



Seduced By the Rakish Duke

Author: *Scarlett Osborne*

Category: Romance, Adult, Historical

Description: "I am the last man you should trust, little mouse..."

Alone in a dark room with an intimidating, handsome stranger, even Jenny's unladylike boldness leaves her. Until he kisses her and now she craves more...

No woman can trust rakish Duke David and he likes it that way. So giving in to the alluring minx is more of a warning. No matter how tempting, she must avoid men like him...

Only David is determined to teach the daring little vixen a lesson. And Jenny soon realizes... Never provoke a rake...

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CHAPTER 1

Jenny cringed as Lord Banefield stepped on her foot... again.

“Are you enjoying the Season, Miss Bennett?”

Not as much as I enjoyed having ten toes.

Jenny forced a smile. “Very much so, thank you, My Lord. However, if I may be frank, I must say the pool of willing suitors is severely lacking.”

Lord Banefield stumbled slightly, stepping on another one of her toes in the process. “I beg your pardon,” he choked out.

He looked absolutely horrified. Jenny didn’t know whether to laugh or be embarrassed.

“What?” she questioned with a chuckle. “Is it not the purpose of these affairs to find a suitable match and wed?” She fluttered her eyelashes for extra emphasis.

She used to be excited about these balls, but she quickly became quite tired of all the pomp and hype that surrounded them. If she didn’t poke the bear every now and then, she feared she’d lose her mind.

Lord Banefield blustered at her question.

Jenny let out another laugh and patted his shoulder. “There’s no need to worry, My

Lord. My sights are not set on you.”

He seemed unsure how to take her comment. Jenny chewed on her bottom lip.

Oh. I may have just insulted him.

“That’s not to say that you aren’t a suitable match,” she continued. “You seem like a lovely man. I mean, if you were interested and if we could get to know one another more, there could be something there, and we cou?—”

“Miss Bennett,” Lord Banefield’s harsh whisper interrupted her rant. “I must say this is a highly inappropriate conversation to have while dancing.” He looked around the room, making sure no one overheard her salacious ramblings.

Jenny shrugged. “Dancing, eating, walking—it makes no difference to me where I am. I think it is an appropriate conversation to have anywhere.” She scrunched up her nose at the thought. “If it involves a decision that will impact the rest of my life, why reserve it for just a drawing room? Life primarily takes place outside of such rooms, Lord Banefield, so why not discuss it anywhere? It’s not like I’m asking you to do untoward things in the middle of the dance floor.” She snorted at the idea.

Lord Banefield huffed out hot air that lifted the tendrils that framed her face. “I must insist we end this conversation at once. An unmarried lady should not discuss such issues openly with an unmarried man, lest you attract rakes and scoundrels like the Duke of Marlow. Men like him are always on the prowl for unsuspecting young women.”

Jenny rolled her eyes. “Pfft. Rubbish. You must think I’m a dolt who can’t spot a reckless rake a mile away.”

Lord Banefield’s shoulder tightened under her hand, while the hand holding her own

twitched. The poor man might go into an apoplectic shock if this conversation continued further.

“You naïve, little girl. Men like the Duke of Marlow only have one goal in life—to bed as many women as possible and leave them ruined. They don’t care who they stomp on to have their fun.”

Jenny pursed her lips. “Now, My Lord, is this proper dance floor conversation?”

Lord Banefield’s face turned an impressive purple. Jenny had to swallow her laugh so as not to push him over the edge.

“Rest assured, My Lord, I am an excellent judge of character. I have no doubt in my abilities to protect myself and my heart from rakes and scoundrels such as the intolerable Duke of Marlow.” Jenny drew out the words as if she were telling a scary story to her nephew to entertain him.

This whole conversation was preposterous, and she was surprised she had entertained it as long as she had. She must be bored.

Her eyes scanned the room while Lord Banefield slowed his breathing. She eyed her sister-in-law, Frances, who was standing near the refreshments table, and made a mental note to go to her once this blasted dance ended.

Ouch.

Lord Banefield once again stepped on her foot. Jenny took a deep breath to regulate her emotions like Frances taught her, and brought her attention back to the man with two left feet.

Lord Banefield lifted his chin. “Regardless, it is quite off-putting, and a gentleman

would not engage in such conversations. I guarantee, if you were having this conversation with an ill-mannered man, he would have left you standing here by yourself.”

Jenny took a deep breath. “If any man could not handle my honest and sincere opinions about with whom I should share my life, then he is no man for me.”

Lord Banefield bristled. “You sound like a child dreaming of a fairytale.”

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“No, I sound like a woman who believes what I say holds some merit. And while I know my place, I also know my opinions are not fairytales.” She tilted her head up and met his eyes. “Surely, there must be a strong enough man out there willing to engage in conversations that will benefit his life as well as mine. Clearly, that man is not you.”

“Clearly.”

Oh, I should step on his toes!

Thankfully, the music ended with his retort. They both quickly stepped back as if they were burned. She curtsied, he bowed. Jenny willed herself to turn around and be done with the dance, but her pride won out.

“And thankfully so, My Lord. Gross incompatibility aside, I fear I would lose my foot by our wedding if I had to keep dancing with you.”

She turned and made her way to the refreshments table, proud that she didn’t let him have the last word.

The cool punch helped calm Jenny’s nerves. Away from the dance floor, the tension began to wear off, and embarrassment set in.

Why must I say everything that is on my mind?

When she debuted, she would overshare everything and had trouble controlling her excitement. It would spill out in rants and ramblings, causing the demure to titter

about her outlandish behavior. Luckily, Frances was a calming force and helped her refine some of her rougher edges. Much like she did with Jenny's brother, the Duke of Pilton, whom she married.

Where is Frances, anyway? She was just here.

Jenny busied herself with her punch, looking around for a friendly face. Unfortunately for her, her eyes landed on a group of giggling girls. When she made eye contact with one of them, the giggles stopped—a tell-tale sign she was the subject of their mirth.

Her heart sank.

“How are your feet?”

Jenny turned around, finding Frances standing behind her with a knowing smile.

“Is it that obvious? I tried not to limp too much when I walked away.”

Frances's laugh was a soothing balm to her nerves and helped ease the tension in her shoulders.

“I danced with Lord Banefield more than once in my day, and each time I walked with a limp the day after.”

Jenny's smile didn't reach her eyes. The feeling of disappointment once again tightened her shoulders.

“Jenny?” Frances took Jenny's free hand in her own. “Are you all right?”

“Frannie, I did it again.”

Jenny put down her drink so she wouldn't spill it. She had a bad habit of talking with her hands.

"I started rambling, and before I knew it, I was defending my dream to find a husband who wouldn't dismiss my opinions. Apparently, I offended the precious Lord Banefield by discussing it in a ballroom where"—she pretended to gasp—"anyone could hear. As if we're not all here parading around each other, hoping to find a match."

Frances smiled. "Thankfully, it was a short waltz, or who knows what gossip you would have started."

Jenny groaned into her hands. "How did you do it, Frances? You grew up in the ton, yet you speak your mind freely and still have a good reputation."

Frances snickered. "Well, that depends on who you ask." She tilted her head in the direction of the gaggle of girls who were back to giggling, most likely at her expense.

"I'm serious, Frannie. Just when I think I've made my mark, or at least have enough people fooled into thinking I'm respectable and homely, I open my mouth and all my hard work goes right out the window."

Jenny looked up at Frances, who was watching the dancing couples—she seemed distracted.

"I'm sure it's not all that bad," Frances sighed.

Jenny's eyes once again landed on the group of girls at the end of the table. She couldn't help but eavesdrop. Pretending to look at the different desserts laid out, she moved slightly closer to them.

“Did you see her dancing with him?” one of them harshly whispered.

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“He was looking positively horrified,” came the reply.

“Wouldn’t you be if you were him?”

“Who knows what she said to him? She always has a way of broaching the most inappropriate subjects. She can be so awkward.”

Ugh. Jenny knew that voice—Marie was not a fan of hers and vice versa.

Jenny turned away. She had heard enough. While they never said her name, she would have to be an imbecile not to know they were talking about her.

She stepped closer to Frances, whose attention was still fixed on the dance floor.

“I think it is that bad, Frances. If I’m not insulting the men who dance with me, I’m giving the women plenty to gossip about.”

Jenny looked over to Frances, hoping to find solace and comfort. Instead, she found her sister-in-law standing on her tiptoes, trying to see over the dancing couples.

“Frances? Are you listening?”

“Hmm, what?” Frances huffed out a flustered laugh. “I’m sorry, Jenny. Yes, I heard. I’m sorry, it’s just...” She began to wring her hands—her tell that she was nervous.

“You miss the baby, don’t you?” Jenny smiled.

As much as she needed reassurance, she couldn't deny the hold that tiny baby had on her entire family.

Frances flushed. "I do. I'm sorry. I'm not used to being away from him for this long. We rarely attend these events anymore, much to the chagrin of your brother." She winked.

"Ha! I'm sure," Jenny countered.

"But the Countess specifically asked for our attendance at her ball. She said it would be highly improper for us not to attend and give honor to her matchmaking skills."

Jenny cocked her head in confusion. "Matchmaking skills?"

Frances flicked her hand. "Oh, were you not aware? Since it was at her dinner party that I first met your brother and it was apparently that evening that sealed our fate. It was her idea that we sit male-female-male-female, therefore she is solely responsible for him sitting next to me." She rolled her eyes. "If that was the case, I should have sent her my laundering bill for the stain that the drink he spilled on me left."

Jenny laughed. That sounded exactly like something Lady Staunton would claim. "Go. Find Thomas and get back to that handsome baby boy. I'm sure enough people have seen you and Thomas tonight to be in awe of the Countess's matchmaking prowess."

"Are you sure? You still seem upset, I can..." Frances's eyes found Thomas, and she smiled, once again losing her train of thought.

"You can...?" Jenny prompted.

"What?"

Jenny rolled her eyes and pushed Frances towards her husband. “Go. Give my nephew a big kiss for me.”

“Are you sure you’ll be all right?” Frances didn’t even let Jenny answer as she continued. “I will tell Lady Staunton—she will see to you.” She hadn’t averted her gaze from Thomas even while talking to Jenny.

Jenny shook her head. “I promise. It’s been a long night, I think I’ll take a break outside and cool off and let my feet rest before I venture back onto the dance floor and risk more injury.”

She winked at Frances as she gave her one more playful shove towards Thomas, who was looking just as anxious to leave as his wife was.

She watched them leave and couldn’t help but feel bereft. Smoothing down her dress, she eyed the shortest path to the terrace, and then made for the door. Luckily, she happened to look up and see that Marie and her minions had moved to the terrace.

No, thank you.

Jenny quickly scanned the ballroom for another escape route. She found a door that led to a well-lit hallway. Feeling some sense of security with the lights, she tried her luck with the first door on her left and sighed in relief when it opened.

The room was dark, with only the faint moonlight filtering through a grand window in the middle of the wall. Shadows danced along the bookcases that lined the rest of the walls.

A library. The perfect room for solitude.

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She made her way into the room and plopped down on a plush sofa in front of an unlit fireplace. The smell of smoke hung heavy in the air, and she took in a deep breath. She always enjoyed reading in front of a roaring fire. She closed her eyes and took one more deep breath, settling into the comfort of the quiet.

“I think it would be wise if, upon entering a room, looking for solitude, one should make sure it is not occupied. Unless you want company, that is.”

Jenny’s eyes flew open at the deep baritone that floated from a darkened corner of the library. Apparently, the room was lit enough to see the furniture but not enough to see the stranger sitting in the corner.

CHAPTER 2

Jenny jumped up from the sofa and stumbled towards the door out of pure instinct.

She pressed her hand to her thundering heart. She couldn’t quite determine where the voice came from. She squinted as she slowly spun in a circle, trying to see into the corners of the room.

Finally, her eyes landed on a dark figure sitting in a chair in the far corner of the library. She couldn’t make much out of the form other than broad shoulders and long legs.

“Oh! You scared me. I had no idea this room was occupied.” She took a deep breath and then released it before continuing. “Do you wish me to leave?”

She waited for an answer from the sitting shadow, but none came.

“Hello?”

Was someone there? She did hear someone, didn't she?

The shadow shifted.

Definitely not alone.

“Um, if you don't mind, could we sit in silence together? I promise not to bother you. I just needed a short break from the ball.” She waved her hand towards the door with a laugh.

Nothing. The stranger continued to sit there, staring at her. At least it felt as if he was staring at her. She couldn't see his eyes, but she could feel them on her.

“So... I'm, um, I'm just going to sit back down if that's alright with you.”

As Jenny sat, the stranger rose and moved towards her. She watched as he closed in on her. Her previous nonchalance was quickly replaced with uncertainty. She looked nervously at the door and began to calculate the distance in her head. Then, after a nerve-wracking moment, she shook her head.

Lady Staunton would never invite dangerous people to her home... would she?

Jenny squared her shoulders and stood back up. She thought better on her feet. Plus, didn't she just tell Lord Banefield that she could handle her own in situations such as these?

“Is there an issue?” She mentally cursed the tremor in her voice.

The intolerable man said nothing but continued to stalk towards her until he was standing right in front of her. An overwhelming sense of dread washed over her, but she couldn't help but notice that a small flicker of interest bloomed in her chest. In the moonlight, she couldn't tell the color of his eyes, and for a brief moment, she regretted not knowing their true color. She felt captivated by them.

Her breathing quickened as he took her in. Her mind was surprisingly quiet as she waited for him to say or do anything.

She licked her lips in anticipation.

His eyes followed that small movement, and his lips curled into a wicked smile that sent a wave of heat through her body.

"I'm not one for propriety, but I do know that being alone with a man is frowned upon. Are you willing to risk it for a moment of solitude?"

His voice was deep and soothing, and Jenny found herself wanting to say something just to hear what he'd say next.

She waved off his concern. "I'm not worried about that. After all, if we both want peace and quiet, then there is nothing to cause alarm even if someone were to open the door and find us here. Besides, I doubt you'll do anything untoward to me, with a ballroom full of people just outside the door."

The man tilted his head to the side ever so lightly.

Jenny hesitated at the small gesture before continuing, her voice breathier than before. "You were enjoying the solitude, and nothing has changed that. Consider me another piece of furniture—forget I'm here."

The man took another step closer to her, causing her to step back, and the back of her legs hit the sofa. He cocked his head and leaned in. “And what, my darling girl, makes you think I will not dosomethingto you?” he whispered, his breath tickling her ear.

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Jenny swallowed. Fire and ash mixed with the scent of whisky flooded her senses, obliterating any coherent thought she had. “I... uh, well, I...”

She chastised herself inwardly.

Come on, Jenny, get your head together. He’s going to think you’re a complete dolt.

The man smiled and let his gaze fall to the rest of her before returning to her eyes. “Also, I highly doubt anyone could forget you were in a room they were in.”

Jenny silently thanked God for the low light that hid her blush. No man had ever stood this close to her and evoked such feelings within her. His words slid over her skin like silk, and she found herself wanting more.

“I assure you...” She laughed. “There are many people who would love to forget my presence.”

The man inhaled deeply as if he were memorizing her scent. It made goosebumps break out all over her skin.

“Imbeciles,” he whispered.

Jenny’s eyes widened as the compliment registered. She tried desperately to control her breathing, but he was standing too close. His eyes were too intense.

Did he intend to kiss her? Was this how she would experience her first kiss? In a darkened library, with a mysterious stranger?

He leaned in again, and she found her body mirroring the movement. She tilted her head towards him, her heart and mind racing with possibilities.

However, just before their lips touched, he stepped to the side. Without another word, he turned around and made his way towards the door. “I suggest you be more careful in the future, kitten. You never know who is hiding in the corner.”

His hand reached for the doorknob, and Jenny felt a sudden twinge of regret. She was desperate to keep the conversation going. This was the most alive she’d felt in a while, and she didn’t want it to end.

“If this conversation is proof, then I shall have no problem handling the next darkened room I enter.” She crossed her fingers behind her back, hoping she baited him enough into staying.

He stopped and let out a laugh. The low rumble went straight to her center and had her knees trembling. He stood just outside a stream of moonlight that cut the room in half. How she wished he took a single small step to his right so she could see what he truly looked like. She could tell his face was well-defined, but her mind was desperate for more information.

“You are a feisty kitten, aren’t you?”

The term of endearment did things to her insides that she only read about in books.

Jenny smiled. Her heart flipped, knowing the conversation would continue just a little bit longer. “I’ve been known to stand on my own two feet if the situation calls for it.”

She mentally cheered her ability to respond. Maybe she was capable of handling such situations.

His low laugh tickled her core again—she had to bite her lip from smiling too wide. They fell silent for a few seconds, yet no one moved. Jenny’s body was buzzing from the electricity that hummed between them.

“So, tell me, kitten, what would you do if a man approached you again?”

Jenny swallowed. She felt as if this was some sort of trick, but her foolish heart wanted to test the waters. “I would remain calm and ask if there was something he needed.”

The man’s eyes narrowed in interest as he slowly made his way back towards her. “Ah. What if this man has bad intentions and does not want to share his thoughts for fear of scaring you off?” His voice was full of mirth, but there was an underlying tone of danger.

Jenny licked her lips. Fear mixed with exhilaration coursed through her. “I would insist that he be a true gentleman and tell me his real intentions.”

“Oh, well, if you insist, he has to tell you then.” He lazily trailed one long finger over the backs of the chairs he passed.

Jenny heard the mocking in his voice and squared her shoulders. He was intentionally being insufferable.

She raised an eyebrow. “If your intention is to mock me, then this conversation is over.”

He continued to pursue her, holding her gaze, not allowing her to break that connection. The playfulness and intrigue that once held her interest were quickly disappearing as her fear won out.

A smile slowly spread across his chiseled face. “Ah. There are your true feelings,” he quipped, acknowledging the change in her demeanor. “You should be afraid to be alone with any man, no matter what he says. I assure you, there’s only one reason why a man wants to be alone with a woman, and it is not to read a book,” he said, nodding towards the books that surrounded them.

He stopped in front of her, crowding her. His tall frame towered over her, and she lifted her chin in order to meet his eyes.

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She desperately searched for words but found none.

“Now, I say again, be more careful in the future, kitten.”

His eyes darkened as he brought his hand up to cup her face. Jenny’s eyes fluttered shut as she tilted her head towards his hand on instinct, hoping to feel his touch on her cheek. But he dropped his hand at her movement. She opened her eyes just in time to see a look of surprise flashing across his face, before turning into anger.

She opened her mouth to say something, but he cut her off.

“Don’t make me tell you again—I hate repeating myself. Stay out of darkened rooms, kitten.”

The man abruptly turned around and stormed out the door, leaving her staring at the empty space in front of her.

Jenny could hear her heartbeat in her ears. She felt dizzy. One moment she wanted to engage with this stranger, the next she was fearful of his intentions. Next, he seemed as if he was going to kiss her twice, yet both times he backed away. Her head spun with the insanity of it all.

After a few deep breaths, she decided she had enough of meeting strangers in dark rooms and made her way back to the ballroom.

That was definitely enough excitement for one night. Hopefully, the rest of her evening would pass without any more disruptions.

The bright lights in the ballroom made David squint as he searched for the exit. It was time to bid farewell to the hostess and get the hell out of there. Normally, he didn't waste his time with these elaborate soirées, but he lost a game of cards to the Earl of Staunton, and instead of wagering coin, the Earl made everyone who lost to him come to one of his wife's events. This was David's night to come.

He was positive the blasted man cheated.

He spotted the Countess at the door talking with a couple who looked eager to leave.

"My Lady," he interrupted. "I beg your pardon, but I must get going. I have some business to attend to." He nodded his apologies to the woman, trying to make a quick escape.

"Oh, soon so?" Her hand flew out to bar him from the door. "Have I introduced you to the Duke and Duchess of Pilton?"

He reached out his hand to the Duke. "Yes, we've met plenty of times at the club."

Pilton took his hand and shook it. "Nice to see you again."

David nodded his head in acknowledgment.

"Their Graces are going home to their beautiful baby boy," Lady Staunton gushed.

"How nice."

David had no idea why the Countess was telling him this. He eyed the couple. Pilton tugged at his cravat like it personally offended him, and his wife looked ready to stab the woman if she didn't get out of her way and let them leave. The three of them eyed the door while the Countess rambled on.

“You know, I was the one who introduced this lovely couple.” She laid her hand on his arm. His jaw ticked at the connection. He was not one for people touching him.

The Duchess of Pilton tried to hide a snort behind her fan. “Something like that. We met at one of Lady Staunton’s infamous dinner parties. My husband was ever so charming and spilled his drink on me.”

Her laughter was soft and endearing.

If his mind wasn’t whirling from the encounter he just had, David may have been curious about the Duchess and the Duke’s relationship. It wouldn’t be the first time he entertained a bored wife. However, a slip of a woman with enough bravado to take down a fleet of men had seized his thoughts.

The Countess bristled. “Oh, it was more than that. I knew it the moment I saw the two of you seated next to each other that there was something there.” She scrunched up her face and teasingly pointed at the couple.

David rocked back on his heels. “Well, sounds like it was a magical evening. Now, if you will excuse me, I must go?—”

“Nonsense,” the Countess said while taking his arm. “Did you know that His Grace has a younger sister? And she’s here tonight.”

David groaned inwardly. He may have lost a bet to her husband, but he made good and showed up. He drew the line at being paired up with some giggly girl who had the common sense of a walnut.

“Now, I know you have a certain reputation, but isn’t it time you thought about settling down?”

He raised an eyebrow at the Countess's forwardness. He looked to the Duke and Duchess for assistance, but he found only amused faces observing their exchange. They were enjoying this.

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Noted.

Normally, he would put a stop to this sort of conversation, but he learned the hard way that it was easier to let the Countess get out what she wanted to say. It was less taxing that way.

“She’s a lovely girl, very bright, and a wonderful conversationalist. A bit strong-headed if you ask me, but I think she would be an excellent match for a man such as yourself.”

Pilton coughed. “I don’t think he’d be interested in my sister.”

David looked at him and found the amusement had turned into derision.

Well, now I am interested in this chit.

“Someone who is intelligent and well-spoken, you say? Tell me, what does this young lady look like? Not like Pilton, I hope.”

The Countess fawned over his quip while the Duchess grabbed her husband’s arm before he charged.

“I think that is our carriage that pulled up,” the Duchess interjected. “Thank you again, Lady Staunton, for the lovely night. We feel better knowing that we are leaving Jenny in your capable hands. We appreciate your hospitality.”

With that, she dragged her husband out the door, leaving David alone with the

Countess.

The Countess barely registered their goodbyes. She was looking over the couples on the dance floor. “She should be around here somewhere. I think Her Grace said that Jenny had stepped out for some fresh air, but she should have returned by now.”

That definitely sparked his interest.

She stepped out for some fresh air? Could it be...?

“Ah, there she is. Do you see that young woman over there by the entrance to the hallway?” The Countess pointed in the direction he had just come from, and his heart rate quickened. “See there? The girl with the reddish-brown hair? That’s her, Jane Bennett—Jenny to her friends.”

David’s breath stuttered as he took her in. The shadows in the library played with the color of her hair, but here in the light, it was a beautiful mahogany. Her alabaster skin glowed under the light from the chandeliers, and a smattering of freckles peppered her face and shoulders.

He watched as she scanned the ballroom. She carried herself with poise and confidence, much like she did in the library.

“She is something isn’t she?” Lady Staunton nudged him.

“Yes, something.” He looked back at the grinning woman next to him. “Perhaps next time, Lady Staunton. I really must be going.”

The Countess sighed. “Fine. But one of these days, I’m going to sic a darling young woman on you, and you won’t be able to deny her.”

David nodded his farewell and ducked into the entryway.

He knew from previous parties that the ballroom could be accessed from a side door. He wasn't ready to leave just yet. For as much as he'd hate to give the Countess an excuse to invite him to another gathering, she just may be onto something with this girl.

It was time he got to know Miss Jane Bennett, Jenny, in the light.

CHAPTER 3

After splashing some cool water on her face to ease her nerves, Jenny made her way back into the ballroom. She found Lady Staunton standing by the entrance.

“Miss Bennett! I just saw the Duke and Duchess—their carriage just pulled away. It seems as though they couldn't wait to leave.”

Jenny smiled. “Yes. They were both anxious to get home to Simon.”

Lady Staunton shook her head in disbelief. “I remember when you and your brother first joined Society. It has been like night and day with him. He definitely found a good match in her.”

Jenny's smile grew wider. “He certainly did.”

A gentle cough came from her right.

“Oh!” Lady Staunton exclaimed. “My apologies, Lord Rifly. Miss Bennett, may I introduce Lord Rifly. He is the son of a distant cousin of mine. Lord Rifly, this is Miss Jane Bennett, sister of the Duke of Pilton.”

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“Ah yes, lovely couple. Lady Staunton was filling me in on your rise in Society.”

Jenny narrowed her eyes at his insinuation. It isn't a secret that she and her brother came from a common background, but he claimed the duchy through a distant relation, not by some scheme. Nonetheless, she plastered on the smile that she and Frances worked tirelessly to perfect and curtsied.

“It is true—the past few years have been a whirlwind, but one I am most grateful for.”

Lord Rifly barked out a laugh. “I would think so! To think the Duke was a shopkeeper.”

Jenny couldn't be positive, but it looked like the man shivered at the thought of an honest day's work. She quickly remembered why she sought a respite in the library.

The library.

Her heart began to race as memories of long gazes and a warm breath flooded her mind. The room around her seemed to fall away, colors faded to just black with slices of white, just like those that blanketed the library. Her skin prickled at the memory of his breath tickling her ear.

“Miss Bennett?”

Lord Rifly's nasally voice cut through her reverie. She almost reached out to slap him. She was enjoying her moment.

“Yes? I’m sorry. The night is getting long, and I think I shall retire. Lady Staunton, would you be able to call for a carriage to take me home?”

“Surely you can last one more dance?” Lady Staunton urged as she, not so slyly, pushed Lord Rifly towards Jenny.

“Uh, yes, Miss Bennett, it would be my pleasure if I could have this next dance.” His eyes darted between her and Lady Staunton.

Jenny groaned inwardly.

Does no one say what they want to say anymore?

Lord Rifly clearly did not want to ask her to dance—probably because of her humble beginnings.

But with Lady Staunton’s eyes boring into hers, and since she was a hospitable host, Jenny found herself accepting his hand. Apparently, he wasn’t the only one who had trouble speaking his mind in front of Lady Staunton.

The dance went slightly better than her previous one. He managed to step on her dress only once, and her feet were spared.

When the music ended, she took a step back to curtsy.

“Thank you for th—” When she looked up, Lord Rifly was gone.

Well then.

Jenny didn’t have the care to feel embarrassed or bereft at being left on the dance floor. If anything, she felt a sense of relief. She hiked up her skirt and stepped off the

dance floor to find Lady Staunton and call for the carriage.

A body blocked her way to the door. A tall body, a familiar body. She looked up into sea-green eyes whose depths she could easily fall into.

Him.

She knew on instinct that it was the mysterious stranger from the library. It's true that she barely saw his features or the true color of his eyes, but she knew it was him from the way her body reacted to his proximity.

"May I have this dance?"

Just five words that ignited a fire deep in her core.

Her body froze in shock. No conscious thought moved in her mind. It took her several seconds to realize he had asked her a question.

"You may."

It wasn't until he started to move that she realized she said that out loud.

The stranger wrapped his arm around her waist and pulled her in. She could hear faint warning bells going off in her head and a voice that sounded like Frances's telling her that it was highly inappropriate for him to hold her in such a manner, especially before the dance even started. However, she couldn't find it in herself to care.

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For a moment, all he did was look into her eyes. He didn't move her to their starting position or ask her about her evening. Nothing. He just looked at her while his blazing hot arm seared its silhouette into her lower back.

Is he going to say something? Should I say something?

The more he stared at her, unmoving, the more her mind reeled with possibilities.

“Are we going to stand here like this, or are we going to dance?”

The corner of his lips quirked up into a sly grin. His eyes danced with mischief that had her questioning if accepting the dance was the right thing to do.

“We'll dance, of course.”

His voice was even and gave no hint of his true emotions. Surely he had to be affected by her as she was by him. At least she hoped he was.

Yet, he did not move.

Jenny glanced around the dance floor. No one was looking at them yet, but soon it was going to be blatantly obvious that they were the only two not moving.

“Sir, I don't know where you come from, but here, when we dance, we actually mo—oh!”

The man tightened his grip around her waist and began to twirl her around in perfect

rhythm with the rest of the dancers. Jenny stumbled to keep up, but once she found her footing, she was pleasantly surprised with his dancing ability.

“You seem shocked.” He didn’t seem offended. In fact, he spoke as if he was talking about the weather. Completely unaffected.

“Well, if I’m being honest?—”

“As you should always be,” he interjected.

“I have no idea who you are. We had a...” Jenny looked around to make sure no one could overhear her.

“No need to worry about others. From my experience, they are too worried about their own dance steps to waste a single brain cell on what other people are doing, let alone what they’re saying while dancing.”

Jenny chuckled. “Have you been absent from the ton recently? Perhaps you have hit your head? This is the prime time to catch up on the latest gossip. Everyone is watching and listening.”

“And you worry about your place in the ton so much that you cause yourself stress by making sure everything about you is prim and proper. Sounds very calculating to me.”

Jenny gasped. “I assure you, if you don’t protect yourself with some sense of decorum, true or not, this place will eat you alive.”

The man said nothing but shrugged. His ability to shrug off the conversation was irritating.

“Do you always do that?”

“Do what?”

“Shrug off conversations? You did it in the lib—” She looked around, dipping her head to whisper, “In the library, and you just did it now.”

The man looked down at her and pursed his lips in thought. “I see no reason to continue a conversation if I have nothing of note to add. I surmise most people talk to fill in the silence—I do not. Do you?”

Jenny could feel the beginnings of a headache between her temples. Smooth voice or not, this man was intolerable and willingly played with her emotions. He had to be aware of how insufferable he was.

“Now who’s dropping the conversation?” he added with a smirk.

Jenny huffed out a breath. She tried to look away, but his body was so bloody big it blocked her entire line of sight.

He wasn’t bulky, but tall with lean muscles—not that she was noticing. Regardless, she could only fix her eyes on the buttons of his shirt.

“Tell me, kitten, why did you accept my offer to dance?”

Kitten. Why did that nickname cause her stomach to flip in a devilish way?

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She sighed—she might as well answer him. “Because you asked.”

A dark eyebrow rose at her response. “So, if I were to ask you to return to the library with me, you would have said yes?”

Jenny’s mouth fell open, and she pulled away from him, quickly taking note of those around her. “Hush before someone hears you!”

Once she was satisfied no one heard his remark, she stepped back into his arms to resume the dance.

“What makes you think I am that kind of woman?” she asked incredulously.

She thought back to their time in the library.

Was there anything I specifically said that would make him believe that?

Her throat went dry, and she could feel sweat begin to bead on her forehead.

“The fact that you accepted the dance only because I asked.”

Horried, Jenny tried to pull away, but his arm was like a vice around her waist.

“I assure you I would not go back into that room with you...ever.”

How dare he think her a light skirt because she happened upon him in a library. By accident, mind you.

“So, it is not because you are at the mercy of men and just do as you are told? That’s good.”

Jenny gave him a quizzical look. “What do you mean by that?”

The man lifted a shoulder in one of his annoying shrugs. “Just that in my experience, when a handsome man asks a woman to do something, they usually do it with little to no question.”

Jenny snorted. “I see you’re humble as well as a great conversationist. The list of your qualities grows by the minute.”

The man brushed off her insult. “It’s prudent to know one’s worth. Never let someone else decide your worth, kitten. I know I am handsome, as I know you are beautiful. I’m just stating facts.”

He was making her dizzy. She no longer knew if she wanted to slap him or kiss him.

“And, for the record, I didn’t take you as that kind of woman. A naive woman, yes. But not a trollop.”

Jenny’s eyes widened. While she appreciated not being compared to a trollop, being called naive was as much an insult to her. Why? Heavens knew, but it rankled her.

“Naive? I am not naive, Sir.” She pouted.

Once again, that dark blonde eyebrow rose, causing her to groan.

“I’m sorry, kitten, but naïveté is written all over your fair skin. Your complexion, although quite fair, is not known for hiding secrets.”

Jenny felt the warmth of his words wash over her, no doubt leaving her cheeks pink under his gaze.

“Must you talk like that?” The words were no louder than a whisper.

“Like what?” he teased.

“Say those things about my skin, my... um, my?—”

“Beauty,” he supplied.

Jenny rolled her eyes. “Yes, that. You talk so openly about these things. I was just told that it is not appropriate for men and women to have these conversations on the dance floor.”

The man considered her warning. “Were you told you could not have these conversations, or if men and women—regardless of their station—could not have these conversations?” When she didn’t answer, he continued. “Chances are, your forwardness was intimidating and therefore needed to be stopped before you unknowingly embarrassed the man. I’m assuming it was a man who told you this?”

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Jenny could only blink. She felt as if the physical dance wasn't the only dance they were performing. She was finding it hard to keep up with the mental gymnastics this man was taking her through.

"What difference does it make?" she blurted out. "The point is that we shouldn't be talking about such things."

Oh, how the tables have turned. Just earlier that night, she was arguing for the ability to talk about taboo topics, and now she was preaching the opposite. Her head truly hurt. She needed to lie down.

The man's shoulder rose and fell under her hand, sending her annoyance to another level. "Will you stop doing that!"

He looked down at her with slight amusement in his eyes.

"Does nothing affect you?" she sputtered. This was exhausting. "You shrug off topics, you stop talking, you... you... you..."

"Have an effect on your speech?" He flashed beautifully white teeth that temporarily halted her tirade.

Regaining her thoughts, she spat out, "Oh, don't go thinking you have any effect on my speaking ability. If anything, you are truly intolerable and purposefully being obtuse."

The man continued the dance, letting her words hang between them. However, she

seemed the only one to be upset by the turn their conversation took.

She heard a slight sigh. "I promise to behave."

"Thank you." She dipped her head in acknowledgment.

"Only if you do."

Jenny's eyes flew up his annoyingly long torso to meet his gaze. "Whatever could you possibly mean by that?!"

He pulled her in even closer, and his eyes darkened. Standing this close to him, Jenny could see faint lines around his eyes. Her fingers itched with the need to reach up and touch them.

"I mean, I'm quite sure I told you to be mindful of men and to stay away from them. And yet, here you are in my arms." He squeezed her hand.

Jenny swallowed. "We are not alone." Her breathy voice was unrecognizable to her own ears.

What power did this man have over her that she could go from indignant to flushed in a mere moment?

"Are you always this naive?" he countered.

"Stop. Calling. Me. Naive," she ground out.

The man looked around the dancing couples. "It is your goal to find a match, is it not?"

Jenny shook her head, trying to keep up with the lightning-fast change in topic. “Yes.”

The man took a second to ponder her answer. “I don’t think you’ll find a suitable match with your current behavior.”

Dumbfounded, Jenny cocked her head. “I assure you, my current behavior is based on my current company,” she chided.

He studied her carefully. “No, I don’t think so. I think you need someone to teach you what gentlemen are looking for, lest you be led astray by a scoundrel.”

Jenny let out a rather unladylike snort. “And who should tutor me? You?”

The man lowered his face, and his strong jaw brushed against hers. His whisper coaxed a sigh from her lips. “It would be my honor to teach you all the ways to catch a respectable suitor’s eye, but it would come at a price.”

Her shoulders dropped when he moved away—her body wanted more contact.

“What price?”

Alarm bells rang in her head. Did she really just ask what it would cost her for him to teach her how to get a husband?

Regardless, she refused to avert her gaze. If he wanted to challenge her, he would soon learn that he had met his match. And for once, in the entire time they had spoken to each other, he finally faltered.

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He tilted his head from side to side, contemplating his options. “Let me think on a proper repayment, but I can guarantee it would be worth it for both parties.”

The devil winked.

The music ended, and the couples began to disperse, leaving the two of them standing, staring at each other.

“You are not serious.”

“Oh, but I am.” He stepped aside to let a couple pass. “Think on it, kitten. Send word if you decide to take me up on my offer.”

He turned to step off the dance floor, but she reached out to grab his arm, forgetting all about decorum.

“Wait. I don’t even know who you are. How will I send word of my decision?”

Was she truly considering this?

The man turned back to her. “Did I not introduce myself, Miss Bennett?” She froze when he said her name. “Please forgive my lack of manners. My name is David Elkins, the Duke of Marlow.”

With an exaggerated bow, he winked at Jenny and left her standing on the dance floor, her mouth agape.

Did he just say he was the Duke of Marlow? The one everyone is talking about? The scoundrel and the rake who preys on young maidens? The voices and music around her became muffled before she heard a ringing in her ears.

Not only was she alone with one of the most notorious rakes of the ton, but the scoundrel of a duke offered to tutor her on how to find a husband. He said he didn't think she was one of those ladies, but what if he was actually insinuating the opposite?

Jenny's head began to swim. She needed air. She needed to leave. She needed to have her head examined because, in the end, she was contemplating taking him up on his offer.

CHAPTER 4

Jenny stared out the window from her place at the breakfast table. It'd been three days since the ball, and she could not stop thinking about the Duke's proposal. If she was honest with herself, she couldn't stop thinking about the way his body felt close to her while they danced. Her cheeks flushed at the memory.

But he wasn't just any duke—he was the infamous Duke of Marlow, known for his rakish ways and irresistible charm.

Jenny let out a laugh.

Irresistible charm? They must not have had an honest conversation with the man if that's what they think.

“Jenny?”

“And who is *they* anyway?”

Frances stopped bouncing the cooing baby in her arms and just looked at her. “What?”

Jenny propped her head on her hands. “I’m sorry, Jenny, I’m a bit out of sorts this morning. What were you saying?”

Frances returned to the child in her arms. “I was just asking if you have anything planned for today. I was thinking of taking Simon out for a walk before the rain starts falling. Would you like to join us?”

Jenny took in the mother and child opposite her. What she wouldn’t give to be in her shoes. The Duke’s proposal pushed its way to the forefront of her mind.

There’s someone who said he could help you get your wish.

She scrunched up her nose at the thought. Maybe she should go on a walk with Frances and the baby? She obviously needed a change of scenery—sulking around the house was doing her no favors.

“I suppose s?—”

“Excuse me, Your Grace.” Helen, the head housekeeper, interrupted their breakfast. “There seems to be a problem with the renovations in the library.”

Frances groaned. “Let me guess, His Grace has changed the plans again and is being difficult.”

Helen dropped her eyes and smiled at the accuracy of Frances’s guess. Neither woman envied anyone who tried correcting the Duke of Pilton.

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“I will be right in, Helen, thank you.” Frances looked back at Jenny. “Would you mind keeping an eye on Simon while I see to your brother?”

Jenny reached out to take her nephew in her arms. It was always a highlight of her day when she got to hold him. However, over the past few days, she began to notice new feelings creeping in whenever she spent time with the baby. She used to just feel overwhelming love and joy, but recently, there was a hint of jealousy and longing that accompanied them.

Frances followed Helen out of the dining room, leaving Jenny to cuddle with the now-sleeping infant.

“Of course you’re asleep,” Jenny murmured. “It’s probably better off this way. I fear I’m not the best company right now.” She brushed a soft curl off of his face while he burrowed further into his swaddling blanket. “Not that you’d understand anything I’d say even if you were awake.”

She looked back out the window and sighed. Then, she stood up and made her way to the bassinet one of the maids pushed in earlier. She placed the sleeping child ever so gently in it and sat in a chair next to him.

She lazily traced the stitches on his blanket.

“I don’t know, Simon. There has been so much change for me these past few years. At first, it was just Thomas and I, and it was fine. Not ideal, but manageable. Then everything changed. We were thrust into this world, and while it has been nothing short of brilliant, I’m starting to feel that I am overstaying my welcome in this house.”

The baby shifted in his sleep.

“Oh, don’t worry, I don’t intend to go back to the shop and take up shopkeeping. I am most grateful to leave that behind. But I sense I’m more in the way here than is appreciated. I know your mother and father love me dearly, and I love them too, but...” She smiled down at him, wiping a little drool that rolled down his chubby chin.

“It’s just that they got married not too long ago, and now they’re living their lives. They have you now, and if I know my brother, there will be more of you running around here soon. I’m not sure that me being underfoot is helpful.” She looked over her shoulder to make sure there were no lurking maids before she leaned into the bassinet to whisper, “Do you think I should take the Duke up on his offer?”

The baby snorted and sucked on his bottom lip.

Jenny sat back and laughed. “I see. You make a good point. I did tell myself that this was the Season I’d do everything in my power to secure a match and elevate my standing in Society. From silly girl to a respectable matron of the ton.”

Simon sighed.

“I know. I could barely get that out without rolling my eyes. Regardless, I need to find a match. I can’t live here forever, and I refuse to be your spinster aunt living across the hallway from you until it is your time to leave.”

Jenny looked around then leaned back into the bassinet. “Don’t tell anyone, but I think I have made up my mind.”

Jenny pushed through the gate. It was heavier than it looked—most likely, the thick mud that settled at its base didn’t help. When she set out on this adventure, she

thought the rain was over for the day, so it was very surprising when, halfway through her trek, the night sky opened up and started pouring rain. She was drenched and shaking, but her resolve ignited her blood and kept her moving forward.

If her maid's directions were correct, she was at the right residence. If not, whoever opened the door would be in for quite the shock offinding her there, soaked from head to toe, looking most dreadful.

She had a moment of uncertainty as she rang the bell. Her finger had a mind of its own, and she watched in slow motion as it pressed on the bell. She caught a glimpse of her reflection in the side window. Because of the rain, her hair had escaped its pins, and the bottom four inches of her dress and outer coat were coated in mud. Panic set in.

What am I doing?

Jenny gathered her skirts and turned to leave just as she heard footsteps approach the door from the inside. She looked back at the front yard she walked through to get to the front door. There had to be a bush or shrub to hide behind before the door opened.

Her foot hit the bottom of the stoop as the front door started to open. She made a mad dash to the pruned shrubbery to her right, jumping behind it.

“Who goes there?” a deep voice barked from the darkened doorway.

Jenny crunched down as far as she could and prayed that the cover of night helped her escape.

“Come out. I saw you go behind that bush.”

Jenny glanced at her surroundings. Just her luck—she hid behind a shrub that lined a

wall. She was stuck between a bush and a hard place.

“Feel free to stay there all night.” The voice chuckled. “I have nowhere to go, so I’ll still be here when you get tired of hiding back there.”

Her heart thundered in her ears. Her knees were already starting to ache from her position, and the dampness of her clothing was causing her teeth to chatter. Steeling herself, she stood up to face the consequences of her foolish actions.

Her mind raced with escape plans. She could give his butler a different name. He’d never seen her before, so she could pretend to be someone else, and when word got out about a midnight visitor at the Duke’s house, her name wouldn’t be associated with it.

She stumbled out of the bush, with only minor scrapes, and looked towards the door.

“Sir, forgive me, I’m—Oh, bloody hell.”

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David had never been so glad to let his butler take the night off than he was in this moment. Standing before him, soaked to the bone with part of her coat still stuck in the bush, was the woman who had occupied his thoughts for the past three days.

Miss Jane Bennett stood in the moonlight, her owlsh eyes blinking up at him in disbelief. “Your Grace?” Her voice was thin and incredulous.

David tried to hide his smile but failed. He leaned against the doorframe, crossing his legs and arms. “Yes.”

She took a step forward, tugging her coat from the brambly bush. “It’s me, Jenny—er, Jane Bennett.”

“I know.”

David was being intentionally obtuse with her, but there was something about her that made him want to push all her buttons just to see what made her tick.

“Oh. Well. Alright then.” Jenny looked around the empty street, twirling a ribbon from her coat in her hands.

“Did you come all this way to tell me your name?”

Jenny’s head snapped up, and she looked at him. “No,” she said in a mocking tone that made him want to push more. “I came here to...talk.”

Nowthatgot his attention.

David pushed off the doorframe and stood to the side. “Then, by all means, come inside.”

Jenny had a moment of hesitation, but then she thought better of it and brushed past him. The smell of cinnamon and rain filled his senses. He tightened his grip on the doorknob to stop himself from reaching out to her.

She was a dangerous mix of naïveté, stubbornness, and beauty. Exactly the type of woman he should not be ushering into his house at this late hour.

After a quick glance to confirm that no one saw her, he closed the door behind them. She stood in the entryway, looking much smaller than when they first met. Her personality made her seem larger than life in both the library and on the dance floor, but standing in the darkened foyer, her wet clothes hanging off her, she looked vulnerable—helpless.

A familiar feeling tugged at David’s heart, but he pushed it away.

Definitely need to be careful around this woman.

“Let’s go to my study, I still have a fire lit in there.” He walked to the first door on the left. “You must be freezing. I’ll call for some tea to help warm you.”

Jenny reached out to his arm. “Please don’t. I shouldn’t be here. If word?—”

“My staff knows better than to cross me or share my secrets. Your virtue is safe within these walls.”

He couldn’t keep the scorn from his words. Damsels in distress always made his hackles rise.

Jenny followed him into his study and immediately took refuge in the chair in front of the fireplace. David had been working on some proposals here, so the room was already warm. True to his word, he tugged on the bell-pull. There was always someone awake doing God knows what, but he never cared as long as they remembered their duties and left him to his.

A young kitchen maid called Missy answered and returned some moments later with hot tea and leftover biscuits from dinner.

David handed the tea to Jenny, who wasn't shaking as noticeably as before. "Here, let me take your coat."

He took the proffered garment and hung it beside the fire to dry.

"Thank you, Your Grace."

Of course, she would bite out his title. It wasn't an accident that he waited until the last minute to tell her who he was.

"Of course." He shrugged. He noticed how her eyes narrowed at the movement, but she said nothing.

David bit back a smile. Making this kitten's claws come out was becoming his new favorite hobby.

"Now that some of your color has returned, do you care to tell me why I found you lurking in my bushes in the middle of the night?"

She rolled her eyes. "I was not lurking."

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She took another sip and groaned as the warm liquid slid down her throat.

Little, bloody hellion.

Her groan went straight to his cock. His breath stuttered as he clenched his fists. His heart skipped a beat when she pointed to him.

Oh God, can she read my thoughts?

He desperately wanted to look down to make sure he wasn't embarrassing himself when she then pointed to the chair behind his desk and motioned for him to sit.

Inwardly, he was thanking the heavens that she wanted him to sit—it would be a lot easier to hide any further physical reaction to her sounds. Outwardly, he raised an eyebrow at her.

Bossy, little thing.

Jenny positioned her body away from the fire, sitting sideways in the chair. "I'm going to get straight to the point, Your Grace. I want to know what exactly you are offering to teach me and what you get in return."

David shook his head in approval. He always appreciated those who didn't pussyfoot around. He took a moment to consider the enigma of the woman sitting in front of him.

She was just a slip of a girl. Her dark reddish hair had fallen loose and hung in wet

tendrils around her face. Yet, she could stand toe to toe with the likes of him.

He licked his lips. “I thought we went over this. You want to secure a match, I can give you tips and teach you tricks to catch the perfect suitor.”

She furrowed her brow as she looked at him. “And what do you get?”

David sat back in his chair. He watched as her narrowed eyes followed the movement of his thumb rubbing his bottom lip.

“Your time.”

“You want my time?—”

“Alone.”

Jenny bolted from the chair. “You want to be alone with me?”

David couldn’t help but laugh at the hypocrisy. “Why is that so shocking?” He looked around his study. “You’re alone with me right now. In fact, if my memory serves me right, you were perfectly fine being alone with me during our very first meeting.”

Jenny bristled. “Oh, I knew you would bring that up.”

She hoisted up her water-logged skirts and stomped over to his desk, slamming her hands down on the blotter.

“Listen, and listen well. I don’t know how you know my name, or what you know of me, but I assure you that my common background does not mean you get to take advantage of me. If you think for one moment that I would agree to such a torrid

affair, you are gravely mistaken. I am no wanton lady or a lady of the night—or whatever you call them.”

Her breath came out in hot puffs of air as her chest rose and fell with each inhale and exhale. She was emotional. She was seething.

She was breathtaking.

David placed his hands on his desk, just on either side of hers. He slowly rose to his full height and leaned across the desk, towering over her.

“You have a very dirty mind, Miss Bennett,” he drawled.

Jenny gasped at his insinuation. Her hand came up to slap him, but he caught her wrist right before it made contact.

“Now, now, kitten. There’s no need for violence,” he tsked.

She sucked in a breath as her eyes trailed up his lips to meet his eyes. Her wrist felt so delicate in his hand. A shiver that he hoped was hidden under his clothing ran down his spine.

His eyes darkened as he leaned further across his desk. “You listen, and listen well. I never take what is not offered freely, and I certainly wouldn’t need to stoop so low as to bargain for it. If I want a woman, I go and find a willing partner. It’s never been an issue for me, and I don’t see that changing in the future.”

Jenny flinched at his words. If the closeness of her body wasn’t causing his brain cells to misfire, he would have taken a moment to study her movement. Alas, he made a grave miscalculation by leaning so close to her.

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She blinked, all the bravado leaving her right before his eyes.

“I-I’m sorry. It was inappropriate of me to assume such horrible things about you. Please forgive me, Your Grace.” Her eyes dropped to where he still held her wrist.

He watched her eyes as they focused on their connection, and he used the opportunity to pull her further across the desk.

“No need to apologize. I know my reputation precedes me where women are concerned. Plus, I remember being the one who told you that there was only one reason why men would want to be alone with a woman.”

Her eyes flicked up to his. “Wait. So, I was right?”

“No. It appears I was wrong.” He chuckled at the look of shock that crossed her face. “I know. While I am not wrong often, I do own my mistakes. You should note this—it doesn’t happen often.”

A small smile danced on her lips, and he couldn’t help but smile in return.

Their breaths mingled as his fingers twitched around her wrist.

His eyes drifted down to her plump lips that were slightly open. Inviting.

Didn’t I just say I wouldn’t take anything from an unwilling partner?

Although he’d been with enough women to know that from her body language and

eyes, she was more than willing.

It was that thought that had David straightening up, dropping her wrist in haste. Anger and disgust coursed through his veins at the narrative his mind had just created. He banished that line of thought to the far recesses of this mind.

“I think it is time for you to go, Miss Bennett.”

Jenny’s body fell forward, her hands slapping the desk surface to stop her face from hitting it. She pushed herself up, still breathless from their interaction.

“What?”

She brushed the drying red curls from her face—David couldn’t help but notice how soft they looked.

He took a deep breath. “Do we have an agreement?”

Jenny huffed, clearly dumbfounded. He couldn’t blame her. If this was any other woman, he would have her across his desk right now.

He could tell the next words out of her mouth were not going to be pleasant. And while he has been developing a certain taste for their special brand of conversation, he needed to see her out.

He raised his hand to stop her. “It is late, Miss Bennett. We’re both very tired, and I think it would be better for both of us to continue this another day.”

He moved around his desk and took a step towards her. Fighting against his better judgment, he tilted her chin up so their eyes could meet.

“Do we have an agreement?” he asked again. “My helpful tips in exchange for your company?”

The tip of Jenny’s tongue darted out to wet her bottom lip. It took all of his willpower not to lean in and capture the tiny tease.

She shook her head slowly while his hand still held her chin.

“Very well,” he said, dropping his hand.

He opened the study door and led her out into the hallway, to the front door. Jenny stood there expectantly.

He looked between her and the door. “Is there something else, Miss Bennett?”

She looked at the door and back to him. “Oh, I thought... Usually, people call for a carriage or a hackney. I just assumed you...”

David laughed. “And risk people seeing you leave my residence in the middle of the night in a carriage? Oh no—not happening, kitten. You got yourself here just fine, you can get yourself home.”

If David could paint, he would paint the picture of absolute surprise mixed with distress written all over her face. There was a reason why redheads were his favorites. No matter how hard they tried, their complexions could hide nothing.

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Her face went from ghostly white with shock, to red with embarrassment, to an almost purple with rage.

She was magnificent.

She could do nothing but stutter half-sentences as he ushered her out into the night. She was still muttering unintelligible words when he closed the door.

This was going to be fun.

CHAPTER 5

“Jenny, would you like more tea?”

Nora’s maid stood beside where Jenny sat, holding the teapot expectantly.

Jenny shook her head. “No, thank you, Nora. I’ve had enough.”

“So, as I was saying, I heard that Lord Gloushire asked Anna Dennison to marry him.” Nora stirred her tea after adding a healthy amount of milk.

Sarah scrunched up her face. “Anna Dennison? The girl that never quite grew into her feet and is always tripping over them?”

Jenny chuckled at the image. Sarah was right, a baby deer walked better than Anna Dennison did at the age of three-and-twenty.

Nora nodded. “The very one.”

“Could you imagine if Lord Banefield asked for her hand? The two of them wouldn’t make it anywhere—they’d be too busy tripping each other on their way out the door.”

Sarah and Nora burst into giggles.

“I heard you had the honor of dancing with him the other night.” Sarah eyed Jenny’s feet. “You seem to have recovered well.”

Jenny snickered. “Yes, it was touch and go for a while.”

“Wait.” Sarah sat up. “Wasn’t Lord Gloushire the one who asked for Frannie’s hand but she turned him down?”

Jenny nodded. “Yes, she turned him down to give my brother a chance to get his head on straight. And lucky for him, he did.”

The women all tittered at her response.

“And how is Frannie doing?” Sarah asked. “I miss seeing her during our weekly teas.”

Jenny chose her next words carefully. She didn’t want to come across as insensitive or selfish. “She is very busy with Simon—they both are. They dote on him hand over foot. It’s quite endearing, actually.”

The truth was that she missed the camaraderie she had with Frances from when they first moved here. Frances and Nora were the first ones who truly accepted her into Society. Now that Simon was here and Frannie was settling into the role of Duchess

and motherhood, Jenny barely saw her.

“Still, it’s not like she’s the first one to give birth. I’m sure she could spare an afternoon for her friends,” Sarah huffed with a roll of her eyes.

Jenny cackled, while Nora, always the voice of reason, chastised her. “Sarah Hornsby! That was not a very nice thing to say. I shall remember that when it’s your time to juggle a family and a title.”

Sarah didn’t look one bit remorseful. “You do that. Frances was supposed to be the old spinster in the group. Since she’s off and married, I’ll take up the post. Feel free to chastise me about the amount of time I will spend with my cats.”

Nora narrowed her eyes at her friend. Sarah stuck her tongue out.

This is what Jenny missed with Frannie. She couldn’t help but laugh at the two grown women making faces at each other.

“I understand what you mean, Sarah,” Jenny said wistfully. “I miss her and I live with her.”

“What you two need is to find good matches, and then you’ll both be too occupied to be worried about what your friend is doing,” Nora chastised.

Sarah and Jenny looked at Nora and stuck their tongues out at her.

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“Very mature, ladies,” Nora sniffed.

The women couldn’t contain their giggles. Sometimes it felt nice to set the rules of Society aside and be silly with trusted friends.

“How was the latest ball? I heard it was at Lady Staunton’s. She always has the best biscuits,” Sarah sighed.

Jenny chewed on her bottom lip. She had been dying to talk to someone about what happened at the ball and what transpired three days later, but she had no one to confide in. But what she really needed was to find out more about the Duke of Marlow. The only information her maid had was his address.

“Yes. It was lovely as usual. The same people were there, with a few new faces,” Nora responded.

Jenny nodded her head in agreement. “Yes, Lady Staunton’s distant cousin was there. I think his name was Lord Rifly. Oh, and the Duke of Marlow was there as well. And yes, her biscuits are always so tasty.”

Sarah sat straight up, her teacup clattering on its saucer. “Wait! Stop. Did you say the Duke of Marlow?”

Jenny’s heart began to race, and she prayed her face wasn’t betraying her with a blush. It was always so hard for her to conceal any true thought or desire when her face was basically projecting her thoughts.

She cleared her throat. "I did."

Sarah clasped her hands together. "Oh, how I wish I was invited. I would have loved to see the illustrious Duke in real life. I hear he is quite dashing."

Jenny swallowed past the lump in her throat.

"Oh, he is that. I also hear that he runs hot and cold," Nora added.

Jenny cocked her head and cleared her throat. "I danced with him."

Both women stared at her with their mouths hanging open.

"I'm sorry, I just heard a buzzing in my head. Did you say you danced with him?" Sarah came and sat next to her on the settee.

"Yes." Jenny gave in. She could feel the blush bloom on her cheeks.

The two other women started talking over each other, each trying to get their questions in.

"What was he like?"

"Did he know how to dance?"

"What did he say?"

"What did you say?"

Jenny threw her hands up to quell the onslaught of questions. "He was a very good dancer?—"

“I heard he’s good at everything,” Sarah interrupted, nudging her.

“Sarah!” Nora gasped. “Really, what has gotten into you today.” After a quick dismissive look at Sarah, she returned to Jenny. “Don’t mind her, go on.”

Jenny licked her lips. “Well, we didn’t say much to each other.”

She couldn’t tell them what they talked about. It felt too private, something she wanted to protect.

“But I will say he is a very handsome man, and charming.”

Sarah fanned herself. “I’ve heard such stories about him. I’m surprised he didn’t try to back you into a dark corner of the ballroom. He has quite a reputation for ruination. It’s like a sport to him. Although, if the gossip is true, I wouldn’t mind being ruined by him,” she added with a wink.

Nora looked on, horrified, but she soon burst out laughing. “Sarah, you are something else today. However, I don’t think you should say such things in front of Jenny. She is still young and hoping for the best in the opposite sex.”

Jenny looked down. Would she always be seen as the “little sister,” the young naive girl who needs help with the most mundane task?

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She decided to ignore Nora's well-intended jibe. This was her opportunity to get the information she wanted.

She cleared her throat again. "What specifically have you heard? He seemed like a gentleman during our dance."

"Of course, he would be—he was out in the open." Nora stood up to refill her cup of tea. She held out the plate of biscuits to Sarah and Jenny. Sarah took one and began to nibble on it.

"He wouldn't be stupid enough to proposition you somewhere he could be seen and risk marriage. That's not how his kind works."

"Hiskind?"

Nora sighed. "Oh, love, you are naive, aren't you?"

Jenny frowned at the description. She was beginning to hate that word.

"He's a rake, Jenny," Sarah said while brushing crumbs off her skirt. "A scoundrel. Charming, yes, but they have to be. They fill your head with pretty words and introduce soft touches that encourage wild behavior. They make you think you're the only one in the world and then leave you ruined, with nothing but regrets. I've seen it too many times to count. It's sad, really. I'm sure it's exciting in the moment, but the aftermath is ugly."

"I'm familiar with the term and concept," Jenny spat out. "People accused my brother

of such things.” She tried to steady her breathing.

There was so much she wanted to ask, but she didn’t want to come across as desperate. These women had an ear for gossip and an eye for pinpointing people’s true intentions. If they got one whiff of desperation from her, they’d know she was dangerously close to getting caught up in the Duke’s snares. They’d most likely warn her off him.

“I haven’t seen him around other balls. I wonder why he came to this one...”

Jenny had hoped she sounded nonchalant. However, if they looked closely at her hands, they’d find her teacup shaking. She set the cup down and folded her hands in her lap, hoping to still them.

“He doesn’t attend them often,” Nora offered from her chair. “Probably lost a bet to the Earl. Lady Staunton has been begging him to help her get more gentlemen to show up to her parties. She has it stuck in her head that all the best matches must happen at her events.”

Sarah laughed. “Gentlemen being the keyword. However, if they’re losing bets, something tells me they are not the kind of gentlemen the Countess should be inviting.”

The women chuckled, but Jenny just sat there, processing their words.

“Why hasn’t he taken a wife?”

Both her friends looked at her curiously.

“What I mean is, my purpose is to go to these affairs and find a husband, and if the Duke needs to find a wife to produce an heir, shouldn’t he be concerned about the

continuation of his line instead of sowing his wild oats? You'd think he'd be married by now."

Jenny crossed two of her fingers under her hand, hoping her explanation was good enough to fend off follow-up questions.

Nora waved off her question. "It's different for men. I agree, most men are married by his age, I believe he's seven-and-twenty, but unless they have a mother breathing down their necks to get married, most men take their time."

"So, he doesn't have anyone breathing down his neck?" Jenny questioned.

The two older women exchanged a fretful look.

"No. His father died when he was twenty, passing the title to him. His mother was never the same after his passing."

"Don't forget about what happened to his sister," Sarah added.

Nora shot her a pained glance. "Sarah, we shouldn't gossip."

Because what we've been doing up until now hasn't been gossiping.

Jenny looked between the two women. "What happened to his sister?"

Nora huffed in Sarah's direction, who was completely unaffected by the gesture.

"Right after she turned eighteen, a suitor came to her door and asked for her hand in marriage. Some of the details have been lost to the rumor mill, but the common theory is that the Duke was not happy and the two young lovers ran away to Gretna Green to get married."

Jenny's heart hurt for the young couple having to run from family. She couldn't imagine having a wedding and not having Thomas and Frances there. Yet, at the same time, she couldn't help but feel for the young Duke trying to take on such a role while doing what he thought was right for his family. If he didn't want the marriage, he must have had his reasons.

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“The Duke went after them and...” Nora leaned in. “This is where details get hazy, but somehow his sister ended up dying.”

Jenny’s heart dropped to her stomach, and her mouth went dry. She couldn’t imagine the pain and torment the Duke must have felt at the loss of his sister.

Sarah nodded in agreement. “Yes, it was all so shocking and terribly sad. But no one really talked about it. The Duke kept to himself for a while, but when he emerged, he was more concerned about solidifying his reputation as a rake and scoundrel than settling down.”

Jenny could only stare. Her heart broke for the man, although hearing these stories helped put some pieces of the puzzle together. His aloofness, his temperament.

After a moment, she spoke up. “It didn’t seem like much affected him when we danced. He seemed very nonchalant. I would assume someone who went through so much trauma would be like... well, like my brother. Thomas was very off-putting. You ladies remember how he acted when we joined polite society? Everyone was afraid of him.”

Sarah laughed. “I certainly was. Your brother definitely carried a cloud of darkness over him. Most of the time, I find that intriguing in a man, but with him, let’s just say that I was all too happy when Frannie came along and lightened him up.”

Mock shudders ran through their bodies, and they burst into more sober laughter.

Jenny smiled at the mention of Thomas and Frances. They definitely were each

other's perfect match.

Could I be the Duke of Marlow's perfect match?

She blushed at her thought. He shouldn't even be an option. Their agreement, if she could call it that, was just a way for him to help her and at the same time have her company.

Company.

The realization dawned on Jenny like a ton of bricks.

He is lonely.

Of course! That's why he asked for her time in exchange for his help. Maybe she was as naive as everyone said.

"Nonchalant—that is a good word to describe him," Nora pointed out. "He's charming, of course, but one of the most repeated complaints from wanna-be-conquests is that he can turn that charm off in an instant and become distant."

Jenny bit her tongue, stopping herself from agreeing with those poor women. She witnessed firsthand how quickly the Duke could change the direction of their discourse.

"Do you remember when Caroline Linesby and Danielle Cherston had a bet going on to see who could make him smile? Really smile." Sarah laughed.

"He smiles!"

Sarah and Nora both were taken aback by Jenny's slight outburst.

Jenny looked down at her hands. “I mean, I’ve seen him smile. He smiles.”

She’d seen his smile—it was when he held her wrist after she tried to slap him. Her wrist tingled at the memory of his touch.

“No, not a polite smile,” Sarah continued. “Like one that lights up your whole face. For instance, when you say something and the person’s whole expression changes with delight. Like they truly enjoy your presence. Those kinds of smiles. He doesn’t do that often, if ever.”

Nora agreed. “Oh Sarah, you’re right. Any time I see him with a woman, he’s smiling. But it’s not a genuine smile, it’s more cunning and manipulative. Like a cat playing with a mouse.” She sniffed and flicked a crumb off her skirt. “He’s most likely trying to flirt and charm her to get what he wants. He seems like he keeps his true feelings to himself.”

Sarah squealed. “Yes! He can be so charming yet so stone-faced at the same time! He is quite an enigma.”

Jenny’s heart twisted. She was hungry for more information about the Duke, but hearing stories of him trying to capture other women left a funny feeling in her stomach. One she did not care for.

Sarah sighed. “However, I wouldn’t mind being the woman who finally cracks that nut.”

Nora clapped a hand over her mouth as she barked out a laugh. “Sarah! You are too much today. Has my maid slipped something in your tea?”

The women erupted into fits of giggles.

Jenny tried to join in the merriment, but her thoughts kept straying back to a duke who lived three blocks away. Some of their stories helped her understand him. He was lonely, so it made sense for him to want her company.

However, some of their stories left her with more questions. They called him a scoundrel and a rake whose favorite pastime was ruining young girls. However, he said that he never took something that was not freely given. He also said her virtue was safe with him.

Was she truly naive in thinking that he wanted more than just her company? Plus, he may come across as aloof, but Jenny swore there was something deeper lurking under his mask. They might have never seen him truly smile, but she had, and it was beautiful.

Call it naïveté, call it stubbornness, call it what you like. There was only one way to find out what the Duke's true intentions were, and she was going to find out. Now she was determined more than ever to figure out the paradox that is the Duke of Marlow.

CHAPTER 6

Jenny walked around the side garden with Nora. It was a beautiful day for a garden party and the perfect day to corner a certain duke to try her hand at discovering his true nature. The impression she got from Sarah and Nora was that he was impenetrable and would only show the world what he wanted to show. Controlled people like that intrigued Jenny.

She was always so eager to get people to understand her that words just flew out of her mouth with little regard for their appropriateness. To find someone who controlled his words and actions so smoothly, yet came across as charming rather than broody, was fascinating. Sarah was right—he was quite the enigma.

Jenny spotted him speaking with Thomas. She couldn't ask for a better opportunity. No one would think anything of her joining a conversation with her brother.

“Who are you looking at?” Nora's question interrupted her thoughts.

“Hmm? Oh, my brother,” Jenny lied.

“Right. And the Duke of Marlow, who he happens to be talking to, holds no interest for you.”

Jenny chewed on her bottom lip, hoping the blush she felt rising to her cheeks wasn't as noticeable in the sunlight. “If I were to say he doesn't, would you believe me?”

Nora smiled. “I can't blame you for being interested.” She leaned in to whisper, “Don't tell my husband, but that man has definitely turned my head.”

Jenny covered her mouth with her hand to muffle her laugh. “Your secret is safe with me.”

“Still, I would keep your interest just that, a curiosity. I would not want to see you be one of his fallen ladies. The trail of broken hearts he's left is long enough.”

Jenny ducked her head—it was only a matter of time before someone pointed out her odds with this man.

“Oh, trust me, I have not set my sights on him.”

Regardless of what her body told her, she had to keep reminding herself that it was just an arrangement and nothing more.

“Do you want to go over there?” Nora eyed her.

Jenny considered for a moment. She looked back over at Thomas and the Duke of Marlow. Frances was there as well. Would she see through her as quickly as Nora did?

Curiosity won out over pride. “Let’s. You and Sarah have piqued my interest in this man. Tell me, is he truly as bad as everyone makes him out to be?”

Nora led Jenny across the lawn towards the terrace where Thomas and the Duke of Marlow were talking. “I’m not one to say, since I don’t know him well. But yes, his reputation does not do him any favors.”

Jenny nodded solemnly. She wanted to ask if she was insane for wanting to get to know him better. She feared Nora would shoot her idea down, and she didn’t feel like dealing with one more person treating her like a child. Plus, Nora would ask why, and Jenny wasn’t ready, nor willing, to divulge their time in the library or her midnight visit.

Her heart began to beat faster the closer they got to the terrace. By the time her foot hit the first step, her heart was thundering in her ears. She could only imagine the red hue that darkened her cheeks.

Bloody fair complexion giving away my secrets.

“Ah, Jenny.” Frances reached out to welcome her. “I’m so glad you came today. I was getting tired of listening to these men talk.”

Jenny accepted the brief hug her sister-in-law gave her. After she pulled away, she became suddenly aware of her body. Everything she did felt awkward under the Duke’s stare.

Why do I feel like I’ve never stood before?

She shifted from foot to foot, trying to remember how to stand. Her hands felt funny at her sides, but holding them in front of her seemed to take up too much space. She was a fidgeting mess, and she had only been in the Duke’s company for less than

twenty seconds. How was she supposed to endure this for their arrangement?

“Jenny, we must get you out of the sun.” Frances’s voice was full of worry. “Look at your face—you look flushed. How long have you and Nora been walking? You’re starting to look red.”

If Jenny wasn’t red before, she was now. Usually, she adored Frances and didn’t mind her motherly ways, which have grown exponentially since Simon arrived, but at this moment, she wished Frances would focus her attention on her son and not her.

Jenny risked a glance at the Duke while Nora and Frances found a glass of water and a chair for her to sit in. She could have sworn she saw a flash of concern cross his features, but it was quickly replaced by nonchalance.

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She raised her hands to stop Frances from rearranging the entire terrace. “Frances, I’m fine, really. Why don’t we go down to the refreshments table? It’s in the shade and by the pond. There’s always a nice breeze there.”

Please, God, please just get me out of here before I make a bigger fool of myself.

Frances and Nora exchanged a worried look before Nora shrugged. “It is nicer there—we wouldn’t have to listen to men pretend to fix all the problems they most likely created.” She winked.

Frances burst into giggles. “That is true. It’s settled. Thomas, your sister, Nora and I are going down to get refreshments. Do try not to start any wars while we’re gone. I’m still trying to calm down the carpenter you riled up over our library.”

Thomas lifted an eyebrow at his wife and gave her a look that, as Jenny had come to learn, was not meant for polite company to see.

Once again, Jenny found comfort in the cool liquid. It has become her lifeline in events such as these. Purposefully giving her mind and body something to do that wasn’t perfecting the perfect curtsy, or remembering which step came next in a dance, or what not to say in polite society was relaxing. All she needed to do was lift the cup, drink, and enjoy the refreshment. Even if it was just watered-down lemonade.

Jenny eyed the punch bowl. More like lemon water than lemonade, really. Still, it helped.

“Well, your color looks better now. Maybe it was not the sun.” Frances studied Jenny’s face under the shade of the tent, tilting it this way and that to inspect every inch of it.

Jenny did her best not to cringe, but Frances’s motherly tone was really starting to grate on her nerves. She knew her sister-in-law meant well, but she couldn’t handle it right now.

“I’m fine, really,” she said while pulling away from Frannie’s grip. “No need to concern yourself. One afternoon in the sun won’t kill me.”

Nora lifted her hand. “Come, let’s sit on that blanket by the water.”

Jenny set the cup down on the table and walked over to the pond to sit on the blanket already laid out. She felt a tingle run down her spine as she sat. She looked over her shoulder, and her eyes met the Duke’s, who was watching her from his spot on the terrace. She was far enough away that she couldn’t hear their conversation but close enough that she knew his eyes were on hers.

Her breath hitched. Why was he looking at her like that? She lifted a hand to her hair. Was something amiss?

Nerves danced in her belly. She shifted her position so she was sitting parallel to the pond, allowing her to see the Duke out of the corner of her eye. He continued to stand there, staring at her, most likely ignoring anything her brother was saying to him.

“So, tell me, how is your Season going?” Frances asked while leaning back on her hands. She looked relaxed, and Jenny welcomed back the easiness between them.

Jenny looked over the pond. “It’s going as well as you would think. Nothing has really changed since last week’s ball and that fiasco.”

“Fiasco?” Frances screwed up her nose in confusion.

“Lord Banefield and his two left feet? Not to mention the inappropriate conversation I apparently tricked him into having, regarding my less desirable traits.”

Frances shook her head. “Ah, yes, I remember.” She waved her hand dismissively. “I wouldn’t worry too much about Lord Banefield. No one likes him anyway.”

“Easy for you to say—you’re married. And while I question your choice,” Jenny said, nudging her, “I must say, I’m jealous you no longer have to go through this. It’s intolerable.”

Frances chuckled. “I got rather lucky, didn’t I?”

She looked up at the terrace to find her husband. Jenny followed her gaze and once again found herself staring into the Duke of Marlow’s eyes. Her eyes widened at the intensity in them. He was looking at her as if they were the only two at the party. The small patch of grass between them seemed to shorten as an invisible thread pulled them towards each other.

Jenny shook off the thought and dropped her eyes to her fiddling hands on her lap.

There was nothing between them. He was lonely, looking for companionship. He’s just another closed-off man who smiled when he wanted something and used his charm to entice willing partners. Surface-level qualities, much like the rest of the ton.

Still, the nagging thought that she felt something deeper with him was there. She wanted so badly to pull at the thread, to dissect the possibility of something more between them. She wanted so desperately to see what he kept under the outer layer of aloofness and apathy.

She peered back up and saw he was gone. Her heart sank. She turned her body to look behind her—she felt desperate to see him again. The thought alone should have made alarm bells go off in her mind, but instead, she was frantic, trying to locate him.

“Looking for someone, Miss Bennett?”

She turned back and craned her neck. The object of her curiosity stood in front of her.

“No, Your Grace. I, um... There was a bee I was trying to avoid.”

His smirk was knowing. “How terrifying. You must be careful not to move too suddenly around bees, or you may get stung.”

He retreated towards the house, the cup from the refreshments table in his hand.

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Jenny swallowed, she couldn't help to think that was more than a warning about bees.

David walked into the house. He needed to put some distance between him and Miss Bennett. She was too young, too naive, and too of everything he should not be around. Once again, he chided himself for making that silly arrangement with her.

Truth be told, he was not sure why he did it in the first place. It was her stubbornness and her naivety that drew him in. He felt this incessant need to protect her even though he hardly knew her.

He stood in the parlor looking out over the grounds. He watched as she and Frances walked back to the terrace just outside. He couldn't help but watch her expressions as she talked with Frances. Her features were so expressive. What must it be like to be so free with your expressions?

Visions of her lying on his bed flashed through his mind, her expressions guiding his hands and his tongue to the right spots.

Voices drifted in from outside, and David righted himself. He should not be thinking these things. He offered her help to find a suitable match, not to bed her. She needed to be with a man who was more suitable for her—someone who was gentle, who would make her laugh.

As if on cue, her throaty laugh drifted in through the open doors. He closed his eyes to let the sound settle over his body. It felt like a warm blanket comforting him.

He took a deep breath and stepped into the doorway, leaning against the frame. He

wanted her to see him. He needed to see her reaction to him up close. He needed to know she was affected just as much as he was.

It was as if he called to her. Her head snapped over her shoulder, and she looked directly into his eyes. A slight blush stained her cheeks. He tilted his head in acknowledgment, which had her turning her body away from him to hide her blush.

She moved to the far corner of the terrace, pretending to look out over the rose garden. It was a game of cat and mouse. Except now, he was the cat and she was his prey.

He walked to the railing parallel to her and leaned over it, taking in the same view. He noticed her shoulders stiffen at his movement. He smiled down at his hands that were gripping the railing, happy that she was, in fact, affected by him. Without saying a word, he looked over at her. She was looking out over the garden, but her chest was rising and falling rapidly.

He straightened up and sauntered over to a table behind her where Frances and Thomas now sat. Not bothering to interrupt their conversation, he stood there, pretending to look at his pocket watch, when he felt her shift from her spot. When he looked up, he saw that she turned around and was now facing him, with only the table between them.

She chewed on her bottom lip while her eyes darted around, looking for an escape. She rushed to the door he had just come out of, and bumped into the back of Frances's chair in the process.

"My," Frances said. "What is the hurry? I wonder where she is going. Do you think I should go check on her?"

David couldn't have that. "Pilton, I heard you're having some difficulty with

renovations in your home.”

Pilton’s hand hit the table while Frances sank in her chair, groaning. “I cannot stand that carpenter! He is a pompous arse who knows nothing of how things are made properly.” He gave his wife a pointed look.

Frances only rolled her eyes. “We hired him because you said to!”

Pilton reared back in his chair. “Since when do you listen to me?”

Frances’s laugh echoed through the terrace.

Satisfied that Frances wouldn’t follow Jenny, David tucked his pocket watch back in his jacket and walked into the house.

He stood in the small entryway and listened for any sounds. He heard rustling behind the first door. He opened it and peeked in.

Jenny was standing in front of a window, once again looking out over the garden party. He slipped in through the door, noticing that they were, once again, alone.

She said nothing, but she was positively radiating nerves.

How delicious.

“We’re going to have a problem if you keep looking at me like that, kitten.” His voice carried across the room, startling her.

Her whole body tensed up at his words. “Correct me if I’m wrong, Your Grace, but I’m currently not looking at you.”

She still didn't turn around. She just stood there, staring out the window.

He grinned.

Cheeky, little kitten.

“You know what I mean. You've been throwing bedroom eyes at me the whole party.”

She scoffed at his accusation but still did not face him.

“Turn around.” Damn, his voice was gruffer than he had expected.

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Because.” Her voice wavered, but her ramrod-straight back told him enough to know that she wasn’t going to willingly turn around.

He took a deep breath. “Are you really going to be childish with me?”

She spun around at the accusation.

Interesting.

“I am not childish. I just wish not to look at you,” she huffed, picking an imaginary speck of dirt off her sleeve.

“And why is that?” he countered as he leisurely strolled towards her. With every step he took, her breaths became more shallow. “I’ve been told I’m a handsome man. Do you find me lacking?”

He stopped and widened his stance, holding his arms out for her inspection.

Her eyebrows rose, and a blush bloomed on her cheeks. She dropped her eyes to the

floor. "I wish not to talk about your appearance. It is of no matter to me."

He clucked his tongue as he approached her. "I don't believe you."

Stubbornness drove her eyes back up. "I could not care less what you look like. Besides, what I think of you doesn't matter, what with our arrangement," she said with a shake of her head. "We agreed that you help me find a match and I keep you company." She pinned him with a glare. "You could look like a giant wart and it wouldn't affect me one way or another."

Her childish insult had him grinning. "Ah, but don't you see? We've already started your lessons."

Her eyes widened as he stood in front of her and traced one finger down her cheek, to her neck. Her eyes fluttered shut as she tilted her head back to allow him more access. He took her chin into his hand, and her eyes opened.

"You need to learn how to flirt with a man, Miss Bennett," he whispered. He felt her body shake with anticipation at his words. "I'm quite positive that likening a man to a wart is not flirting."

He lifted one dark eyebrow, challenging her to disagree.

Embarrassment seeped through her pores as he chuckled. She pushed away from him.

"Ugh. Why must you always toy with me?" Her hands were fidgeting with the ribbons that lined her dress.

His little kitten was a bundle of nerves.

He stepped back and leaned against the desk to the right of the window. "Because

you make it so easy.”

“Isthisflirting?” She waved a finger between the two of them. “Because if so, then I need to rethink our arrangement.”

He tilted his head to the side. “If I were flirting with you, you’d know it.”

She rolled her eyes. “How original. How mysterious,” she drawled. “Is there a courting guidebook for men in publication? Because I’m pretty sure I’ve heard other men say this to gullible, naive girls before.”

David’s eyes darkened as he abruptly stood to his full height. Jenny took a step back at the abrupt shift in his mood and stance.

He stalked back to her until they were standing almost toe-to-toe, causing her to crane her neck to look up into his eyes. The alarm in her eyes was more enticing than he cared to admit.

His hand cupped her cheek, while his other slid down her back to her waist and pulled her in. “There is no guidebook when it comes to you, kitten. There’s only one way to learn your truths.”

Her breath came out in small puffs. She leaned into his hand and rose on her tiptoes to meet his lips. Her hands timidly slid up his arms to find purchase on his shoulders.

David lowered his lips to hers, but the sound of voices outside the library had both of them jumping out of each other’s arms.

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Both panting, both wanting, they could only just stare at each other, praying the door didn't open. Whoever was outside would need to be blind not to see what was about to happen in this room.

“Judging by what almost just transpired, I think I more than proved my ability to teach you how to flirt, kitten.”

Jenny stood, trying to slow her breathing. She only nodded in agreement.

“So our agreement is still on?”

Again, she only nodded, the pink slowly disappearing from her cheeks. David could admit he missed seeing it.

“Come to my residence tomorrow night, and we'll continue our first lesson.”

David turned to leave, but her breathy voice stopped him.

“Continue?”

He turned back to her with a smile. “Of course. You think you succeeded in learning how to adequately flirt because I almost kissed you?” he scoffed.

Jenny blinked at him, completely lost in the moment.

“My sweet kitten. That was all me—you just stood there.” He shook his head. “No, you need more lessons in the art of flirting. Trust me, when I'm done with you, it will

be you in charge of the conversation, making the man putty in your hands, and it will be him hoping for you to kiss him, not the other way around.”

The blush returned to her cheeks, and David inwardly congratulated himself. She was going to be quite the student.

CHAPTER 7

Jenny stood in front of the door, willing herself to knock. She tried convincing herself that her hands were shaking because of the evening chill, but she knew better. The truth was, the prospect of an evening alone with the Duke was wreaking havoc on her nervous system. With a quick glance over her shoulder to make sure there were no stragglers on the street who would recognize her, she knocked on the door.

The door opened, and the Duke of Marlow stepped out of the shadows of the entryway. “Miss Bennett,” his voice rumbled. “So nice to see you standing outside my door instead of having to force you out from behind my bushes.” He dipped his head in acknowledgment.

Jenny blushed. She took a deep breath, refusing to let him get the better of her. “Must we start the night this way?”

The Duke grinned. “Ah, this is all part of the lesson, kitten. Men like to play with their food.”

Jenny’s eyes widened at his forwardness. “I, um... I honestly don’t know how to respond to that.”

“And that is where I come in,” he said with a devilish wink. He stood to the side and ushered her inside.

“I think we should start in the parlor.” He led her down the hallway as he continued. “We can pretend it’s the start of a dinner party, people are just coming in, and there are some drinks to lighten the mood and get everyone liquored up for what will most likely be a dull night of monotonous conversations.”

Jenny remained quiet at his side, listening to him set the scene. She risked a quick glance at him while he spoke. He seemed comfortable in his own space. The previous times she saw him out in public, he appeared to be closed off. But here, he was relaxed—chatty even.

“Forgive me, Your Grace, I didn’t realize you held many dinner parties.”

“I don’t. I do, however, attend quite a few, unfortunately. I’m usually brooding in a corner, waiting for the right time to make my excuses and leave. Most attendants of dinner parties are insufferable.”

Jenny looked at the table of light refreshments. “Yet, here you are, recreating the start of one for our amusement.”

The Duke swallowed. “There’s a big difference between a normal dinner party and this one.”

Jenny cocked her head. “And what is that?” she questioned.

The Duke’s eyes darkened as he looked at her. “I like the people who are at this one.”

His words caused a river of fire to course through her veins. She couldn’t hide her blush if she tried. She felt as if her whole body was engulfed in flames.

She took a few deep breaths to regain her composure.

The Duke sauntered towards her. “First things first, and this might be your most difficult hurdle to overcome.”

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Jenny eyed him, waiting for him to continue.

He lifted one finger to her chin and tilted her face up towards his. “Your blush.”

Jenny gasped, horrified, and tried to pull away. Could there be anything more embarrassing?

His grip on her chin tightened while his other hand grabbed her arm, steadying her. “I mean no offense whatsoever, Miss Bennett. But courting is a game where your secrets will be used against you. Due to your complexion, your secrets are usually written all over your face.”

Jenny had never been more embarrassed in her life. “I’m sorry, Your Grace. I never knew that,” she drawled. “I guess I should go change my complexion then,” she huffed.

The Duke ignored her impudence. “You might not be able to change it, nor should you, but you have more control over it than you think.”

Jenny laughed. “Trust me, Your Grace, I have lived with this affliction my entire life. It doesn’t take much to make me blush, unfortunately.”

David shook his head, releasing her chin but still holding her arm. “I beg to differ.”

Jenny raised an eyebrow. “Please, enlighten me then.” She rolled her eyes.

This ought to be good.

“You usually blush when you’re embarrassed, yes?”

Jenny lifted a shoulder in agreement.

“What makes you embarrassed?” he questioned. “Things you do not know,” he answered his own question matter-of-factly. “Situations you’re not used to.” He leaned in closer. “People saying or doing things you’re not accustomed to.”

Their breaths mingled. Jenny could feel the start of something building low in her core.

“So, what are you suggesting?” Her voice was barely above a whisper.

“We put you in those situations enough times for them to become commonplace for you.” The Duke’s voice slid over her form like soft silk, and goosebumps erupted all over her body. His eyes trailed over her face. “Like now, your blush isn’t as it was before. But then again, you and I have been in this position before, have we not?” His eyes sparkled with mischief.

Jenny was mesmerized by his words. She searched his eyes for some sort of answer to a question she didn’t know how to ask. She nodded, hoping that he would take the next step—whatever that might be. She leaned in. Maybe he’d kiss her if she moved her body just so?

Instead, the Duke stepped back, leaving her unsettled.

“See? I proved my point. The first time we were in that position, your blush was so deep I could see it through the shadows of the library.”

Jenny blinked. How was he able to step away when they were mere breaths away from doing something more?

She balled her fists at her sides to remind herself she was here to get tips on how to find a husband. People always called her naive. If she wanted to prove them wrong, she needed to learn how to leave her childhood fantasies behind and learn how to be a woman. And by some strange twist of fate, the Duke of Marlow was her only hope.

Stepping away from her was the hardest thing David had done in recent memory. Damn her luscious lips for looking so plump and damn kissable. He turned towards the drink cart. He needed some distance to regroup and get back on track.

“My thinking is, the more we work on your flirting and being close to a man, the less likely your blush will expose you.”

He poured whisky into his tumbler, then turned to find Jenny still standing in the middle of the room, with a peculiar look on her face.

“Everything all right, Miss Bennett?”

She blinked, then shook her head. “Yes. Forgive me. It just amazes me how quickly you can go from one extreme to the other.”

David took a sip of whisky. “I’m not sure I understand.”

Jenny laughed. “Of course not.”

She joined him at the drink cart and nodded towards a tumbler, silently asking for a whisky. With a raised eyebrow, David poured her a healthy two fingers.

Jenny took a sip and sputtered. “Ugh! This is awful. How do you drink this?”

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David couldn't help but laugh at her honesty. "It's an acquired taste."

Jenny made a noncommittal noise. "Hmm, just like men. No wonder you drink it."

David chuckled while pouring her some punch his maid had brought in specially for her visit. "Here, drink this."

Jenny accepted the punch and took a sip. Her shoulders dropped in appreciation. "Much better, thank you."

"Of course. Now, tell me, what did you mean by how I go from one extreme to the other?"

Jenny waved him off. "Oh, that. Well, when we met in the library, as you said, we were in a similar situation of closeness, and I thought... well, I thought..."

David put his whisky down and folded his arms across his chest. He knew where she was going with this, but watching her fish for words was entertaining.

"You thought what?"

Jenny closed her eyes and let out a long sigh. "I thought you were going to kiss me." She opened her eyes and stared down at her feet. "Then again in your office, then at the party, and now..." She covered her face. "I'm sorry, this is all so embarrassing. I feel I have made a mistake. I should go." She put her glass down and turned.

David grabbed her shoulders, turning her back to face him. "Look at me, Miss

Bennett.”

Jenny’s eyes, however, remained trained on the floor.

“Look at me, Jenny,” he demanded.

Her eyes flew to his at the mention of her name.

“This is exactly why you should be here. I mentioned before that courting is a game—a game of risk, a game of chance. In order to win, you need to get close to the enemy.”

Jenny cracked a smile. “Enemy? I thought I was looking for a match?”

“Make no mistake, Miss Bennett, most men approach finding a bride like going to war. There will be strategic maneuvers, doing things you don’t want to do, but in the end, someone will cave, concessions will be made, and a match will be set.”

Jenny fluttered her eyelashes. “How romantic.”

David smirked. “You asked for help to find a match, not love.”

Jenny nodded her head in agreement. “Touché.”

David let her shoulders go and went back to the drink cart, taking another sip of his whisky.

“I do often wonder, though.” Her voice was soft, inquisitive. “How easily you go from being so close to kissing someone to walking away. I was led to believe that most men can’t stop once they start something.”

David knew she was goading him, but he couldn't help feeling a flash of anger at her words. "Where have you heard that? Unless you're telling me you're speaking from experience."

Jenny cocked her head. "I assure you, the only experience I have is with you."

David didn't want to know why that response soothed his ego.

"But women talk." She shrugged. "I assume they're talking about similar predicaments to the one you and I were in."

David's hands tightened around his tumbler. Her naïveté was endearing and a constant reminder that he was dealing with an inexperienced young woman.

He took a deep breath and let it out. "Something like that," he muttered. "But to answer your question, I go from one extreme, as you say, to another because I try not to let anything rile me. Most of the time, situations such as those at a dinner or a ball are not worth the worry."

"Have you always had a cynical outlook on life?"

Jenny's voice was laced with pure curiosity, but her question brought up better-forgotten memories.

David shuddered, trying to steer the conversation away from his past and back to their arrangement. "I've been around enough to know where importance lies and what can, and should, be left alone to sort itself out."

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“And courting a woman is something that cansort itself out?” Jenny’s expression was one of mockery and disbelief.

David shrugged. “Most of the time, yes.” He finished his drink and poured himself another. “I wasn’t exaggerating when I said most men approach courting like going to war, but it’s also worth noting that men are simple creatures.”

He took a long sip of his whisky before setting down the glass. Then he walked over to the fireplace, placed his elbow on the mantel, and leaned against it, letting his eyes roam over her body.

“When we see something we like, we tend to go after it.”

Jenny walked towards the drink cart. “Is it really that simple for you lot?”

He watched her pick up her glass only to set it back down.

She’s nervous.

David straightened up. “Mostly. We’ve resigned ourselves to knowing that a game will be played, but more often than not, we’d rather enjoy an honest conversation with a woman who is confident and knowledgeable.”

Jenny snorted. “But not too confident, right?”

“How do you mean?” David started moving towards her.

“At the last ball, I was dancing with Lord Banefield.” David couldn’t hold in a snort. “And he led me to believe that a woman shouldn’t be too forward with her conversations.”

“Banefield is a pompous arse who is afraid of his own shadow.”

Jenny’s throaty laugh had him adjusting his trousers as he stopped in front of her. For a woman who claimed she needed lessons in getting a man’s attention, she definitely had a natural talent for getting his.

“Regardless, I was brought up to believe that women are to be demure, quiet, and non-aggressive.”

David considered her words. “Simply put, Miss Bennett, you were lied to. Unless you want a weak man who would inevitably bore you, I would consider my lessons as your only guide on the matter.”

Jenny chuckled. “So far, all you told me was to control an uncontrollable bodily reaction and be confident.” She clapped slowly. “Gentlemen, guard your loins—here I come!”

His heart flipped at her uncontrollable laughter. Her ability to be herself no matter the situation was refreshing.

David shook the undesirable feeling away. “I see your point. Let’s get back to flirting.”

Jenny squared her shoulders and brought her hands up in front of her as if she just stepped into a boxing ring. She bounced on her toes.

“You look like you’re gearing up for a fight, Miss Bennett.”

Jenny smirked. “You did say most men approach courting as if they’re going off to war.”

David acknowledged her quip. “Correct” He reached out and lowered her hands to her sides. “So, first things first, getting a man’s attention.”

Jenny chewed on her bottom lip. She was hanging on his every word, and it stroked his ego. He enjoyed having her focus solely on him.

“This is where confidence comes into play. When you walk into a room, make sure your eyes are up, looking straight ahead. Walk into a room like you own it, like you belong there.”

Jenny rolled her lips between her teeth. “Hmm. What if I don’t feel like I do?”

David was surprised by her admission. “What do you mean? I thought this would be the easy part for you.”

She blushed slightly as she looked anywhere but at him. “Maybe it’s because Thomas and I joined Society later than everyone else, but I sometimes feel like we are forever playing catch up.”

He was genuinely confused. “How can that be? You have no problems when you and I are together. You seem quite confident around me.”

Jenny laughed him off. “You’re you. You make it easy to be myself.” She rolled her eyes. “I don’t know, maybe it’s because I’m not afraid of you.”

David leaned in to crowd her space. “I thought I told you that you should be afraid of me?”

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Jenny blinked. “No. You said I should stay out of darkened rooms.” She looked around the dimly lit room. “Technically, this room isn’t darkened, just dim. Should I have asked what constitutes ‘darkened’ to you? Perhaps candlelight is too dark?”

“You ramble when you’re nervous,” David pointed out.

Jenny nodded her head. “It’s a talent of mine.”

David’s lips curled into a slow smile. She was quite the puzzle.

He reached out and tapped the tip of his finger on the end of her nose. “Stay on topic, kitten.”

She wrinkled her nose. “You’re the one who brought it up,” she grumbled.

“Back to confidence. If you can be confident around me of all people, you can be confident around anyone. And if not, fake it. I guarantee you that the majority of the ton is doing the same thing.”

He let those words sink in as he walked to the far side of the room.

“Now, when you walk into a room, you want to use your whole body to capture a man’s attention. You want your movements to seem light and airy. Walk with purpose, your head held high.” He stopped to take in her stance in the firelight. “Lucky for you, you always seem approachable.”

He turned and leaned against a table. “Walk towards me.”

The color drained from her face. “Now? Me? Walk towards you?”

David just nodded.

Her steps were timid at first, her eyes trained on the floor in front of her.

“Eyes on me, Jenny.”

Her eyes flicked up before her head followed. He signaled her to square her shoulders, and she did just that.

“Now, give me a small smile, like a smirk. Like you have a secret no one knows. That a girl. Now, let it widen as you approach so when you stop in front of your target, he can do nothing but stare at your beautiful lips to learn their secrets.”

His pants became tight as he watched this glorious creature follow his every direction and approach him with the poise and intention of a clever minx.

As she stood in front of him, her smile was bright and stunning. Her eyes twinkled, and the firelight created a red halo around her that was downright sensual.

David swallowed. “That was perfect.”

Jenny huffed out a breath, immediately breaking the spell she cast over him. “Then why does no one approach me?”

She rounded the sofa and plopped down, defeated.

David looked back at her.

And she accuses me of changing moods quickly.

“Must be your conversation,” he deadpanned.

Jenny narrowed her eyes at him. “Excuse me?”

She was getting riled up, and he wasn’t ashamed to admit that watching her face take on the color of contention was exciting.

David raised an eyebrow. “Remember, kitten, men are simple creatures. I think it’s safe to say that you speak what’s on your mind.”

Jenny nodded in concession. “I do.”

David walked around the sofa and sat next to her. “Right. There are two things that motivate men—competition and sex. You’re motivating men to compete, when you should be motivating them to solicit sex.”

The horrified look on her face was entertaining.

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“I see I’ve shocked you with this simple truth.”

Her pupils were dilated, her breath was coming out in short bursts, and her cheeks were red. God, she was magnificent when she was worked up.

“Remember, Jenny, men are...”

“Simple creatures,” she finished.

David leaned back on the sofa and stretched out his legs. “Correct. You want them to think they are winning. When you speak your mind, eloquently and perfectly self-aware I’m sure”—he raised his hand to stop her from interrupting—“you are essentially challenging them. I’m afraid most men don’t like that.”

Jenny sighed in defeat. “So where does that leave me? I tried being quiet—it is not my thing.”

The image of a not-so-quiet Jenny underneath him flashed through his mind.

Keep it together, man.

David smiled. “No. No need to be mute. But how you talk to a man can be the difference between motivating him to a duel and motivating him to intimacy.”

Jenny tilted her head to the side, the light once again highlighting her soft features. She looked ethereal in this light.

David raised his hand to trail his thumb over his bottom lip and watched her eyes track the movement. He rolled his lips between his teeth to stop from smiling. He was doing that too much around her.

“Talk slowly, draw certain words out to keep our attention.”

He demonstrated by drawing out the word ‘attention.’

“Change your tone, play with how you say things, keep it interesting. You want them hanging on your every word. Speak in such a way”—he lowered his voice, causing her to lean in—“that they have to lean in to hear you. When you capture their attention, use your body to keep it.”

He lifted his fingers to his neck. “You can play with the buttons on your dress. It’s an innocent gesture, but it draws the eye.”

He pulled at the cravat at his neck, and her eyes followed his fingers.

“Jenny?”

“Hmm?” Her eyes were fixed on his throat.

He had intended to point out that she was no longer sitting there listening, rather she was leaning in, staring at his throat, but the words wouldn’t form. Instead, he found himself leaning in as well.

He sat back on the sofa, and her face fell. “Why did you sit back?”

David played dumb. “I proved my point. I had you hook, line and sinker. Hanging on my every word.”

“But I thought you were going to kiss me... and once again you toyed with me.”

David turned his body to face hers. “I don’t take what’s not freely given. If you want something, you’ll need to ask for it.”

She might be outspoken in some areas, but he knew when it came to intimacy, she was not.

“So kiss me then.”

David sat up. “What?”

She sat straighter. “So. Kiss. Me. Then. You say men like confidence. Well, here’s me being?—”

Her words were swallowed by David’s mouth. Her sweet, delicious mouth which had challenged him at every turn was sweeter than he had imagined.

His tongue pushed between her lips and tangled with hers. She moaned into his mouth, and the vibration ran through him and awakened something he thought he had lost long ago.

Alarm bells rang in his head, but for once, he ignored them. He reached up and cupped her chin, tilting her head to allow him to plunge his tongue deeper into her mouth. His body pressed hers into the sofa.

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He wanted more of her. He wanted more than her mouth. He wanted her body, her soul. He wanted to consume her.

Her body awakened under his touch. She reached up and grabbed a hold of his shirt before her hands ran through his hair. Her movements were jerky at first, hesitant, but she found her rhythm quickly. David couldn't help but picture her finding her rhythm fully underneath him.

Startled, he pulled away. Both of them were breathing heavily.

“Well, I think you have successfully learned that lesson.” He stood up, running a hand through his hair. “I think we should call it an evening.”

Her eyes were dark with lust as she nodded absently. “Oh-h, alright. Yes. Right. I, um, I should go. Thank you, Your Grace.”

He saw her to the door and helped her into her coat. “I enjoyed our evening together, Jenny.”

She slowly blinked up to him, still in a daze. “I as well, Your Grace.”

He leaned down and kissed her forehead. “You can call me David, considering our arrangement.”

Jenny's mouth formed the shape of an 'O', but she didn't say anything. With a small pat on her backside, she was off, and David was left marveling how fast of a learner she was.

CHAPTER 8

“Thank you so much for coming with me, Jenny. Thomas absolutely abhors the opera.” Frannie turned to make sure Jenny got out of the carriage all right.

Jenny looped her arm through her sister-in-law’s as they walked up the steps of the opera house. “I’m sure he was overcome with grief at being away and not being able to accompany you this evening,” she joked.

Frannie laughed. “Something like that. If he had his way, he’d never set foot in an opera house again.”

“I believe it. The only art Thomas is interested in is how organized his ledgers are at the end of the day.” Jenny rolled her eyes at the thought of her straight-laced brother.

“You know your brother well,” Frannie quipped. “Regardless, I appreciate you coming with me. I’ve heard such wonderful things about this opera, and I’ve been begging Thomas to bring me here.”

Jenny smiled. “I’m more than happy to be here. Thomas has no idea what he’s missing.”

The two women made their way into the lobby. Jenny always loved coming to the opera. Aside from the ballroom, it was a place to see and be seen.

It was also the perfect place to put into practice some of the tips David gave her.

David.

She bit her lip to keep herself from smiling too widely. Just thinking his Christian name gave her goosebumps. She still couldn’t believe he allowed her to call him by

his given name. It felt so wrong... and so right. Much like their kiss.

The lights in the lobby dimmed.

Frannie touched Jenny's arm, interrupting her reverie. "Why don't we make our way to our box?"

Jenny nodded and followed her through the crowds. People were beginning to gather in front of the doors to the opera house, creating a mob that was trying to funnel through the doors. Jenny's foot was stepped on in the chaos.

"Ow!" She tried hopping on her non-injured foot, but she ended up losing her balance and colliding with a wall.

No. Not a wall. A man. A very solid man.

She turned to offer her apologies, but her eyes landed on the emerald-green ones that had been haunting her days.

"Your Grace?"

A body knocked into her from behind, causing her to fall forward into David.

"Oh, I'm terribly sorry." Her hands rested on his chest, and she hesitated to move them. She rather liked the way his chest felt under her hands.

A not-so-subtle cough from behind her had her pulling away.

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“Duke,” Frannie said, casting a knowing look at Jenny, who was now standing to the side, fidgeting. “How nice it is to see you tonight. Although, with how crowded it is, I dare say most of the ton is in attendance tonight.”

David’s eyes never left Jenny’s. “Yes, it appears to be that way.”

Jenny’s body flushed under his stare. She found herself staring at the top button of his shirt. She couldn’t bring herself to hold eye contact. Standing this close to him after what transpired at this house a few nights ago was causing her brain cells to misfire. She felt like she had the memory displayed on her forehead for the world to see whenever she looked at him.

“Is your husband here, Duchess?” David finally tore his eyes away from her to acknowledge Frances.

“I’m afraid not. He is away on business, so my darling sister has agreed to accompany me for a night out on the town.”

David’s eyes flicked back to Jenny, once again causing her heart to race.

Damn this man and the effect he has on me.

Her emotions were a chaotic whirlwind while he stood there, seemingly unaffected.

Does nothing rankle this man?

She took a few deep breaths and focused on what she and David went over during

their last lesson. Men like subtle confidence and eye contact. Straightening her back and squaring her shoulders, she lifted her eyes to his.

“How thoughtful of her.” His voice was soft and smooth.

Jenny offered a coy smile.

“Would you ladies care to join me this evening? I have a center box, and it would be my honor to share it with you both.”

Frances looked at Jenny and shrugged. “That would be lovely. Thank you, Your Grace. Our box is off to the side, and I’ve always wanted to see a performance from one of the center boxes. What do you say, Jenny? Shall we join the Duke?”

“I think that would be a wonderful idea. Thank you, Your Grace, for the kind offer.” Jenny nodded her head in thanks.

“Splendid. Please, follow me.”

David walked them up the stairs to their left and down the hallway to a center box. All the while, Frannie kept glancing at Jenny.

“What?” Jenny mouthed behind David’s back.

Frannie, afraid of being overheard, tilted her head towards the Duke and back to Jenny, raising her eyebrows, insinuating that something was going on between them.

Jenny scrunched up her nose. “No.”

But as usual, her face betrayed her.

Frannie didn't miss her blush. Her eyes widened, and she opened her mouth to say something, but Jenny nudged her, pleading for silence.

Frannie eyed the Duke, who was now standing in the doorway, holding the curtains open for the women to walk through.

"Thank you, Your Grace," Frannie said with a sideways glance at Jenny, who just rolled her eyes.

David gestured to the front row. "Please, sit here, it offers the best view in the house."

Frannie waved him off. "No, thank you, Duke. I like to be higher up. Why don't you and Jenny sit in the front row, and I'll sit right behind you."

Jenny cringed inwardly.

Very subtle, Frannie.

She knew she would have a lot of explaining to do on the carriage ride home tonight. There is no way that Frannie was going to let this drop.

"Very well, if you insist. Miss Bennett? Care to join me in the front row?"

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Jenny took his proffered hand. “Yes, I would love to.”

David settled into the seat next to her. “Have you been to the opera often?”

Jenny looked over the theater below her. David was right, these were the best seats in the house.

“I’ve been a few times, yes. I’ve always enjoyed coming here.” She looked back at him. “I must admit, I was surprised to see you here. This doesn’t seem like your favorite type of outing.”

David shrugged his shoulder. “I’ve been told I need to get out more, so here I am.”

“Lucky me.” Jenny smiled.

“Yes.” David eyed her. “Lucky you.”

Jenny refused to break eye contact. “Tell me, Your Grace, are you familiar with this particular opera?”

David shrugged.

That bloody shrug.

Jenny was determined to see his carefully cultivated indifference break.

“I am not. However, I heard it is heartbreaking and very tragic. There are stories of

even men leaving greatly touched by the performance. I even heard that some men were seen crying during it.”

She was goading him, hoping to get some sort of reaction.

David leaned back in his seat. “Is that so? Well, now I am intrigued.”

“Yes. So am I.”

The house lights dimmed as Jenny sat back in her chair. Not only was she going to see one of the most popular operas of her time, but she would have a front-row seat to David’s emotions.

Surely, an opera that had touched the hearts of thousands would be able to crack the tough exterior of David Elkins, the Duke of Marlow.

Three hours in and David was ready to shoot someone. Yes, the singing was good, and the music was enticing and well-played, but he would rather be at a ball than here. The only positive about this evening was the woman sitting next to him.

The woman who was watching his every move like a hawk.

He leaned over and whispered to her, “Is something amiss?”

Her eyes snapped to the stage. “No. I’m fine, thank you.”

Her hands were fidgeting in her lap, and she sat straight in her chair. She couldn’t be more nervous than if she were standing on the stage singing herself.

David turned back to the stage, but his mind was still on the woman next to him. He could feel her eyes returning to his profile.

Why is she looking at me like that?

Could she be remembering the other night? The way her body fit perfectly against his? How her mouth molded to his and the delicious sounds she made when he deepened the kiss?

David shifted in his seat. Not only was he bored, but now he was also uncomfortable.

Jenny tilted her head, silently questioning if he was all right. He waved her off, hoping he wouldn't cause himself any embarrassment. They were not that far in their lessons for him to educate her in all the ways a woman can affect a man.

Just thinking of how that conversation would go and the beautiful blush that would bloom on her cheeks had him shifting in his seat once again.

How much longer can this blasted performance be?

An hour later, he was escorting the women back to their carriage. Frannie was her normal jovial self, but something seemed to be plaguing Jenny.

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“Everything all right, Miss Bennett?” David asked.

Jenny chewed on her bottom lip before answering. “Just wondering how you enjoyed the performance.”

He shrugged, knowing it frustrated her. Her little sigh at his gesture lit the fire that was starting to grow in his gut. He balled his hands into fists by his sides to stop himself from reaching out to her.

She was still watching him. Oh, right.

“It was... entertaining.”

She raised a reddish brown eyebrow. “Entertaining? That’s your response? It showcased love and loss, trials and tribulations, death... All of that is just entertaining to you?”

David’s face split into a devilish grin. “I would think the definition of entertaining is sufficient enough to describe all of those things.”

Jenny’s teeth began to grind. He desperately wanted to reach out and rub the tension from her jaw.

“You’re purposefully being obtuse again!” She stomped her foot.

David bit back a smile. She was absolutely delectable when she was flustered.

“Am I?” He winked.

A little snort came from behind them. They both stopped and turned back to Frannie, who was walking behind them.

“Oh, don’t let me interrupt,” she said with a knowing grin.

Jenny huffed out a sigh. “All I’m saying is that it was a very emotional performance, one that is known all around the world to bring even grown men to tears.”

“Why are you so preoccupied with my reaction to an opera, Miss Bennett?”

Jenny looked up to the heavens and sighed. She looked deflated.

David whooped with laughter. “Why would you be upset that I wasn’t overcome with emotion while watching an opera?”

Jenny looked between him and Frannie.

Frannie’s hands flew up. “Don’t look at me. I’m just trying to get into the carriage.” She hurried past the couple, and, with David’s help, she climbed into the carriage. She poked her head out of the window. “I’ll just be in here when you are through with your conversation.”

With that, her face disappeared into the carriage, but not before she gave a cheeky wink to her sister-in-law.

David took a step towards Jenny. “Well? Why are you upset with me?”

Jenny swallowed and pursed her lips. “Because nothing seems to affect you, and it’s frustrating. I’m pretty sure a dog could get shot in front of you and you wouldn’t stop

to acknowledge it.”

David folded his hands in front of him. This beautiful creature had no idea how much he felt, especially when she was around. Which was the exact reason why he could never show it. Feeling too much could lead to mistakes, and he couldn’t afford any more mistakes.

But seeing her now, with the moonlight glancing off her auburn hair, he couldn’t stop himself from reaching out to touch a silky curl. “Miss Bennett, I was very much affected tonight, but it was not the opera that toyed with my emotions.”

Jenny’s eyes searched his. His fingers let go of the curl and slowly trailed over her jaw, down her cheek, stopping just before they touched her décolletage. Her breathing was erratic, and David was mesmerized by the rise and fall of her chest.

He leaned in, whispering in her ear, “Come to my residence tomorrow night. I’ll show you all the ways you can affect a man.”

Jenny’s eyes widened. He saw the goosebumps rise on her arms. She glanced at the carriage, but thankfully, Frannie had closed the curtain.

David was certain his voice was low enough; he doubted Frannie had heard his comment. He waited for Jenny’s eyes to return to his.

“Will you come?” Blasted, he sounded needy.

Jenny nodded. “I will.”

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David helped her in the carriage and saw them off. For the first time in a long time, he was looking forward to hosting someone in his home.

Jenny settled into the seat across from Frances. The two women stared at each other as the carriage pulled away.

“Well?” Frances prompted. “Are you going to tell me what’s going on?”

Jenny tried feigning ignorance. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

Frances cackled. “Oh, don’t give me that. I was once young and smitten with someone, and look where it got me!”

“Happily married with a beautiful son?” Jenny noted.

Frances leveled a glare in her direction. “I’m serious. I know what I saw, Jenny. Is there something going on between you and the Duke of Marlow?”

“No. We danced at Lady Staunton’s and had a lovely conversation about Lord Banefield’s goal to wipe out balls altogether by injuring all the women. He was just inquiring about my recovery.”

Frances arched an eyebrow. “While I’m impressed by how quickly you came up with the semi-believable lie, I don’t believe it.”

Jenny smiled to herself and moved the window curtain to watch the passing scenery. While nothing scandalous happened during the opera, she did feel closer to the Duke.

She didn't know what that meant, but she couldn't ignore the butterflies that fluttered in her stomach whenever she saw him.

"Jane."

Jenny's eyes snapped to Frances. She never used her given name.

"I'm serious. Be careful. You are still young in your Seasons, but there are men out there who are willing to disrupt your life for a night of reckless abandon. The Duke of Marlow is known to be that kind of man. I do not wish to see that happen to you."

Jenny's eyes narrowed. "You did it with my brother, and may I remind you how that turned out?" she snapped.

Frances sighed. "Jenny, not everyone is so lucky. You are so young?—"

"Stop. Just stop!" Jenny cried. "I'm tired of people dictating what I want or how I should live my life based on their own experiences. When do I get to experience life, Frannie? When is it my time to make mistakes and fall in love and out of love? To learn what love even is?"

Frances sat back, shocked, staring at her.

A wave of exhaustion washed over Jenny, and she rested her head on the back of her seat. After a breath, she apologized.

"I'm sorry, Frances. It's just that I keep hearing that this is the time of my life where I'll get to experience what is truly out there, but I feel like no one is letting me experience it."

Frances dropped her eyes to her lap. "I'm sorry, Jenny. I had no idea you felt this

way. I'm so caught up in the household and raising Simon that I haven't been around much for you."

Jenny reached across the carriage and took Frances's hand. "I do not blame you. If anything, I am envious of you. I wish I had the same."

Frances put her other hand on their joined ones and squeezed gently. "And that is why I implore you to stay away from the Duke of Marlow. Nothing but scandals follow him." She cupped Jenny's face, stroking her cheek. "Your match is out there, I know it. Just give it time. And I'll do better at being there for you."

Jenny forced a smile. She was beginning to realize that she didn't want another man. She wanted the butterflies, the mystery. She wanted the enigma that was the Duke of Marlow.

CHAPTER 9

Jenny waited by the pianoforte for David to return with Millie, one of his maids who knew how to play. She had spent all day fluttering around her house with nervous energy, but now that she was here, she felt frozen in place.

She'd been to David's residence several times now, and each time she kept waiting for it to get easier. It never did.

She knew there was something brewing between them, but she also knew she wasn't experienced enough to know what it was.

She walked over to the large window that looked over the back half of a garden. Rows of beautiful flowers swayed in the summer breeze, lit by the moonlight.

She felt his presence behind her.

“My sister helped plant them. She and my mother worked tirelessly with our gardener to make it just right.”

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His voice was low and gruff, with a hint of something she couldn't quite place.

Sadness?

"It's beautiful. They must've been very proud of their work." Her voice was barely above a whisper.

Maybe it was the mystery that night held, but Jenny felt a vulnerability radiating from him. It made her want to push to see if he would open up to her.

"Do you spend a lot of time out there?"

"No," he bit out, and the spell was broken.

He abruptly stepped from her and cleared his throat. He motioned to a small woman standing next to the pianoforte.

"Miss Bennett, this is Millie. She'll be our accompanist for this evening's lesson."

Jenny dipped her head and smiled at the woman. "Thank you so much for playing for us. I'm sorry it is late in the night. I hope we aren't asking too much of you."

The maid looked up from the ground and quickly glanced at David, looking for approval.

David nodded for her to respond.

“’Tis fine, Miss. I enjoy playing, and if I can help in any way, I’m honored to do so.”

Millie sat on the bench and started playing low and soft. The music was lovely and emotional, and it immediately drew Jenny in.

David came and stood beside her, and together they watched Millie play.

“She plays beautifully,” Jenny remarked, awed.

David nodded in agreement. “She does. She came to my family when she was young. She always played—she learned with my sister. They used to love playing together.”

Sadness. It was sadness that Jenny noted in his voice. Of course. He lost his sister a few years ago. It must be very hard for him to talk about her.

Hoping to lighten the mood, Jenny nudged him. “Well, shall we start? The sooner we start, the sooner I can take care of my feet after you step all over them.”

The corner of David’s mouth quirked up. “If I remember correctly, it was Lord Banefield who ruined your slippers that night. I actually recall you complimenting my dancing abilities.”

Jenny rolled her eyes. “You must be losing your memory in your old age. That does not sound like something I would say about you.”

David smirked. “Well then, I guess I need to prove myself again.” He led her to the center of the room. “Now, tonight’s lesson is all about touch.”

The amiable mood Jenny had just created evaporated. Her core turned to molten lava at the word ‘touch.’

David held his hand out to her, his eyes challenging her to accept it.

She took a deep breath and slipped her hand in his, feeling little shocks of electricity run up her arm to fan the flame that was ignited in her core.

David wrapped one strong arm around her waist while the other held her hand up in his. “Place your other hand on my shoulder.”

Jenny chewed on her lower lip. She knew how to dance—she’d been doing it for years. However, there was something about being instructed by him that made this particular dance feel more intimate than any other dance she’d partaken in.

She lightly placed her hand on his shoulder.

“Good. Now, once we start to move, and conversation is flowing, I want you to ever so slowly move that hand closer to my neck.”

Jenny furrowed her brow in confusion. “That seems quite forward.”

David looked down at her. “It can be. But if the conversation is pleasant and you can tell he’s enjoying himself, light, little touches will be welcomed, I guarantee.”

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She cocked her head. “How could you possibly guarantee something like that?”

“Because I am a man.”

His eyes locked onto hers, and she wanted to look away. There was so much authority in the way he was looking at her that it both frightened and excited her.

“I told you before, we are simple creatures. Keep it simple with us and you’ll go far.”

She looked down as they twirled around the room.

“Next, keep eye contact.”

Jenny closed her eyes in defeat. She knew he was going to say that.

“Eyes on me, Jenny,” he commanded.

A wave of fire rolled over her, and her eyes rose to meet his.

“Eye contact is very important to men. You can tell almost everything there is to know about a person when you look in their eyes.”

David continued to twirl her around the room, the hand on her waist guiding her.

“If they’re honest, if they’re friendly, if they mean you harm.” He leaned to whisper in her ear, “If they want you. The key to everyone’s secrets is in their eyes. You just have to know how to unlock them.”

It was too much. Jenny wanted desperately to pull away. They were too close, too connected. Feelings she didn't understand overtook her when she was this close to him. She never could decipher if it was a good or a bad that he had this effect on her.

“And what is it when you look into my eyes, Your Grace? What secrets do you see there?”

She hoped she sounded flirty, but she felt the conversation was veering away from flirty to something more.

“That's where you seem to differ from most women I've met.”

“How so?”

David took a moment to consider her question. “Most women who approach me are looking for something, a means to an end.”

Jenny's eyebrows rose. “You mean like what I'm doing right now?”

David smiled. “If you recall, I approached you with this offer. So, no, not like what you're doing. As I was saying, you don't hide what you're thinking or feeling.”

“Much to the dismay of the ton, I assure you.” Jenny scrunched up her nose.

“Well, that's a shame. I find it refreshing that what I see is what I get with you. I don't feel like you have any secrets—you are probably the most genuine person I know.”

Jenny preened under his compliment. She was often made to feel that her outward behavior and free expression were a blight on her character, not a strength. Here, in his arms, she felt seen, understood, and appreciated.

The music continued as they moved around the dance floor.

David looked down at her and smiled. “Miss Bennett, did you intend to do that?”

Jenny furrowed her brow. “Do what?”

“Where is your hand?”

Jenny’s eyes flicked to their clasped hands, and her eyebrows knitted together.

“Not that one, kitten.”

It was then that her body reconnected her other hand to her mind. Before she dragged her eyes to her other hand, she could feel the strand of dark hair she was toying with between her fingers.

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Horrified, she stepped back and covered her mouth. “Your Grace! I am so sorry!”

What was happening to her? She had no idea the hand on his shoulder had made its way up to his neck to play with the hair that curled just over his collar. What if she had done that in public?

David didn’t hide his smile as he gathered her back into his arms. “No need for apologies, kitten. Again, I did tell you to do that if the moment felt right. It felt right,” he said with a shrug.

Jenny was still beside herself. “I wasn’t even thinking. One minute I’m listening to you talk, and the next my hand is in your hair. I’m so embarrassed.”

He resumed the dance. “Again, if this dance was happening at an actual ball and I was having an enjoyable conversation with a lady, and her fingers touched my hair or neck, I would have to be a complete imbecile not to know her interest. You want men to know you’re interested in them? You need to show them you’re interested. You did just that.”

Jenny huffed. This didn’t feel appropriate. She couldn’t see herself doing that with another man.

“Did you make yourself move your hand?”

She looked up at David. “No. It was like it had a mind of its own.”

“So you were comfortable, you read my body language, and something in your brain

made your hand move. Did you feel me tense up under your touch?"

Jenny nodded.

"Exactly. Again, we're simple beings. We work in the realms of 'yes' and 'no.' A man would be quick to tell you if you go too far. Although I don't know a man alive who wouldn't appreciate that move from you."

Jenny laughed. "I can definitely name a few."

David's eyes darkened, and she wondered if she said the wrong thing.

"Did I say something that upset you, Your Grace?"

David snapped himself out of wherever his thoughts had taken him. "No, I'm sorry. I got distracted for a moment."

He pulled away from her and rubbed his hands on his trousers.

"Millie?" He looked over to the pianoforte. "That's all for tonight, thank you."

Jenny looked at him in confusion. "Are we done for tonight?"

David waved her off. "No, we can continue our lesson in the parlor."

He turned and walked out of the room.

Jenny sighed. Something offended him, and she was going to figure out this man even if it was the last thing she did.

David walked into the parlor and right to the bar to pour himself a shot of whisky. His

mind was racing with images of Jenny dancing with other men, touching other men. He was seeing red. He needed to calm down before he touched her again, or he would do something they both would most likely regret.

Why was it only now dawning on him that the lessons he was giving her were for her benefit with other men? He was becoming too attached to her.

Downing his whisky and quickly pouring himself another, he once again reminded himself that she was off-limits to him.

Jenny pushed through the door. He took in the blush on her cheeks and the rise and fall of her chest.

Uh oh, the kitten has her claws out. Good.

“What has gotten into you? I cannot keep up with your mood swings.”

She crossed her arms in front of her, unconsciously pushing up her breasts. David threw back his whisky to give himself time to collect his thoughts.

“My apologies, that was rude of me.” He put his tumbler down on the bar and approached her. “I just thought that since you obviously mastered the slight touch while dancing, we should focus on other ways you can show your interest in a man.”

Jenny stood for a moment, studying him. “Well, next time feel free to show a little more decorum and not just storm away.”

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David dipped his head in apology. “Would you care for a drink?”

Jenny shrugged. “Sherry, if you have it.”

David poured some into a glass and offered it to her. As she reached out for it, he pulled it back.

“There is always an opportunity to show your interest in someone, kitten. Don’t let the moment pass you by.”

She tilted her head in question. “How is taking a glass from someone a moment to show interest?”

David tsked. “Brushing of fingers can be very seductive, kitten. When you reach for the glass, over-extend your hand a little. A slight touch here and there will go a long way, trust me.”

He once again held the glass out for her to take.

She blew out a breath and reached for it, this time letting her fingers stretch out a little further than she intended. Her fingers brushed against his as she took the glass.

David blew out a breath. Through her gloves, he could feel the heat from her fingertips as they wrapped around his. It was as if her fingers were branding his—it was intoxicating. If he could have her touch everywhere, he would gladly wear her brand.

Her pupils dilated. She felt it too, he was certain of it. Alarm bells rang in his head, so he dropped his hand once she had the glass firmly in her hand.

“Well done.” Blast it. His voice came out low and broken. She had too much power over him.

She brought the glass up to her mouth. He watched her lips close over the rim and her throat work as she swallowed. He tried to suppress a moan, but he couldn't. She was a siren of the worst kind, one who didn't know how her magic worked. He was falling for her song, and if he wasn't careful, he'd be lost to her forever.

“So, now that I have mastered the art of touch while dancing and drinking, what is next?”

“Conversation.”

Jenny wrinkled her nose. “Please don't make me touch people when they're talking. I see ladies do it all the time, and quite frankly, I get embarrassed for them.”

David chuckled. “What do you mean?”

Jenny pursed her lips. “You know exactly what I mean. These silly ladies who giggle and touch a man's arm in hopes of catching his attention, when really it just sends him running for the hills.”

She then did an impersonation of those women by letting out a high-pitched giggle while grabbing his arm as if it were a life raft in the middle of the ocean.

David couldn't help but laugh. “Yes, those chits are quite annoying and not at all what I'm referring to.”

Jenny persisted with her act.

“Good Lord, will you stop?”

David was about to double over in laughter. He couldn't remember a time when he enjoyed another's person company as much as hers.

“I'm just saying, whenever a woman touches a man during a conversation, it makes me annoyed. They are trying too hard. I could never,” she sniffed.

David pointed at her. “Exactly, they are trying too hard.”

He put his drink down, or what was left of it—he spilled most of it while he was laughing at her performance.

“Tell me, when we were dancing and you touched me, were you trying?”

Jenny shook her head in earnest. “No, it just happened.”

“Young women who try too hard are just that, trying, and it feels most inauthentic. But a touch that happens accidentally...” He lowered his voice to a whisper as he leaned in. “Now that has the ability to elicit strong emotions from both sides.” He ran his fingertips down her arm. ““Did she mean to touch me?” ‘Does she want to touch me again?’ ‘Can I reciprocate?’ It's all a part of the game.”

Jenny stared back at him, unblinking. She was hanging on his every word. The need to act on the growing need within her was becoming too strong to ignore.

Just then, she said the two words that would send him straight to hell if he obliged.

“Kiss me.”

David chuckled. “You’re becoming quite demanding, kitten.”

“You heard me.” Her eyes searched his, and her hands tangled in his hair as she pulled herself up on her tiptoes. “Kiss me,” she breathed.

Her lips crashed into his, swallowing his laugh. Suddenly, it wasn’t funny.

Without warning, his arms pulled her closer to him, drawing a sigh from her lips that made him hungry for more. He pushed her back towards the desk behind her, lifting her onto it.

Her legs naturally opened, allowing him to stand between them. His hands cupped her face, angling it to the perfect position to consume her.

Their tongues crashed against each other in a fight for dominance, neither one wanting to ignore the lust that had overtaken them.

David’s body erupted in flames when Jenny’s hands slid to his front, pulling at his cravat and the top button of his shirt. He wanted her brand, her nails on his skin. He wanted more than to just take her. He wanted to consume her.

He pushed her down onto the desk, grinding the bulge in his trousers against her most delectable center. He swallowed her moan as he began to move. His lips trailed down her neck, leaving bite marks in its wake.

Jenny squirmed underneath him, her legs now wrapped around him, and she tried to pull him closer to her. David thanked God she was a fast learner.

That thought alone was like a cold bucket of water thrown over his head.

She is innocent.

He took a breath to gather his thoughts. His body was itching to do what it was designed to do, but his mind was trying desperately to regain control. It was a fight he was tired of having around her, but one that he mustn't lose.

He pulled away from her deliciously sensitive neck and kissed her panting lips. Then he rested his forehead against hers, their breaths mingling.

"I am sorry, Miss Bennett." His voice was soft and low.

"You better be apologizing for stopping," Jenny quipped.

David stood to adjust himself. He ran a hand through his already disheveled hair. "I'm afraid not. I should not have taken it that far. I took advantage of your innocence. I hope you can accept my apology."

Jenny sat up on the desk, her chest still rising and falling with her heavy breaths. "No need to apologize, Your Grace. I was a willing participant." Her smile was slight but was filled with apprehension. "Did I—Did I do something wrong?"

She lowered her eyes out of frustration, and a sweet pink blush crept onto her cheeks.

David stepped back between her legs to cup her face in his hands once again. "No, no, no. You were, you are, perfect. It is I... I should not have done this."

“Nonsense. You are acting as if you tricked me into it. I came here of my own volition. I am here for exactly this. To learn. So teach me.”

Once more, She reached up to pull him closer to her. His hands covered hers, and he stepped back.

“You do not know what you are freely giving up.”

David looked into her eyes for some sense of understanding, but he only found defiance. Normally, he would be impressed with a woman's ability to know what she wanted, but at that moment, he wished she was more of the docile sort.

She looked up at him with hurt in her eyes. “I am not a child, nor am I naive when it comes to what is expected when a man and a woman...” she trailed off.

“When a man and woman what? If you can't say it, then you shouldn't be doing it.”

He was angry. Did she not know what she was carelessly giving away?

Jenny groaned and pushed him further back. “You're doing it again. You push me away whenever we get close. Why are you fighting this?”

“No, I'm pushing you away for your own good. You're too young to get swept up in this.”

The color rose high on her cheeks. “Do not begin to presume you know what's the best for me. I am tired of people assuming they know my heart and mind. I am my own woman, Your Grace.”

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“You know nothing of what men like me are capable of.” He towered over her. “If you learn one thing from me, Miss Bennett, let it be this—men like me are dangerous. We do things that can’t be forgiven. When you choose your match, make sure he is nothing like me.”

Jenny’s eyes widened, and she could barely hold back her tears. “You don’t mean that. How could you say?—”

“Because it is true!” he bellowed. “You said yourself you know your own heart. Well, I know my character better than anyone else. I am not who you think I am, and there are a lot more of my kind out there than gentlemen. I beg of you to find the latter, or else your life will be nothing but heartbreak. Now, stop acting like a child and go.”

Jenny stood there, bereft, confusion written all over her face. David stalked over to his tumbler of whisky and threw it back, letting the burn soothe his aching throat. He couldn’t bear to look at her despondent face anymore.

Curse her and her expressive features.

He didn’t turn around when the door slammed shut behind him. He didn’t sit when he heard her steps disappear into the night. He didn’t sleep when the footman he ordered to follow her brought back word of her safe return to her home.

Like it or not, this was his cross to bear, and if he couldn’t protect his sister, he would protect Jenny, even if it killed him.

CHAPTER 10

The knock woke Jenny from a restless nap. She had spent the past two days in bed, not knowing, or caring, when one day ended and another began. She kept track of the hour only by the bringing and taking away of breakfast, lunch, and dinner plates—which she had barely touched.

She looked at the door and called for whomever it was to come in. Her voice cracked from misuse.

“Jenny? It’s Frances. Are you alright?”

Jenny poked her head from beneath the duvet. “Define alright.”

Frannie came around and sat next to her on the bed. “You’re worrying me, Jenny. Thomas said he heard you come in late the other night. What on earth were you doing out at night by yourself?”

Jenny groaned. She knew it was only a matter of time before someone heard her. Still, she couldn’t bring herself to tell Frannie the truth. How could she begin to tell her that she agreed to such an arrangement, and with the rakish Duke of Marlow of all people? She had already sworn nothing was going on between them. Telling Frannie the truth and admitting her lie was too much to handle.

Not only that, but she was admittedly embarrassed that the rakish Duke was only scandalous with other women, not her.

The echo of his words still pierced her heart whenever she recalled that night.

“Now, stop acting like a child and go.”

“It was nothing.” She waved off the inquiry. “I’ve been having trouble sleeping, so I go out and walk the grounds at night when that happens.”

She didn’t dare to look Frannie in the eyes. Her sister-in-law was notorious for her ability to sniff out lies from even the most seasoned of liars.

Frannie sat for a moment. “I’m not sure if I believe you, but then again, my own lack of sleep is messing with my mind. I hardly know what I’m doing anymore.”

Jenny silently thanked Simon for being a fussy nighttime sleeper.

“So why have you spent the last two days in bed?”

Jenny pushed herself into a sitting position and rested her head on the headboard behind her. “Have you ever made a fool of yourself?”

Frances let out one of her loud laughs that shook her whole body. “Who do you think you’re talking to? Of course, I have! You have met me, right?” She couldn’t stop chuckling. “Oh, my poor dear. What did you do that has caused this much affliction in your life that you stayed in bed for days?”

Jenny closed her eyes and lightly banged the back of her head against the headboard. “Let’s just say I became interested in someone, and I made an absolute fool of myself in front of them.”

Frannie leaned in and gathered Jenny in her arms. “Oh, Jenny, I have been there. But trust me, matters of the heart seem so much more detrimental than they actually are. I’m sure you weren’t as foolish as you think.”

Jenny pulled away and flopped back down onto the mattress. The absolute horror and embarrassment she felt when she recalled the look of disgust on the Duke’s face

when he told her to leave after she tried to kiss him again was too much to bear.

She pulled a pillow over her head. “I absolutely was. I showed my interest, and he turned me down on the spot.”

Frannie tugged on the pillow, removing it from her face. “If he turned you down, then he is the dumbest man to ever walk the face of the earth.”

Jenny groaned. “You’re just saying that because we’re related.”

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Frannie smiled. “No, I’m saying it because it’s true. If I knew of this man you’re speaking of, I would go right up to him and ask him if he’s all right in the head. Truly, that would be the only possible reason any man would turn you down.”

The idea of Frances marching up to David made a laugh bubble up Jenny’s throat. “What a sight that would be,” she mused.

“I would do it, too,” Frances sniffed.

Jenny wiped a tear from her eye. It felt good to cry from laughing and not from a broken heart. “Of that, I have no doubt,” she sighed. “Do you know what bothers me the most?”

“What?”

Jenny picked at a stray thread on the duvet. “That I didn’t even realize I have feelings for him.” She scrunched up her nose. “Do I have feelings for him? I don’t even know. All I know is that I started to feel something, and I thought he did, too.”

She bit her lip to stop it from quivering. Just thinking about how things ended was enough to send her spiraling again.

Frances took her hand. “In all seriousness, Jenny. You are quite the catch—intelligent, witty, engaging. I don’t know why any man in his right mind would turn you away.”

Jenny swallowed past the lump that had formed in her throat. “Thank you, Frannie.

That means a lot to me.”

Frances stood up and walked towards the door. She turned back before leaving. “Will you join us for dinner tonight, or should I have a tray brought up?”

Jenny looked out the window—it was about time she left her room. “I will join you. But there is something I need to do first.”

Frances nodded. “Very well. I’ll have them ring you when dinner is ready.”

Jenny smiled at her sister-in-law as she closed the door. Once she heard Frannie’s footsteps disappear, she hopped out of bed and went to her desk.

Frances was right. Jenny was quite the catch, and David knew it too. Why else would he kiss her the way he did? She might be naive in some ways, but she would have to be positively obtuse not to understand what would have happened had he not stopped.

“If you learn one thing from me, Miss Bennett, let it be this—men like me are dangerous. We do things that can’t be forgiven.”

His words kept repeating in her head in an endless loop since she left his residence. What did he mean by “men like me”? He was angry. Of that, she had no doubt. But why? What set him off?

She huffed in frustration. It still annoyed her that he presumed to be acting in her best interests. As if she was a child who needed tending to. If there was one thing she could get across to him, it would be that she was not in need of a caregiver.

Jenny pulled out a piece of paper and dipped her quill into the inkwell on her desk. If he thought that abruptly dismissing her would be the end of their conversation, he was mistaken.

She would have the last word.

The next morning, Jenny sat at the breakfast table, enjoying some fruit, when the front bell rang.

Frances looked up from her buttered toast. “Who could that be? Are we expecting anyone?”

Jenny shrugged and nodded. “I’m not. Maybe it’s another carpenter for the library.” She smirked.

Frances narrowed her eyes at her. “Don’t even joke about that. It’s too early for me to get a headache.”

Both women laughed as Simmons appeared in the doorway.

“Miss Bennett? The Duke of Marlow is here to see you.”

Jenny’s aim faltered, and a piece of strawberry rolled down her bodice and landed in her lap. “I’m sorry, who is here?” she squeaked.

Simmons remained standing in the doorway, stoic as ever. “The Duke of Marlow, Miss.”

Jenny and Frances exchanged a glance.

Frances stood up, wiping her hands on her napkin. “Well, please show him to the drawing room. We will be right in.”

Simmons retreated down the hallway to collect the Duke.

Jenny sat frozen in her chair. David was here.

“Jenny?” Frances’s voice took on the matronly tone that irked her. “Why is the Duke of Marlow being escorted to our drawing room?”

Jenny bit her bottom lip and shrugged. Unfortunately for her, it was still too early in the morning for her brain to be awake enough to come up with a believable excuse.

Frances gasped. “Jenny, don’t tell me the man you made a fool of yourself for was the Duke of Marlow?” She sounded positively scandalized.

Jenny felt a blush spread across her face.

Frances covered her face and groaned. Apparently, Jenny didn’t need to verbally admit it. Her expression gave her secret away.

“I knew something was going on at the opera, but you told me it was nothing.” Frances threw her hands up in the air. “Jane Bennett, have you not heard the stories about him?” Frances pinched the bridge of her nose. “Why must you drift towards scandals? What will Thomas think when he finds out?” The color drained from her face. “Oh goodness, you’re going to make me tell him, aren’t you?”

Jenny rushed to her side. “Why does he need to find out? I told you, I showed my interest, he said no, and that was that.”

Frances pointed to the doorway. “Then why is he here?”

Good point.

“Well, I guess we’re going to have to go down there and find out.”

Jenny was surprised at how nonchalant she sounded, considering that her insides were shaking to the point of liquefaction.

Frances narrowed her eyes at her but ultimately stalked out of the room. Jenny hurriedly followed after her. Her mind was racing with possibilities. Why was the Duke here? Was it in response to her letter? She had one of Thomas’s footmen deliver it last night after she finished writing it.

She couldn’t remember exactly what she wrote, but the main theme revolved around her being her own woman and needing to be treated as such. She was old enough to make her own choices and live with the consequences.

Jenny rubbed her eyes. At least she hoped that’s all she said. Her nervous ramblings weren’t isolated to just talking. Her written word could be just as loquacious as her speech.

Frances and Jenny stood in front of the door to the drawing room. With a nod of acceptance, Frances opened the door. They found the Duke of Marlow leaning against the mantel, looking at his timepiece.

“Duke, to what do we owe the pleasure of your visit?”

Frances was ever the immaculate hostess. She breezed over to him as if she had expected him to show up this morning.

The Duke straightened, tucking his timepiece back into his coat. “I was hoping Miss Bennett would walk with me this morning.”

Frances looked at Jenny, who was still standing in the doorway, completely dumbfounded.

Jenny's eyes met the Duke's as he stood straighter. He folded his hands behind his back, seemingly unaffected. She had a moment of confusion. Had she dreamed their last encounter? Was it all an elaborate nightmare?

No, it happened. He called her a child and basically dismissed her as if she were a servant. Now, he had the audacity to stand in their drawing room, asking her to promenade with him as if they were courting?

Jenny took a deep breath and fixed him with a glare. He responded by looking bored. Frances stood between them, her eyes darting back and forth.

"I got your letter," the Duke offered.

Jenny's eyebrow rose in derision. "And yet you're here."

The two resumed their standoff.

Frances clapped her hands together, hoping to break the tension. "Well, it does seem like a nice day for a walk, doesn't it, Jenny?"

Jenny stood still, her eyes boring holes into the Duke, who was completely unfazed by her hostile stance.

"Yes, well, I think that's a yes," Frances replied.

Jenny gasped at the same time the Duke said, "Splendid."

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Frances ducked her head and turned to walk out of the room. She briefly stopped beside Jenny and whispered in her ear, “For heaven’s sake, talk to the man and figure out what is going on. Because if it is something, I need to find a way to break the news to your brother.”

“There is nothing to tell him,” Jenny seethed and turned on her heel to follow Frances out.

The Duke followed them out silently.

CHAPTER 11

David held his hands behind his back. Jenny had her claws out, and it was his favorite version of her. She harbored so much passion in her lithe little body, he just loved riling her up to see it boil over. She was the most beautiful when she was at her breaking point.

But that was not why he was here today, and it was best he remembered that. Hence, his hands were folded behind his back to suppress the urge to touch her.

“Thank you for walking with?—”

“Why are you here?” Jenny asked curtly, cutting him off.

David grinned. “I’ve always enjoyed your ability to speak your mind.”

Jenny grimaced. “Since you always like to play your games and hide your true

thoughts, I figured one of us might as well be transparent.”

David nodded once. “Touché.”

The pair continued to walk, with Frances some paces behind them. David noticed she started drifting closer as they began to talk. He didn’t blame her. The tension in the drawing room was thick and suffocating. It took all of his willpower not to tug at his cravat when Jenny glared at him with such animosity.

Deservedly so, but still.

David cleared his throat. “I came here to apologize for my behavior the other night.”

Jenny stopped abruptly and shook her head. “Pardon me, Your Grace. What did you say?”

David screwed up his face in annoyance. “Your hearing is just fine, Miss Bennett.”

Jenny rolled her eyes and continued walking. David balled his hands into fists behind his back.

“Fine. So, you’ve apologized for dismissing me so horribly.” She turned back to face him. “I haven’t decided if I’ve forgiven you yet.”

David lengthened his strides to catch up to her. “You misunderstand, Miss Bennett.”

She cocked her head. “You’re not apologizing for the way you threw me out?”

David looked around to make sure no one overheard her not-so-subtle whisper. The only one near them was Frances, who had found a particular tree branch fascinating.

“I do apologize for the brazen way I dismissed you the other night. But my behavior prior to that is why I’m here. I should not have kissed you that way.” David tucked his chin and cast his eyes downward.

That kiss had haunted him every night since. The feel of Jenny’s skin under his fingertips, the ease with which her legs opened. She was putty in his hands and would have done anything he asked. She freely gave herself over to him, and that much power over a woman usually led to problems.

Jenny’s feet stepped into his vision. He looked up into her eyes. The sun brought out specks of yellow in her green eyes. How had he never noticed them before?

“Your Grace, while I appreciate your apology and your worry over my sensibilities, I did ask for it, and quite plainly if I remember correctly.” Her eyes sparkled, and a small smile danced on her lips. “I won’t pretend your actions didn’t hurt, but I understand that you take my position in our arrangement very seriously. So on that account, I can accept your apology.”

David sighed. She wasn’t getting it.

Jenny’s eyes dropped to her fidgeting hands. The Duke seemed different. Usually, his confidence was laced with playful sarcasm, but today, there was an air of resignation about him.

Some tension had eased between them since she accepted his apology, but the ease of companionship they once had now felt forced.

They continued to walk, neither one of them speaking. Jenny noticed that with each couple they passed, the tension in his shoulders seemed to return.

Finally, David cleared his throat and offered her his arm. Her shoulders dropped with

an exhale of relief. She smiled up at him and took his arm.

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“I was thinking, while we’re out, we can finish our lesson. This is the perfect place and time to work on getting the ton to do the hard work for you.” David acknowledged the people around them.

Jenny slightly leaned against his shoulder. “What do you mean?”

“Promenading isn’t just about fresh air and exercise, Miss Bennett. It’s a time to be seen, just like at a ball or the opera. Show off. When passing a couple, make eye contact with both people, regardless if they are together or not.”

Jenny blushed. “Are you suggesting I flirt with a married man... and a woman?”

David’s chuckle reignited the fire in her belly that she thought was distinguished.

“No. It’s all in good fun, I assure you. Just nod and smile. When your eyes connect with the man’s, wait for a beat, tilt your head, and smile slowly.” His voice was low and seductive in her ear. His breath sent goosebumps down her arms even on this warm summer day. “Remember, men like the chase. Making him wait for a smile will catch his attention. Once you have his attention, all you have to do is exist.”

Jenny let out a laugh. Was it really that simple?

David nodded to the group of people walking towards them. There was a man walking with two women. One looked to be his mother, possibly, and the other was quite younger.

As they approached the couple, David nudged Jenny’s shoulder with his.

Jenny acknowledged the women first with a kind smile and a slight nod. When she passed the man, she made eye contact, waited for a beat, then gave a small smile as her head dipped slowly.

She watched as the man's eyes lit up, and, if she was not mistaken, he may have licked his bottom lip.

Before the man could utter a "good day," David pulled her away.

"I cannot believe that worked!" Jenny exclaimed. "All I did was smile slowly at him. Is it really that easy? You weren't kidding when you said that."

She felt positively giddy, she didn't even notice that they weren't walking anymore. She also didn't notice that David looked unwell.

"Your Grace? Are you alright?"

"No. I mean, yes." He sighed, running a hand through his hair. "I am fine, thank you."

He glanced over his shoulder and sneered at the man's retreating back. Jenny stood watching him. He kept saying that men were simple creatures, but there was nothing simple about the complex man before her.

Was he jealous of her brief exchange with the man?

She pointed to the path ahead of them. "Shall we continue?"

David folded his hands behind his back and held them there. "I fear I must walk you back to your home. I have a meeting I must get to."

Jenny's heart sank. "Oh. Well, I can practice some more on our way back."

Once more, she looped her arm through his, and they began their walk back to her home.

David's mood seemed to lighten a bit, which pleased Jenny. She missed the way she felt in his presence. He never made her feel like her personality was too big or that she was being too much. She always felt just right with him.

David bumped her arm. "Here comes old, crotchety Mr. Daniels."

Jenny looked up to see a middle-aged man walking with a cane. His dark hair was peppered with some white, but he didn't look crotchety.

Just then, he kicked a rock at a nearby squirrel.

Oh.

"He is a solicitor known for being a curmudgeon. No one gets along with him, not even his mother. If you can get him to smile, then you know you've truly conquered the art of smiling flirtatiously."

Jenny's lips thinned. "I'm ready."

She widened her stance and bounced back and forth on her heels as if she were going to charge at the man.

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David laughed. “Steady, girl. You don’t want to give the man a heart attack.”

She shot him a wink and cracked her neck. “Look, he’s walking towards us. Let’s go. Introduce me,” she whispered out the side of her mouth.

She wrapped her hand around his arm and practically dragged him to Mr. Daniels.

“Ah, Mr. Daniels, it’s nice to see you out and about on this beautiful summer day.”

Mr. Daniels sniffed in their direction and grumbled about the heat.

“May I introduce Miss Jane Bennett? You may know her brother, the Duke of Pilton.”

“Pilton you say?” Mr. Daniels eyed her suspiciously.

Jenny cringed inwardly. While her brother’s reputation had improved since his marriage to Frances, he was still not a favored member of polite society.

She side-eyed David. He did that on purpose. Finding nothing but an innocent smile on his face, she squared her shoulders and shifted her attention back to the solicitor. She prayed her brother hadn’t done something to irritate the man.

“Mr. Daniels.” She extended her hand while her eyes locked onto his. When he reached out to take her hand, she made sure to apply the right amount of pressure—not too strong, not too light.

She waited until he squeezed ever so lightly to let out a little gasp.

She raised her eyebrows and let a smile curve her lips. “It is an honor to meet you, Mr. Daniels. His Grace has been singing nothing but your praises.”

The Duke raised an eyebrow at her comment.

Mr. Daniels squinted, confused. “He has, hasn’t he?”

“Oh yes. He says you’re the man who knows his business and everyone else is just playing the game.”

She knew she was laying it on thick, but she remained confident and tried for nonchalance.

Mr. Daniels straightened up and picked at the cuff of his shirt. “Well, he’d be correct.”

His face contorted with what could be considered a smile if one was having a seizure, but she took it as one.

Jenny dipped her head, hoping it came across as demure. “I will tell my brother to consider you for any services he may need. I hope you have a wonderful day.”

Mr. Daniels blinked, coming out of the slight trance he was just under.

Jenny slipped her hand back into the crook of the Duke’s arm and walked past him. She couldn’t contain her smile.

“How was that?” she asked when they were far enough away from the man. “I think he was positively smitten with me.”

David looked down at her as they walked through the front gate of her home. “I think I have successfully taught you everything you need to find yourself a suitable match.” He nodded gravely.

His demeanor shifted from playful to remorseful, and Jenny couldn’t understand why. It’s true that she had come a long way from their initial lesson. She should feel elated, but instead, she felt despondent.

“I’m sure there is more to learn. After all, I’m only a beginner.” She felt their camaraderie slipping away again, and she was desperate to hold onto it. She looked over her shoulder to make sure Frances was out of earshot. “Shall I stop over tonight to continue our lessons?”

David cleared his throat and shook his head. “I don’t think you should. There’s really no need to continue. You just needed a little confidence, which you have.” He shrugged. “My work here is done.”

That cursed shrug.

“What?” she demanded.

His jaw ticked. “Miss Bennett.” Her name came out as a plea. “I think our time together is over. You don’t need my company or my help anymore.”

Jenny sputtered and looked back at Frances.

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Frances stepped forward, taking her elbow. “Thank you for the promenade, Duke. It was nice of you to stop by this morning. But we must get going.”

She tugged on Jenny’s elbow, but the Duke raised his hand to stop her. “Please, will you allow us a few moments?” he asked.

The plea in his voice caused alarm bells to ring in Jenny’s head.

Why does he sound like he’s sad? If he’s sad, he should stop saying it’s over.

Frances looked at Jenny, who could only nod. She needed to know where this was going. Her stomach twisted at the possibility that he was truly ending their arrangement so soon after she thought she got his friendship back.

Jenny nodded to Frances. “Go inside, Frannie. I shouldn’t be long.”

Frances leaned into her sister-in-law. “I’ll be in the foyer.”

She kissed her cheek and slipped inside, leaving her with David on the front stoop.

Jenny refused to lower her eyes. If David was going to end whatever this was between them, then he had to do it while looking at her.

His eyes flickered, but they remained on hers.

“I’ve enjoyed our time together.” His words were measured and calculated. “I wish you the best in your search.”

A lump formed in her throat, making it impossible for her to speak. She refused to let her eyes water. She squared her shoulders and lifted her chin.

Come on, Jenny, say something!

“I must disagree.”

A muscle in his jaw ticked. “Thank you again for your time, Miss Bennett.”

Without giving her a chance to respond, he turned and walked out of the gate and down the road. Jenny watched him as he disappeared across the small hill. She willed herself to move, to call after him, to sit and cry, but her body had completely shut down.

The man had been hot and cold since the first day she met him, and each time he refused her, she promised herself it would be the last time she would cave to him. Yet, not more than twenty-four hours after she vowed to stay away from him, she faltered again, only to be crushed once more.

Finding the strength, she turned and made her way inside.

“Jenny, are you alright?”

Jenny looked up to Frances’s worried face. “Define fine,” she responded.

Truth be told, she didn’t know how she felt. She felt numb, sad for sure, but it was the emptiness that bothered her more.

Frances glanced at the drawing room and chewed on her bottom lip.

“I’ll be fine, Frannie. I think all the fresh air tired me out. I think I will lie down for a

bit.”

Jenny went to move past Frances, but her sister-in-law gripped her arm. “You can’t go just now.”

“Why not?” Jenny questioned.

“Because there is someone here to see you.”

Jenny raised an eyebrow. “Who?”

“A man.”

CHAPTER 12

“Aman?” Jenny rushed to the drawing room door and peeked through the crack.

“Who is he?” Her mind was spinning with the turn of events.

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“Simmons says his name is Harry Featherstone, the Duke of Dovegrove.”

Jenny scrunched up her nose. “Never heard of him.”

“I have. Nothing scandalous. He seems like the perfect gentleman, which, based on your most recent conquest, may sound dull to you. But give him a chance.”

Jenny ignored Frannie’s insinuation about her feelings for David. After all, her sister-in-law was right. David was nothing but a confusing headache. Maybe she should give this new man a chance.

“What do you suppose he wants?” she asked.

Frances scowled and tapped her on the shoulder. “What do you think he wants? To court you!”

Jenny straightened up. “What do you mean, to court me? I’ve never met the man, why would he just show up out of the blue? Maybe he wants something else?”

Frances snickered. “Sure. He wants advice on his latest needlepoint.”

Jenny was not amused. This morning had been a whirlwind of emotions, and she was not in the mood to entertain anyone. She just wanted her bed to wallow in self-pity.

Frances nudged her. “Come on. You say there is nothing going on between you and the Duke of Marlow—by the way, you ended your conversation with him. I can attest to that. Why not give this man a chance?”

Jenny rested her head against the grain of the door. When did life get so complicated? When she said she wanted to experience life, this was not what she had envisioned.

“I guess there is no harm in finding out what he wants.” She sounded resolute, but she felt a small piece of her heart shatter.

She placed her hand on the doorknob, and with a silent prayer for strength, she opened it.

The Duke of Dovegrove stood up from where he was sitting in front of the fireplace.

Frances entered first, gesturing to Jenny behind her. “Duke, may I introduce my sister-in-law, Miss Jane Bennett. Jenny, this is Harry Featherstone, the Duke of Dovegrove.”

The Duke took Jenny’s proffered hand and placed a chaste kiss on the back of it. Her mind conjured up images of David kissing her neck, and she withdrew her hand, cradling it to her chest with her other.

“I’m sorry, Miss Bennett. I didn’t mean to startle you,” the Duke muttered as he stepped back.

Jenny could feel the blush rise to her cheeks. She brought a hand up to her neck where she could still feel David’s kisses. “No, please, it was me. I don’t know what came over me.”

“Oh.” The Duke furrowed his brow in concern. “Come, sit down. The Duchess said that you were both out for a walk. Maybe you are just tired.” He guided her to a chair next to where he was sitting.

“That must be it.” Jenny threw a cautious glance at Frances, who was staring at her as

if she completely lost her mind. She shrugged and sat in the chair.

“Jenny, I will send in some tea. Your maid Martha is here and will sit with you both. Duke, it is an honor to have you in our home. Please excuse my absence while I go attend to my child.”

The Duke of Dovegrove stood back up. “That’s right, I remember hearing that you and Pilton welcomed your first son. Congratulations to you both. Children are God’s greatest blessing.”

Frances dipped her head in agreement. “Yes, he would be a greater blessing if he would sleep through the night.”

While they conversed, Jenny took the opportunity to gather her thoughts.

How was it just five minutes ago when she was joking with David, then having her heart ripped out, and now she was sitting in the parlor with a potential suitor?

She rubbed her temples. How did this become her life?

Frances saw herself out when Martha settled into the chair by the window.

The Duke sat back down and turned towards Jenny. “You’ll have to forgive me for coming without prior notice. The truth is that I’ve been wanting to call on you for some time now.”

“Have you?” Jenny tilted her head in his direction.

The Duke was a nice-looking man. He was not tall like David, but he had an agreeable height. His kind blue eyes sparkled when he smiled at her like he was doing now.

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His smile took on a mischievous edge, as if he was caught with his hand in the cookie jar. “Oh yes. I saw you at Lady Staunton’s ball last month, and then again at the garden party. Unfortunately, each time I tried to approach you, you were either indisposed or with the Duke of Marlow.”

Jenny sat up at the mention of David’s name.

The Duke of Dovegrove sat forward on his chair. “I must ask, Miss Bennett. Is there anything between you and the Duke of Marlow? I would not want to interfere in any arrangement.”

Jenny’s stomach churned at the word ‘arrangement.’

She shook her head most vehemently. “No, there is nothing between the Duke of Marlow and myself other than a friendly rapport.”

She forced herself to smile and feel something at his obvious relief at her admission. But the numbness that settled over her when she was outside persisted.

“Friendly rapport?” The Duke of Dovegrove laughed. “I don’t know many who would use those particular words when describing the Duke of Marlow.”

Jenny’s throat went dry. She took a sip of tea to help ease the tension building in her body. “You know the Duke of Marlow well?” Her voice was strained.

Every mention of David made more pieces of her heart shatter.

Dovegrove lifted his chin and sniffed. “I wouldn’t say well. But stories of his dalliances do get around.”

He made no apologies for the disdain he obviously felt towards David.

Jenny smoothed out her dress. “Well, we mustn’t listen to every word that flies around the ton. Gossip cannot be trusted now, can it?”

“Men like Marlow can’t be trusted,” Dovegrove snipped.

Jenny was getting really tired of people speaking freely of David’s character, especially when they had it all wrong.

“I admit he is a bit abrasive, but he is honest and isn’t afraid to mince his words with anyone. If anything, there should be more people like him.”

Dovegrove tugged at his lapels. “If I didn’t know any better, I would think there was something going on between the two of you.”

Jenny chewed on her inner cheek as the familiar sadness settled in her bones. “No, Your Grace. There is nothing between us. This is simply me standing up for a man who was nothing but respectful and kind to me.”

Her words cut up the remaining pieces of her heart. David was kind to her in his own way—a way that tore her up inside.

Dovegrove was unimpressed. “You should consider yourself lucky, Miss Bennett. Many others were not shown such respect.”

His ominous words sent a shiver down her spine.

What could David have possibly done to warrant such strong reactions from people?

Jenny dipped her head. "I assure you, Your Grace, I am as free as the robins that fly outside."

"I'm glad to hear it, Miss Bennett."

Simmons opened the door and ushered in Mary, one of the kitchen maids, who pushed in a tea cart.

"Thank you, Mary. Would you like some tea, Your Grace?" Jenny asked, thankful for the interruption.

The Duke of Dovegrove smiled and accepted the teacup and saucer from Mary. "Thank you."

Both sat in silence while they sipped their tea. It was unbearable.

"How are you enjoying your Season? I saw you had danced with Lord Banefield." He raised an eyebrow and looked her over. "You walked in here just fine, so you must have fared better than other ladies of the ton."

Jenny was not in the mood for banter, and after the way their conversation started, she definitely didn't want to talk about other suitors.

She forced a smile. If she was going to forget David, she would have to actively try to move on from him. She figured now was as good a time as any to use his tips.

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She tried dropping her shoulders to give off a more casual appearance. She lightly chuckled at Dovegrove's mention of Lord Banefield while she let her finger trace the rim of her teacup. She watched as his eyes tracked the movement.

“Yes, I was very lucky where Lord Banefield is concerned.” She kept her voice light and airy like David taught her. Her heart lurched at the thought of him.

Pushing her pain aside, she watched Dovegrove's cravat bob as he swallowed.

She tilted her head. “Tell me, Your Grace, do you enjoy... dancing.”

She felt like a complete dolt spacing out her words. But believe it or not, the Duke was watching her lips form every word she spoke.

They really are simple fools.

Dovegrove put his cup down on the table next to him and rubbed the palms of his hands on his trousers—a sign that he was nervous. “If the occasion calls for it, I have been known to be an adequate dance partner.”

Oh, adequate? How exciting.

Jenny had to bite the inside of her cheek to keep from rolling her eyes. Maybe Frannie was onto something. Maybe she did enjoy the more scandalous side of life.

“Well then, I hope one day I will get the chance to have an adequate dance partner.” She smiled and lowered her eyes.

After hearing the words leave her mouth, she crossed her fingers, hoping the gesture came across as inviting and not sarcastic.

Dovegrove's low chuckle had her looking back up.

"It would be my honor to dance with you, Miss Bennett. I will make sure that mine is the first name on your dance card at the next ball. Well before Lord Banefield's," he added with a wink.

Jenny smiled, knowing it didn't reach her eyes. However, Dovegrove didn't seem to notice.

David would have.

Jenny shook the intrusive thought away. She cleared her throat. "I would like that, Your Grace."

At that, the Duke stood up. "I fear I must get going, Miss Bennett. I have some business to attend to."

Jenny set her teacup down on the table to walk him to the door of the drawing room.

He took her hand and kissed the back of it once more. "Thank you for seeing me today. I look forward to calling on you again."

She could only offer a slight nod of acknowledgment before he turned and walked out of the house.

Jenny leaned against the doorframe, closing her eyes. Tears stung the back of her eyes, but she was determined to hold them back.

“He seems like a good man, Miss,” Martha offered, her voice soft.

Jenny sighed. “He does.”

She made her way to her room. After closing the door behind her, she expected the tears to fall, but none came.

She sat on her bed, looking out over the garden. Her mind replayed her times with David. The darkness of the library, the glow of the ballroom. She could still feel his touch lingering on her neck and the way his whisper sent shivers down her spine.

She only met the Duke of Dovegrove this one time, but she couldn’t see him eliciting such reactions from her. The first time she met David in that darkened library, something changed within her, and she knew on some level that something was happening between them.

She looked down at her fingers, tracing the spot Dovegrove kissed. There was no visceral reaction to the kiss, nothing branded into her skin to remind her of his actions. Yet, all David had to do was look into her eyes and she would be completely and utterly lost to him.

She lay back on her bed and let out a small laugh. All she ever wanted was to find a good match and live a happy little life with a man who loved her. That future could be within her grasp, only it would most likely be with a man like Dovegrove. Not David.

Was that something she could live with?

She rubbed her eyes. It had to be. Right then and there, she became determined to finally put David behind her. She was moving on. She will find her match, and she will be happy.

So why did she feel as if she just signed away her life by agreeing to give the Duke of Dovegrove a chance?

CHAPTER 13

The night was long. Jenny untangled herself from her bedsheets for the third time this evening. She huffed as she sat up.

This is pointless.

She swung her legs over the edge of the bed and padded to her window. She drew back the heavy curtains and took in the moonlit landscaped gardens below. It was a nice little garden. Nothing like David's, but it was nice to look at.

Jenny groaned. David. She told herself she was going to move on, and in order to do that, she needed to stop thinking of him.

Unfortunately for her, her mind had other plans. It kept conjuring up every encounter they ever had. She hoped if she studied them enough, she would discover the misstep she took that changed his demeanor from flirtatious to loathsome.

Unfortunately, all she came away with was an ache in her heart and more frustration than she knew what to do with.

She leaned her head against the cool glass. Memories of his smile, his touch, his whispers rolled over her. It was presumptuous of her to assume David felt anything for her. She didn't even know what she truly felt about him.

Her hand rose slowly and lay over her aching, confused heart. She enjoyed his company—she even enjoyed it when they bickered.

He allowed her to express her feelings, no matter how big or small. For someone who was constantly told she was being too much, didn't he realize how much of a gift he gave her?

She pushed away from the window. She had enough of this sleepless night. It was getting her nowhere. Only one person could finally give her the closure she needed to move on.

And right now, that man was thinking that he had heard the last of Miss Jane Bennett.

Jenny looked upon his darkened door, hoping it wasn't the last time she would be standing in front of it. She knocked and shifted from foot to foot.

She tried thinking of what to say to him on the way over here, but her mind had gone blank.

The door creaked open, and the object of her angst stood in front of her. "Jenny?"

She couldn't help but grin at the surprised look on his face. He was always so unflappable that seeing him genuinely surprised was exhilarating.

She didn't give him the chance to welcome her, she just stepped inside.

"What are you doing here? I told you not to come to my residence anymore."

Jenny rolled her eyes and folded her arms. "You're not the only one in this arrangement." She was really beginning to hate that word. "I get a say as well."

David's lips thinned, and his eyes darkened.

Jenny felt a flicker of heat in her core. She felt the rush of excitement course through her veins. This is what she craved. Someone she could go toe to toe with. She didn't want pacifying compliments. She wanted heat, passion. She wanted to feel.

"Jenny, I'm calling for my carriage and you're going home."

Jenny raised an eyebrow. "Am I?" She cleared her throat exaggeratedly.

David furrowed his brow. "What on earth are you doing?"

"Getting ready to scream. I guess it would alarm your neighbors and make them come out and see what all the fuss is about." She looked around the empty hallway. "Hmm, I wonder what would happen next. I'm thinking your staff would come running as well."

She fluttered her eyelashes and smiled. She had him.

"You wouldn't," he scoffed.

She let out a hearty laugh, and by God did it feel good to be challenged. "Do you question my intentions, Your Grace?"

"I'm questioning your sanity," he said dryly.

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When she brought her hand up to clear her throat again, he rushed towards her.

“Alright, alright, you can stay. But only for a moment. And I am having someone take you home. You shouldn’t be out this late at night by yourself.”

Jenny huffed out a laugh as she took a seat in his study. “That’s rich coming from you. All the times I came here, I came on my own.”

David sat down in a chair opposite her and shook his head. “Other than the first night, no you have not.”

She gave him a questioning look.

“I sent one of my men out each time to follow you here and to follow you back home.”

Jenny was gobsmacked. “You what? How? Who? How did I not see them?”

David leaned back in his chair, stretching his long legs out in front of him. “I employ very good men who know how to trail people.”

“Why do you have men in your service who know how to do that?”

David shrugged. “I’m full of many surprises, kitten.”

Kitten.

His nickname for her settled over her and warmed her from the inside.

She sank into her chair, taking in the man across from her. “Yes, that you are.”

“If you’ve come to try and change my mind, it won’t wo—” David started to say, but she cut him off.

“The Duke of Dovegrove paid me a visit after our walk this morning,” she said matter-of-factly.

“He—what? Who?”

Jenny picked at a button on her coat. “Harry Featherstone. The Duke of Dovegrove? He was waiting for me when we got back from our walk.”

“He was there?” David’s voice was thin and suspicious.

Jenny nodded. “Yes. I went inside, and Frances was there waiting for me to usher me into the drawing room.”

David sat up. “What did he want?”

Jenny shot him an incredulous look. “I don’t know, Your Grace, to ask me about the weather?”

David huffed out a breath. “Don’t play coy with me, Jenny. Did you invite him? Has he called on you before?”

He was angry. Not outwardly seething, but his hands were balled into fists in his lap, and his foot began to tap on the floor.

“No. I was just as shocked as you are. I have never met the man, but he seems pleasant enough. He said he would call on me again. Frannie feels that this will lead to a proposal.”

David cracked his knuckles. “And what do you think?”

Jenny chewed on her bottom lip. “I agree. I wouldn’t be surprised if I was engaged by the end of the week.”

A muscle in David’s jaw ticked. His body was taught with tension. Realization dawned on Jenny, rendering her speechless.

He is jealous.

How has she never seen it before? She always thought of him as closed off, aloof, but if she were paying attention, she could see that his thoughts and feelings were on display just as much as hers. She just needed to know what she was looking for.

Armed with this new knowledge, she decided to poke the bear.

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“What do you think of that, Your Grace?” she asked smugly.

David’s eyes narrowed. “I think it was wonderful. Congratulations.”

Jenny let her lips curl into a slow, seductive smile. “Oh, why, thank you, Your Grace.”

She stood up and walked over to the drink cart, letting her fingertips trail over the furniture she passed. She recalled him doing this in the library, and she thought it appropriate to put their earlier lessons to work.

“I wasn’t sure how you would take the news.”

David bristled. “I don’t understand. Wasn’t this the purpose of our arrangement? I’m sure you put all of our lessons to good use.”

Jenny didn’t hide her smile. He sounded absolutely miserable.

She picked up his favorite whisky and poured two glasses. She held one out to him, forcing him to come to her.

This game is fun.

She made sure their fingertips touched when he took the glass from her. She gave him a warm smile as she took a small sip.

“So it wouldn’t bother you if I marry the Duke of Dovegrove?”

David took a healthy sip and licked his lips. “Of course not. If it is what you want, then I am happy for you.”

Jenny took one more sip before putting her glass down. She started to unbutton her coat, slowly, watching his eyes track her slow movements.

“I’m so glad to hear that, Your Grace.” She laid her coat over a chair. “You know, there was a time during our arrangement that I thought something might happen between us.”

David scoffed, but his shoulders were rigid. He stood unmoving, just trailing her with his eyes. The tension rolling off him was delicious and encouraged Jenny to keep going. For once in her life, she felt in control of the situation, and it was intoxicating.

Jenny shrugged one shoulder. “I must have read the situation wrong. I guess that’s all for the better. I mean, if this man will be my husband, I should be glad to offer him my body without worry.”

David sputtered. When she looked closely, she could see small beads of sweat forming on his hairline. His carefully constructed façade was starting to crumble.

“Offer him your body?”

Jenny laughed. “Of course, Your Grace.” She walked to him as her fingertips played with the lace just below her neck. “As a married woman, I’ll have to let him kiss me.” She stood in front of him. “Touch me.” She locked gazes with him. “Take me.”

Her words were barely a whisper, but he reacted as if she shouted at him. He recoiled and took a step back.

“What is the matter, Your Grace?” she asked innocently enough, but she knew she

had hit her mark.

David's chest was rising and falling quickly. His face was flushed and damp with sweat. "What is the meaning of this?"

Jenny tilted her head. "Of what, Your Grace?"

"You're trying to seduce me."

"Am I?" Her eyes grew heavy-lidded with lust, and she played into it. "Is it working?"

She watched his pupils dilate just before his lips crashed into hers. His arms crushed her to his body, and she moaned into his mouth.

All the pent-up anxiety she carried around for days erupted into a hungry need for this man. Her hands were tangled in his hair, scratching and pulling, coaxing growls from him.

David turned her and walked her backward to his desk. Without pausing his assault on her lips, he reached behind her and swiped the papers to the ground.

He picked her up and placed her on the desk, and once again her legs fell open. He fit perfectly between them. His kisses became more demanding, and she opened fully to him.

His hands trailed from her back to her front. One held her cheek, positioning her at the perfect angle for his kiss, while the other found her breast and started massaging it. Jenny's head fell back at his touch.

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David trailed hot, open-mouthed kisses down her neck until he found the sweet spot at the base of her throat that had her moaning his name.

He stopped his ministrations and pulled away. His eyes were almost black with desire. “We should stop.”

Jenny sat up and grabbed his collar. “You are not stopping this again. You once told me I am a woman of my own mind. I want you. I want this.”

She pulled him back to her so his center was lined up with hers. She could feel him through his trousers and her dress.

She raised an eyebrow. “And you can no longer deny you want this as well.”

David rested his forehead on hers. “Don’t you see I’m trying to protect you?”

Jenny sighed and cupped his face in her hands so they were looking into each other’s eyes. “I’m tired of people assuming I’m a lost child who needs to be looked after. I’m no longer playing a game, David. It’s time I collect my prize.”

She pulled his face back to hers and kissed him. She wrapped her legs around his back, locking him in place. She nibbled on his bottom lip until he gave in and kissed her back.

Her hands pulled at his shirt, untucking it from his trousers. The feel of his hot flesh sent electric shocks through her fingertips straight to her core. She couldn’t touch him fast enough. She wanted to trace every inch of his body and sear it into her memory.

His fingers deftly undid the buttons on the front of her dress and pulled it down. She sucked in a breath when the cold air hit her breasts, and then she let out a moan when David's lips closed around a nipple.

Her hands flew to his head to keep him there. Her body started to rock, trying to chase a feeling she was unfamiliar with but inherently knew it was something she needed.

Her nails scratched down his back.

David hissed. "Careful kitten, those claws are sharp."

Jenny smiled coyly. "Take me, David. Finish what you started. Teach me how to be with a man."

He looked back up at her.

"Please, David."

David growled and pushed her back down on the desk. Lying on her back, she reached up to him, pulling him down to her. The way their bodies lined up made her core melt.

Once again, her body started to move in a rhythm foreign to her, yet it felt as familiar as any dance she had learned.

David bunched her dress so the entirety of the material pooled at her midsection. His eyes raked over her body. Everywhere he looked, Jenny felt as if she was on fire. She craved his hands on her. She wanted to feel his touch everywhere.

"What are you doing?" Her voice was raspy with need.

“Do you know how gorgeous you look when you want something?” David’s fingertips grazed her thighs.

Jenny’s breath came out in a groan. “No, but if you don’t do something soon, I’ll smack you.”

David chuckled. “I love it when my kitten gets feisty. It’s when you’re the most beautiful.”

Jenny whimpered as his fingers moved lower. He was so close to where she wanted to feel his touch the most. She had no idea what she’d feel if he touched her there, but instinct told her it would satisfy the growing hunger inside her.

“David.”

“Shhh, kitten. I’ll take care of you.” His fingers trailed up to the apex of her thighs before returning to her knee.

Jenny was shaking with need and excitement. His teasing touches consumed her, but still, she moved her body in the hope of having him connect with her center.

David kneeled down before her and leaned in to kiss the spot that was demanding attention. Jenny arched her back as pleasure shot through her body. Her hands tangled in his hair, trying to hold him there.

“Ah, does my pet need some attention?” David asked in a dominant voice. She no longer had control of the situation, and she was absolutely fine with that.

She shook her head vigorously. “Whatever you just did, do it again.”

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David nipped her bud, coaxing a cry from her. “Bossy,” he teased.

His mouth devoured her in the most salacious and wonderful way. Pressure began to build in her lower stomach and climb its way up her spine. Her thighs tightened around his head as he continued to lap at her. The wet noises he was making and his satisfied moans pushed the building tension to a fever pitch.

Jenny thrashed against his mouth while he held her down.

“You’re so wet for me, kitten. So wet and so damned delicious,” David spoke in between his licks, bites, and kisses.

“David. David. David.” She chanted his name, hoping it would bring her relief from the growing tension in her core.

With one final suck on her nub, David sent her over the edge and into ecstasy. Her head spun as colors danced behind her eyelids. Her heart felt as if it would burst right out of her chest.

David kissed his way back up her body, leaving a trail of fire she was sure would be burned into her skin forever. He nibbled on her neck before giving her a last chaste kiss on the lips.

Jenny opened her eyes, blinking quickly to regain her focus. “That was... that was...”

David laughed lightly. “Are you speechless, Miss Bennett?”

Jenny sat up. “You seem proud of yourself,” she noted.

David smiled, but this time it did not reach his eyes.

The elation Jenny felt evaporated almost as quickly as it came. “What is it?”

David stood up, adjusting himself and putting his shirt back on. “Well, now you know what you should feel when you lie with your husband.”

Jenny’s racing heart stuttered and then stopped. She felt her cheeks flushing. “What?”

“Jenny.” He sounded resigned. “This is as far as it goes between us. I must say, you have taken our lessons quite well to get me to do that. Although, I do recall telling you that by the end of our lessons, you’d have the man tripping over himself to kiss you. It seems I am quite the teacher.”

He nodded towards the desk and the papers scattered on the floor.

Jenny yanked her dress up to cover herself and the embarrassment that was settling over her.

“You think I seduced you only because I could? Is that what you think of me?” She was repulsed. “I came here because I can’t stop thinking about you.” She pushed her arms through her sleeves and stood up. “I came here because I know you feel something too, and I wanted to prove it to you. And I did.”

She had to fight to get the words out. Her eyes were filled with tears she refused to let fall.

David walked over to where she discarded her coat and picked it up. “You didn’t prove anything to me.” His voice was flat.

Jenny's eyes widened in disbelief. "You wouldn't have done that"—she pointed to the desk—"if you didn't feel something for me."

David fixed her with an unreadable look. "It wouldn't be the first time that I have done that with no feelings behind it, Miss Bennett. Do not confuse lust with something more."

Jenny flinched as if she were struck. Her eyes searched for some clue that he was lying. He always hid the truth behind his aloofness. She had seen cracks in his veneer before—there had to be some now.

As he stood there staring back at her, her world fell apart. She saw no signs of what she was looking for.

"So, you are perfectly fine with me returning to the Duke of Dovegrove and marrying him after what we just did?" she choked out.

Her chest was constricting, causing her breaths to come out in short bursts. She thought she saw a flicker of hesitation in his eyes, but it was gone quickly.

He simply shrugged and said, "I think you two will make an excellent pair."

Jenny stood there, shocked. Crushed. Heartbroken. He truly did not care. He never would. It all was just an arrangement for him.

She grabbed her coat from him and left his home.

From his study window, David watched as she walked straight past his carriage and off into the night. He motioned for the footman to follow her one last time.

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He sat at his desk, looking at the wrinkled and torn sheets of paper that now littered the floor. He opened a drawer in his desk and pulled out a miniature portrait of him with his sister, Heather. He traced her features with a finger.

The portrait was painted just before their father passed away. Both he and Heather looked so young, so happy.

“Tell me I’m doing the right thing, Heather. I cannot have someone so pure of heart be attached to me again. I will not break another spirit like I broke yours. She deserves so much more. She deserves a family, a man who will protect her. I can’t give her either of those things.”

David sat with the portrait in one hand and his tumbler in the other. One day Jenny would forgive him and move on. The truth was, he didn’t know what hurt worse, knowing he would never have her or knowing she would move on.

CHAPTER 14

Jenny sighed into her cup of punch, feeling the liquid bubble and tickle her lips. It was only a matter of time before Harry would come find her.

Harry. Saying his Christian name didn’t give her the same thrill as saying David’s name. She grimaced as her stomach churned.

David.

In fairness to Harry, saying or even just thinking David’s name no longer gave her a

thrill. Instead, it exposed the large gaping hole in her heart. Instinctively, Jenny brought up a hand to rub the soreness in her chest.

Just then, one of the objects of her thoughts appeared at her side.

“There you are. I was starting to worry.” Harry looked down at her with bright blue eyes.

Jenny managed a polite smile, which was all she had been able to offer him since that night two weeks ago. Either he wasn’t picking up on her melancholy or he didn’t care. She couldn’t decide if she cared enough to be offended one way or the other.

She placed her punch glass down and played with the ribbon from her reticule.

“I was just speaking with the Earl, and he said that Lady Staunton is thinking of having another ball to end the Season. He asked if we would be in attendance.”

Jenny swallowed. In the ton’s eyes, the two of them were officially courting. In her eyes, they were going through the motions. Well, at least she was.

“It sounds like it would be a lovely time.” She cringed. Even her voice sounded dull.

“Would you care to dance?”

Jenny nodded and took his hand as he led her to the dance floor.

Over the last few weeks, she had danced with him countless times, and each time she hoped this would be the time when she would feel something. Unfortunately for her, no such feelings ever came.

His arm wrapped around her waist and held her closer than would normally be

acceptable. However, since the ton was under the impression they were on the road to matrimony, no one looked scandalized by his action.

She tilted her head up to take in his expression. She knew he was older than her, and most likely even David, yet there was a hopeful look in his eyes that gave him a boyish charm.

An uncomfortable feeling settled in her stomach. He was doing everything right by her—he courted her properly, brought her flowers, asked after her family, and even cooed over her nephew. He took her on walks and listened to her stories, and all the while, she was still pining over someone who no longer wanted her. If he ever did.

Jenny swallowed her pride. Every meeting between her and Harry, she promised herself she would give him her full attention and forget the man who broke her heart. She should honor the man she was with. A man who truly wanted her and wasn't afraid to show it.

Wasn't that what every woman wanted?

For the first time in weeks, she felt her smile reach her eyes.

Harry's eyes widened. "May I say, Miss Bennett, how ravishing you look when you smile?"

Jenny felt a slight blush bloom on her cheeks. "Not tonight," she said with a laugh.

Just as the heaviness surrounding her heart began to dissipate, she felt a dark presence descend over her. The feeling of being watched enveloped her, and the hairs on the back of her neck stood up.

She closed her eyes, silently wishing it was just her imagination. She pushed the

narrative that it was just her and Harry dancing. She tried convincing herself there wasn't a tall, brooding duke standing in a corner somewhere, staring at them.

“Is everything alright, Jenny?”

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She opened her eyes at the concern in Harry's voice. She nodded quickly. "I am, Your Grace. I must say, your dancing skills have improved from just adequate."

Harry beamed. "It's all a credit to my dance partner, I assure you." His eyes darkened with his words.

Jenny knew that look. She knew how to flirt, thanks to David, but whenever Harry's body language or words became suggestive, she always found a way to change the subject.

However, after her little pep talk about fully committing to the relationship, she knew she had to play the game.

She tilted her head coyly and fluttered her eyelashes. "I wonder what else I can help with?"

Harry's eyes went wide with shock.

Jenny's cheeks reddened with embarrassment.

Oh goodness, that sounded horrible.

Harry barked out a laugh that had her embarrassment reach a whole new level. She felt herself pulling away from him.

"Oh, Miss Bennett, what has gotten into you?" he said with a smile.

Jenny just shrugged, not understanding what was so funny. Sure, what she said may have been a bit forward, but she was new to this. New to him.

“We shall have a wonderful life together with your sense of humor.” He leaned in to whisper in her ear, “However, we must be careful. We don’t need to rush anything now, do we?”

Jenny let a smile settle on her lips. Of course, he was the perfect gentleman. He made sure there was always a chaperone present, he said the right things, and he never let either one of them get carried away. Not that they had to worry about her. Apparently, they didn’t have to worry about him either.

Harry continued to twirl them around the dance floor when her eyes landed on the bottle green ones that had been haunting her dreams. The dance pattern changed, and she was thankful when she lost sight of David.

Harry was prattling on about some sort of goose hunt happening in a few days, but Jenny couldn’t concentrate. Every move they made, she felt those eyes on her. She knew David was watching every one of her movements as if she were his target in a hunt.

The song ended, and everyone clapped.

“Shall we go again? I could dance with you all night, Miss Bennett.”

Jenny scrunched up her nose. “I think I need some air. I feel it is too warm in here all of a sudden.”

“Do you need any assistance?” Harry reached a hand out to her arm. He looked genuinely concerned for her health.

She patted his hand. “No, thank you. I shall be fine. Plus, I think the Earl is headed your way. I’m sure he wants to talk about your upcoming hunt.”

Harry sighed, taking her in, uncertain if he should let her go.

Jenny nudged him towards the Earl. “Go, I’ll be fine. Once I get some fresh air, I will be right as rain. I promise.”

Harry nodded and gave a slight bow. “I will find you after I speak with the Earl.”

Jenny tilted her head in acknowledgment and made her way out to the garden.

The cool night breeze felt good on her hot cheeks. The truth was, the air in the ballroom was a bit stuffy. She really did need the fresh air. She had come out here for that, not to get away from a certain man’s stare.

At least that was what she told herself.

She found a bench not too far from the garden’s entrance and the door to the ballroom. The light from the room reached just beyond the bench, allowing her to take in some of the elegant array of flowers around her.

“Why must I always find you in a darkened area by yourself?”

That voice. The voice that visited her in her dreams was directly behind her.

Jenny sighed deeply and looked straight ahead, refusing to turn around. “No one asked you to come outside. If you don’t want to find people in places, stop going places.”

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His low chuckle slid over her skin like silk, making goosebumps rise on her arms.

It's just a cool night, she told herself as she rubbed her arms to ward off the chill.

"I see you still speak your mind."

"I see you're still being obtuse and insufferable."

Why must he stand behind her, towering over her? Her heart and mind were warring with each other. Not seeing him was wreaking havoc on her nerves, but seeing him would send her into a spiral of pain.

Unfortunately for her, he took matters into his own hands and finally walked around the bench and sat next to her.

Neither of them looked at each other, each staring into the darkened garden in front of them. The tension between them was palpable, causing her heart to beat wildly in her chest.

"I hear congratulations are in order." His voice was low and gruff, devoid of emotion.

Jenny sat taller. "Yes, I suppose so. Thank you." She dropped her eyes to her balled fists in her lap.

David stood up abruptly, startling her. He stomped towards the darkened garden only to spin back around. "You're truly going to marry him?"

Jenny swallowed. She could only nod her head, afraid she'd say something they'd both regret if she opened her mouth.

David ran a hand through his hair and then put his hands on his hips, staring back at her.

“Wh—why are you looking at me like that?”

“Like. What?” he gritted out.

“Like you’re either going to eat me or attack me.” Her voice was so low she wasn’t sure he heard her.

She watched as his throat worked and his jaw ticked. His dark eyes bored into her soul, and she felt as if he could read her every insecurity, every secret. She shifted in her seat, unable to shake off the intensity of his stare.

Finally, she had enough. She rose from the bench.

“Fine. Don’t answer.” She looked up at the night sky, raising her hands in question. “I don’t know why I keep expecting anything different from you. You do as you wish when you wish it, leaving me to scurry around, picking up little tidbits of information and trying to put them together to understand just a small part of you,” she huffed and marched right up to him.

“Well, as you pointed out, I have a future now, and I no longer have to sit around, waiting for the Duke of Marlow to grace me with a nod or conversation. I have someone whowantsme, whoacknowledgesme.”

Her tears threatened to fall, but she pushed through, using the ache in her chest as fuel. Without thinking, she brought her hands up and pushed him. To their surprise,

David staggered back a few steps.

“He doesn’t play with my emotions,” she cried. Her tears spilled over—she couldn’t stop them.

She wanted the tears. Let him see what he had done to her. She wanted to finally say all the things that she had bottled up inside of her to finally free herself from the pain she’d lived with for the past few weeks.

“He doesn’t say one thing and then do another. He doesn’t make me feel one way only to turn around and hurt me in the next breath.”

He doesn’t make me feel anything.

Jenny pushed that thought aside. Her sobs began to die down.

“He is the perfect match for me,” she whispered.

She had hoped to hurt David like she was hurting, but he stood there, unmoved.

The fight quickly left her body. Her arms now hung limp at her sides. Her words surprised her—she hadn’t realized how much this was eating away at her.

“Why?” Her voice cracked. “Why? Just tell me why. Why did you dismiss me? Why did you push me away? Am I not good enough for you? Is it because of my background? My personality? My looks?”

She searched his eyes. She wanted to believe there was pain in them, but it disappeared as quickly as it came. David continued to look down at her, his body rigid and still. Even with the anger, frustration, and hurt, she wouldn’t be able to push him now.

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Where was the man who would banter with her, who would challenge her until she finally saw the strength she had within herself?

Now he was a stranger to her. He had made it clear that there was nothing between them but a friendly rapport, that he had enjoyed her company but their time had come to an end.

“Please help me understand, David. For as confusing as you are, I always felt comfortable with you. Even if I was lost in your moods, I found myself. I was able to be myself with you. I need to know why you pushed me away.”

Silence hung between them. Her eyes pleaded with his.

Please, just give me something.

David cleared his throat and tilted his head. “I must bid you goodnight, Miss Bennett.”

With that, he turned on his heel and walked out of the garden, leaving her staring at his retreating back once again.

CHAPTER 15

Aknock sounded at her door. “Come in.”

Frances walked in, wiping a stain on the shoulder of her dress. “It’s amazing so much can come out of someone so tiny.”

Jenny smiled at her reflection. “You don’t need to tell me. You weren’t there the first time he tried strained carrots. My favorite dress is forever dyed orange.”

“The Duke of Dovegrove is downstairs. Going on another promenade this morning?”

Jenny shook her head. “Mhm. Martha is accompanying us.”

Frances took the pin that Jenny was trying to place in her hair. She artfully tucked the stray curl under her hat. “He is a good man, Jenny.”

She rested her hands on Jenny’s shoulders as both women looked at each other in the mirror.

Jenny nodded in agreement. “I know, Frannie. He is everything a woman should want.”

Frances tilted her head. “Should want? Not does want?”

Jenny chewed on her bottom lip. “No. I do want it?—”

“Just not from him?” Frances’s tone was clipped.

Jenny turned on her bench and looked up at her sister-in-law. “Please, don’t be cross with me. I am trying my best to navigate all of this.”

Frances retreated to Jenny’s bed and sat on the edge with a sigh. When Jenny looked at her, she was surprised to see mischief in her eyes and a playful smile on her lips.

“I remember someone quite ardently asking when it was going to be her turn to live through these experiences. To fall in and out of love.”

Jenny threw a hairbrush in Frances's direction. "Oh, stop." She laughed.

"I tried to warn you," Frances said while dodging the flying brush.

Jenny got up in a huff and trudged over to the bed, where she flopped face down next to Frances. "How did I get myself into this?" Her words were muffled by the duvet.

Frances patted her back. "Come, sit up before you ruin your hair and dress. What will people think if they see you walking with the Duke of Dovegrove while wearing wrinkled clothes?"

Jenny grimaced. "Absolutely nothing. The Duke is the most polite, well-behaved man I've ever met. They would sooner think I have low hygiene standards than suspect he took advantage of me."

Frances smirked. "Well, they know your brother, so it wouldn't be surprising if some of his unrefined qualities rubbed off on you."

Jenny turned over her pillows and duvet.

"What are you doing?" Frances asked.

“Looking for that hairbrush so I can throw it at you again.”

Frances held up her hand that was holding the brush. “Sorry, dear sister, I know how much your family likes to throw things when they’re pitying themselves. I’ve learned to hold onto easily thrown items.”

Jenny narrowed her eyes at her sister-in-law. “Clever.”

“I like to think so,” Frances said with a wink. “Now, come on. We shouldn’t leave the Duke waiting.”

With one more glance in the mirror, Jenny followed Frances out of her bedroom and made her way downstairs.

“We’ve been blessed with another lovely day.”

Harry escorted her down the pathway through the park, with Martha trailing behind them.

Jenny looked up into the lush trees, noting the sunlight filtering through their branches. “We really have. It’s beautiful out.”

“Jenny, there is something I was hoping to discuss with you today.”

Jenny turned her attention back to the man at her side.

“I was thinking it was time I brought my daughter Elizabeth to meet you.”

Jenny's lips formed the shape of a small 'o'. She knew he had a daughter—he mentioned her early on in their courtship—but she never considered that she would meet her one day. That one day, she would become her mother.

“I see I’ve surprised you.”

“No, no.” She paused. “Well, yes. But not because I don’t want to. It’s just I didn’t realize we were there yet.”

Harry laid his free hand over the arm that was tucked into his and looked into her eyes. “I think we are there.”

Jenny could only swallow and nod her head.

“Am I alone in thinking that?” Confusion and hurt laced his words.

“Oh no. No.” She lifted her hand and put it on top of his. “Forgive me. I know where we are headed. Becoming a wife is one thing, but becoming a mother to a small child is another, and I’m afraid I haven’t given it much thought. That was terribly wrong of me.”

Relief flooded Harry's features. “No, it’s my fault. I don’t talk much about her. But we are a package deal. She needs a mother.”

Jenny looked at the path ahead of them. “Tell me about her.”

Harry smiled and sighed. She could tell he was happy to finally be able to share the weight of childrearing with someone. Feeling needed made her steps feel lighter, but she couldn’t deny there was still a small lead ball of regret that rolled in her stomach whenever she thought of the future.

Harry blushed. “Oh, where to start? She has my eyes and coloring,” he said, his eyes flicking up to his blonde hairline.

Jenny smiled.

“She loves to read... Well, she’s just learning, but she’s doing quite well. However, she is a precocious young girl with a love of the outdoors. No matter how many times we scold her, we continue to find her outside without her stockings or shoes on.”

Jenny cocked her head. “We?”

“Her nanny and myself. She’s a wonderful older woman my wife hired before she passed. We had other nannies before, her but she’s been with us since my wife’s death. A godsend, really. Elizabeth can be a handful.”

“She sounds like a lively, little girl with whom I shall get along brilliantly.”

For a moment, Jenny allowed herself to imagine what it would be like to be a mother to the young girl. She could see herself walking hand in hand with a little girl who had her father’s eyes. She, too, was known for enjoying the cool earth underneath her bare feet.

The girl was smiling up at her, possibly missing a tooth or two. Jenny could feel the love for the child swell in her heart. Only, the girl’s eyes were no longer blue, but deep green. Her hair wasn’t blonde like before, but darker, with wild curls that would push pins out of her hair just like Jenny’s did.

The solid rock of regret turned into searing pain that stole her breath. Jenny shook the vision from her head. That dream was not to be. Harry was the one who was courting her. Not... him.

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She convinced herself it was just her pride that was holding onto what could have been.

She looked at Harry, who was still giving tidbits about his young daughter.

“She has been asking to meet you for some time now.”

Jenny nodded her head. “Then it is high time for me to meet her.”

Harry’s face lit up with excitement. “Fantastic. I can bring her with me for our walk tomorrow. If that is alright with you.”

Jenny nudged him. “Quite confident that I would accept to go on another walk with you, Your Grace.”

Harry pretended to be hurt. “Are there other suitors I will need to chase away?”

Jenny chuckled. “No. Just you, Your Grace, and I am alright with that.”

Harry stopped and faced her. The jovial mood quickly dissipated as he looked deeply into her eyes. “Are you really?”

“Yes.”No.

Harry smiled, his eyes twinkling with gratitude and hope. Jenny ignored the growing ball of lead in her stomach and reminded herself that all of her dreams were coming true with Harry.

Many people got married and then fell in love with their spouse. She could do that. He was a lovely man, with a generous heart that appealed to hers. Who cared if he didn't make her heart flip when he looked at her, or if his words didn't elicit waves of need and want? It didn't mean she couldn't train her body to react that way in time.

After all, thanks to David, she learned to do many things with her body. She could trick it into thinking Harry was giving it everything it needed.

Patience is a virtue, isn't it?

She just needed to be patient. Those feelings would come—they had to.

The next day, Jenny found herself staring into the same eyes as Harry's. Only instead of looking up into them, she was looking down into them.

Elizabeth was a beautiful cherub of a child. With round cheeks and bright blue eyes, the girl exuded energy in every movement. And she was driving Harry absolutely mad by refusing to sit still.

Jenny leaned down and picked up the shattered pieces of the vase. "It really is alright, Harry. It was a wedding gift that neither my brother nor Frannie were fond of. If anything, Elizabeth did them a favor."

Harry did not find amusement in the situation. Ever since he and Elizabeth walked through the door, the child became interested in touching every single item in the parlor. The upholstery of the chairs, the picture frames, the poor unfortunate vase.

Jenny barely spoke to Harry in the twenty minutes they were there. He was too busy telling Elizabeth to "put that down," or "stop touching that."

"Why don't we go out for a walk?" She looked down at Elizabeth, who was eyeing

up a tiny glass horse figurine, a family heirloom she and Thomas brought from their old life. Jenny reached out and took the child's hand to distract her from its shiny exterior.

“What do you say, Elizabeth? Would you like to go for a walk with us? It's a lovely day outside.”

The little girl finally tore her gaze away from the glass horse and nodded her head vigorously. “Yes, please,” she intoned in her tiny sweet voice, making Jenny smile.

Jenny looked over at Harry, who looked exhausted. “There. All she needs is some fresh air and exercise.”

Harry eyed her skeptically but moved to the door. “Since I'm not doing a good job of controlling her in here, I say we give it a try.”

Jenny scrunched up her nose. “Control? She's a bit rambunctious, but you make it sound as if you're expecting her to be a tiny soldier and not a little girl.”

“If she were a boy, I'd understand. But a girl?” He looked positively shocked. “No, girls should know how to behave. I'm sure you understand what I mean.”

Jenny cocked her head as they walked out of the house and towards the park. “Your Grace, you must remember that I have a vastly different background from my peers. Thomas and I grew up as the children of a shopkeeper. My childhood was not one of strict discipline and conformity.”

Harry waved her off. “I'm sure it wasn't that bad. I wasn't lying when I said she was precocious. I need someone to help me rein her in.”

Jenny stopped walking. Elizabeth tugged on her arm, urging her to keep moving. “I

think we have a misunderstanding, Your Grace. I'm not much of a disciplinarian. I think children should have some freedom to explore things. Some of my favorite memories are of a young Thomas and I exploring our town and causing mischief."

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Harry sighed and held her shoulders with his hands, looking into her eyes. “I don’t expect you to be the disciplinarian, my sweet. I just expect you to back up my discipline.”

“Oh.” Jenny resumed walking with the now-skipping Elizabeth. But then she stopped again. “Wait. Am I to have no say in how we raise Elizabeth?” She cocked her head.

Harry once again sighed. “I’m not saying that... Well, not exactly. Elizabeth is a special child who needs a firm hand. As her father, I can do that. But as you can see...” He pointed to Elizabeth, who was trying to kick a stone at a duck. “She needs more attention than I alone can give her.”

Jenny processed his words. They didn’t sit right with her. However, he never showed any signs of aggression or ill behavior towards her or anyone else. It was not like he was saying that he beat the poor child. Some discipline was good for children.

For instance, if Jenny wasn’t concerning herself over their differing parenting styles, she would most likely be disciplining Elizabeth on successfully hitting the duck with the stone.

If she truly looked at the situation, Harry was acting like his peers did where their children were concerned. Maybe more so.

Jenny decided to drop the conversation. Maybe all Elizabeth needed was a mother figure in her life. After all, she had Frances to help her become accustomed to high society. Jenny could do that for Elizabeth.

“Miss Jenny, are you going to marry my papa?”

Harry sputtered in front of them. His face turned bright red as his eyes bulged at his daughter’s question.

Jenny did her best to cover her giggle, but his expression was too comical not to laugh. “Well, not one to beat around the bush, are you?” she asked while swinging Elizabeth’s hand as they continued past Harry, who was now trying to regain his composure.

The little girl tilted her head to the side and looked around. “I’m not by a bush?”

Jenny laughed. “No, sweetheart, that’s not what I meant. It’s a saying. It means you say what’s on your mind. I like that about you.”

Elizabeth beamed up at her. “Papa and Mrs. Winslow say I need to...” She paused, screwing up her face in concentration. “Stop... before... I speak.”

Jenny looked over at Harry, who was now walking alongside them. “Well, yes. There is an appropriate time and place for all conversations, and you must stop and think if this is the correct place to say what you’re thinking.”

Elizabeth looked up at her father. “Is this the appropriate time for me to ask if she’s going to marry you?”

Harry opened his mouth and closed it, only to open it once more. And close it again.

Jenny took pity on the man. He seemed to really struggle with the precocious child.

“No, Elizabeth. This is not the appropriate time or place.”

“Actually,” Harry interjected, surprising her, “why not?”

It was Jenny’s turn to stare, her mouth hanging open. “Excuse me?”

“Why not here? It’s a beautiful day. I was going to ask you when we returned to the parlor anyway. Why not discuss it here?” His voice held no pretenses or emotion.

Discuss it here.

As if they were negotiating a business deal and not the rest of their lives.

Jenny felt a wave of nausea wash over her. She felt as if everything was happening too fast, even though she’d known for a month this was inevitable. Still, at this moment, she felt completely unprepared for the question.

“Because it is not proper.”

She knew he was one for propriety. Surely, he wouldn’t profess his love for her out in the open in front of strangers and cause a scene.

Harry’s expression turned nervous. He looked around, taking in the couples and groups walking nearby, giving them odd looks as they passed.

She sighed a breath of relief.

Ah. That worked.

Harry shrugged. “I guess it’s a bit uncouth. However, I’ve already talked to your brother about an agreement, so whether it’s in a parlor or this lovely park, I say we make it official.”

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Jenny took a few breaths to steady her breathing and calm her racing heart. He'd already talked to Thomas. A nervous laugh bubbled up her throat and escaped her lips.

To think she was concerned about him professing his love in front of strangers. This wasn't a love match, she needed to remind herself.

She felt a small tug on her hand and looked down into Elizabeth's eyes. Blue eyes, not green. They'll never be green.

She raised her eyes and found Harry waiting for an answer. With a swallow, she squared her shoulders and lifted her head.

Go on, Jenny. This is what you wanted.

"I agree. Let's make it official."

Harry whooped and pulled her in his arms, once again surprising her with his behavior.

He quickly remembered where they were and backed away, looking embarrassed. "Please forgive my outburst, I am very glad to hear you accept. Let's go back to your home and tell your brother the good news."

Jenny's heart sank. If anything, his show of emotion softened her towards him. But just as quickly as his more emotional side showed, he locked it back up behind a wall of propriety and decorum.

Harry took Elizabeth's other hand, and together they walked back to Jenny's house.

With each step, Jenny walked towards a new life. One that didn't hold grand gestures or sweeping emotions, but one that was solidified by saying, "I agree."

CHAPTER 16

"I can't believe the library is finally done. I was beginning to think the renovations would never end," Nora said from the settee in front of the window overlooking the small back garden.

"If my husband had any more say in the matter, that would have been a possibility." Frances stood next to the fireplace, rocking a now-sleeping Simon in her arms.

Jenny sat in a chair opposite the empty fireplace, watching Frances whisper sweet nothings to her child. Her mood seemed to sink further with each sway of her sister-in-law's skirts.

She could have children with Harry. It could be her one day rocking her own child in her husband's house. The thought should fill her with joy. Instead, she rubbed her chest where an unrelenting ache had settled in and refused to leave.

She sank back into her chair and tried to refocus on the tea she was having with her sister-in-law and Nora.

"Frannie, Simon is just adorable. But I must ask, how is your husband dealing with fatherhood?" Nora asked as she reached for another biscuit.

Frances handed the sleeping baby over to her maid. "He's doing as well as you'd expect. He's madly in love with Simon but is still learning that his life is now controlled by a tiny tyrant who can't speak," she said with a laugh.

“It’s true,” Jenny chimed in. “Just the other day, he was about to have a meeting with Frannie’s father when Simon started to cry. He was so confused. ‘Doesn’t he know I have a meeting?’ he barked. As if poor Simon could plan his cries around his father’s schedule.”

The women burst into fits of giggles.

“Yes, he’s still learning the ins and outs of fatherhood. But...” Frances leaned in and whispered, “Don’t tell anyone I said this, but he is a big softy when it comes to his son. I’ve found him singing Simon to sleep a few times.” She brought a hand to her heart. “It stole my breath.”

The love in Frances’s eyes was apparent to anyone who looked at her, and while she’d never begrudge her sister-in-law any amount of happiness, just looking at her made Jenny feel ill.

Her wedding to Harry was just a few days away. The closer the day came, the more she thought of David. No matter how many times she and Frances, along with Nora, met with the modiste or talked about flowers and banquet food, her mind would drift back to the one man who had rejected her.

Nora and Frances continued to talk about motherhood while Jenny’s mind wandered back to the unattainable Duke.

She recounted their nights together so many times that it felt like they happened recently and not a month ago. She was told heartache got better with time, but in her experience, the wound just grew and festered.

As her wedding day neared, she didn’t feel relief that her dreams were coming true. Instead, she felt increasing anxiety and the need to run.

“I’m so glad the Duke found someone, but did they really need to elope to Gretna Green?” Nora’s voice broke through Jenny’s reverie.

“The Duke? What duke?” Jenny snapped. Her heart started to pound as the sound of rushing water echoed in her ears.

They couldn’t be talking about David, could they?

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Oh please, say that it's anyone but David.

"The Duke of Greymore ran off with one of Lord Chester's daughters. Haven't you heard? Everyone is talking about it," Nora confided.

Frances tsked. "Since when have you become our group gossip, Nora?"

Nora leaned back and rubbed her growing belly. "Since it's getting harder to move, I find myself sitting at events. Turns out, if you sit still long enough, people forget you're there and say the most scandalous things without realizing you can hear them. I've learned many things over this past month," she said with a mischievous twinkle in her eyes.

Frances shook her head. "You used to be the moral center of our little group. What is Sarah supposed to do now? You took her role."

Nora laughed. "Who do you think I heard all of this from? If she was able to join us today, she would have told you herself. Think of me as her second-in-command."

The two women laughed, while Jenny was still reeling from the feelings that washed over when she thought David was the duke they were talking about. The thought of David eloping with someone else made her stomach churn. She put the biscuit she was about to eat back on her plate.

Frances played with the napkin on her lap and looked out the window. "I still can't believe they tried to elope only to be caught just outside of town."

Nora guffawed. “Ha! I knew you were interested in this story, “ she said triumphantly.

Frances snorted, not a bit embarrassed to show her curiosity. “Of course, I am. Like you said, everyone is talking about it. I was surprised to hear that Lord Chester disapproved of their marriage plans. It was widely known he was looking to offload his daughter onto someone. I think the Duke of Greymore is an excellent match for her.”

Nora nodded. “I agree. I heard that when he caught up to the happy couple, there was such a scuffle between the two men that the poor bride-to-be fainted. Thankfully, all parties involved were safe and there were no mishaps, unlike other unlucky couples trying to elope to Gretna Green.” Her eyebrows rose and fell above her eyes comically, hinting at a juicier story.

Frances rolled her eyes. “You really are turning into Sarah. Aren’t you usually the one scolding her for bringing up gossip about eloping couples.”

Nora studied her. “Usually, but you yourself admitted that these stories are fascinating. For instance, I finally found out what happened to the Duke of Marlow’s sister.”

Jenny sat up straight. Her eyes went wide. She didn’t want to miss a word of what Nora was about to say, so she held her breath, afraid that even her own breathing would hinder her hearing.

Frances sighed. “Can’t we leave that poor family alone and let her rest in peace.”

“What happened?” Jenny’s voice was barely above a whisper, but it was quickly drowned out by Nora’s exclamation.

“Aha!” Nora pointed at Frances. “So you do know what happened. Why didn’t you tell me?”

Jenny remembered that David’s sister eloped with a man and somehow the poor girl was killed. What else could have happened that would cause more gossip than that?

Frances played with the napkin on her lap. “Because it is none of our business and it isn’t a proper topic.”

“Oh, come now, Frannie. You and I both know, and it happened in the past. What is done is done.” Nora shrugged. “I don’t see the harm in discussing it.”

“What is done? What happened to the poor girl?” Jenny blurted out.

Nora nodded towards her. “Jenny doesn’t know. It would be rude of us not to include our friend in our conversation.”

Frances gave her friend a knowing look but motioned for her to continue.

Nora leaned towards Jenny. “Do you remember how Sarah told you the Duke’s sister wanted to elope and how the Duke was unhappy when he found out?”

Jenny nodded impatiently. “Yes, yes, I remember all that.”

Her heart still broke every time she thought of David losing his younger sister.

“Well, it turns out that the Duke was so unhappy with the situation that he actually chased them down with two of his men.”

Jenny’s heart stopped. She could see the young Duke fearful for his sister, hurt by her disobedience, chasing after her.

“When he got there, there was a fight between the Duke and the brigand. The Duke had a ransom note the man left when he convinced the Duke’s sister to leave with him. The poor girl actually thought the man loved her. I can only imagine the heartbreak she felt when she learned the truth.”

Jenny chewed on her bottom lip. She didn’t want to hear anymore. Each new detail gutted her. Yet, at the same time, it shone some light on the mystery that was the Duke of Marlow.

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“So, the two men fought.” Nora leaned in as far as her pregnant belly would allow her. “Now, here is where the stories diverge. Some say it was the man she eloped with.” She paused for dramatic effect, coaxing a heavy sigh from Frances. “And some say it was the Duke who killed her.”

Jenny blinked, then let out a loud laugh. “Impossible.”

Nora had the audacity to look offended.

Frances chuckled at her friend’s expression. “See, Nora? Not everyone is so gullible to fall for such a ridiculous theory.”

Jenny shook her head. “It’s not a theory, but a most outlandish lie.”

Nora’s eyes narrowed on her. “You sound like you have first-hand knowledge of the Duke in question.” She raised a blonde eyebrow.

Frances and Jenny exchanged looks.

Jenny heaved a sigh of relief—Clearly, Frances hadn’t told Nora about her feelings for the Duke.

Thank goodness.

She nodded. “I have spent some time with the Duke, and while he can be irritatingly broody and frustratingly moody, he has never shown any flaw that would lead anyone to believe he could be capable of murder, let alone be responsible for the murder of

his sister.”

Jenny felt her cheeks flush and her pulse race. The man had been through so much, and the thought of this ugly rumor following him wherever he went made the ache in his heart deepen.

Frances waved Nora off. “This conversation is moot. The brigand that the Duke’s sister ran away with confessed to stabbing her when the Duke was trying to defuse the situation. The man was hung, and the Duke is now doing his best to move on. I think we should let him.” She gave her friend a pointed look.

“Oh, fine.” Nora flopped back in her chair. “I don’t know how Sarah does this anyway. Gossiping is exhausting. It’s so hard to keep up with everything.”

Frances rose and walked over to where Nora sat, offering her hands to help her stand up. “Then it is best to leave it to Sarah and the professionals. Besides, I’m sure getting yourself all worked up over nonsense is not good for the baby. Come, let us get you home. You must be getting tired.”

With one firm pull, Nora was standing on her tired feet. “Very well then. I shall get going.”

She and Frances walked towards the library door. Frances turned back to Jenny. “Are you coming to see Nora off, Jenny?”

Jenny still sat in her chair, staring at the painting over the fireplace. It was of two young children running in a field, chasing dogs.

“Go on. I’m feeling quite tired myself. I think I will retire to my room for the afternoon.”

Jenny's eyes returned to the painting. Her father bought it for her and Thomas before he passed. He said it reminded him of the two of them when they were children. However, when she looked at it now, she couldn't help but think of David and his sister.

She couldn't help but feel they must've been close. Did they run in a field together? Did they play tricks on each other and get into mischief like she and Thomas did?

Jenny glanced back at the door. She didn't know what she'd do if she lost Thomas in such a manner. The utter devastation David must have felt being there, trying to rescue his sister, only for the unthinkable to happen.

"Jenny?" Frances's question startled her. "I thought you were going to lie down?"

Jenny shook off her melancholy. "Uh, yes. I'm going now."

Frances leaned against the doorjamb. "Are you all right? You do look a little pale. Should I send for the doctor? I would hate for you to get sick so close to your wedding day."

Jenny waved her off. "No, I'm fine." She stood up, smoothing the wrinkles in her dress.

Frances smiled and walked over to her. "It must be all the wedding planning. I love your brother dearly, and I am so glad I married him. But if I had to plan another wedding, I don't know what I'd do. It was not an easy process."

Jenny pursed her lips. "My brother is more opinionated than Harry. Any suggestion I have, Harry agrees with. Other than the church. He was adamant about getting married in a church."

Frances eyed her curiously.

“I always dreamed of a beautiful outdoor wedding, with strings of flowers hanging from trees,” Jenny explained. “Thomas and I grew up in the outdoors—we used to run in the fields just outside of town when Papa would go pick up stock for the store. Those are the best memories from my childhood.”

Frances smiled warmly. “Well, consider yourself lucky it’s only one thing you needed to concede to. Your brother fought me on almost every decision. And in the end, he got his way, the sneaky scoundrel.”

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Jenny gave a wistful smile. “I remember. You wanted a formal ceremony, and Thomas talked the minister in doing the shortest wedding ceremony in the history of mankind so he could?—”

Frances threw her hand up to cut her off. “We don’t to go into the reason why your brother did what he did. Or what we did afterward,” she added with a devilish wink.

“Frannie!” Jenny let out a genuine laugh that helped loosen the knot that tightened around her heart since their discussion of David and his sister.

Frances pulled Jenny in her arms. “Oh, it is so good to hear you laugh. I was beginning to think you forgot how.”

Jenny cringed.

I guess I’m not getting better at hiding my true feelings.

“What is it? Is Harry not treating you fairly?”

Jenny scrunched up her nose. “It’s not that at all. As I said, he is being perfectly agreeable with wedding decisions, and he talks lovingly about our future. It sounds like everything I wanted.”

Her eyes dropped to the floor.

Frances dipped her head, hoping to catch Jenny’s eyes. “Is it Elizabeth? I’ve heard she is quite the handful. He’s lucky to have found Mrs. Winslow. There are stories of

a constant rotation of nannies because she is a terror that scares everyone away. Mrs. Winslow is the only constant.”

Jenny shrugged. “I’ve only met her that once.” She furrowed her brow. “I think he may be keeping her away from me for fear I may change my mind about marrying him,” she mused.

Frances’s eyes widened. “Is she really that bad?”

Jenny shrugged. “I don’t think so, but what do I know? I’m not a mother. She was energetic and easily excitable, but she seemed like any other curious child to me.”

“You’re not marrying him just for the sake of the child, are you?”

Jenny barked out a laugh. “What? No! Why would you say that?” She paused. “Although, I do think she needs more of a mother figure than Mrs. Winslow, and I do think someone needs to rein in Harry’s discipline. Plus, I could do for her what you did for me.” She shook her head. “But no, I’m not marrying him for the sake of Elizabeth.” She eyed her sister-in-law. “Why are you asking me these questions?”

“Because you do not seem like a woman who is happy to be getting married. It used to be all you talked about, and now that it’s happening, you look as if you’re walking to the gallows, not to a loving husband.”

Jenny sighed and looked out the window to avoid Frances’s gaze.

“Oh...” Frances murmured, her voice low. She closed her eyes and brought her hands up to her face. Behind her hands, her voice was muffled. “Please do not tell me this melancholy is because of a certain duke.”

Jenny screwed up her face.

Frances peeked from behind her hands. “Jane! You cannot be serious.”

Jenny straightened her spine and looked at her sister-in-law. “I’m not going to lie and say I haven’t thought of him. I have. His rejection still hurts, but Harry is the man for me. I’m going to marry him because, unlike David, he wants me. From what I hear, that is a good start to a marriage.”

Frances studied her. “My dear sister.” She paused as she hugged her once more. “I wish I could tell you that it gets easier. I warned you against love. It’s a horrible affliction.”

Jenny chuckled against Frances’s shoulder. “Spoken like a woman in love.”

Frances swayed them back and forth as if Jenny was a babe. “Oh Jenny, if you only knew.” She pulled away and peered into Jenny’s eyes. “Hmm. Maybe you do.”

Jenny swallowed, fighting the tears that were forming along with the lump in her throat.

“I have a feeling it will all work out in the end.”

Jenny sniffled. “How do you know?”

“Because, my dear, you and your brother share some traits. One of them being stubbornness.” Frances led them out of the library and towards the stairs.

Jenny arched an auburn eyebrow. “Is that a compliment?”

Frances laughed. “For the sake of this discussion, yes. You are simply too stubborn to give up on what you want. If you’re anything like your brother”—she leaned in—“and you are, you will get what you want. One way or another.”

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Jenny smiled and took the first step, before turning back towards her sister-in-law. “Thank you, Frances. I’m grateful that I have you in my life to help me navigate this terrible... affliction,” she snorted.

She turned to continue up the stairs when Frances’s voice called to her.

“Jenny? You are a grown woman now, one who is old enough to make her own decisions and live with the consequences of those decisions. No matter what you decide, Thomas and I will always defend you. If you say you want to marry Harry, then we will stand by you. We both know what it means to fight for what you want. If you want this marriage, then so be it.”

With that, Frances nodded and made her way back into the library.

“And if you want to fight for something else, then we’ll also stand by you,” she added before she closed the door. Her voice echoed in the hallway.

Jenny continued up the stairs, contemplating Frances’s parting words. Was she willing to fight for what she wanted? She had always thought she would stop at nothing to get her happily ever after. Now that her dream was finally in front of her, she needed to figure out if it was worth fighting for.

Or has this fiasco with David changed what she wanted?

CHAPTER 17

David looked at the ledger on his desk. His eyes refused to look at tomorrow’s date.

He knew Jenny was getting married to Dovegrove tomorrow. He'd read about it, he'd heard about it. It was as if there was nothing else going on in this bloody town other than her marriage to that pompous arse.

He slammed the ledger shut and rubbed his hands over his face. He needed to get out of the house. The hallway clock chimed one in the morning, and he huffed out a sigh. If he went out now, he'd only meet trouble.

He pushed himself out of his chair and made his way towards the stairs when a knock sounded at the front door.

"What the deuce?" he grumbled. "Who the hell is calling at this hour?"

He slowly walked towards the door, picking up a cane he had left nearby. He raised the cane over his head as he opened the door. He brought the cane down, stopping just mere seconds before it landed on the head of a cowering Jenny.

"Jenny! What are you doing here? Do you know what time it is?" David scolded. "I could have hurt you."

He looked around to make sure there were no onlookers before he pulled her into the foyer and slammed the door shut behind them.

"I'm sorry, I wasn't aware you changed security measures since we parted."

David bit his lower lip. He refused to give in to the urge to smile at her remark. She was still as spicy as ever.

"I won't ask again. What are you doing here?"

The relief of not hurting her was waning, and anger was taking its place. Which was

good. He knew how to handle anger. It fueled him. It kept him going.

Jenny ignored the question and walked into his study. She headed straight to his drink cart, pouring herself a glass of whisky. “I hope you don’t mind if I help myself. It’s been a chaotic few weeks.”

David’s jaw ticked. “Yes, I heard.”

He stood in the doorway, refusing to go in. If he went in, he was accepting her arrival, and she should not be here.

Jenny stared back at him. “That’s it? You heard?” She cocked her head. “What have you heard, David?”

He swallowed, trying to hold onto the composure and sanity that were currently fleeing him. “I heard about your news.”

She gave a wicked smile, one that grabbed the knife in his heart and twisted it. It did not matter that he placed the knife himself—she had the control to inflict more damage.

“Ah. I see you’re still a man of few words.” She threw the whisky back and made a sour face that almost broke through his anger. “Well, since you heard, you know it’s cause for a celebration.” She poured herself another glass and raised it in his direction. “To a happy marriage.”

She took a healthy sip and sputtered violently.

David sighed and walked over to her. He placed the whisky glass down on the cart and filled another glass with water from the pitcher. “Here. Drink this.”

A red-faced Jenny took the proffered glass and drank from it.

“Thank you.” She coughed a few more times.

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“So that’s it, then. You came here to toast your impending nuptials?” David bit the inside of his cheek. Saying the word ‘nuptials’ felt like sand on his tongue.

Jenny refused to look him in the eyes. Instead, she brushed past him towards the fireplace. She turned to face him and leaned on the back of the sofa.

“You know, I’ve had a lot of time to think in these past few weeks.”

David sighed. She was settling in, there was no way he’d get her to leave now. She stood there, staring at him, waiting for him to... what?

What is it that she wants? Why did she come here, and this night of all nights?

He rolled up his sleeves, and her eyes tracked his every movement. The longer she stood there staring at him, the more dangerous the situation would become for both him and her... and her virginity.

David cursed himself inwardly. He should not be thinking of her like that. She had someone else. Someone who could give her the life she deserved. His fists balled at his sides.

“What are you thinking just now?”

David shook his head. “Hmm?”

Jenny stood up straight. “Just now. You were staring at me?—”

“I was not staring.”

Jenny rolled her eyes. “You were staring at me, and your body stiffened. It’s like you went somewhere else. Somewhere dangerous.” Her eyes sparkled with interest.

David forced his hands to uncurl. “I was thinking that it is late, that I am tired, and that I am in no mood for celebration.” He walked past her and pointed to the study door. “I must ask you to leave. I can call a carriage to take you home.”

Jenny stood unmoving, looking down at the water glass in her hand. “As I was saying before you took your mental trip, I’ve had a lot of time to think over these past few weeks. I think I have you figured out.”

David laughed and folded his arms across his chest. “Oh, really? This should be interesting. And what have you figured out?”

She took another sip of water, still refusing to turn towards him. She swirled the water in the glass, purposefully drawing out the moment.

The tension was getting to him. Would the blasted woman ever speak? Oh God, is this what she felt like all the times he withheld easy conversation?

She finally turned towards him. “You are not him.”

He furrowed his brow in confusion. “I am not who? Dovegrove?”

Jenny scrunched up her nose and waved him off. “No, not him.” Frustration and annoyance laced her words.

David bristled at her tone. If anyone was being annoying and frustrating, it was her and not him.

“You are not the brigand who killed your sister.”

Jenny watched the color drain from David’s face.

“What did you say to me?” His voice was low and even, but it did not disguise the storm building behind his eyes.

Jenny took a step forward, driven by defiance and stubbornness. “I did not stutter. I said you are not the brigand who killed?—”

“Enough!” David thundered, his voice echoing through the room. “Get out.” He pointed to the door.

Jenny noticed a slight tremor in his outstretched arm. But she remained calm. After weeks of her emotions being pulled in different directions, the feeling of control slipped over her like a silk glove. She had prepared for a fight, and she was not leaving until they had an honest conversation about their arrangement.

“No.”

David sputtered. “What?”

She looked him in the eyes. “Your Grace, I’m becoming concerned with your hearing. I said no.”

Her sarcasm was not appreciated.

David stood with his hands on his hips, anger and frustration rolling off him in waves. “You have no idea what you’re talking about.”

Jenny walked ever so slowly towards him. She kept her voice low and soft as if she was approaching a caged animal. “For weeks I could not understand you. How could you go from touching me the way you did to dismissing me like an old maid the next?”

David stood motionless, only his shoulders moved from his heavy breathing. Sweat beaded on his forehead.

“You made me feel seen, understood, wanted, only for you to kick me out of not only your home but also your life, with your next breath.” Jenny shook her head. “I thought it was me. But it wasn’t, was it? It was you.” She stopped and searched his eyes. “It has always been you.”

David dropped his head. “I told you I?—”

Jenny raised her hand and cupped his cheek. “No,” she cut him off. “You’ve had plenty of chances to explain yourself. It’s my turn to talk now.”

She dropped her hand and slowly circled him. She controlled the situation, and the power was intoxicating. He did this to her. He made her feel she could control the world, and she wanted it to last as long as it could knowing what tomorrow would bring.

“I knew you were pushing me away. I just didn’t understand why.” She placed a finger on his shoulder and traced it over his back, from shoulder to shoulder.

David shivered under her touch.

“That is until I learned what actually happened to your sister that night.”

David’s shoulders went taut with tension. “Please, stop.”

His voice was broken, and she felt it calling to her. She stood in front of him, and this time, she cupped his face in both of her hands. She caressed his cheeks with her thumbs as she looked into his eyes.

For the first time, she saw emotion. She saw heartbreak, grief, sadness. She willed it to flow into her. She wanted to absorb all his pain and take it away from him.

“You tried to save her.”

“No.” His voice was soft.

“You raced out of the house when you found the ransom note and ran to her aid. You took men with you.”

David began to crumble into her arms. He leaned into her hands as a single tear fell from his eye. “I killed her.”

Jenny shook her head, her own eyes filling with tears. “No, David. He did. You tried to rescue her.”

“I was young, naive. Stupid. I didn’t think of her safety. I lunged at him and forced his hand.” His voice cracked, and another tear fell.

She pulled him in her arms, cooing words of comfort.

How odd it was that all this time, she thought him emotionless and immovable. It only took hearing what happened to finally understand why he constantly pushed her away, saying he was a bad man. Why he played into the horrible things people said about him.

He thought he was responsible for his sister's death.

"Shh, David. No. None of that is true. The man responsible for her death was punished. He is dead. Your men were there. They corroborated what you said. Plus, the man himself admitted to the kidnapping plot and the murder."

She pulled away to look into his red-rimmed eyes. "Look at me, David. You did not kill your sister."

David pulled away and swiped his hands over his face, wiping away any evidence of tears. "No. I was responsible for her safety. I failed her, and I failed my mother. My mother barely survived the death of my father—she did not survive my sister's passing. I am not only responsible for my sister's death but my mother's as well. If they couldn't have a happy ending, neither can I."

Jenny sucked in a breath. She thought her heart could not shatter more than it had, but now it lay in a million pieces at her feet.

"David."

He threw his hands up. "Enough. No more of this. You do not understand. You are too naive. Like Heather. Like I was. I will not cause another's loss of innocence. Go. Marry Dovegrove. He will protect you."

Jenny let out a mirthless chuckle. “I doubt that.”

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David shook his head. “He’s a good man. He’ll do right by you.”

Jenny tilted her head and sighed. “You don’t get it, do you?”

David looked up at her. “What?”

“I don’t want him. I want you.”

David ran his hands through his hair and let out a low growl. “Didn’t you hear me? I will not ruin another life because of my need to prove something!”

Jenny raised her hands. “What is there to prove, David? We’re doing nothing wrong. We both feel this.” She stormed towards him with her finger pointed at him, stopping the words that were about to leave his mouth. “And do not insult my intelligence by lying and saying you feel nothing for me.”

When she reached him, she jabbed her finger into his chest. “You would not be acting like this with someone you had no feelings for.”

David’s jaw ticked, and his fists balled at his sides. She noticed the movement, and he quickly moved his hands behind his back. He didn’t speak, just shook his head.

“David.” She tried to keep her voice even, gentle. “You said if your sister couldn’t have a happy ending, then neither can you, correct?”

He nodded in agreement.

She rested her hands on his chest and leaned into him. She raised her eyes to his. “Would your sister want that for you?”

His eyes widened, and he tried to pull away. She grabbed his shirt to keep him in place.

“David.” Her tone was commanding. “Yes, she was young and naive, and she thought she was in love. You know what that tells me? That tells me that she was adventurous, that she was full of life. She must’ve lived life by her heart, and that’s beautiful. She does not sound like someone who would want her brother to be shut away in some study, not living life to the fullest.”

David opened his mouth to speak, only to close it a second later.

“What would your sister want for you?” Jenny asked softly.

David’s eyes lit up with fire and desire. Before she could comprehend what was happening, he pulled her in and kissed her with an intensity that knocked her off her feet.

She stumbled backward, but he caught her, pulling her towards him. His tongue forced its way into her mouth, fighting hers for control. Her moans only pushed his tongue in further.

His hands fell to the swell of her arse and lifted her. Her legs instinctively wrapped around his waist. Her nails dug into his scalp, causing a low growl to rumble in his chest. The vibrations sent shivers through her.

He walked them to the sofa, where he laid her down, his body falling on top of hers.

He pulled away, and his eyes remained closed as their noses touched. “My feelings

for you haunt me. I want you, but I don't want to take advantage of you. If I do, I'm no better than that bastard who stole my sister."

Jenny's breathing was heavy, her core was throbbing, and her heart was aching. "Is that a good enough reason to let me marry another?"

David's eyes flew open. This close, she could see the conflict in his eyes. There, before her, were the raw emotions he so deftly kept hidden.

"David, if this is to be our last night together, let us help each other. Let me take away some of your pain."

David brushed the hair from her face. "And what will I help you with?"

"I want to know what it's like to be with someone who sees me for me. I want to know what it's like to be yours, if only for one night, before I become someone else's."

Jenny watched his eyes tighten with heartbreak. He closed them and shook the pain away. When he opened them, some of the hurt had disappeared.

He nodded once. "For one night, you will be mine."

CHAPTER 18

David no longer cared about what was right and what was wrong. Having Jenny here, underneath him, looking up at him with innocent eyes and a mischievous smile should be wrong. So, why did it feel so right?

He had denied the electric chemistry between them for too long, and finally giving in to it was liberating.

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He lowered his mouth to hers once more. This time, his lips gently coaxed hers open, allowing their tongues to explore each other. He was careful not to put his full weight on her. She felt so fragile under him that once again doubt crept into his mind. He shifted again, hoping it took more of his weight off her.

Jenny pulled her face away, breaking their kiss. “What are you doing?” Her voice was breathy and playful.

“I, um, I don’t want to hurt you.” David tucked his chin.

“Oh, that.” Jenny let out a light laugh. “I know all about that. I’m ready.”

David’s cheeks reddened.

Good God, am I blushing?

“No. I mean, I’m a great deal bigger than you. I don’t want to crush you on my sofa.”

Jenny rolled her eyes. “I won’t break, David. I promise.”

She narrowed her eyes at him. He knew that look—she was thinking.

“Here. Let me prove it.”

Without warning, she wiggled out from underneath him, pushed him to a seated position, and climbed into his lap, straddling him.

“Miss Bennett, this is very forward of you,” David said cheekily.

Jenny flashed him a bright smile. “I was told I’m a quick learner, and I had the most excellent teacher when it comes to learning what the opposite sex likes in certain situations.”

It was at that moment, looking up at this beautiful creature who had met his challenges day after day, that David realized that no matter who she claimed to belong to after tonight, she would always be his. Even if it meant he never saw her again.

That deuced Dovegrove didn’t know how lucky he was. Jenny was more than a wife, or a mother. She was the very essence of a woman. She was graceful and wickedly intelligent. She had a beauty that could steal a man’s breath and could give someone life with one look. She was everything. And if she was his for only one night, then he would do his damndest to show her that.

He reached up and cupped her cheek in one hand. She nuzzled it, her eyes becoming heavy-lidded with lust.

David sat up and pulled her down, bringing their mouths together. The shift in her weight had her sitting in the perfect position, coaxing a growl from him and a gasp from her.

He pushed up into her body, and her gasp turned into a moan. He opened his eyes just in time to see the most beautiful pink color on her cheeks. He watched in awe as she discovered what movements she liked.

She started out slow, gently rocking her hips back and forth. David grabbed her hips and fought the incessant need to control her movements and give them both what they wanted.

But this was about her. It had always been about her. He watched as her eyebrows rose and fell with each new sensation. His need grew when her lips formed the shape of a perfect little 'o' when she found the spot that brought her more pleasure.

She opened her eyes to find him watching her, and the pink in her cheeks darkened to red.

"I'm sorry. I'm getting carried away." She shifted her weight, but David held her still on his lap.

"Never apologize for finding your pleasure, Jenny."

She looked down at him with a warm smile. "You always make it so easy to be myself."

David played with a curl that brushed her shoulder. "There is no one else I would want you to be."

Mine. I want you to be mine.

His heart settled with that thought. Knowing that could never be, he could at least give both of them tonight.

Yours. I want to be yours. And if that is not me, then I want to be whomever it is.

Jenny chewed on her lower lip, debating whether or not to voice her thoughts.

"And all I want for you is to be happy, Jane."

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His use of her Christian name startled her. There was something in his voice that cautioned her, a vulnerability in his words that led her to believe this really would be their last night together in any capacity.

The reality of tomorrow was marching towards them with every tick of the clock. This wasn't a lesson—those days were long gone. This was goodbye.

She furrowed her brow as he once again shifted beneath her. He pulled her to the side and stood up. Then he extended his hand to help her stand up.

She slid her hand into his, her heart racing.

Please, please, please don't walk me to your door.

Jenny bit her lip as she silently followed him out of the study, down the hallway, and up the stairs. She breathed a sigh of relief, only to become suddenly aware of what was about to transpire between them.

She took a deep breath with each step that brought her closer to his bedroom door.

She remained silent when he ushered inside and led her to his bed. She watched as he removed his shirt and tossed it on the desk next to a grand window.

Her mouth went dry as her eyes raked over his naked torso. He was tall with lean muscles that flexed and moved in a way she never witnessed before. Her fingers itched to touch his skin, so different than hers.

She kept her eyes on him as he strode back to her, reaching up to loosen the ties of her dress. She focused on the dark pools of green as he gently tugged her dress down, leaving her in just her shift.

Only when she felt his feather-light touch on her neck did her eyes flutter shut.

Her body soon became overwhelmed with too many sensations. His warm breath on her neck as he leaned in to place gentle kisses on her neck and shoulders. His light touch as he pushed her shift off her body. His hands as they led his kisses down to her stomach, leaving a fiery trail in their wake.

David knelt in front of her, peeling off her stockings one by one. The plush carpet tickled her feet. She felt the air leave her lungs when he looked up at her with such... what? How was he looking at her? Was it love? Was she that naive to think he may feel the same way she did?

Did she truly love him? If they loved each other, could they have a future?

Jenny pushed the intrusive thoughts away. Tonight was not about the future. Tonight was about the here and now, regardless of what she wanted.

Tonight was for them.

She reached down to him and pulled him back up.

He cupped her cheeks and kissed her, then he tilted her head to deepen the kiss. Her hands rose and delved into his hair. She tugged on the strands, unwilling to let this moment end.

David turned them and laid her down on his bed. He settled between her thighs, a smile forming on his lips. "Well, kitten, it seems you're ready for me."

She was thankful for the dark, for it hid her blush, much like the night they first met. Only his words had the ability to make her blush so deeply.

“I’ve been waiting a long time for this, David.”

“Then I will have to make sure it was worth the wait,” he said with a devilish grin. He trailed kisses down her body, stopping just at the apex of her thighs. He looked up at her with the most rakish smile. “I’ve been waiting for this as well, kitten.” He nodded towards her center, looking as if he was about to devour her.

Jenny tilted her head in confusion when his lips touched her molten center, coaxing a cry from her lips. Her hands reached out to grab his head. Her first instinct was to push him away, only she found herself holding onto him.

“David” she moaned.

“Yes, kitten?”

She could hear the smile and triumph in his words.

“What are you... ohhhhh.” She arched her back.

A new feeling began to grow deep within her. Her body began to move in a way that was foreign to her yet felt as natural as breathing.

David moaned against her sex. “This. I’ve been waiting for this. You are sweeter than any fruit on this earth.”

Any other time, those words would have had her crawling into a hole to hide her embarrassment, but here, underneath the spell he was casting over her body, she felt empowered.

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Something in her began chanting, “More, more, more.” She dug her fingers into his hair and pulled.

“Careful, kitten. You have sharp nails, and I’d rather keep my hair.”

She let out a laugh that turned into a loud moan when his tongue flicked against a particularly sensitive spot.

“Jenny? Look at me.”

Jenny looked down at the man between her spread legs. His face was glistening with her arousal, his pupils blown wide.

“Listen to me, I need you to relax for the next part.”

She nodded her head frantically. She did not understand what she was agreeing to, but as long as he kept doing what he was doing, she’d be fine with it.

He slid a finger inside her, causing her to jolt. “Shh, kitten. It’s alright.”

She shook her head. “David. I don’t... I don’t know. Something is happening.”

His kisses continued as his finger slid in and out of her. Jenny dug her heels into the mattress, pushing up into him. Tension was building in her core, and the faster his fingers moved, the faster the tension built.

“Breathe, Jenny. Just feel. There is no tomorrow, there are no rules, there is only you

and me. What do you feel?”

Jenny’s breathing became labored. “I feel hot, and there’s so much happening that I’ve never felt before,” she managed between choppy breaths.

“I know, kitten.”

Her hips began to buck.

“That a girl. You’re almost there. Keep going. You always follow your instinct—follow it now.”

Jenny’s body was flooded with emotions and sensations she could no longer differentiate. But one word kept her grounded. David. David. David. David.

His name became her lifeline. Only now, his name was no longer just a thought.

“David. David. David. David.”

Her chant started as a breathy whisper, only to grow louder with each thrust of his finger, each flick of his tongue. She chased the high her body was promising her until her core spasmed and hot white light flashed before her eyes.

Her scream echoed off his bedroom walls.

She lay there utterly spent, panting through the haze her orgasm left her in. “What was that?”

David kissed his way back up her body. “That was proof I know what I’m doing.” His tone was playful, but there was something brewing behind his eyes that, if she were honest with herself, scared her.

She swatted his shoulder. “Show off.”

He looked down at her. “Are you ready?”

Her eyes bulged. “There’s more?”

David raised an eyebrow. “That was just the opening act, kitten.” He shucked his trousers off before he settled between her legs again. “Get those claws out. I expect to have you scraping my back in a minute.”

Jenny let out a laugh. “You’re incorrigible. I’ll leave scars!”

David kissed her neck, sucked on it. Each little pull of his mouth elicited a sigh from her. “I’ll gladly live with your scars for the rest of my life.”

His words were like a balm on her soul.

David reached down between them and guided his cock to her entrance. With one more look for approval, he slid into her.

She yelped at the intrusion.

“Are you alright?” His voice was full of concern, his body still above hers.

She opened her eyes and shook her head. “Yes. I’m fine, please, just, um... move?”

Jenny cringed at her naïveté. She had no idea if his moving would help ease the burn or make it worse. But her instinct told her to move, and David told her to trust her instincts.

David clucked his tongue. “Ever the bossy one.”

She looked up to find his lips curling into a teasing smirk. And that’s when the dam inside her broke.

She knew, without a doubt, she was in love with him. Funny it happened when he called her bossy, but it was so perfectly them. Even when she was at her most vulnerable, he was able to evoke her strength and help her see her worth.

She was bossy, she knew what she wanted, and David was the first person who truly made her feel like that was something to be proud of. That alone was enough to make her love him.

“I know what I want, and I want you, David.”

He leaned down and kissed her. “Then it’s me you shall have.”

His hips began to move, slowly at first, allowing her to become accustomed to his girth.

She raised her hips, meeting his thrust with one of her own.

His smile grew. “My, my, my, kitten, you are a fast learner.”

She preened under his compliment. “Move faster, David.”

The sensation she chased earlier was building again, and she now understood why Thomas and Frances were never around those first months of their marriage. If she could feel this every day, she’d never leave her bedroom either.

“As you wish, kitten.”

David began to move faster. Jenny wrapped her legs around his waist, pulling him closer with a squeeze of her legs.

Her moans mixed with his groans, making the most beautiful symphony she had ever heard. She raked her nails down his back.

“That’s it, kitten. Mark me.”

His scandalous words emboldened her. She locked her legs around him, lifted herself, and began to nibble on his neck as his thrusts quickened. His moans of ecstasy fueled the fire growing inside of her, and she bit hard.

David growled in her ear in response.

She leaned back, worrying her lip with her teeth. “Too much?”

He captured her mouth, his tongue matching the frenzied pace of his hips. “Nothing is too much when it comes to you, kitten.”

Heavy emotions swirled inside her, getting caught up in the building storm within her.

“David,” she pleaded. “Please, I need to... I need... David. David.”

Once again, his name was her lifeline to navigate the pressure her emotions and feelings were putting her through.

“Look at me, kitten.”

His eyes were dark pools of green, holding her captive. She couldn’t look away even if she tried.

“Go after what you want.”

His words were a lightning bolt straight to her core, and her heart. She squeezed her legs together, and her fingernails dug into his back as she arched.

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With a slight tilt, David hit the aching spot within her, and her world exploded. Her euphoric scream dried out her throat and left her head spinning.

David frantically thrust into her another time before following with his own orgasm.

Her legs relaxed, but she refused to let him roll off her. “Please, David. Not just yet.”

She cringed. She tried to keep the desperation out of her voice. Just as quickly as her orgasm hit her, so did the reality that whatever they had between them was over.

David said nothing. His body molded to hers, letting their skin touch in the most intimate and vulnerable way for just a little longer. He placed soft kisses on her throat and then on her cheek, where his mouth met a lonely tear.

He sighed. “I’m sorry, Jenny. I?—”

Jenny vigorously shook her head. “No. Please, don’t. I can’t hear how we cannot be together. Not now. Not after... not after...” Her breath hitched in her throat, and she sniffled.

He rested his forehead on hers, before placing one last kiss there and rolling off her.

The cool air hit Jenny’s body, making her shiver. David rose from the bed and collected his clothes. “Stay here. I’ll go get a towel and some water.” His voice was void of emotion, which hurt her even more.

Jenny silently shook her head, wiping the tears that were falling faster now.

David walked out into the hallway, leaving the door slightly ajar. Jenny looked around the room, feeling bereft and more heartbroken than ever. She had intended to come here to put this arrangement behind her, but it only made her realize she was in love with him.

She looked at the door. She couldn't face him again. She couldn't handle saying goodbye.

She scrambled out of his bed, collecting her clothes as quickly as she could. Through her blurry vision, she threw her dress and shoes on, then stuffed her stockings in her coat pocket.

With a quick look up and down the hallway, she sprinted down the steps and towards the front door.

As she ran out the door, she heard her name being called out, followed by the sound of glass shattering.

CHAPTER 19

"You look beautiful, Jenny. Doesn't she look beautiful, Thomas?"

Frances was trying, unsuccessfully, to tame the curls that refused to stay in place on Jenny's head.

Thomas looked at his sister. "She looks sick."

Frances gasped, horrified, and swatted at her husband. Thomas dodged her hand right before it made contact with his shoulder.

"What? Look at her. You didn't look green when you married me."

Frances and Thomas both narrowed their eyes at Jenny, who was currently staring blankly at her reflection in the mirror.

She heard what they were saying, but she didn't care. Thomas was right, she did look sick. If anything, she wasn't appalled by his comment, but grateful. At least someone was being honest about how ridiculous this all was.

Jenny kept telling herself this wedding was what she wanted. She even wrote in her journal that whatever was between her and David was over and she would eventually get over it. She just had to put one foot in front of the other. Only, today her steps were weighed down with regret and longing.

"Jenny?" Frances's motherly tone got her attention. "Drink some water, love, you do look a little pale."

"And green," Thomas piped up.

"Thomas!" Frances scolded.

Jenny couldn't help herself. The corner of her mouth quirked up. No matter how her life turned out, she was grateful she had those two in her corner. No matter how much they drove each other, and her, crazy.

A soft knock sounded at the door, and her maid entered.

"The carriage is here, Miss."

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Jenny met Frances's eyes in the mirror. This was it. Everything she had worked for since she and Thomas arrived was now coming to fruition. Without a word, she pushed away from the vanity and stood up. She turned to Frances, who was watching her with anxious eyes.

A ball of guilt formed in her stomach. Frances was Jenny's true friend when the ton judged her and her brother upon their arrival. She had helped Jenny find her place in Society, and now that the day every young woman dreamt of was here, Jenny was acting like she was walking to the guillotine and not her happily ever after.

She forced her shoulders to relax. However, no matter how hard she tried, she couldn't remove the stiffness from her body.

"Thank you for helping me prepare for this day, Frannie. I appreciate it so much." She leaned in and placed a kiss on both of her sister-in-law's cheeks.

She moved to stand in front of Thomas, who was looking at her suspiciously. "Thank you, Thomas, for everything you have done for me. You kept a roof over our heads when Mama and Papa passed. You defended us, provided for us, and took care of me when I needed it the most." She kissed his cheek.

Thomas raised an eyebrow. "Frannie, I honestly think there is something wrong with her."

Jenny smiled and patted him on his shoulder. "And I think you are colorblind. Your bride was all sorts of green on your wedding day—you must not have seen it."

She breezed past him. Harassing her brother didn't take all her pain away, but it did coax her first smile in what felt like a long time.

Frances giggled. "I think she's fine. Come, let's get this over with."

Frances and Thomas left her to find a seat at the front of the small church.

Jenny peered down the aisle and saw Harry standing at the altar next to the pastor, with little Elizabeth running circles around him. She smiled at the girl's complete disregard for decorum. However, the muscle ticking in Harry's jaw was bothersome.

She wished they were outside. She always loved this little church, but today, it felt stifling. Being outside would feel so freeing and would distract Elizabeth. If a few ducks needed to be sacrificed to let the ceremony progress smoothly, then so be it.

Jenny sighed into the wall. Who was she kidding? Indoors, outdoors, on the moon, there was nowhere this wedding could take place that would make her feel free.

The worst part was that she was her own jailer. There is no doubt in her mind if she told Thomas she didn't want this marriage, he would handle the fallout for her.

But her own stubbornness had a tight hold on her. She had set out to do something, and by God, she was going to see it through. Even if it meant locking her heart away.

A loud crash and a scream came from the front of the church. Jenny peered through the doorway in the vestibule to see the pastor dousing his vestment with holy water to put out flames.

A giggling Elizabeth holding a now-extinguished candle hid behind her horrified father as he, too, helped put out the burning cloth.

Frances caught Jenny's eyes and motioned for her to walk down the aisle, lest the poor child set the whole church on fire.

Jenny bit her cheek. She never minded a rambunctious child, but she was beginning to think Elizabeth needed more than just a mother figure in her life.

With one deep breath, she put one foot in front of the other. The guests all shifted in their seats and turned to her as she walked down the aisle.

Her feet shuffled under her dress. The closer she got to Harry, the heavier her steps became. Her heart thudded in her chest, and her breathing quickened. If she wasn't careful, she would faint in front of the congregation.

When she reached the altar, Harry stood looking frazzled. Not exactly the sight she had envisioned whenever she fantasized about her wedding day.

His eyes kept flicking to the nanny, who had a death grip on his young daughter, whispering empty threats into her ears to get her to behave.

The charade was becoming too much for her. None of this felt right. The church didn't feel right. She didn't feel right. The groom didn't feel right. Nothing was as it should be.

Jenny felt the sudden urge to drop her flowers and run. She shifted her weight to turn around when Harry's hand reached out and took hers.

Locked in.

The heavy sound of a chain locking echoed in her mind. This was it. She could waver all she wanted, but she was standing in a church, holding the hand of the man she was to marry. It was no longer about to happen. It was happening.

It was done.

Jenny's body swayed under the stress. And for a moment, her vision went black.

She heard screams, and Harry's arms caught her before she fell. She looked up into his eyes only to see him looking down the aisle.

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The commotion she heard was not in response to her fainting but to a man charging down the aisle. An angry man.

An angry man who looked like... David.

“Stop!” he bellowed as he ran down the aisle.

“What is the meaning of this?” Harry was still holding Jenny in his arms, and his hold on her tightened.

She looked between both men, trying to process the spectacle in front of her.

“Do not marry this man, Jenny.” David’s eyes were wild and pleading. His shirt was wrinkled, and his hair, usually combed to perfection, was sticking up as if he had been running his hands through it.

Harry stood between him and Jenny, and he looked to the congregation for help. “Someone restrain this man.”

Thomas rose from his seat and turned to face the congregation, daring anyone to interfere.

No one moved.

“What is going on?” Harry sputtered.

“Jenny,” David started.

“That is Miss Bennett to you. Soon to be the Duchess of Dovegrove,” Harry snapped.

“Not if I have anything to say about it,” Thomas thundered.

David moved closer to the couple. Harry held his hands out, barring him from reaching Jenny.

Jenny stood motionless behind Harry. Her mind couldn’t catch up to what was happening fast enough. Her instinct finally kicked in, and she stepped away from Harry.

“David, what are you doing?”

“Don’t marry him, Jenny. Marry me.”

Gasps rippled across the congregation as people shifted in their seats, all trying to get a better look at the scene unfolding before them. Even little Elizabeth was enraptured.

A hot rush of emotion washed over Jenny. The room began to spin, and once again, she feared she would faint. David lunged towards her. However, it was Harry who steadied her.

“Do you see what you are doing to this poor woman? Leave now!”

David shook his head. “I’m not leaving without Jenny.”

Jenny looked up at Harry. He was usually so composed, other than the few times she saw him discipline Elizabeth. But now, he looked positively mad with frustration. His grip on her arms was beginning to hurt, and she yelped with pain.

David’s eyes landed on Harry’s hands and narrowed. “Let. Her. Go.”

Harry looked at Thomas. “Are you going to let this madman storm in here and make these demands? We had an agreement.”

Thomas, who was still standing, now with his arms folded across his chest, simply raised an eyebrow and then shrugged. Frances beamed up at her husband from her seat.

“And if you want to fight for something else, then we’ll also stand by you.” Frances’s words from the other day echoed in Jenny’s mind.

Jenny pulled her arms from Harry’s grip. “Stop!” she demanded. But his hold was too strong.

Fear seized her body. Calm and respectable Harry turned into something that terrified her.

People pushed to their feet. Thomas stood behind David, murder in his eyes.

Jenny’s eyes met David’s. He was standing, ready to charge, but there was a calm air about him that soothed her.

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She couldn't explain it, but just looking at him, knowing he was there for her, quelled her fear. Together they would get through this.

She looked up at Harry. "Harry." She tried to keep her voice calm and neutral. "Harry, you're hurting me."

"If I let you go, will you go to him?" She cast a glance at David, causing Harry to jerk her closer to him. "You will, won't you? You said there was nothing between you!" His eyes were fury mixed with hellfire.

"I'm sorry, Harry. This is my fault. I led you on. My heart was never in this," she pleaded.

Harry's eyes widened. His face flushed red as a vein throbbed in his neck. "Did you lie with him?" His voice echoed through the church.

David's eyes darkened. Ever so slowly, he crept up to the altar. Out of the corner of her eye, Jenny could see his form approach them. She needed to keep Harry distracted.

"Please, Harry," she begged. "Let me go. Do not do this in front of everyone. Think of Elizabeth."

Harry barked out a laugh as he shook her. "I am thinking of Elizabeth!" His eyes flicked to the pastor, who retreated behind the pulpit for safety. "You there. Marry us."

The pastor shook his head. "I cannot marry someone who doesn't wish to be married."

With Harry's back turned to the congregation, David was able to get close enough to tap him on the back. When the man turned, David threw a punch, knocking him away from Jenny.

If she thought there was chaos before, it was nothing compared to what happened after that. Thomas rushed David. David rushed the fallen Harry. Some people ran towards the melee at the front of the church, others ran to the back. Elizabeth jumped up and giggled at the chaos in front of her.

Jenny had a second to think about how she dodged a bullet with that child before her focus returned to the fight in front of her. Thomas and David had restrained a blustering Harry, who was whimpering about his bruised eye.

David cast a look at Thomas, who nodded to confirm that he had control over the deflating Harry. He looked Harry over once to make sure he wouldn't attack him before he let him go. Then he stepped up to Jenny, who was standing alone at the altar.

He held her arm and noted the bruise forming where Harry held her. A low growl rumbled in his chest. He pivoted to return to Harry when Jenny reached out to grab his arms.

"No. He's done. He doesn't matter."

David snarled at Harry, who cowered in Thomas's hold. He returned to Jenny and cupped her face in his hands. "Are you sure you're all right?"

His eyes roamed over her face, inspecting every inch of her, looking for any signs of

injury.

She nuzzled his hand. “Despite what just transpired, I don’t think I could be any better. This is the best I’ve felt in a long time.”

David furrowed his brow. “How you continue to amaze me, Miss Bennett.”

Jenny scrunched up her nose. “That’s ‘kitten’ to you.”

David’s eyes flashed with heat. “I love you, Jenny.”

His words stole her breath.

“I’m a fool. I should have said it sooner. I was just so afraid of making the same mistakes and ending up hurting you. I couldn’t live knowing I hurt you.”

He leaned in and kissed her, and she melted in his arms.

“But when you left last night, it broke me in two. I couldn’t sleep. I couldn’t think. I didn’t want to live knowing you weren’t with me. I won’t be the perfect husband.” He shrugged. “I’m not the perfect man. But I can’t go on another day without you in my life. Please, marry me.”

Jenny’s heart swelled at his declaration. Looking into his eyes, she found everything she had ever dreamed of. He showed up for her and only her. He saw her, wanted her, never told her she was too loud or too much or too anything. To him, she was perfect the way she was.

She rose on her tiptoes to capture his lips in a passionate kiss. A little too passionate, as she heard a gentle cough coming from Frances.

She pulled away, not one bit embarrassed at her display of affection.

“Is that a yes, kitten?”

Jenny smiled. “It’s an absolutely!”

CHAPTER 20

“I will never forget the look on that man’s face when he burst through the door.” Sarah sighed as she sank into the settee. “All masculine and strong...” Her face reddened.

“I’d stop if I were you, Sarah. Jenny looks like she could kill you right about now.” Frances laughed.

“What? Come now, I know you and Nora are married, but you can’t tell me you didn’t swoon a little when you saw him barging into the church to stop the wedding.”

Nora rocked her sleeping baby in her arms. “I know I did. But I told my husband it was a side effect of pregnancy.” Her eyes twinkled with mischief.

The women all laughed.

Jenny sat on the sofa with her teacup in hand, feeling lighter than she had in months. Tomorrow, she was marrying the man she was destined to marry, there was no doubt in her mind. David Elkins, the Duke of Marlow, had always been hers. Her heart sang just thinking of it.

She looked at her friends, who all gathered to see her before her wedding, which was taking place the next afternoon.

“Quite honestly, it all happened when I was passing out from the stress of pretending I was alright with the wedding. I missed his grand entrance.”

Frances scoffed and pointed a finger at Jenny. "I'm still not happy that you weren't honest with us. You know we would have stepped in had we known your true feelings regarding the wedding."

Jenny shrugged.

"Oh, it was a sight to see," Sarah remarked. "There we were, watching this charade of a wedding take place." She stopped to look at Jenny. "I'm sorry, Jenny, you weren't fooling anyone. We all knew you didn't really want Harry."

"We just didn't know it was the Duke of Marlow you wanted," Nora interjected.

"Well, I did," Frances offered to the shocked amusement of the other two women.

All eyes flicked to Jenny, who bit her lip. "You were saying, Sarah?"

Sarah narrowed her eyes but continued. "We'll come back to how Frannie was the only one to know about David. But yes, there we all were, watching you get married, andboom!Someone kicks in the door."

Jenny's hand flew up. "Wait. He kicked in the door?"

The women giggled.

"He did. It was quite impressive," Frances said.

Jenny grumbled. "Well, now I'm even more mad that I missed it."

"How about Harry's face when he saw David charging him?" Nora laughed.

"The man went as white as a ghost!" Frances added.

“Oh, Frannie, speaking of strong, defiant men. The way your husband stood in front of everyone, daring anyone to step up and interfere with God’s plan, was...” Nora kissed her fingers. “The chef’s kiss.”

“Oh, I know.” Frances blushed. “When do you think Simon’s sibling was conceived?” Her hand patted her stomach.

The women burst out laughing, although Jenny stopped when she realized Frances was talking about relations with her brother.

Sarah once again sighed. “You ladies are getting all the good men. What is left for me?”

“Well, I hear there’s one back on the market. Although he does have quite the temper.” Jenny shuddered.

“Oh, didn’t you hear?” Sarah leaned in.

Of course, Sarah has gossip to share.

Jenny sat back on the sofa. All was right in the world. “I’ve been a bit busy planning a wedding—one that I actually want—so I’ve been quite occupied.”

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“Well, I ran into Mr. Winslow. Remember her?”

“Elizabeth’s nanny,” Jenny offered to a confused Nora.

“She said Harry sent Elizabeth away to live with relatives because he couldn’t handle her. And since she was no longer in his employ, she felt the need to tell her story.”

Jenny sat up with interest. “Her story? What do you mean?”

“You definitely lucked out, my dear,” Sarah started. “It seems his behavior at the wedding was not a one-time occurrence. He was known to have a temper. He never hit or struck anyone, but she said he was always yelling and had no control over that child. Mr. Winslow hated living there, but she felt bad leaving the girl alone with him, so she stayed on.”

Frances gasped. “He always seemed so in control of his emotions when he was around us. I mean even when Elizabeth lit the pastor’s vestments on fire, he seemed level-headed about it.”

Sarah clapped her hands together. “Apparently, it was all a ruse. He knew how to conduct himself in Society, but behind closed doors, it was a different story.”

Jenny shivered at the thought of what her life could have been like. Once again, she thanked her lucky stars that David barged into that church on that fated afternoon.

Frances waved her hands. “Enough of this nonsense. What is done is done, and we’re all moving on to brighter days. Isn’t that right, Jenny?”

Jenny blushed. “Absolutely. I can honestly say I have never been more excited about tomorrow. I don’t even think I was this excited when Thomas and I first arrived here.”

Frances reached over and grabbed her sister-in-law’s hand. “I remember the first night Nora introduced us. You were a bundle of nervous energy, ready to take on the whole world. I’m glad to see you haven’t lost any of that lively energy. I was worried for a bit that you may have.”

The women sat in silence for a moment, each recalling those days leading up to the wedding to Harry.

“You know, there is a question I need to ask you, Jenny. I wonder what possessed David to barge into the wedding like that,” Nora mused.

Jenny wrung her hands in her lap. “Frannie said something to me the night before that got me thinking.”

Frances looked curiously over at her.

“You told me to fight for what I want, so I did.”

The women processed Jenny’s words.

Frances groaned. “Tell me you didn’t snuck out to his house that night.”

Jenny said nothing but offered a smile and a shrug.

“Jane! What did I tell you about sneaking off to his house?!”

Nora and Sarah yelped in surprise.

“You would sneak out to go to his house at night?” Sarah was positively giddy at the thought of more gossip.

Jenny stood up. “Well, ladies, I think we should call it a night. I don’t know if you heard, but I have a big day ahead of me tomorrow.”

She ushered the nosy women out of the house, knowing full well they’d be revisiting that conversation later. But that was for another day. She had better things to do, like figuring out how she was going to fall asleep when she was as excited as a child on Christmas morning.

The carriage pulled up to Lady Staunton’s estate. The Countess had offered her grounds for their wedding after witnessing the scuffle at Jenny’s ill-fated wedding. She claimed that since their first introduction was at one of her infamous parties, it only be right that they hold the wedding there.

Thomas helped Jenny out of the carriage, his face lit with a bright smile.

She stopped. “What is your face doing?”

Thomas held out his arm for her to take. “Smiling.”

“Why?”

Thomas chuckled. “Because this is how you should look like when you’re getting married.”

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Jenny looked up at her brother. “And how should that be?”

“Radiant.”

Jenny blushed. Her brother was not one for platitudes. Much like her husband-to-be, he only offered words when they were absolutely necessary. His one-word compliment meant more to her than any gift he could have purchased for her.

“I’m serious, Jenny. Frannie and I are very happy with your match. I’ve come to know Marlow well, and he is exactly the man I would have picked for you.”

“Is that so?”

Thomas shook his head. “It is. And if I had any doubts about his character, his actions at the church put them to bed.”

Jenny couldn’t contain her joy. She leaned against her brother’s shoulder as they turned the corner to step onto Lady Staunton’s porch.

“And if, by chance, there were any lingering doubts, this would extinguish them immediately.”

Thomas led her onto the porch that was decorated with floral arrangements and candles as far as she could see. A white cloth lay on the steps off of the doorway and down the path to where David was standing.

Jenny’s breath caught in her throat. Small candles lit the pathway to David, while

strings of flowers hung from the trees. It was the most beautiful thing she had ever seen—it was exactly what she had envisioned when she dreamt of her wedding day.

“If a man can go through the lengths he did to pull this off, he is a better man than me. I thought dealing with Frannie was frustrating. She has nothing on Lady Staunton,” Thomas joked.

Jenny’s eyes filled with tears. She couldn’t wait to get to David’s side. She even began tugging on Thomas’s arm as they walked.

“Calm down, woman. We’ll get there,” Thomas chided, lengthening his strides to keep up with her.

David had never dreamed of his wedding. Hell, he had never even given it much thought. Sure, the prospect of marriage was always there. He was a duke, after all. He just assumed when the time was right, he’d find a formidable woman, and that would be that.

Never in a million years did he expect the woman of his dreams to sneak into an unlit library and upend his entire life. But she did, and he couldn’t be happier for it.

He watched as Jenny and Thomas walked down the aisle Lady Staunton’s men created in her garden. She never looked more beautiful. Her auburn hair was twisted up into a chignon, and a couple of stubborn curls were framing her face.

The low afternoon sun created a halo around her, giving her an ethereal glow. Which fit her perfectly—she really was an angel sent by God to rescue him.

She saved him from a life of misery and a self-imposed prison sentence. The fact that he almost lost her to Harry still caused his hackles to rise. Jenny’s frightened face when Harry grabbed her still haunted his dreams. It was the same look in Heather’s

eyes the night she died.

David promised himself on the night he lost Heather that he would never put someone in that position again. When Harry held Jenny hostage in front of their peers, he knew it was his turn to make it right. He was forever grateful that his actions resulted in a better outcome. The thought of losing Jenny the same way would have killed any reason for living.

Now, watching Jenny walk towards him, he felt relief, as if a weight was finally lifted off his shoulders.

When Jenny and her brother reached him, Thomas reached out and shook his hand. “Good luck,” he said quickly, before joining his wife and son in the chairs.

“Took you long enough.” David winked at his bride.

Jenny’s smile ignited a fire in his gut. He wanted to grab her hand and run for the nearest empty room, but he knew how important this day was to her.

“I’m sorry, Your Grace. I didn’t realize you were waiting for me.”

David took her hand and kissed the inside of her wrist. “I’ve been waiting for you my entire life, kitten.”

EPILOGUE

Jenny stood looking out over the garden David’s sister and mother had created. She felt David behind her and leaned back against him. “I was thinking, I would like to tend to your family’s garden. I’d like to continue the tradition.”

David brushed her hair from her shoulder so he could trail kisses down her neck.

She giggled in delight. “David? Are you listening?”

“Nope.” He continued his ministrations on the other side.

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Jenny sighed. “Whatever shall I do with you?”

She could feel him grin against her skin. “I have a few ideas.”

She turned in his arms. “Oh, you do?”

“Mhmm. And it has nothing to do with gardening.” He stopped and peered outside. “Although doing what I have planned out in the garden could be something to think about.”

Jenny let out a laugh as she swatted his shoulder. “Baby steps, Your Grace.”

David reached under her knees and lifted her, cradling her against his chest. “Hmm... baby steps. I kind of like the sound of that.”

Jenny looked up at her husband, shocked. “You mean...”

David nodded. “Oh yes. The idea of you carrying my child is quite enticing.” Jenny squealed as he dropped her on their bed. “In fact, it’s so enticing that I feel we should start trying right away.”

Jenny laughed. “We just got married. It’s going to take more than one time.”

David crawled up over her, pulling her shift with him. “Oh, I’m counting on it,” he said with a devilish smirk.

His fingers trailed up her body, leaving goosebumps in their wake. “Have I told you

how astounding you look today?”

Jenny wrinkled her nose. “Not recently.”

“You took my breath away.” He lifted her ever so gently to pull her shift off, leaving her naked beneath him.

Jenny had always assumed that the intimacy of lovemaking would leave her embarrassed and make her movements clumsy. But she felt more sure of herself lying here with David than at any other time in her life.

With him, she knew she could handle anything that came her way. She was confident, bold, adventurous. He even challenged her to be more true to herself if it was possible.

She reached up and captured his mouth. Tiny nibbles turned into passionate kisses. Her hands raked up and down his back, which caused his hips to buck against hers.

“Anxious to get started, kitten?” David groaned into her neck.

“I’m always anxious to get started with you. You bring out the absolute worst in me when it comes to wifely duties.”

David scoffed. “If this is your worst, I’ll gladly take it.” He reached down between them and guided himself into her.

Jenny sighed, opening her legs to accommodate him. With each thrust, their breaths grew heavier. With each stroke, they pieced together the broken parts of each other until they created one beautiful unit. Nothing could break them apart now—they were as much a part of each other as their hands or feet.

Jenny brought her hands up to cup David's face. "Take me over the edge, David. Take me to where only you can take me."

His eyes grew heavy-lidded with love as he thrust into her faster and harder. The bed creaked and slammed against the wall, putting a rhythm to their love. The familiar ache inside her started to grow, causing her toes to curl. Her heart raced—excitement electrified her blood. She knew what her body was running towards, and she was ready for it.

She arched up into him and ran her hands through his dark, silky hair. His eyes rolled to the back of his head as he let out a primal growl.

Jenny bit her lip in amazement. It still shocked her how much she affected this man.

David leaned down and seized her mouth. Moaning into his kisses, she tightened her grip on him. Their sweat-slicked bodies slid over each other in the most primal of ways.

The familiar chant started in her head. David. David. David, until it spilled from her lips.

"That's right, kitten. Who do you belong to?"

She opened her eyes and peered into his. "You. I belong to you, David. I always have."

Her words sent his hips into a frenzy. He raised one hand to the headboard above her head to brace himself as he continued to piston into her. Her moans turned into euphoric screams as her orgasm crashed over her.

David continued pounding into her, drawing out her release until he climaxed. Then

he rolled off her and pulled her to him, tucking her into his side.

“That was something,” she panted.

David opened one eye and looked down at her. “Something? Just something?”

She snuggled in closer. “Forgive me, husband. The part of my brain responsible for formulating words is currently not functioning.”

David grinned smugly. “That’s more like it.”

His chest continued to rise and fall as he tried to catch his breath. Jenny traced her fingers over his chest, marveling at the feel of his chest hair beneath her fingertips.

He squirmed under her touch with a little laugh. “Stop, you’re tickling me.”

Jenny sat up and gasped. “Are you telling me that the dastardly Duke of Marlow is ticklish?” she asked jokingly.

David opened his eyes and stared up at her, quickly realizing his mistake. “What? No. Nothing of the sort.”

Jenny’s face lit up. “You did. You’re ticklish!”

She pounced on him, tickling his sides and stomach, trying to find the place that caught him off guard in the first place. She straddled his hips and continued poking him. David tried to capture her quick hands, but she moved too deftly for him to catch her.

He rolled her off him, only for her to wiggle out from underneath him.

“I thought I already proved to you how strong I am.” She climbed back on top of him, their laughter echoing off the walls of the bedroom.

David’s eyes darkened. “I was only allowing you to move me.”

She raised an eyebrow at him and then looked around the room. “I’m sorry, who’s on top?”

Before she could finish pronouncing the ‘p’ in “top,” David grabbed her hands and flipped her, pinning her underneath him with her hands held above her head.

“Ohhh,” she breathed.

“Oh,” he echoed.

Jenny tried to wiggle free, but she found herself unable to move at all. “Oh.”

“You keep saying that. Cat got your tongue?” His smirk would be frustrating if she wasn’t so turned on by it.

She narrowed her eyes at him. “You’ve won this round, Your Grace.”

He bent down to take her mouth. “That’s where you’re mistaken, kitten.” He ground his hips against her center, where she could feel his length harden again. “We’ve both won.”

The End?