the dowager duchess happily announced to the cook that they had successfully managed to procure the cheese they wanted.

Penelope's heartbeat eventually slowed down enough for her to be able to enjoy the light bird song in the air—how she wished she could exchange places with the carefree sparrows that curiously watched her as they perched on the branches above.

And what a curious sight she must have been to them, walking around and around the winding garden path that encircled the manor, like a haunting sentinel chasing an invisible opponent.

But as she turned the corner this time, she caught sight of another coach arriving, its driver a familiar face. Before she had fully registered who it was, the coach's door was swinging open to reveal Uncle Winston—his face an angry crimson as he stalked towards her.

Penelope wanted to run but found her feet practically nailed to the ground, feeling too weak as she felt her soul drain away, her knees weak and shaking against each other.

Her worst fear had come true.

“You!” he hissed, thundering towards her, already raising his cane high.

Knowing what was coming, but still unable to run, all Penelope could do was brace herself—sucking in a deep breath as she squeezed her eyes shut.

But the blow never came—but strangely enough, the sound of a blow still rang in her ears. When she finally opened her eyes, she found out how it had been possible.

The Duke of Blackmoore’s large frame stood between her and her wretched uncle, who now lay on the ground, blood visibly leaking from his nose.

“Get up,” snarled the duke, his voice low and guttural, different from anything Penelope had ever heard from him before. “Common courtesy prevents me from hitting an adversary when he is down—even if he is nothing but vile scum.”

The older man looked up at His Grace with shock, but when his eyes landed on Penelope once more, his features contorted as the flames of his rage stoked higher.

“Stay out of our family’s affairs, Blackmoore,” hissed the older man propping himself up on his elbows.

“Stay out of my garden, then,” the duke retorted, “or would you prefer that I drag you out with my bare hands?”

“A pathetic wench like her isn’t worth your-”

The earl’s remark halted abruptly when the duke placed a heavy boot against his chest—not pressing down into the other man’s frame yet, but the threatening implication was enough to jolt Penelope out of the statue-like state she had found herself in.

“Your Grace, please!” she barely managed to yelp.

But the duke remained unyielding, lowering his foot just enough to leave a print on his opponent's chest as he growled, "Close your eyes, rat. You aren't fit to even look at her!"

"Your Grace..." Penelope pleaded again, weakly tugging at his arm.

The contact managed to momentarily snap his attention to her where, once again, she saw his eyes different from anything she had ever seen from him before. But this time, the barrier of cold cordiality had not dissipated, replaced by scorching rage that threatened to consume anything in its path.

"Your Grace..." Penelope swallowed, beginning anew in the hopes of getting through to him, "it's only because he had intended to marry me himsel-"

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“Who- Wha- Do you mean this worm?” the duke let out with a scoff. “Well, raising his cane against you is certainly an interesting way to show it.”

The duke’s foot must have increased its pressure once more because the other man squirmed and grasped at the heavy weight that bore down on him. When this proved unsuccessful, he instead began to claw for his cane.

“Is that how you would have treated her once she became yours?” the duke roared, using his other foot to hook the cane and kick it further away. “And given the ease with which you were about to commit such an unspeakable act, I’m certain this isn’t the first time you’ve hit a woman, is it? Is it?”

The earl’s face looked up in fear, his silence betraying that the duke’s assumption had been correct.

“I thought so, you bastard...” snarled His Grace, his fists clenching at his sides.

Unsure of what else to do, Penelope wrapped her arms around the duke, holding him tight as she begged for him to calm down. Her shaking frame against his, the only word she could muster through her sobs was: “Please...”—a prayer she helplessly repeated as she pressed her tear-stained cheek flush against his sturdy back.

An eternity seemed to pass between one heartbeat and the next. But when it had finally lapsed, she could feel the duke gradually slacken in her grip, giving her the courage to open her eyes once again.

The next thing she knew, the duke was wrapping strong arms around her, steadying

her because she was still clinging to him as he took a step backward, finally releasing the man he had pinned below.

“Get out,” His Grace coldly commanded. “This is the last time you have the privilege of being in Lady Penelope’s presence. If you dare approach her or her mother again...” his eyes momentarily drifted to Penelope before resuming, “...well, I pray you never have to find out.”

The older man said nothing in response, focusing his efforts instead on scrambling to his feet as best as he could, grabbing his cane, and then hobbling towards the coach.

Without meaning to, Penelope held her breath until the coach turned the corner and was finally out of sight. When she finally exhaled, both her breath and whatever strength she had left seemed to forsake her as she fell to her knees, a hand clutching her chest to still her throbbing heart.

“Are you all right?” the duke gasped, sinking to the ground with her as frantic questions poured out of him. “Was I too late? Did he hit yo-”

“N-No, Your Grace,” she replied, her breath hitching in her throat at the sensation of his hand gently cradling her face, a stark contrast to the ruthless fury he had displayed earlier.

“Thank Providence,” he exhaled, his head falling backward in relief.

Penelope missed the warmth of his hand the moment it fell away from her face. But the warmth soon reappeared, this time when his hand squeezed hers.

She eyed their interlocked fingers in curiosity before raising her eyes to meet his once more. His blue eyes screamed at her, but seemingly in a language that she was unfamiliar with.

“You can't keep doing this to me...” he choked out, his voice painfully hoarse.

Penelope opened her mouth to ask what he meant, but the question lodged in her throat as her world suddenly went black.

CHAPTER 29

Penelope gradually became aware of the sounds of quiet sobbing.

She screwed her eyes tighter before slowly opening them.

“M-Mother?” she called out weakly.

“Oh, my poor darling!” the older woman sobbed, practically jumping up from her chair to kiss Penelope’s forehead and temple. “I’m so, so sorry... so sorry,” she continued to babble.

Her mother’s sobs elicited a lump in Penelope’s already painfully dry throat.

“D-Don’t apologize, Mother, please...” Penelope lifted a weak hand to brush away the stray locks on her face. “None of this is your fault.”

The older woman didn’t reply, only reaching for a nearby glass of water as she made a gesture with her free hand. “Are you strong enough to sit up, my darling?”

“Yes, Mother.” Penelope shuffled herself carefully, but quickly—eager to prove that there was nothing for her to worry about.

After gulping down her water, Mother immediately took the glass out of her hands and replaced it with a bowl of soup, “Eat as much as you can stomach, darling. You need to replenish your strength.”

Mother closely eyed each of Penelope's movements, her pupils following the spoon as it dipped into the soup and was brought to her lips.

Eventually, Mother's demeanor began to relax, and Penelope decided it was finally safe to ask, "What happened?"

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“The physician says it was nothing more than a fainting spell,” Mother answered, her voice still somewhat shaky, “brought on by the tension of your uncle’s unexpected visit. He said it is also likely that your constitution is weaker than usual given how busy we’ve been with preparing for the wedding.”

“I... see.” Penelope gave an understanding nod as she took another sip of her soup, “And... do we know how Uncle Winston found out about the wedding? It was likely through the reading of the Banns, yes?”

“That does seem like the most reasonable explanation, yes.” Mother shrugged. “Or perhaps other churchgoers in our parish wrote to congratulate him on the news,” she sighed. “However, such details seem insignificant in light of everything that transpired in the garden today.”

“The doctor also said it was imperative that you exert yourself as little as possible for the next few days,” Mother added.

“Normally that would be a rather easy order to follow” Penelope chuckled, “but given that we are in the midst of preparing for a wedding...”

“Don’t even worry about that now,” Mother tutted. “The dowager duchess and I shall take care of as much of it as possible. The better you rest, the sooner you shall be able to rejoin us.”

“Yes, Mother.” Penelope sighed, not wanting to upset the older woman any more than she already had.

Mother handed her a handkerchief as soon as Penelope had finished the last of her soup.

“Now that you’ve had some nourishment,” Mother began, returning the bowl to the tray, “would it be all right if Lord Gloushire came to speak with you for just a little bit?”

“Is he here?” Penelope blinked in surprise.

“Indeed,” answered Mother. “We sent word to him as soon as the doctor left, and he arrived just over an hour ago.”

Well, Penelope could hardly turn the poor man away now. And with some help from Mother to help make herself a bit more presentable, she was finally ready to greet her fiancé.

“Oh, thank heavens you’re all right!” the viscount exclaimed the moment he set foot in the room.

Mother mumbled something about leaving the young couple to console each other in peace before making her exit, leaving a lone footman standing in the doorway facing the corridor as their new chaperone.

The viscount sank onto the same chair that Mother had used earlier.

“Getting to see you is certainly preferable to anything else the doctor prescribed,” Penelope joked, a feeble attempt to lighten the mood.

But the viscount paid her remark no heed. “Why didn’t you tell me that your uncle was such a fiend?”

Because then I would have to admit that I'm only marrying you to get away from him, she replied inwardly.

"I- I didn't want to burden you," she replied outwardly—an answer that had at least some truth in it.

Lord Gloushire's lips pressed into a grimace. "My beloved..." he inched the chair closer to the bed, "after all this time, do you still have so little faith in me?"

"It's not that!" Penelope exclaimed. "I just- You always have so much on your plate. I didn't think it fair to burden you with my family's problems."

"Beloved, we are soon to be wed," the viscount reminded her. "Your family is as much mine as it is yours."

He looked down at his fidgeting fingers. "When I asked you this morning about possibly inviting him to dinner, you didn't even—" he cut himself off with a scoff of disbelief.

After a quick exhale to regain his composure, he continued, "You didn't just make excuses, you expressly deceived me!"

"I'm sorry..." Penelope averted her gaze, "I think a part of me worried that you would call off the wedding if you found out how terrible my family is."

"So, you truly do think so little of me after all," the viscount sighed, bitterness evident in his tone.

Penelope wanted to object, but couldn't for the life of her figure out how to prove him wrong. Several minutes of awkward silence passed before the viscount finally rose to his feet.

“It’s unfair for me to pick on you when you’re already unwell,” he stated matter-of-factly. “So I shall let you get some much-needed rest, Lady Penelope. And I hope...” his voice trailed off as he walked towards the door.

He flashed her one last look over his shoulder, “...I hope that you trust me the next time a predicament like this arises.”

“I will,” Penelope vowed. “Have a good afternoon, Lord Gloushire.”

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He didn't bother to answer her, save for a polite nod of acknowledgment. As the door began to close behind him, Penelope braced herself to stew in the awkward air that had gotten left behind even after his departure.

But the sound of more voices in the hallway told her otherwise.

She strained her ear to see if she could tell who they were. A part of her feared that Uncle Winston had somehow found his way into the house.

No, she told herself, the voices sound too calm for that to be the case.

Her curiosity was soon sated when the door swung open again, but this time to reveal Mother and the Earl of Graystone.

"Jerry Gray?" Penelope beamed, sitting up straighter against the pillows at the sight of her old friend. "What are you doing here?" she asked.

"Oh Penny!" he answered, pressing a chaste kiss to her hand. "I've been meaning to come to offer my congratulations the moment I heard that your wedding preparations had already begun. And I finally had some time today but..."

His voice trailed off as his concerned eyes quickly ran over her form.

"Uncle Winston came by," Penelope explained despite knowing that Mother had most likely already done so, "but I'm all right."

Once again, Mother excused herself, again allowing the same footman from earlier to

take over as chaperone. He took up his usual post, just outside the open doorway to afford them sufficient privacy.

Unlike her fiancé, Graystone decided to pace around the room rather than confine himself to the chair by her bedside. The silence between them was companionable and familiarly comfortable.

“I just realized...” her old friend let out a husky chuckle, “I’ve been engaged for longer, yet you’ll somehow manage to get married first.”

Penelope chuckled along with him. “Come Jerry, surely by now you should know full well that I always have—and always shall—outdo you.”

“Maybe you shouldn’t,” he bit back playfully. “Just look at how well it’s working out for you so far.” He nodded towards her.

Although she knew he didn’t mean anything by it, Penelope felt the smile she had been wearing practically fall off her face, a gesture that did not go unnoticed by her companion.

“What is it?” he frowned.

“Do you think I’m making a mistake?” she asked him directly, seeing no point in tiptoeing around the subject.

Graystone’s absent-minded pacing ground to a halt upon hearing her question. Frustratingly, however, instead of providing an answer he simply tossed her question back at her.

“Do you?”

Penelope raised a hand to gently massage her temple. “Lord Gloushire’s a wonderful ma-”

“But not wonderful enough for you to be sure about him?” Jerry interjected.

Penelope bit her lip, pausing before she finally admitted—both to him and herself, “Yes...”

Graystone’s eyebrows shot up in what appeared to be a mix of amusement and confusion. Approaching her bed, he finally decided to take a seat. Leaning forward to rest his elbows on his knees, Grayston sucked in a deep breath before assuring her,

“It is only natural for you to not be as... enthralled by him. After all, your courtship has been somewhat rushed—a fact that I believe we should all be grateful for given your original predicament with your uncle.”

Penelope fidgeted with the edge of the blanket that came up to her waist. “Yes, I just- I don’t know what has gotten into me these days,” she mumbled tiredly. “My initial plan was to marry whoever was willing as long as he wasn’t Uncle Winston. But now—for some inexplicable reason—a part of me wishes to marry someone who I actually...”

“-who you actually care for?” Graystone finished her thought for her when she trailed off.

He studied her expression as he spoke, familiar eyes not allowing her a single moment of respite. “Penny...” he exhaled her pet name softly almost as though she were a small animal that he did not wish to startle.

“Yes?”

“The primary reason I can think of for one in your shoes to suddenly become dissatisfied with marrying anyone is because one has developed an interest in marrying someone in particular.”

Her heart crashed against her ribs, a guilty blush spreading up her cheeks. She wanted to deny the charge brought against her, but Graystone knew her well enough to see right through her if she did.

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“What should I do?” she squeaked out in defeat.

Graystone shifted in his seat. “That depends on who the other man is—that is, who the real object of your affection is.”

His words implied another accusation—yet another testament to how well he knew her. But he was polite enough to leave it unsaid for Penelope’s sake, it was but a means to give her the benefit of the doubt—a chance for her to prove his assumption wrong.

But when she merely continued to toy with the edge of her blanket, Graystone had little choice but to let out an exhale at the fact that he had—once again—presumed correctly.

“Penny... you swore you wouldn’t let your guard down.”

“And I didn’t!” she exclaimed. “I was prepared to reject any unwanted interest, but I—” her voice faltered momentarily, “I didn’t expect that unwanted interest to be from my side.”

“Penny!” Graystone’s voice grew frustrated for the first time since his visit began, dragging a hand over his face before lowering his voice again, “Not only is a rake like him not worth the sacrifice, but do you also mean to tell me that you’re questioning whether to marry a perfectly fine gentleman like Lord Gloushire when you don’t even know how the other man feels about you?” he hissed.

Penelope’s fingers began to tremble, unintentionally prompting Graystone to soften

his approach.

“All I’m saying, Penny...” the chair creaked as her companion inched it closer, “You simply must marry Lord Gloushire.” His eyes bore into hers earnestly. “There is simply no angle from which the alternative would work better—”

“Of course I intend to marry him!” Penelope choked out, ignoring the stinging tears that had begun to well up behind her eyes. “I don’t have a choice, do I?”

Her reply took Graystone aback—literally and metaphorically—as he leaned back in his chair.

“But did you just ask me if you were making a mistake?” His head tilted sideways as his eyebrows furrowed in confusion.

“Yes, I was merely asking for your opinion.” Penelope cleared her throat. “I may be a fool who allowed her heart to get the better of her, but...” her voice slowed as the weight in her chest grew, “I am not so far gone that I have completely lost sight of the reality of my circumstances.”

“That’s a relief to hear.” Her friend shot her a mischievous smile. “I was beginning to suspect that that accursed wretch’s charm was powerful enough to incapacitate even your sharp mind.”

Penelope reached for the pillow next to her and threw it at his face. “You’re still the most unhelpful man I have ever had the displeasure of meeting!”

Graystone dodged the pillow with a lighthearted laugh, before clearing his throat as his expression grew more serious, “With regards to your question, Penny... you said it yourself, you don’t have an alternative. In that case, rather than being a mistake, marrying Lord Gloushire is the only correct choice.”

Penelope swallowed in acceptance, Graystone's straightforward reasoning proving undeniable and irrefutable as usual.

"Thank you..." she met his gaze, "...for the assurance. I had thought as much myself, but it is, of course, very different when someone else says so."

"Marry him, Penny," Graystone urged her once more, as if he hadn't already made his point very clear. "I am certain you won't regret it—unlike the alternative."

"I will," Penelope promised—not just to him, but to herself as well. "You're right..."

"As usual," came the smug addition.

"I thought bedside visitors were supposed to make the infirm feel better, not worse?" she huffed, her hands threatening to throw another pillow at him.

"What do you mean? You look better already."

CHAPTER 30

"And what do you think, Lord Gloushire?" the dowager duchess chirped expectantly.

Presently, Her Grace, Penelope, Mother, and Lord Gloushire were gathered around the dining table at Blackmoore Manor discussing the final outcome of the wedding breakfast trials.

"It truly is perfect this time! I thank you all ceaselessly for your hard work." The viscount dabbed the corners of his mouth as he gestured to the food in front of them. "And did you say that your cook will share all of her notes and recipes with our cook?"

“That is correct!” The dowager duchess beamed with pride. “I had also mentioned to Lady Penelope that if it were agreeable to you, it might be easier to have some of our kitchen staff assist yours on the night before and the day of the wedding breakfast. It might prove-”

“Oh, that won’t be necessary, Your Grace!” Penelope’s fiancé waved a sheepish hand. “We’ve troubled you more than enough as it is and-”

“Nonsense!” Her Grace cut him off. “As I explained to Lady Penelope before, it is my pleasure and honor to be able to play a role in this momentous occasion.”

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However, the viscount remained firm and unyielding. Perhaps it was a matter of pride, or perhaps he worried that the convoluted arrangement would invite disaster, but whatever his reasons, he remained adamant.

“What do you think, pet?” Her Grace finally turned to Penelope looking for some support. “What would you prefer?”

Penelope sucked in a deep breath. Ever since the day Lord Gloushire told her off for not trusting him, Penelope had been working extra hard to remain on his good side.

So even though she personally agreed with the dowager duchess, she found herself taking Lord Gloushire’s side when her lips finally answered, muttering something along the lines of how the dowager duchess had already done so much for them and so on and so forth.

Their generous host did not appear fully convinced, as evidenced by the manner in which her eyes silently queried Penelope about her sudden change of heart. But like the elegant and dignified woman she was, the dowager duchess acquiesced on the matter and declared that she would have the collection of notes and recipes placed in Lord Gloushire’s coach straight away.

The party moved to the parlor where they washed down their meal with fresh cups of tea and nibbles of various fruits and biscuits.

Just as Lord Gloushire stood up to leave—his thanks for the hospitality and praises for everyone’s hard work falling from his lips—the Duke of Blackmoore happened to arrive.

Penelope hadn't had the chance to properly speak with His Grace since he had saved her from Uncle Winston. Her suspicions that something about him had changed since his trip were proven all the more correct through the overly cordial smiles he would throw her way at the dinner table or whenever they happened to pass each other in the hallways.

In a way, it worked in Penelope's favor because it made it easier for her to put him out of her mind. But just because it was easier these days did not mean that it was completely effortless, especially when his cryptic plea would echo within the walls of her mind at the most unexpected moments: "You can't keep doing this to me."

Do what? she wanted to ask—to scream—at him.

He had looked at her so desperately then. But not a hint of that desperation could be found in the distant politeness he showed. So thorough was the duke's calm and collectedness that a part of Penelope began to wonder if she had imagined the vulnerability in his words, the earnestness in his face, and the gentleness of his plea.

The two men exchanged greetings without much fuss—even His Grace's manner of dealing with Gloueshire had changed, but at least for the better rather than decaying further.

His Grace continued to hover in the entrance hall, politely making conversation with everyone until the viscount finally managed to take his leave, flashing a playful wink at Penelope and waving a final time as he did so.

When the door closed behind him, the dowager duchess called after her son, who was already out of the doorway's line of sight—likely already striding down the hall towards his office.

"Duncan? Dearest?" the older woman called in vain. "Are you hungry? We still have

some leftovers from the wedding breakfa-”

“No, thank you, Mother!” his distant voice simply replied.

As the servants cleared the table and the two older women switched their topic of interest to the breakfast’s flower arrangements and when they would arrive, Penelope declared that she would like to walk around the garden to get some fresh air—a declaration that was met with hearty encouragement as both older women urged Penelope to take as much care of her constitution as possible.

Similar to how she had done last week, Penelope followed the winding garden path—making sure to stay under the cool, shady side over where the trees stretched their limbs—as she went around and around the manor.

Several minutes into her walk, a high whistle rang in Penelope’s ear. Eyebrows furrowed, she looked around for the source and her eyes landed on the Duke of Blackmoore, leaning on the windowsill of his office as he beckoned her closer.

As she approached the window, Penelope was suddenly painfully aware that she did not know what to do with her hands—so she chose to neatly clasp them together over the front of her stomach.

As she endeavored to conceal her self-consciousness, Penelope quietly cursed His Grace for his ability to appear so casual and confident no matter the circumstances. It seemed as though even Mother Nature was partial to him because the wind gleefully toyed with his dark locks, a small detail that raised his charm and appeal to almost otherworldly heights.

“Yes, Your Grace?” she murmured when she was finally close enough, her feet now treading soft grass instead of the paved path.

“Did Gloushire receive confirmation about the final reading of the Banns in your parish?” inquired the duke, his tone and expression alike remaining all too neutral.

Penelope didn’t know what she had expected him to say when she approached the window, but it certainly wasn’t that.

“The reading of-” she echoed and then trailed off as she fully registered his question. “Oh! Yes, Your Grace. In fact, that was one of the reasons why Lord Gloushire dropped by earlier, to let us know that the final reading of the Banns had been carried out and accepted in Mother and I’s home parish.”

“That’s good.” The duke nodded solemnly. “But we should still keep an eye out for your wretch of an uncle. If you agree to it, I suggest that you stay indoors as much as possible for the remainder of today. It’ll be easier for us to ensure your safety.”

His words flowed from him so easily, too easily—too quickly for Penelope’s nervous and addled mind to keep up with.

Not wanting to look even more foolish than she already had, Penelope took her time mulling over each of His Grace’s remarks. First, he had asked about the final reading of the Banns—the mere fact that he remembered it at all was intriguing in itself given his clear lack of interest in all things connected to her wedding.

But perhaps that could be explained by the remarks that followed: he had been worried about the reading of the Banns because—like Penelope—he probably worked out that that was what had alerted Uncle Winston and prompted him to visit.

His final remark about ensuring her safety, however, had been the most interesting of all. Despite the distance he had kept her at, there was no denying that-

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“You still want to protect me...?”

“Of course,” he answered like it was the most natural thing in the world, jolting her out of her thoughts as she realized that she had stated her conclusion out loud.

How could he say it so easily and naturally when he had behaved so indifferently towards her this past week?

Penelope studied his expression carefully, but the duke was quick to return the favor, his blue eyes running over every inch of her face almost as though it was the last time he would get to see her.

The only thing to break the spell was the upward curl of his smirk as he asked, “What are you contemplating so deeply, Lady Pen?”

The sudden use of his pet name for her felt like an arrow to Penelope’s poor heart.

“You can’t keep doing this to me!” she wanted to scream at him, wishing to throw his words back in his face, even if that meant contorting whatever their original meaning was to suit her own purposes.

But His Grace appeared completely oblivious to the thoughts that galloped through her mind, continuing to stare at her expectantly as he waited for her to answer his question.

“I-” her voice got stuck, so she cleared her throat to try again, “I wanted to thank you for...” she looked down at her fidgeting hands, “...everything you did last week, and

I'm sorry for always causing you trouble no matter how I—"

"It was no trouble at all." He cut her off, sounding very much like his mother.

His voice wavered for just a moment, giving Penelope the nerve to raise her eyes to him where she now found him being the one to avert his gaze.

"How are you?" he coughed out. "We were... worried when you collapsed."

"Better now, Your Grace." She smiled, mustering some more bravery to add, "But of course, you would have already known that if you were around more often."

Her tone had been teasing but there wasn't a sliver of amusement in the way his eyes returned to meet hers.

Penelope dropped her smile at once. "I-I'm sorry, Your Grace," she barely managed to choke out, "I was only trying to jest—"

He let out a sigh—it sounded more like it was out of defeat rather than annoyance, "I know."

Suddenly, the tense, awkward air between them had returned in full force, stifling Penelope's thoughts and leaving her at a loss.

He let out a bitter laugh, "Sometimes I ask myself if you're doing it on purpose, you know." The sound of his voice—now low and gruff—grounded Penelope once again. "But I know you would never be so cruel."

Penelope narrowed her eyes at him, completely unconcerned with how plainly her bewilderment must have been written on her face. She also finally found the will to voice it. "I... never understand you, Your Grace," came her frank confession.

“Nothing you ever say or do makes sense.”

“You can’t keep doing this to me,” his past voice echoed in her mind yet again.

“I have the very same complaint against you,” his voice said in the present, and for just a moment, the familiar glint in his eyes returned. “You... you’re unbelievable,” he exhaled.

As soon as the words left his lips, Penelope knew in her heart that she had been cursed with another cryptic phrase that would haunt her in her quietest moments.

“I have the same complaint against you,” she somehow managed to retort, finally fulfilling her wish from earlier to use his own words against him. “What should we do?” she asked, surprised at the unmistakable vulnerability that her question carried.

“What is there to do?” he replied tiredly. “Even if-”

The shrill creaking of the front gates opening cut him off. Penelope stepped aside as His Grace immediately leaned his upper body out of the window, and craned his neck to see who it was that had arrived—he looked just about ready to climb out of the window right then and there.

“Ah. It’s just the seamstress,” he exhaled in relief before returning his attention to Penelope. “You should go,” he stated matter-of-factly, that irritating cordiality back in his voice and expression now fully returned.

“Yes...” she mumbled in response, “I should.”

CHAPTER 31

“Mother, please...” Penelope let out a chuckle, slightly embarrassed in front of the

seamstress despite knowing that she had likely witnessed countless similar scenes before. “It’s still only the fitting...”

“I- I know,” Mother sobbed out as the dowager duchess gently stroked her back. “But yo-ou look so beau-utiful!”

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Penelope watched her mother through the reflection of the mirror, patiently waiting for the seamstress to finish pinning a portion of the dress near her lower back that was evidently a bit too loose. Then, with the seamstress' hesitant approval, Penelope carefully lifted her skirt a bit higher so that she could descend from the stool.

“Come now, Mother...” Penelope scooped her skirt up a bit more as she carefully joined them on the sofa, “let us save some of the tears for the wedding or the guests might wonder at our lack of fervor on the day itself.”

“What do you think of your dress, pet?” the dowager duchess smiled from the other end of the sofa. “Because I believe your mother's view is very clear.”

“It's perfect, Your Grace,” Penelope answered. “I hardly recognized my reflection earlier.”

Her Grace's attention was distracted by the sound of the manor's front door creaking open.

“Is that you, Duncan dear?” she called out.

The door to the parlor had been shut to afford Penelope some privacy while she got changed.

A moment of silence elapsed before the duke's muffled, hesitant answer came through the door, “Yes, Mother. I agreed to meet Fairhaven and Harlington, I shall return shortl-”

“Perfect!” the dowager duchess called out, straightening her skirt as she stood up from the sofa to cross the room. “Before you see them, could you please take Lady Everbrook this parcel? We need to thank her for her help with the flowers and bits last week.”

The parlor door opened, and His Grace stuck his head through the door. “Did you say parcel, Mothe-”

His eyes landed on Penelope and her weeping mother.

Penelope smiled sheepishly as an apology for the commotion and tears. But he seemed concerned with an entirely different matter.

It took a moment of the duke running his eyes over her, mouth slightly agape before Penelope remembered that she still had her wedding dress on.

And his positive response wasn’t just her imagination because a playful smile spread across the dowager duchess’ face as she handed her son the aforementioned parcel,

“Doesn’t Lady Penelope just look lovely?” she cooed.

Her question evidently snapped the duke out of his daze, and he instantly straightened up as he accepted the parcel from her. “Indeed, she does, Mother.” His tone indiscernible. “Many gentlemen would envy Lord Gloushire’s position.”

Penelope valiantly fought the blush that pushed its way up her cheeks, but it was all in vain.

“Well, perhaps if you finally stopped your foolishness and searched for a wife of your own, you would be the one in an enviable position,” tutted Her Grace. “Isn’t that right, Lady Penelope?”

Penelope's fingers suddenly tightened on her skirt. "Y-Yes, Your Grace," she answered, before cheekily adding, "Although many gentlemen would certainly envy His Grace, I know I certainly wouldn't envy his unfortunate bride."

Her remark elicited a hearty laugh from the dowager duchess, prompting the duke to place a hand over his heart to feign being hurt. "Mother! Do you betray your own son?"

"You betrayed yourself." The older woman clicked her tongue. "If you were more of a gentleman to Lady Penelope, then perhaps she wouldn't have such a... frank appraisal of you."

Another smile tugged at the duke's lips before he returned his gaze to Penelope. "Could you... stand up, Lady Pen?" he coughed.

"Er, of course." Penelope complied, straightening her skirt as she did. "Why, Your Grace?"

The gentleman didn't answer right away, his wide eyes too busy studying her from top to bottom and vice versa.

"Your Grace?" Penelope asked again.

"Never mind." He cleared his throat. "For a moment I thought your skirt was swallowing you whole and just wanted to make sure you could still stand amidst all that fabric."

Penelope rolled her eyes. "Oh, you're as funny as ever, Your Grace," she retorted sarcastically.

"Duncan!" the dowager duchess chided, smacking his arm playfully. "This is exactly

the sort of thing that Lady Penelope was talking about earlier.”

Having stated his piece, the duke took his leave with a mischievous bow whilst declaring that he did not wish to be late.

“Shall we resume the fitting, Lady Penelope?” the seamstress politely asked once the parlor door had fallen shut once more.

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“Yes, please,” Penelope answered, her gaze lingering on the door just a moment longer than she meant it to.

* * *

“Thanks, Harls!” Duncan leaned forward to ensure that his whisper could be heard—given the lateness of the hour, it was probably wise to make as little noise as possible for the neighbors’ sakes.

“M-hmm!” Harlington groaned from somewhere within the darkness of the coach. “G’night!” he slurred.

Duncan gently closed the coach's door with a nod of thanks to the driver. Rubbing the back of his neck as he climbed the steps up to the manor.

He had met Fairhaven and Harlington at the Stock Exchange just after it had closed so that the three of them could approach Lord Embersfield with their proposal.

Thank Providence, it all went well—so well that Lord Embersfield had invited them all for drinks, but he seemed to have a penchant for Harlington specifically and basically ensured the poor marquess’ cup was always overflowing for the entirety of their visit.

Ever since drinking himself to the point of illness a few weeks ago, Duncan found it necessary to exercise extra restraint lest he somehow slipped back into it again.

The slight tipsiness gently humming behind his eyes, Duncan began to climb the

steps to the house, now plunged in darkness given the hour.

Letting himself in, he exhaled as he began to remove his coat. But his relaxed muscles quickly tensed when he spotted an orange glow coming from down the hallway. He craned his neck to get a better view and noted an orange glow seeping from the slightly ajar kitchen door.

He immediately checked the grandfather clock to his right and it told him it was currently a quarter to midnight.

All of the servants should be asleep by now.

This naturally meant that whoever it was rummaging around in the kitchen had to be an intruder. Duncan looked around for a weapon he could use in case the unwelcome guest was armed, but the best he could find on such short notice was an umbrella.

He flipped it around so that he could grip it by its tip, knowing the hardened handle would be more effective in deterring any trespassers.

It'll have to do, he supposed. Once I'm in the kitchen, I can grab one of the pans on the shelves.

Duncan inched his way towards the kitchen, stepping as quietly as he could. He pressed his back against the wall so he could peek through the ajar door and count how many intruders he would have to fend off.

Duncan knew he should have been expecting the unexpected, but seeing the kettle on the stove still surprised him. After all, what sort of intruder would-

He almost jumped out of his skin when a delicate arm came into view, a folded rag in hand to help lift the kettle from its place.

Lady Penelope?

He didn't think it was possible, but the sight of her suddenly made him even more nervous than the thought of an intruder.

She must have been unable to sleep. Duncan concluded, I should let her brew her tea in peace.

He turned to leave as quietly as he had arrived, but a terrible thought halted him in his tracks. Given the lateness of the hour and the fact that no other staff were around, what if an intruder did happen to break in whilst Lady Penelope was alone in the kitchen?

What are the chances of such a significant coincidence happening? he argued with himself. But then again, he knew that if he went upstairs now, he'd hardly be able to sleep from the worry and then he'd likely come all the way downstairs again to watch over her until he was certain that she had returned to bed safely.

I might as well stay here and cut out all of that unnecessary hassle, Duncan finally decided, reasoning that Lady Penelope was unlikely to stay too long in the kitchen anyway.

He stifled a yawn as he leaned across the wall, allowing himself to gradually slump onto the floor—exhausted after the long day he had had.

A few minutes passed in serene silence, the umbrella now lay on Duncan's lap as he—thankfully—found himself fighting off his drowsiness rather than any possible intruders.

A noise to his left suddenly alerted him. It sounded like sniffing. Slowly rising to his feet, Duncan inched closer to the kitchen door.

Sure enough, he had heard correctly. He couldn't see Lady Penelope from here, but he could hear her much clearer. Once again, a conflict arose within him.

On the one hand, he was probably the last person she wanted to see. But on the other hand, he worried that something serious might have happened to her since he had left the house earlier today.

Each of Lady Penelope's sniffles felt like heavy stones crushing his chest and when a muffled sob rang in his ears, Duncan decided that was it.

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After steeling himself and putting on a polite smile, Duncan landed three polite knocks on the door before pushing it open. “Are you still awake, Mrs. Humphrey? You shouldn’t work yourself too har-”

He pretended to freeze in surprise when his eyes landed on Lady Penelope, her hair pulled into a low chignon and a robe pulled over her nightgown. Her cheeks appeared dry—perhaps she had wiped them on her sleeve when she first heard his knocks? But their redness betrayed that she had been crying.

“Ah, Lady Penelope!” Duncan feigned surprise. “Hosting a private tea party, I see.”

She sat up straight in the rickety chair, a hand wrapped around the warmth of her teacup as she flashed him a pleasant smile. “Yes, Your Grace. I do hope my uproarious celebration didn’t wake you from your slumber.”

Her witty banter eased some of Duncan’s worries about her, but he wondered how he would broach the topic regarding the cause of her tears.

“May I ask what we’re celebrating?” he said with a forced grin.

“We?” she chuckled, raising a taunting eyebrow at him.

“Yes,” he answered firmly, grabbing a teacup of his own from the drying rack before joining her at the work table where she sat. “It must be a momentous occasion if you were willing to fight off your fear of the dark and journey all the way here from your room.”

A lock of hair fell in front of her face as Lady Penelope looked down at the teacup in front of her.

Duncan resisted the urge to tuck it behind her ear, it was the sort of thing he would have done without thinking twice during the early days of their friendship. But Duncan had learned to be extra cautious since returning from his trip.

So instead of reaching for her, he reached for the teapot instead and began filling up his cup, refilling Lady Penelope's as well while he waited for her response.

"I've found myself more afraid of... other things lately," Lady Penelope finally answered, her honesty catching Duncan completely off-guard.

"What things? Is it your uncle again? Is there anything I can do to help?" he offered rashly before getting the chance to properly consider what he was saying.

"You said it best yourself..." she sighed bitterly. "What is there to be done?"

Duncan pressed his cup to his lips, hoping to buy himself more time to think of a response. After taking his sip, he offered her a smile that he hoped was reassuring. "Well, I doubt you are referring to the same issue as me when I made that remark. Surely, whatever's bothering you now has a solution."

Her eyebrows furrowed, framing her doe eyes which—much like his own—appeared exhausted. "Why, Your Grace? What exactly were you referring to when you made that remark?"

Duncan's hand froze around his cup as he realized that he had made a grave error.

CHAPTER 32

Penelope could almost see how hard His Grace's mind worked to answer her question. She had grown tired of being left confused and flustered by him, so she decided to ask him outright what on earth was going through that insufferable head of his.

But of course, the fact that she had asked him a direct question did not guarantee that he was going to give her a straightforward answer. Instead, his response came in the form of a question,

“Do you know where I went during my trip?”

Penelope's eyes widened in surprise. She was certainly annoyed at his blatant deflection, but she was also dying to know why he behaved so differently upon returning from it.

“You said that you had to go for business, correct?” she said with feigned casualness.

“Yes, well, I lied.” He smiled drily, absent-mindedly stroking the teacup in his large hands. “I spent a week at an inn near the Port of Kenstone where my... former fiancée now lives with her husband.”

All at once, Penelope's mind flooded with a myriad of questions for him—it was almost dizzying. But she held her tongue, growing increasingly curious to see where the duke was going with this.

“While I was there, we spoke briefly twice.” He tilted his head upwards, almost as though his recollection was written on the ceiling. “Despite her father hating me until his dying breath for abruptly ending our engagement, she never really held it against me—probably because she never cared much for me either.”

“I see,” Penelope choked out, taking another sip in the hopes of relieving her throat.

“Her parents used the scandal I caused to garner sympathy, thus ruining my reputation while simultaneously bolstering their own,” he went on, “And with their pick of the suitors, my unlucky former fiancée once again found herself in an arranged engagement to another man she did not care for. This time, however, the wedding went through unhindered.”

Not blind to the parallels between his former fiancée and her own situation, Penelope found herself instinctively leaning her elbows on the table as she listened.

“May I ask what she said?” Penelope blinked. “How is she now?”

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“She's happy,” came the matter-of-fact reply. “Three children, a husband she grew to love, and a lovely estate near the seaside that her friends envy her for. But I already knew all of that before going to see her.”

Penelope tilted her head sideways in perplexity. She opened her mouth, but closed it again.

“Go on,” His Grace urged her with a weak smile, “though I believe I have a good idea of what your question is already.”

Penelope gave in—both to his urging and to her own curiosity. “If you knew her situation, Your Grace, then why did you consider it necessary to visit her so suddenly?”

“Because I needed a reminder.” His Grace suddenly met her gaze for the first time since recounting his trip. “Without it, I fear that I would have done something... selfish.”

“Selfish?” Penelope echoed. “I don’t understand, Your Grace.”

Her breath caught in her throat as he suddenly leaned forward, a hand gently cupping her face. “Pleasetry,” his voice suddenly low and fervent as his eyes bore into her, “Or do I have to kiss you to finally get through to you?”

It was too much all at once and before she could even understand why, tears suddenly began to streak down Penelope’s face.

“Your Grace...” her voice croaked, “I’m sorry, I-” a sudden hiccup cut her off, “I reallyamtrying, but I just don’t understand what yo-”

His lips swallowed the end of her sentence as he leaned over the table, crashing his lips into hers. Penelope noted that he tasted like the tea they were both drinking, mixed with hints of cigars and whiskey.

Much like the rest of him, his lips were strong and dominating. But even so, the kiss was unmistakably tender, spreading a warmth through her that caused her whole body to quiver under him.

When they finally pulled away from each other, both of their faces had turned pink.

Penelope’s lips still tingled where his lips had met them, breaths mixing as their foreheads remained pressed together.

“The day that Gloushire proposed to you was the worst day of my life.” His voice came out in a low whisper, “I almost-” he swallowed before continuing, “I had to leave before I knocked him out and begged you to marry me instead.”

Penelope’s heart thrashed against her rib cage. “Then why didn’t you?” she whispered back.

Her question jolted him backwards, separating their foreheads in the process.

“N-No, it was- I couldn’t.”

His chair let out a grating noise as he hurriedly leapt to his feet and began pacing. “A part of me hoped that I- that you might possibly- But no. I knew that you deserved better than me.”

Penelope opened her mouth to object, but nothing came out. Instead, the duke continued, “My trip to Kenstone confirmed that letting you go, staying away from you, would be in your best-”

“No!” Penelope yelped, now also on her feet. “It might have worked out for your former fiancée, but you should have told me about your feelings because...” her eyes began to well up again, “I would have-”

“Don’t say it.” He held up a hand in warning. “Please, this is already agonizing as it is.”

Penelope took a stubborn step towards him. “But what I’m saying is that it doesn’t need to be! I’ve been having doubts on whether I should marry Gloushire anyway, so if you-”

“It’s out of the question.” His Grace cut her off again, “Gloushire will be a better husband to you. He’s reliable, well-reputed, fiercely loyal, and-”

“But he’s not you.” Penelope’s lip quivered just as the dam behind her eyes broke, blurring her vision such that the duke was nothing more than a hazy cloud standing in front of her.

The cloud moved and the next thing she knew, firm arms were wrapping themselves around her, drawing her toward him so that she could lay her head on his broad chest.

“If we got married...” he began, his tone heartbreakingly gentle, “...my enemies would become yours. Since calling off my engagement all those years ago, I have lived my life a little too recklessly and although I am not guilty of everything our peers may accuse me of, I have definitely upset far too many people. I could never put you-”

“I don’t care,” Penelope huffed, lifting her head off his chest so she could look up at him. “I don't care what they'll say or do. I shall stand by you to the end.”

A hand found its way to her cheek, gently stroking the paths her tears had burned into it. “How can you say that so confidently about a disgraceful rake?”

Penelope raised her own hand to caress the barely visible stubble on his jaw. “Given the way you described love as all-consuming, the sincerity of your belief in love itself, the way you stand up for the vulnerable... I have the feeling that you aren’t really as rakish as you pretend to be, Your Grace.”

The defeated smile on his lips told her she was correct before his words did.

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“Yes...” he admitted, leaning away from her touch as he explained, “Well, to be clear, the truth is that I have certainly been...” he cleared his throat, “...around.”

Penelope blushed at his frank confession, suddenly quite aware of the hand that rested on the small of her back.

“However,” he continued, “despite what the rest of the town thinks, such trysts were only with women who already had nothing to lose. I would never ruin a woman who was... er, well, you know.”

Penelope nodded in understanding. “See? Then it turns out you’re not that much worse than Lord Gloueshire after all, Your Grace. So why shouldn’t we-”

“No.” His chest heaved as he answered. “My reputation—despite being exaggerated in its notoriety—is enough to all but exile me from proper society. After a decade of half-truths, accusations, misunderstandings, and the like, there are people out there who will always seek to make me miserable—along with anyone who dares to get close. I could never—will never—do that to you.”

Anticipating her objection, he tilted her chin upwards so he could silence Penelope with another—much shorter—kiss.

When their lips parted a second time, he urged her, “Marry Gloueshire, he’s not the type to attract unwanted attention and I shall find peace knowing that you’ll be out of harm’s way by his side rather than mine.”

“But what about my peace?” Penelope objected. “Do you expect me to live the rest of

my life missing you every day?”

“The rest of your life? No, Lady Pen.” A chaste kiss landed on her temple, “For up to a year—perhaps even two if I should be so lucky.”

His hands lightly brushed against her sides, giving her goosebumps. “But the more time you spend with Gloushire, the more preoccupied you become in your duties as a mother and as a viscountess, the farther your mind shall drift away from me.”

The duke’s right hand tucked a lock behind her ear. “Until finally, you shall forget all about the poor soul who almost held you back from the life you deserved.”

“No,” was all that Penelope could bring herself to utter, inhaling a deep breath before she could add, “I could never forget you.”

“That’s just how it feels right now, but I assure you that-”

Penelope pried herself free of his arms, her eyes burning in defiance. “Who are you to tell me so? Do you think that just because you are more experienced in matters of the heart that you know mine so intimately? How can you predict how I shall feel in a few years when you apparently couldn’t tell how hopelessly I have been pining for you all this time?”

She didn’t give him a chance to answer.

“Your predictions are based on your experience with your past trysts, but do you think it fair to compare the way I have loved you to those affairs?”

“No, of course not, that’s not at all what I-”

“And then when I poured my heart out to you, offered you my unwavering love and

support for the rest of our lives...” Penelope’s hands began to tremble, “you had the gall to presume they are fickle enough to fade away quickly once I’m married to Lord Gloushire.”

“Lady Pen, please-”

“Admit it, Your Grace,” she spat out, her tone having turned completely bitter now, “you aren’t doing this for my best interests, but for your own.”

“Formyown interest?” scoffed the duke. “Did you not hear anything I said about the lengths I had to go through just to-”

“You’re better for me than Gloushire in every respect.” Penelope interrupted, too angry now to care about courtesy, “We get along better, you know and understand me better, youarebetter,” Her breathing hastened, “but you're still afraid of love—afraid of the risk of pain that comes with it—so you’d rather push me into the arms of another man rather than take a chance.”

Penelope reached for the lamp that she had used to light her way here from her room, relighting it once more using one of the nearby candles.

“You would rather listen to your fear than to me.” Penelope’s voice cracked despite her best efforts, “Then fine! I shall marry him instead and leave you in peace.” A sob escaped her lips. “Youselfishbastard!”

As she stormed out of the kitchen, Penelope could hardly see her own feet given the darkness of the house combined with the tears in her eyes. But she didn’t care, all she wanted to do was put as much distance between her and that wretched duke.

CHAPTER33

Just three more days, Penelope told her reflection. In just three more days, you shall be married and away from here.

Since the painful quarrel that fateful night in the kitchen, the walls of Blackmoore Manor felt much too suffocating. Thankfully, as the wedding neared, everyone's schedules grew more frantic, which meant fewer opportunities for shared meals around the dinner table, traded instead for quick bites in one's own quarters or wherever else one might find herself around the house when mealtime struck.

This made it significantly easier for Penelope and the duke to carry on avoiding each other.

Gentle knocks on the door pulled Penelope's attention away from the mirror.

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“Beg your pardon, Lady Penelope...” a maid’s voice called from the other side, “but we have brought the trunks and chests requested by Lady Punton.”

Penelope stood up to let them in, thanking them as they began to help pack her things for her. With the wedding so close, she and Mother needed to get ready to move into Lord Gloushire’s manor—their new home.

As she helped the maids gather her things, Penelope hoped that Lord Gloushire’s endeavors were going better. He and the duke had agreed to get the rest of their clothes and effects from Punton Manor on their behalf in case Uncle Winston attempted to try anything underhanded.

It surprised Penelope that despite everything she had said to him, the duke graciously agreed to help when Mother and the dowager duchess asked him.

A part of her hoped that the duke had agreed to do so out of the fondness that he confessed to have for her. But she fought to put out that dangerous thought and reminded herself that he was the one who wholeheartedly urged her to marry a different man.

Entrusting the maids to carry on with the task at hand, Penelope decided to check if Mother needed any additional assistance with packing her things.

Penelope turned out to be right after all and the hours flew by pleasantly as they continued to pack.

Just three more days.

* * *

“Thank you for your help, Your Grace.” Lord Gloushire flashed him a polite smile as they climbed back onto the coach. “Lord Punton proved much more cooperative than anticipated.”

“My pleasure,” Duncan answered truthfully—not complaining at all since he received another opportunity to remind the monster to stay away from Lady Penelope.

“Shall we take luncheon at Gillingham’s?” the viscount suggested. “It shall be my treat, naturally, to thank you for all of your help.”

“Just knowing that Lady Penelope and her mother will no longer have to worry is more than enough thanks.” Duncan nodded before resigning himself to look out of the window.

“You’re uncharacteristically timid today, Blackmoore. I take it you spent most of your strength on another long night of debauched revelry?”

Duncan shot the other man a dry look. “Thank you for your concern, Lord Gloushire. If it suits you, I would prefer to be dropped off on Lesnall Street as I have some business to conduct today.”

The viscount offered no objections, and a peculiar silence filled the coach. A part of Duncan was curious to know what Lord Gloushire would have said to him if he had accepted his luncheon invitation.

Would the viscount have perhaps confronted Duncan about his feelings for Lady Penelope? Duncan was sure that Lord Gloushire suspected him by now. He also wondered whether Lady Penelope had mentioned anything to her fiancé about their encounter in the kitchen.

Was it possible that Duncan had now technically kissed Lady Penelope more times than Lord Gloushire had? After all, he only ever saw the viscount press kisses to Lady Penelope's hands instead of her lips.

But Duncan resisted his curiosity, bearing in mind how close it was until Lady Penelope had her freedom.

Three days from now, he thought to himself. Three days from now and her future shall be secured.

When the coach finally stopped at the corner of Lesnall Street, Duncan lingered just a moment longer with his hand on the door. "You'll be good to her, right, Gloushire?"

"Of course!" huffed the viscount. "What do you take me fo--"

"Thank you." Duncan nodded his head resolutely, pushing the door open as he began to descend. "That's all I needed to hear."

* * *

"Yes, please put them over there." The dowager duchess gestured to the far corner with an open hand and the servants complied at once, carrying a flower arrangement so elaborate that it required two people to lift it.

With the wedding no more than a day away, Penelope, Mother, and the dowager duchess worked hard to ensure that everything in Willowdale Manor was ready for the wedding breakfast. Penelope looked around at what would soon be her new home and attempted to imagine greeting the guests as they arrived, taking steps as though she was guiding them through to the drawing room and making pleasant conversation.

She did this a handful more times, each time rehearsing a different potential topic of conversation depending on the guest she was imagining.

When the dowager duchess paused to take some water, she called out to Penelope, “Have you had the chance to practice your piece on this pianoforte, pet?” She gestured to the instrument at the far end of the room. “I worry that the keys might feel different from the one you have been using for your practice at home.”

“Yes, Your Grace.” Penelope smiled. “The keys here have a bit more give compared to the one you have at Blackmoore Manor, but with just a few more rounds of practice later in the afternoon, I believe I shall be fully adjusted.”

The preparations carried on at a dizzying pace only briefly interrupted by the giggles of Lucy and Reggie as their game of tag briefly entered the drawing room.

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“Be careful you two!” Penelope gasped, holding both hands up in an attempt to stop them. “We can't have you slipping and hurting yourselves just before the wedding!”

Lucy was the first to listen, stopping her chase of her brother at once. “Sorry, Mother,” she murmured, clasping her hands together over the front of her skirt, “we got carried away.”

Once the younger child realized that no one was chasing him, he let out a huff and then began trudging towards his sister.

“It’s all right, Lucy...” Penelope cooed, hurrying to her side, “Did you just call me, ‘Mother’?” she smiled.

“Yes,” blinked the girl, “I do hope that’s all right? Father said we didn’t have to wait until tomorrow to start cal-”

“It’s more than all right.” Penelope brushed a curly lock away with her hand. “But like I said, please find a less risky means to spend your time.”

The children offered polite promises before they scurried away hand-in-hand, presumably towards the garden, with a maid trailing behind them.

Just one more day. Penelope steadied herself with a deep breath. Just one more day until I become a mother.

* * *

Duncan stretched his arms high above his head, temporarily relieving the ache that burned into his lower back. He couldn't remember the last time he had sat down this long uninterrupted. As a reward for finally getting through the looming stack of papers to his right, Duncan rose from his chair and began to stalk around his office.

Save for Rowley bringing him his meals, Duncan had hardly spoken to a soul today. All the ladies of the house had gone to Gloueshire's for the final preparations, leaving the house to sit quiet and devoid of any commotion for the first time since the wedding planning had begun.

He wondered how Lady Penelope was handling the tension and stress. Duncan imagined her absent-mindedly chewing her lip to soothe her nerves—a dangerous habit for a woman as stunning as her.

He slammed a fist on the table, rebuking himself for allowing his thoughts to drift towards her yet again. It was a battle that Duncan had spent the better part of the day fighting while he attempted to get some work done.

The winds initially appeared to be in his favor, but alas, the warmth of the afternoon sun reminded him of her reddish-brown locks and how her eyes appeared almost golden in the heavenly lighting. And thus, the winds and tides of battle shifted against Duncan, and he found himself getting lost in the thought of her more and more as the day dragged on.

Every passing minute made it painfully clear that Duncan could never bring himself to attend the wedding tomorrow. His eyes briefly scanned the room for an excuse—momentarily considering pretending to be ill.

However, he quickly realized that perhaps he need not bother with a ruse at all—especially after Lady Penelope looked at him with such deep hurt and betrayal in her eyes that fateful night in the kitchen.

He didn't need to explain himself to her, and even if he tried, she would be too busy and too indignant to hear him out.

"You selfish bastard." Her fatal words rang in his ears.

A hand flew up to massage his temples while the other supported his weight against the nearest wall.

Perhaps I could afford to be selfish one more time, he thought to himself. Yes, and then never again. I shall never be selfish with her ever again, he vowed to himself.

Striding back to his desk, Duncan took out a fresh leaf of paper. But his bravado deserted him the moment he picked up the quill and his hand hovered indecisively just above the page.

Naturally, Lady Penelope and her mother would go straight to Willowdale Manor immediately after the ceremony, rendering today their final day here at Blackmoore. When would he next get to speak to her after he intentionally skipped her wedding tomorrow?

Once again, he found his mind torn. His selfishness urged him to write down everything he wished he had said, to make excuses, to drag out his goodbye until it was several pages long.

As if she would even bother to read all of it. He bitterly laughed to himself. She hates you now, remember?

He winced at the thought. What sort of wretch was he that he had managed to earn the wrath of even a creature as gentle and kind as Lady Penelope?

So, Duncan kept his note short.

In no more than three sentences, Duncan apologized for his absence, wished her well, and thanked her for her friendship. His eyes lingered over the bottom of the page where he had signed: “Yours, Blackmoore” and cursed his script for being slightly shakier than usual and prayed that she wouldn’t notice.

Duncan slipped the note into his pocket with the intention of discreetly asking Rowley to take it to her room first thing in the morning.

But when he yanked his office door open, Duncan found Lady Penelope standing before him, her dangerous hazel eyes peering up at him once more.

And suddenly Duncan wished he hadn’t just used up his final chance at being selfish.

CHAPTER34

“I was just about to knock,” Penelope blurted out despite knowing full well that she had been standing outside his door for the past five minutes mustering the courage to knock.

“Is there anything I can help with?” asked the duke, his voice sounding a tad more strained than usual. But Penelope could not blame him, of course.

She was probably the last person he wanted to see right now. And she thought the feeling was mutual until they returned from Willowdale Manor an hour ago and Penelope began double-checking her luggage and scanning her room to ensure nothing got left behind in preparation for tomorrow’s departure.

It had been going well until her eyes landed on the empty spot where the armchair had once been the very first night she had let Duncan into her room, the same armchair that she had attempted to send into storage, but which he sent back, arguing with her until finally it was moved to the library downstairs.

The next thing she knew, her feet were carrying her to the duke’s office’s door.

“Can I come in?” was the only response she had for his question. “Please?”

He eyed her from head to toe, his expression far too stoic for Penelope’s liking. For a moment it appeared as though he would turn her away. But mercifully, he gave her a shallow nod before stepping aside so she could step through the doorway.

“Usually, it’s me who shows up unannounced and asking to be let in,” the duke amusedly remarked, closing the door behind them. “It’s nice to have the favor returned for once.”

Penelope couldn’t help but smile, how typical of him to still be so composed and together while she was on the verge of falling apart.

He crossed the room to sit at his desk, but Penelope was more interested in the sofa near the window, resting her hands on her knees once she had carefully sunk down onto it.

The duke eyed her from his spot. As gentlemanly as ever, he was waiting for her to start—to set the tone and pace for the discussion—so Penelope obliged, “I shouldn’t have said all those things to you that night.”

“Why not?” his words punctuated by the absent-minded drumming of his fingers on the desk. “You were right... about many things.”

“But not everything?”

“No,” he cleared his throat. “In truth, it was my fear of hurting you—not the fear of getting hurt myself—that spurred my actions. I wish I had clarified it that night.”

There was a finality in his tone that confirmed what Penelope had been dreading: it was too late. Almost as though he was saying that if only things had gone differently that night, then maybe—just maybe—they wouldn’t be sitting here like this.

“I wish I hadn’t relied on you so much this past Season,” Penelope sighed, allowing her head to roll back onto the sofa’s backrest. “Perhaps then you wouldn’t have deemed me so fragile.”

She tilted her head slightly, shifting her gaze from the ceiling back to him. “I just wish you had told me sooner.”

He stood from his desk, long legs crossing towards her before settling on the other end of the sofa. “A part of me wishes so too. But who’s to say that you would have accepted me if I did?” he said with a dry chuckle. “You could hardly stand me when we first met.”

“You were the same with me!” Penelope retorted, slamming a palm against the plush of the sofa since he was sitting out of her reach.

She let out a small gasp upon fully understanding his words. “Wait... do you mean to say that you were enamored with me from the start?”

“Don’t let it get to your head now,” he snapped back at her with a familiar cheeky brusqueness, before exhaling softly through his nose,

“But yes, I have always thought you were beautiful. Though it was later...” he made an exaggerative gesture with both of his hands, “much, much, much later when I realized that you were equally as wonderful and beautiful on the inside as well.”

Penelope feigned annoyance at the backhanded compliment. “I was just about to say the same for you, but I fear if your ego grows any bigger, you shall need a separate sack to carry it with you wherever you go.”

He threw his head back in giddy, unrestrained laughter at the remark, an intoxicating sound that Penelope drunk as much as she could, not knowing whether today would be her last chance to hear it.

“God help your imminent husband,” the duke sighed with a smile. “If I liked Gloueshire a bit more, I would pray that he doesn’t suffer the same fate as I—a man

completely undone.”

“And what about me?” Penelope returned his sigh. “What about my fate as a woman doomed to be forever haunted by you?”

The tension in the air grew heavy as he slid closer to her, the sides of his knees stopping just a few inches away from her own, giving her an opportunity to leave or push him away if she wished.

But she did not wish to do so. Remaining completely still, save for her right hand’s fingers digging into the sofa, anchoring her lest she fall over or crumble under the weight of his gaze.

“Do you truly mean it?” his gruff voice rumbled, finally breaking the silence.

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“Yes.” Penelope swallowed, finding herself completely unable to look away from his powerful gaze. “No matter how hard I try, no matter where I go, or where I look, there you are.”

She studied his expression as she spoke, hungry for the way his features twitched as her words seemed to bring him both pain and pleasure.

It took a moment for her to realize that their faces were inching closer together almost of their own accord.

“You were so painfully right about me being a selfish bastard,” he rasped, their noses and lips so close that it would only take a slight breeze to knock them together. “Tell me, what exactly about me haunts you in those moments?”

“Your voice,” Penelope answered without hesitation. “Sometimes your eyes and the way that you roll them whenever I tease you.”

“But not my lips?” he exhaled.

Penelope’s eyes fell to them at his remark and noted that they were flushed a pleasant pink as they hung slightly parted and with an upward tilt at the corners.

She watched in fascination as his lips moved again, not even waiting for her to answer his last question when a second one fell, “Can I... have just one more kiss?Please?”

Penelope couldn’t trust her voice, so she answered him with a wordless nod instead.

Like the first one they had shared, this kiss was also unbearably tender.

But unlike the first, this one had none of the uncertainty and shaky fervor that coursed through them in the kitchen when they had desperately tried to get each other to understand the muddled emotions their words couldn't convey.

Instead, this kiss was fuller, slower, and conveyed one solitary, clear message: goodbye.

* * *

"There!" Mother lightly tugged the shoulder of Penelope's sleeve, adjusting it slightly, audibly fighting back a sob. "You're perfect! And we even have a few minutes to spare."

Penelope did her best to smile at her reflection in the mirror. But it was still nowhere near as bright as the smile that Mother wore.

"It's all right to be nervous, darling," Mother cooed, pulling her into a hug from the side whilst taking care to avoid creasing Penelope's dress or disturbing her hair in the process. "But to help with your nerves, just think of today as the beginning of all the wonderful things that await you and Lord Gloushire."

Penelope squeezed Mother's hand in thanks. Using the rest of her concentration to hold back the sob that threatened to break free from her throat.

She found herself unable to speak even when the servants wished her well and complimented her endlessly as she descended the steps and carefully made her way to the front door.

The next time Penelope found her voice was when she mumbled a short thanks to Mr.

Rowley as he helped her climb onto the coach.

But she lost her voice once again when her eyes landed on His Grace watching her from the front doorway. Offering nothing but a small smile before turning his back on her to return indoors.

If it hadn't been for their encounter yesterday, the sight would have been enough to tear Penelope's heart right out of her chest.

But their goodbye kiss prepared her for this, having put an end to any hopes that her heart had ever harbored about being with him. The kiss served as a final bookend on the long and messy shelf that had been their friendship and infatuation.

Now they were both ready to move on, fresh slates and all.

* * *

"Duncan!" Mother's muffled voice called through the door, "Are you sure you aren't coming, dear? Just throw on your best coat and—"

"No, thank you, Mother," Duncan called back, leaning fully back in his chair as he lazily sloshed the drink in his glass. "Unfortunately, I have quite a lot to do today."

The door handle to his office turned and Mother's angry head poked through. "Is that it, then?" She pushed the door to open it more fully. "You intend to simply sit there while Lady Penelope walks into Lord Gloushire's arms?"

Duncan had been expecting a scolding, of course—but not about this.

"What do you mea—"

“You can drop the facade, Duncan,” Mother drily cut him off. “My eyesight may not be what it used to be, but even I can see the way you two look at each other. Now are you absolutely certain this is what you want? Because your time is about to run out, my darling.”

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Duncan set down his glass and straightened up in his chair, “Lady Penelope and I have actually already discussed it, Mother. It's far too late now. It'll be easier and better for everyone's sakes for her to marry Glou-”

“In what sense exactly?” Mother folded her arms. “Are you afraid of causing a scandal for her? Since when did you care about such things, Duncan?”

“Well, that was one factor, yes, but also the pain of-” he looked down at his glass, “Gloushire is a much more... predictable partner. The risk of him hurting her is far lower than-”

“Next excuse, please.” Mother rolled her eyes. “Because I know you would never hurt Lady Penelope, Duncan, no matter what other people may assume of you. Since when have you ever doubted your abilities, Duncan?”

“It's still too late,” Duncan insisted, his leg now bouncing from the tension. “It's for the best anyway, like I said all those years ago, if should I die before her—or heavens forbid—vice versa, the pain would be completely unbearable anyway. I mean just look at what happened to you, even to Lady Punto-”

He cut himself off when he noticed Mother looking around the room.

“What are you looking for?” he raised an eyebrow.

“For a cane,” she retorted. “I have half a mind to smack your hands for being such a half-wit!” Mother shook her head. “Duncan, I will always thank Providence for giving me a son who took excellent care of me when your father died. But I fear that

your focus on the pain has blinded you to all the joy that your father gave me.”

“No, of course not. I just mean why open yourself up to the possibility in the first place? How can you feel the joy knowing that it will all eventually end in pain? That at any moment it could end?”

“I would do it again, you know,” his mother answered, adjusting her shawl as she turned to leave. “Losing your father was the worst thing that ever happened to me, but I would gladly endure it a thousand times over even for but a taste of the joy that we shared.”

His mother reached for the door handle, pausing to add, “The people we love, Duncan, are always worth the risk of pain.”

* * *

Penelope kept her gaze fixed straight ahead, pleading with her legs to help carry her to the altar without causing a fuss. Out of her peripheral vision, she could see heads turn and skirts shift toward her as she walked down the aisle.

By some miracle, she somehow managed to ascend the steps and arrive at the altar to stand before Lord Gloushire, who silently welcomed her with a timid smile. As the priest began to speak, Penelope allowed her eyes to drift to the first row of pews where Lucy and Reggie sat in their Sunday best with their hands neatly folded on their laps.

This isn't so bad...she soothed herself. In fact, this is actually rather nice. Yes, this could work as long as I-

“Penelope, don't!” a booming voice echoed harshly across the chapel's walls, “Don't you dare!”

Penelope knew who it was even before she turned to look.

“Your Grace?” she whispered breathlessly as the familiar figure bolted down the aisle towards them, only sliding to a halt at the bottom of the altar’s stairs.

Necks craned and whispers and gasps rang out from their guests—including, Penelope noted, Graystone.

“Blackmoore!” exclaimed Lord Gloushire. “What the devil do you think you’re-”

“Shut it, Gloushire. I’m not here for you,” the duke panted, his hair a windswept mess a clear sign that he had ridden here on horseback rather than in a coach. “You can’t marry him, Lady Pen.” His eyes looked up at her, “I- I was a coward and a fool, I see that now! Please, please don’t marry him!”

Penelope’s lips quivered as her anger, happiness, and bewilderment coursed through her. “But you- Wh-What would I even-”

“Marry me.” The phrase fell from his lips almost as easily as the next one. “Marry me instead because I love you, Penelope.”

She suddenly found herself unable to breathe as her eyes began to well up. And yet the insufferable man kept going. “I’m selfish and stupid and utterly unworthy of you, but I do love you. And I’ve already royally botched everything between us, but if you’ll let me—if you’ll have me—I swear that I’ll spend every moment of the rest of our lives making it up to you. I’ll always-”

Penelope didn’t know when it happened, but she found herself practically leaping down the altar steps, where he immediately wrapped her up in his arms.

“Is that a yes?” he grinned, cocking an eyebrow up at her.

“You’re absolutely insufferable,” she huffed, landing a soft punch on his broad chest.
“But yes, I love you to-”

Her confession is cut short abruptly with a kiss. And despite the uproar in the church filling her ears, Penelope can’t help but think this is certainly their best kiss yet.

EPILOGUE

Three months later

Source Creation Date: July 19, 2025, 11:57 pm

“Your Grace, the Viscount of Gloushire is here to see you.”

Duncan looked up from his desk in amusement. “Really? Tell him I shall be there in a moment, thank you.”

Duncan lightly blew on the latest page he had been working on to help the ink dry faster before he carefully gathered the pages together and slipped them into his top drawer.

Straightening his coat, he made sure to quickly check his reflection in one of the hallway mirrors as he walked towards the parlor.

“Good day, Gloushire. To what do I owe the pleasure?”

The viscount rose from the sofa, ignoring his greeting as he remarked, “So this is the infamous lair of the Duke of Blackmoore, hmm? What happened, did Lady Penelope finally get sick of you and force you out of Blackmoore Manor?”

Duncan rolled his eyes but remained unfazed as this was hardly the first time he had heard his house be referred to as a lair.

He had bought this house shortly after his father passed away as a safe haven where he could work without disturbing his grieving mother in the process. But of course, with the reputation that Duncan had garnered, people assumed he had purchased the house purely for the sake of accommodating his trysts.

As Duncan sat down, so did the other gentleman.

“First of all, I think it worth reminding you that I have always preferred to spend my Seasons here, I just happened to stay at Blackmoore Manor this year because I had quite a few renovations to complete here.”

The viscount nodded along politely, but his expression clearly showed that he still had his doubts.

“Second of all,” Duncan continued, pouring himself a cup of tea from the tray on the center table, “it would hardly be appropriate for me to live under the same roof as my fiancée now, would it?”

The viscount swallowed the biscuit in his mouth before answering, “Well, it was hardly appropriate for you to interrupt my wedding and steal my bride away, but that didn’t stop you at all, did it?”

Duncan chuckled as he reached for a biscuit of his own. “Penelope and I already profusely apologized for that. Besides, the scandal that it caused worked out quite well in your favor, didn’t it? With everyone feeling so sorry for you, you practically have debutantes throwing themselves at your feet.”

The other man looked away sheepishly. “Admittedly, that has been the one silver lining in the middle of all of this.”

“Just make sure you don’t become a rake after all,” Duncan clicked his tongue.

“I wouldn’t even think of such a thing,” huffed the viscount defensively, before reaching behind him to reveal a wrapped wine bottle. “Here... your wedding present.”

“It’s not poisoned, is it?” Duncan teased, gripping the bottle carefully as he accepted it.

“Please...” Lord Gloushire rolled his eyes, “you’re hardly worth going to prison for.”

The men continued their conversation for a few more minutes, but since the viscount had accomplished the aim of his visit, he soon rose from his place so he could take his leave.

“You’ll be good to her, yes?” asked the viscount, his hand extended.

“With all my soul and then some,” Duncan answered, accepting the other man’s handshake. “Take care, Gloushire.”

“You too, Your Grace. My warmest congratulations again.”

* * *

Everything about today is amusingly familiar. Penelope thought to herself.

Once again, she found herself dressed in white in front of a mirror as Mother smoothed out her dress and made finishing adjustments to her hair.

“You don’t seem as nervous this time,” remarked the older woman.

“I am nervous...” Penelope confessed, “but this time it’s outweighed by my excitement.”

“I’m pleased to hear it, darling.” Mother chuckled, “But hopefully this wedding won’t have quite as much excitement as the last one, hmm?”

“Mother!” Penelope blushed, before assuring her, “It won’t. This time is different.”

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All Penelope could think about was how excited she was to see Duncan. Living in Blackmoore Manor these last few months without him around had taken some getting used to but after today, it would all be worth it.

When they were finally ready to leave, Penelope had to stop herself from bounding down the stairs and out the doors to where the coach awaited her.

Once again, Mr. Rowley helped her into the coach and she chirped a thanks as she and Mother carefully scooped up her skirt—this one even fuller than the last as Duncan had insisted on giving her money for a completely new one, arguing that it was a necessary measure given that he had already seen her original one.

“Don’t worry about the cost,” Duncan had assured her. “Everyone knows that sort of thing is bad luck. So please stop worrying about trying to save money and go buy a new one.”

“I never thought you would turn out to be the superstitious sort,” Penelope had teased him at the time.

“You are correct, I am not that superstitious,” he had admitted, leaning into her ear to whisper. “But I am indeed that jealous.”

Even just remembering the discussion brought goosebumps up Penelope’s gloved arms. She had assumed that the longer they courted each other, she would slowly grow more resilient to his sly charm and coy remarks, but instead, only the opposite seemed to come true.

At last, the coach arrived at their destination. And once again, Penelope found herself dwarfed by the large and looming church doors.

As she entered, her eyes went straight to the altar, searching for Duncan. She saw him before he saw her, and her heart quickened at how striking he looked—long legs standing at attention, broad shoulders thrown back, and a pleasant heartfelt smile on his lips.

When he finally spotted her, his chest lifted with a gasp. Penelope couldn't fight against the giddy grin that spread across her face at his reaction as she steadily made her way towards him.

He took a few steps down the altar stairs and extended a gentlemanly hand.

"I take it that you like the new dress, then?" she whispered as he helped her climb.

"It's perfect," he murmured back with a smile. "And I imagine it shall look even prettier on the floor later."

The salaciousness of his remark pulled a gasp from Penelope's lips and a blush furiously pushed its way up her cheeks.

"I hate you," she whispered just as they neared the top.

"Well, you have a strange way of showing it." He winked, jerking his chin to gesture to their joined hands—and by extension, the fact that they were right on the cusp of getting married.

Duncan appeared rather pleased with himself for managing to get the final word in before the priest began speaking. For her part, Penelope decided that she had no choice but to kiss that insufferable smirk off of his face.

* * *

“And the wind over there is harsher, darling.” Mother squeezed Penelope’s hands. “So even if it’s a sunny day, make sure that you wrap up tight.”

“I will, Mother, I promise.” Penelope laughed, briefly locking eyes with Duncan as he helped the servants load their luggage into the coach. “We’ve had this exact conversation several times since His Grace suggested Bechdalla for our honeymoon-”

“We’ve been married for all of seven hours now, darling,” Duncan grunted as he and a footman lifted a chest into the coach, “so I believe we can dispense with the formalities now, don’t you agree?”

Penelope tilted her head in confusion before realizing what he was referring to, “Oh!” she rolled her eyes playfully, “My deepest apologies then, Duncan, it was but a force of habit.”

“That’s better.” He smiled, before running his eyes over their luggage once again. “I do believe that’s everything. Shall we?” He nodded invitingly towards the coach, the late afternoon sun’s rays casting long shadows on the ground beneath them.

Penelope hugged Mother tight one more time. “Make sure you continue to eat well,” she reminded her, “and I shall write you the moment we arrive.”

Mother choked back a sob as she nodded, her eyes somehow managing to well up despite having spent the entirety of today overflowing with tears of joy. “I love you, Penny.”

“I love you, Mother.” Penelope exhaled, allowing herself to be pulled in for yet one more hug.

A yelp behind them suddenly caused them to break apart.

Penelope cupped a hand over her mouth to stifle her laughter.

“Ou-ouch!” Duncan protested, leaning sideways as the older woman continued to twist his ear. “All right, all right! I promise, Mother!” he hissed out.

The dowager duchess gave a satisfied nod before finally releasing his ear.

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“And behave yourself,” she added, before turning to Penelope. “If he gives you any trouble, pet, you are to write me at once, is that understood?”

“Yes, Your Grace.” Penelope giggled before throwing her arms around her now mother-in-law. “We shall be back before you know it.”

“None of that now!” the older woman gently patted Penelope’s back before releasing her. “After everything you have been through, you deserve a proper rest.” She raised a hand to Penelope’s cheek. “Just make sure you enjoy the honeymoon, your mother and I shall always be right here.”

After several more minutes of slow goodbyes, promises to write, and other reminders, Duncan and Penelope eventually managed to peel themselves away from their mothers and settle into the coach.

Penelope waved outside the window and blew kisses to Mother until the coach turned the corner and Blackmoore Manor was taken out of sight.

As she settled into her seat, she caught Duncan staring at her.

“What?” she chuckled.

“Oh, nothing.” He shrugged, shifting from sitting in front of her to sitting beside her. “A part of me worried that if you started crying, we’d have to turn the coach around and cancel our honeymoon. It’s a huge relief that it didn’t have to come to that after all.”

Penelope threw her head back in laughter. “Really? You would do that for me?”

“Of course,” Duncan huffed, draping an arm around her shoulder as he rested his chin on her head. “Haven’t you realized by now that I would do absolutely anything for you?” he lazily let out.

“In that case, perhaps we should turn the coach around. I’m far too tired from the ceremony, guests, and whatnot.”

“Are you serious?” He lifted his chin off of her to scan her face.

“Yes.” She shrugged in feigned nonchalance. “I presume you’re every bit as tired as I am, so why don’t we leave tomorrow-”

She let out a surprised squeal as Duncan captured her lips in a kiss. When he finally pulled away he drily remarked, “You’re lying.”

“I- I beg your pardon?” she stuttered, still in shock.

“You’re not serious about turning the coach around,” he repeated triumphantly. “You were just trying to get a rise out of me. That kiss told me so.”

“You can’t detect whether someone is lying based on a kiss!” She landed a soft punch on his arm.

“Yes, I can,” he insisted.

Penelope rolled her eyes. “What? Are you trying to say that you can taste whether their words are truthful?”

“Exactly,” Duncan smirked.

Penelope examined his features in the glow of the setting sun's rays that poured in through the window. "No, you can't," she finally concluded. "You just wanted an excuse to kiss me."

"If you don't believe me, perhaps you should try the method out for yourself," he offered, intertwining their fingers together. "You know, see for yourself how effective the method is."

Penelope shook her head at him before pecking a soft kiss on his cheek. "I can't believe I married you," she giggled, before settling into the crook of his shoulder again.

"Neither can I," he mumbled, returning his chin to its spot on her head.

The last thing Penelope saw before she closed her eyes was the sight of their hands tangled together under the warm glow of the sunset and a part of her silently prayed that this coach ride would never end.

The End?