



The Dark Duke's Virgin

Author: *Violet Hamers*

Category: Erotic, Romance, Historical

Description: "This is your punishment. To burn and ache for my touch until I give it to you..."

Caroline's dark secret has been safe for two years. Until a fire forces her to stay with the most dangerous man. Whose eyes make her burn with desire...

Raising his daughter alone, Duke Frederick is desperate for a governess who won't run at the sight of him. Now, his only option is his mother's companion, a woman so vexing he cannot resist teaching her a lesson...

Yet the moment he claims her lips, Frederick realizes he must tame this minx. Even if that means tormenting her with pleasure until she admits her true desires...

*If you like a realistic yet steamy depiction of the Regency and Victorian era, then *The Dark Duke's Virgin* is the novel for you.

Total Pages (Source): 91

CHAPTER ONE

“Mr. Jenkins!” Caroline called after the head butler of Linfield Estate. “Mr. Jenkins!”

Mr. Jenkins was making his way down the grand staircase that wound into the entrance foyer but paused mid-step when he heard his name called. “Ah, Miss Dowding,” he said with an affectionate smile. “You look lovely this morning. And clean.”

She rolled her eyes at him, for it was the exact same greeting he had given her every morning for the past two years since the first day she had moved into Linfield Estate. A little inside joke between them both as the first time they had met, Caroline had been covered from head to foot in mud and sludge, looking the very opposite of ‘lovely and clean.’

“Have you seen Esther this morning?” she asked as she approached Mr. Jenkins. “She was not in her room, and I worry that she has gone riding without me.”

Mr. Jenkins groaned. “She best not have. The Dowager knows better than to do so.”

“Has Esther ever been known to do what she is told?” Caroline chuckled.

“A very good point.”

“I’d like to believe that she would not be such a fool as to do that...” Caroline bit into her lip as she considered the very real possibility that the elderly Dowager, in a bid to prove a point, had indeed taken her horse for a ride. “Although she also may have.”

Mr. Jenkins rubbed his temples as if in pain. "I shall check the stables."

"And I shall check the library. Hopefully, she has simply lost track of time and forgotten that we had plans today. Plans which most certainly did not involve putting her life at risk by riding atop a horse."

He chuckled. "She never used to be this way, you know."

"When she was younger, you mean?"

"No, no," he sighed. "Before you came along is my meaning. Then, she seemed to understand that at seventy years of age, certain things were expected while others were downright impossible. Why, to look at her then, one might have even called her boring."

Caroline snorted. "I cannot imagine a world where Esther would be considered boring."

"As I said..." He raised an eyebrow at Caroline. "... she was before you came along."

Caroline leaned back and squinted at Mr. Jenkins as she searched out his true meaning. "Is this a rebuke, Mr. Jenkins?"

"Quite the opposite," he said with a wink and a smile. "Boring is as the name suggests, boring. But your presence here has injected the Dowager with a vigor that we all thought she had lost since the passing of His Grace. And assuming she has not fallen off the back of a horse and broken her neck, I dare say that your companionship has added years to her life."

Caroline felt her cheeks blush, and she had to look away for how embarrassed she

felt. “The stables, Mr. Jenkins. And I shall search the library.”

“As you say, Miss Dowding.” A short nod of the head, and he started down the steps.

“Oh!” she called after him. “And will you ask the staff to check that they have not left the hearths burning from last night. It is as hot as an oven in this house!”

Mr. Jenkins indicated that he would do so as he swept through the front door, calling out to a member of the staff to run ahead to the stables in case the Dowager was still there.

Caroline shook her head to herself as the door closed behind him. To think that when she had first met Mr. Jenkins two years ago, he had detested her because he had assumed that she was a street urchin looking to steal her way inside the estate, likely with the intent on robbing from his employer everything that she could get her hands on. And now, well, the two were as close as father and daughter. How things had changed.

Caroline started down the staircase and then made her way quickly to the library at the back of the estate in search of Esther, who she prayed to find there. And as she did, she could not help but ponder these last two years and all that had happened to her, the changes in her life and the happiness said changes had brought.

Mr. Jenkins called her Miss Dowding, for he thought that to be her name. And indeed, the entire staff, as well as the Dowager, thought the same. When she had appeared on the doorstep of the Linfield Estate two years past, Caroline had lied about who she was and her reasons for being here, desperate that they not learn the truth for that would ruin her.

For two years now, she had remained hidden, living at Linfield Estate as the Dowager’s companion, committed to this new life in a way she might never have

dreamed possible.

The library was empty which struck fear into Caroline. She had only been joking about Esther taking one of the horses for a ride, but Esther was as eccentric as she was unpredictable, and it would be just like her to do such a thing for no other reason than to prove that she could.

“Miss Dowding,” a soft voice spoke from the door of the library.

Caroline spun about to see Miss Spencer standing there, one of the few maids who worked for the Dowager. She was older than Caroline’s twenty and six years but still young when compared to the Dowager.

“Miss Spencer!” Caroline hurried toward her. “Tell me you have seen?—”

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“The Dowager has asked after you,” she cut Caroline off. “She is in the cellars at the moment, and she sent me to find you, requesting urgent assistance.”

“Assistance?” Caroline frowned while feeling relieved at the same time. “Whatever for?”

Miss. Spencer’s expression was flat. “Nothing good is my reckoning, but you know how she gets.”

Caroline grinned. “Oh, do I ever.”

Relieved to hear that Esther was on her own two feet and indoors where she was relatively safe, Caroline thanked Miss Spencer and hurried through the house and in the direction of the cellars. As she went, she felt herself sweat more than was normal and considered finding another member of the staff to double check those hearths, but she reasoned that could wait as now, her curiosity had peaked regarding what Esther was doing.

She could not help but smile as she tried to picture it: the eccentric elderly woman squirreled away in the dusty cellars, likely making a mess and fussing over she could only imagine what! But that was just Esther’s way.

When Caroline had arrived on the doorstep of Linfield Estate two years previously, she had only intended on staying the night. But with nowhere to go and no plans to speak of, Esther had insisted that Caroline stay on as her companion—a role designated exclusively to women of the peerage with no family or prospects or much of anything to support themselves with.

She might have said no if she'd had any other option. And she might have still said no if she hadn't sensed immediately that Esther was special and unique in ways that suited Caroline's own esoteric sensibilities. And in the two years since she had started living here, Caroline would go so far as to say that she was more than the elderly Dowager's companion but her dear friend—a thought that brought a warm smile to her face.

It was two minutes later when Caroline walked into the dingy cellars located beneath the estate. Torches buckled into the walls lit the dank interior so that she immediately spotted Esther in the corner, pulling the lids off a series of barrels lining the walls.

“Esther!” Caroline called her. “What on earth are you doing?”

“Oh!” Esther spun around, eyes widening with glee at the sight of Caroline coming for her. “There you are, dear! I was wondering where you had gotten off to.”

“Me?” Caroline shook her head as she came in beside Esther. “I will remind you that we had plans this morning.”

Esther frowned. “We did?”

“The pianoforte? You wished to pick up where we left of last night.”

“Oh, yes, that.” She waved Caroline down. “We can do that later. This is of far greater importance.”

“And what is this, exactly...” Caroline peered over Esther's shoulder, able to see now that the barrels Esther was searching through were packed to the brim with salt.

“Well, I woke this morning in a bit of a state,” Esther sighed as she turned back around, her hand now pawing through the nearest barrel. “Readying myself for the

day, I caught sight of my reflection, and do you know what I realized?"

"Pray do tell."

"That I am old, dear. Frightfully old." Half her arm was buried now. "And while I might not feel it, I look it! Why, I thought it was my own mother staring back at me!"

"Esther..." Caroline sighed and rubbed her eyes. "I do hope that this is going somewhere. And that it explains what you plan on doing with these barrels filled with salt."

"Oh, not salt, dear." She grinned manically at Caroline and then pulled her arm free, revealing a shank of raw meat clutched in her hand. "Meat! I was speaking with Mr. Clancy, and he swore black and blue that raw meat is a most miraculous healing agent for the skin. Said to tighten it up and reduce the effects of ageing." She waved the shank of meat in Caroline's face. "Thirty minutes with this on my cheeks, and I will look ten years younger, I kid you not."

What was there to even say?

Caroline eyed the shank of raw meat in Esther's hand. Then she fixed her with a look that told the elderly woman what she thought of this little venture: that it was as ridiculous as it was insane sounding.

"Oh, do not give me that look!" Esther cried as she put the shank of meat down and then dove back into the barrel. "And make yourself useful, will you? Have a rummage in these barrels and see what you can find?"

Now, just to clarify, Esther was of sound mind and in no way losing her wits because of aging. If that was the case, Caroline might have felt bad for lying to her. She was just eccentric, a little odd, and it was Caroline's suspicion that she often did the

ridiculous simply to see what she could get away with.

“I think I will pass,” Caroline said.

“What? Some companion you make!”

“But I will happily help you apply said meat to your face, if that is what is needed?”

“I suppose that will do—ha!” She pulled another shank of meat free, looking delighted. “Admit it, when you came to me two years ago, you did not think you would be having as much fun as this now, did you? Imagine it; if that scoundrel betrothed of yours hadn’t left you at the altar, who knows what dull, monotonous activity you would be doing today. Something boring, no doubt.”

“Aren’t I the lucky one,” Caroline said with just a hint of sarcasm.

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Two years ago, as well as giving a false name, Caroline had told Esther that she had been left at the altar and that was the reason she'd fled her home. Another lie. Another reason to feel guilty. Another instance in which Caroline was forced to wonder if she had made the right decision in all of this and what would happen when the truth came out.

Every day, Caroline was forced to reckon with this eventuality, the only thing keeping her sane being how much she enjoyed her new life. And that was all thanks to Esther.

"There you are!" It was Mr. Jenkins. He stumbled through the doorway, face ashen.

"It is fine, Mr. Jenkins," Caroline sighed. "I found her."

"How are you both still down here!" he stammered as he stumbled toward them. His face was beetroot red, sweat dripping down it as if he was melting. "Surely you have heard!"

"Mr. Jenkins, you look awful," Esther said as she looked at him. "Might I suggest some meat?"

"We have to get out, now!"

"The heat," Caroline said, suddenly noticing how hot it was down here. And not just hot, boiling. "Mr. Jenkins, did you speak to the staff about the hearths? It is so hot down here, one could boil an egg on the ground."

“That is just it! Dowager, I have just been alerted. There is a fire in the northern wing of the estate! And it is spreading! Quick, we must?—”

“A fire!” Caroline cried. “Esther! Hurry!” She grabbed Esther, who looked set on not moving, by the arm.

“Oh no,” Esther moaned. “Is it bad?”

“We can talk about it later!” Mr. Jenkins took Esther by the other arm. “Please, we have to hurry!”

“Wait!” Esther wrenched her arms free and snatched at the two shanks of meat she had secured. “We best collect as much as we can, for although Mr. Clancy did not say specifically, I have a feeling that cooked meat will not be nearly as effective. Mr. Jenkins, you start in that barrel, and Caroline, you start in this one!” And then, she spun about and shoved both hands into the same barrel as before, determined to collect another shank of raw meat before the house burned down around them.

To the casual observer, it might have looked strange. Downright bizarre. But after two years of living at Linfield Estate as the Dowager of Thornton’s personal companion, to Caroline, it was as predictable behavior as it was boiling hot.

CHAPTER TWO

“Isabella!” His Grace, Frederick, the Duke of Thornton called as he stormed through his estate, rounding the corner and coming upon the drawing room where he knew his daughter to be “Isabella!”

“In here, father!” her soft voice called out.

He strode into the drawing room, not in the least surprised to find his twelve-year-old

daughter with company. Her name was Miss Cecilia Wanton, a governess whom he had hired specifically to help raise his daughter in lieu of a mother. A perfectly acceptable arraignment, if only the same could be said of the outcome.

“Your Grace!” Miss Wanton squeaked at the sight of Frederick striding into the drawing room. “We were not expecting you.”

“In my own home?” he responded coolly.

Her eyes went wide. “I did not mean—I was just—if I had known?—”

“Father...” Isabella sighed and clicked her tongue. “You are scaring her. You know that you are.”

“That was not my intent.”

Isabella snorted. “If you say so.”

“Is it fine,” Miss Wanton said softly, refusing to look at Frederick. Or perhaps she was simply unable? Rarely when Frederick was in the room did Miss Wanton so much as glance at him, as if she worried doing so might burn her eyes out.

“You do not need to be afraid of him,” Isabella instructed. “I know he looks mean, but really, he is not that bad. Is that not right, father?” She winked at him.

He chuckled at the cheek. “Is that your way of saying I have been too soft on you, Isabella? That can change if you like.”

She snorted. “No, no. Forget I said anything.”

The sight of his daughter did much to calm Frederick’s less-than-hospitable

temperament, for he was in a mood today and did not relish what he had come here to do. And while a small part of him did wonder if he was overreacting, the greater part knew that this was as inevitable as the sun rising on the morrow.

As a duke, Frederick had been raised to understand that responsibility and discipline was not something that he had the luxury of shying away from. And while some might spurn him for the way he acted, calling him cold and callous and all sorts of horrible things, he knew that ultimately these decisions made were for the best.

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He just prayed that his daughter forgave him. He was, after all, doing this for her.

She was seated across from Miss Wanton, a set of crochet needles in hand and a length of stitching falling from her lap and trailing across the floor. As part of her education, Miss Wanton was showing Isabella how to properly crotchet with needle and thread, one of the many skills that any young lady of the ton should have knowledge in. That, after all, was the entire point of a governess, to prepare a young lady such as Isabelle for adulthood and what was expected from a daughter of a duke.

And in a way, she had succeeded in said tasks. Having only been here a month, she was everything that she had claimed when applying for the role. But that was merely surface level.

“You look mad, father...” Isabella set down her needles and skipped across the room toward Frederick, throwing her arms around him in a tight hug.

“Do I?”

She giggled. “Although I suppose I would be more surprised if you looked happy. Right, Miss Wanton?” she then asked of the governess. “In the month you have been here, have you seen my father smile even once?”

Miss Wanton’s mouth opened and closed, no words coming out. Fear struck her face, and it was only too clear that she wished to be anywhere but in her employer’s presence.

“My point exactly, big meanie,” Isabella giggled again, arms still wrapped around his

waist, looking upwards and beaming because only she could get away with teasing him like this... and she knew it.

Oh, how Frederick loved her. How he adored her. She was the only source of light in his life, and he cherished her as if his own life depended on it. And the fact that she looked more like him than her mother only furthered this sense of protective love and worship as he saw himself in her often... or at least a side of himself that he rarely let out anymore.

Perhaps that was why he was so protective of her? Yes, there was the fact that she was his only daughter, and if things continued for Frederick the way they had been, she would likely remain his only child. And yes, he wanted the best for her, a life promised that only the daughter of a duke could fulfil. But mostly, it was that she reminded him of who he used to be, and what life might have been like if he hadn't been born to this station. Fun. Jovial. Even whimsical. Words not spoken in the same sentence as Frederick's name because of the image his peers had of him.

And it was this love, this sense of protection he had for Isabella, that had brought him here this morning. The reason he was set to perform a most unpleasant task, one which would undoubtedly anger his daughter as he so hated doing.

"How is everything going today?" he asked, watching Miss Wanton for her reaction. Typically, she grimaced and looked down at her lap.

"Wonderfully," Isabella said as she let him go and wandered back to her seat. "Miss Wanton is a wonderful teacher."

"And that is what she is doing, is it? Teaching you?"

"Well... yes." Isabella frowned and glanced at Miss Wanton.

“I just came from seeing Miss Tibbs,” he said, looking between the two. “She was concerned, for she finished washing your clothing from yesterday, Isabella, and it seems she found something that she thought prudent to bring to my attention.”

Isabella’s eyes flicked to Miss. Wanton; the guilt in them clear. “W-what did she find?”

“Blood,” he said. “On the skirt of your dress. Do you care to explain?”

“I...” Isabella’s mind worked quickly. “I am not sure. Are you certain it was mine? Or even blood? Perhaps it was a food stain?”

“Show me your knees, please.”

Isabella’s eyes widened, but she was quick to reset. “My knees? Father...” An awkward chuckle. “I do not know what you?—”

“Your knees, Isabella. Show them to me. Now.” It was not a question but a command that even Isabella would not refuse.

She bowed her head. “Father... it is not what you think.”

“Show me,” he growled at her.

Silently, with great shame, Isabella lifted the skirt of her dress to reveal her kneecaps, and as expected, as he had known, they were scuffed and torn with scabs growing over recently formed wounds.

“It is not what you think!” Isabella said quickly. “I fell! That is all!”

“And what were you doing when you fell?”

She grimaced, unable to look her father in the eye. “We had finished my studies—I made sure of it. I did. And there was still some time before supper, so I asked Miss Wanton if she might wish to play—I asked her!” Her head snapped up, her eyes turning red as she pleaded. “It was not her choice! It was me, father! I was the one who?—”

“Silence!” he snapped at her, feeling immediate guilt for yelling. “Isabella...” He then groaned and rubbed his eyes, doing what he could to contain the anger that brewed in him... and the disappointment. “We have spoken about this.”

“I know, father,” she said softly.

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“And you have promised me, time and time again, that you would behave.”

“I know, father.”

“And still, you disobey me.”

“But father...” Her chin began to wobble. “It was not as bad as you might think. And Miss Wanton—she did not force me. She did not even suggest it. I was the one who made her.”

“Isabella...” He sighed and shook his head. “When will you learn, you are but a child. It is not on you to make these types of decisions. Nor is it on you to take the blame. As young as you are, you cannot be held accountable for them. That...” He fixed his glare on Miss Wanton who was sitting in silence, staring at her lap, face ashen for she knew what was coming. “That is on your governess.”

It might not have been so bad if this was the first time such an occurrence had happened. Or if Miss Wanton was not one of nearly a dozen governesses who had come and gone these past two years for similar reasons. It was becoming all too familiar now, a pattern emerging, one which inevitably infuriated and broke his daughter while leaving Frederick to pick up the pieces whilst assuming the mantle of villain.

“I can explain,” Miss Wanton began quickly. “Please, allow me to explain.”

“Then explain.” He crossed his arms and looked down his nose at her. “I am all ears.”

She winced. “I... as your daughter has said, we had finished with her studies. There was still some time until supper, so she thought it might be fun?—”

“Is that why I hired you? For fun?”

She winced again. “We were only playing tag, Your Grace. And I made sure we did so on a grass-covered area so that if she fell, she might not hurt herself.”

“It is not the hurting of herself that concerns me. It is the fact that she was doing so in the first place. I have told you, countless times, that I do not wish for her to play such games.”

“I know...” she spoke into her lap.

“And I have told you countless times that if she is to ask, you will deny her.”

“I know...”

“And I have told you, I did tell you, what would happen if you were to ignore my demands. You do remember what I said, do you not?”

“No, father!” Isabella leapt to her feet, fists scrunched by her sides. “Please! You cannot do this! Not again!”

“Miss Wanton...” Frederick had come here to fire Miss Wanton, yet the sight of his daughter pleading had Frederick hesitating more than he had expected. “I want to thank you for your time spent here but?—”

“Father, no!”

“—I am afraid that... that...” He chanced a glance at his daughter, her pleading stare

fixed on him, and he could not bring himself to finish what he had started. Such was a father's love. "I am afraid that another warning is in order. A final warning."

Isabella blinked with disbelief. "Re - really?"

Miss Wanton frowned as if she did not understand. "Excuse me?"

"A final warning," he repeated. "I have told you what is expected of you and what is not. My daughter is not your friend. She is not your plaything. She is your student, and you are to treat her as such. Nothing more."

Miss Wanton continued to look confused as her eyes flicked from Frederick to her lap. "I... are you saying that I have not been teaching your daughter to your standards?"

"I am saying that is all you should be doing. And quite frankly, I am sick of having to look over your shoulder as I am forced to do. So, hear me now..." He looked pointedly at her, wanting her to meet his eyes, so she could see that this was not a discussion, only for her to continue in staring at her lap. "No more! Is that understood?"

Frederick felt a strange sense of relief as he levelled Miss Wanton with a warning scowl. Having not at all looked forward to letting her go, this felt like an acceptable middle ground. One that would not result in his daughter hating him. Only...

"Your Grace, I am afraid that..." Miss Wanton was shaking visibly, hands clenched into balls, eyes still on her lap but that looked to change. "I am afraid that I do not accept your warning."

"Excuse me?" Frederick leaned back as if struck.

“For weeks now, I have done everything that you ask. I have put my blood and sweat into teaching your daughter and... and...” She forced herself to look at him, her stare a mixture of hatred and fear. “And still, it is not good enough.”

“Miss Wanton,” Frederick growled. “I should warn you that?—”

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“No!” she cried. “No more warnings. I have greatly enjoyed teaching your daughter, Your Grace. It has been a dream. But you...” She was shaking still, anger boiling inside of her. “You have turned that dream into a waking nightmare from which there is but one escape.”

“Miss Wanton!” Isabella cried. “Please don’t!”

“I am sorry.” She stood suddenly and quickly. “But I am afraid that I must tender my resignation, starting immediately.”

“No!”

“Isabella...” She looked at Isabella, expression pained. “I am so sorry, dear. Truly, I am. This is not you.” A glare next for Frederick. “It is him!”

Frederick could scarcely believe his ears! Miss Wanton was quitting on her own accord? She was doing herself what he had come here to do in the first place? He might have laughed at the absurdity, were it not for the look of pain on his daughter’s face.

“Good day.” And with that, Miss Wanton stormed from the drawing room.

“Miss Wanton!” Isabella cried after her. “Please do not go! Please! Father!” She grabbed a hold of Frederick’s arm. “Stop her! Say something!”

“You heard her...” Frederick’s lip curled as he looked in the direction that Miss Wanton had vanished. “She quit on her own accord. There is little that I can do.”

“You can!” Isabella begged. “This is your fault! If you had not been so—” She caught her tongue, eyes going wide.

“So, what, Isabella?” he said warningly.

“So mean!” she stamped her foot. “You scared her! You scared all of them! That is why they always leave!”

“Careful, Isabella,” he warned her. “I am sad to see Miss Wanton leave, but she did so at her own behest.”

“She did so because of you!” she screamed now. “And you are not sad! You wanted her gone! You did! I know you did!”

“That simply isn’t true,” he said, doing his best to hide the lie. “I gave her a second chance, and she threw it in my face.”

“I hate you!” Isabella screamed. “I wish... I wish... I wish mother was here! I wish it was she who was here and not you!” Tears streamed down her swollen cheeks, and she cast her father with a final, heartbreaking glare before sprinting from the room.

Even when he tried to do the right thing, it still blew up in his face.

Frederick might have gone after her if he had thought it would make a difference, but he knew his daughter well enough to know that all she needed was some time to cool down. She would get over it. She always did. But that was not the point. Every time this happened, he felt her pulling away such that one day, she might not forgive him at all. Worse, when that happened, he would not be able to blame her.

The life of a duke. One of privilege yet also one of expectation. One day, he hoped that his daughter would come to understand that all he did was for her. One day, he

hoped that they might look back at moments like this and laugh... assuming that she had not cast him from her life by then.

“Your Grace?” a stern voice spoke from the door.

Frederick looked up and saw who it was. “What is it, Mr. White? I am afraid I am not in the mood.”

“It is somewhat urgent, Your Grace.” Mr. White was the head butler of the Dukedom of Thornton; well over eighty years old, he had served Frederick’s father before his death also. “A letter came for you just now.” He showed Frederick the letter.

“A letter?” Frederick sighed. “Leave it in my study, I shall read it later.” He felt rotten, and all he wanted to do was go for a ride, so he might be alone to think. “Oh, and send out for a new governess, will you? We shall be needing one.”

“The letter, Your Grace.” He waved the letter again. “I took the liberty of reading it once I noticed who it was from.” Only Mr. White could get away with such an act.

“And?” Frederick asked, noticing the look on Mr. White’s face, one he could not quite discern.

“It is from your grandmother, the Dowager Thornton. It seems that her estate in Linfield has burned down.”

His eyes went wide. “What? When? Is she all right? Did she say?—”

“She is quite all right, Your Grace,” Mr. White hurried to assure him. “As are the staff. However, seeing as her home is currently a pile of burnt rubble, she has requested that she might come here and stay for a few weeks until a new residence can be found.”

“Requested?” Frederick raised an eyebrow at Mr. White.

Mr. White grinned. “More a warning that she is on her way.”

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“Wonderful...” Frederick groaned. He loved his grandmother as any grandson should, but she was also a handful and seemed to enjoy the fact. Not to mention the joy she took from frustrating Frederick.

“And what is more, Your Grace, according to the letter, she is not alone.”

“Her staff?” Frederick sighed. “How many? I suppose we have the room although it might get a little cramped.”

“No, no, not all of them,” he corrected. “Just the one. She is bringing along her companion, Miss Caroline Dowding. They will be here in two days.”

CHAPTER THREE

“Oh, do not look so nervous,” Esther sighed. “One would think that we are moving in with Satan.”

“Are you sure that we are not?” Caroline responded tartly. “From everything that you have told me of your grandson, Satan might not be such a bad option. Did you write to him to ask if he had any room for us? In hell, I mean.”

“Ha!” Esther cackled. She was sitting by the window of the carriage, looking outside as if searching for something while growing more eager by the moment. “I did not paint a very flattering picture of my grandson, did I?”

“That is the understatement of the century,” Caroline muttered. She glanced through the window, feeling her stomach twist with nerves. She did not recognize the

landscape specifically, but she knew it well enough that an uneasy feeling was beginning to settle on her shoulders.

“I was mostly joking,” Esther assured her, still watching outside. “Frederick is a little uptight, this is true. And a little cold at times. And the temper on him...” She clicked her tongue. “I would not want to find myself on the end of it.”

“Again, you make him sound just so wonderful.”

“But he is kind.” She turned and fixed her expression on Caroline. “And caring. Even sweet, when he wishes to be. He might not have an overt sense of humor like you and I, but do not think him humorless. He is simply... cautious.”

“Cautious about his sense of humor?” Caroline scoffed. “He sounds like a barrel full of laughs. Careful, Esther, when the time comes for us to leave, I may not wish to go.”

Esther giggled and turned back to look out the window. “Do not mistake him for the way he comes across. Sadly, he has no choice in the matter. Raised to be a duke, his father was harder on him than he should have been, instilling a sense of duty in him that even I could never shake him free of. Deep down, he is still the same little boy—why, when he was barely eight, he used to cry at night because he was scared of the dark. Do you believe it!” She laughed at the memory. “He is still my grandson,” she said with a nod, “and the hardened shell he insists on wearing is just that, a shell.”

“So, all that is to say that when he is berating me for heaven’s can only guess, I should not take it personally?”

Esther giggled. “There, now you understand.”

Caroline rolled her eyes. “Thank you for the warning although something tells me that when it is time for us to leave, I will be the first one in the carriage.”

To this, Esther turned slightly and smirked, a twinkle in her eyes as if she knew something that Carline did not. “We shall see,” was all she said. “We shall see.” And then she went back to watching out the window, eyes searching, excitement rising steadily.

Two years of living as the Dowager’s companion and not once had Caroline met or so much as seen His Grace in the flesh. For good reason too. And while the Dowager spoke highly of her grandson, on the few occasions that she visited him, she never once thought to bring Caroline along with her. A blessing that Caroline was forever grateful for.

Oh, His Grace had a renowned reputation which Caroline had been aware of even before she had run away from home. So well-known were his less than stellar hospitality skills that when the Dowager told Caroline where they would be staying for the proceeding month, Caroline almost suggested that she remain behind as the pile of burnt rubble that was the Linfield Estate somehow still felt preferable.

Caroline continued to fidget as she looked out the window, watching the farmland roll by. They were coming closer and closer to the Dukedom of Thornton, and this had Caroline on edge for reasons that went beyond what was sure to be a chilly reception.

The truth was, the Duke wasn’t nearly the concern that Caroline was making him out to be—it was an easy enough lie to tell, for she knew that Esther would sense how nervous she was. Yes, a part of her did not look forward to meeting the infamous Duke, but a larger part, the part which had the hairs on the back of her neck standing as her stomach twisted, was far more concerned with wherethis Dukedom resided.

It was far too close to London for Caroline's liking.

Less than a day's ride south of London, this was the closest to home that Caroline had been in two years. What if someone whom she knew visited the Duke while she was staying here? What if he somehow recognized her? Or had heard of what had happened—the reason she had fled? What if she was out for a walk one day and stumbled upon an old family friend? What if... what if... what if!

It made her ill to think which had her squirming which had Esther assuming it was her son's impending presence that caused it. For two years, Caroline had remained in hiding, and now, she could not escape the dreaded feeling that soon her cover would be blown, and her world would come crashing down around her...

"Oh! Ohoho!" Esther pointed out the window. "There it is! We're here! See, Caroline! We're finally here!"

Caroline took a calming breath as she shuffled to Esther's side of the carriage and looked out the window, getting her first glimpse of the Duke's estate. A truly breathtaking breadth of land on which sat a veritable palace for how grand and opulent it was: three stories tall, grey brick and white painted stone, marble columns framing the entrance, vines growing up the walls as if they were growing from the foundations, and a wondrously vibrant garden stretching from the entrance to what must have been half a mile in front of the manor.

Even Caroline could not help but show awe as she took it in, mouth hanging open in a showing of appreciation.

"And that is nothing when compared to inside," Esther said rightly, smirking to herself.

It was expected that His Grace would meet them outside of his home when their

carriage pulled up. Strangely, he was nowhere to be seen. Rather, a butler by the name of Mr. White stood waiting, apologizing profusely because His Grace was just attending to some private matters and would meet with them shortly.

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“Oh, I don’t care about him,” Esther said, waving the butler down as she strode toward the manor. “Where is my great-granddaughter?”

“She is in her bedroom of the moment, but I will let her know that you are?—”

“You will let her know nothing,” Esther cut him off. “Take me too her.” She reached the front door and spun about, raising a single eyebrow at the butler that warranted no argument. “Now, thank you.”

“Ah... yes, Madam.” He swallowed as he hurried for her. “And shall your friend be joining you?”

“No, no.” Esther looked past Mr. White to where Caroline was still standing by the carriage, not entirely certain what she should be doing. “Make yourself at home, dear. If you take a left inside, you should find the main drawing room. I’ll be there shortly.”

Caroline smiled, and Esther took that as all the agreement she needed, turning back and sweeping inside like a storm. Mr. White hurried after her, calling something out that Caroline could not hear.

Alone now, Caroline took the house in one last time before deciding to head inside. A part of her was worried about walking through this stranger’s home without a proper introduction first, for what if someone thought she had wandered in off the street and did not belong. But she squashed those worries because it must have been known that she was arriving today with the Dowager, so surely there wouldn’t be any problems...

As promised, the inside of the manor was luxurious and lavish in every conceivable facet. Money seemed to pour from the walls, for every piece of artwork looked specifically chosen to impress. Caroline took her time walking through the foyer, taking in the splendor, before she finally found her way to what she had expected to be an empty drawing room.

It was not empty. There was but one person inside, back facing the door, and although Caroline had never seen the man before, she knew immediately that it must be His Grace.

From behind, he was as tall and strapping as she had heard. Well over six feet in height with a broad back and strong shoulders like a bear and a physical stature and presence that was intimidating such that she hovered by the doorway, not sure if she should go in and be alone with him. Not for fear, of course. Just... she couldn't say exactly what.

Only then, the Duke turned around and saw her lurking. His handsome face, centered by a pair of blue eyes so dark they were nearly black, took her in, wondered about her, and then narrowed into an accusatory glare.

“Who the devil are you?” he asked, his voice a deep growl that Caroline could feel in her stomach.

She opened her mouth to respond but found the words catching in her throat. The Duke's dark hair was longer than what was normal, sitting messy on his head, which only added to the intimidation that emanated from his presence. She felt like a deer caught in the wild by some sort of predator, cornered and trapped and without a chance of escape.

“Well?” he barked. “What are you doing in my home?”

“I - I am Miss Dowding,” she stammered. “The Honorable Caroline Dowding,” she then corrected.

“And that is supposed to mean something to me?”

“Your grandmother,” Caroline blurted a little too loudly. “I am here with your grandmother.” A beat. “The Dowager. I am her companion.”

His brow furrowed as he looked over her, assessing her from head to toe. His dark blue eyes worked their way down and then back up as he started toward her, and she had to fight the urge not to back out of the room entirely. “My grandmother. Where is she?”

“I...” Caroline baulked. “I do not know.”

“I thought you said that you were her companion.”

“I am.”

“Yet you do not know where your mistress is.” He reached where she still stood in the doorway, stopping less than a foot away. Up this close, he was even bigger than she had realized, and he towered over her like a monster from legend. “Is that not the entire point of being one’s companion?”

“I—”

“Well?” he demanded. “I was aware that my mother had chosen herself a companion to keep company with. I did not realize that she had chosen a mute, also.”

So, the rumors were true. His Grace was as rude and cold and just plain awful as everyone had said. Intimidated at first, now that Caroline had managed to compose

herself slightly—while getting more used to his commanding presence—she felt a sudden surge of hostility rise inside of her that wasn't at all unexpected.

Who was he to talk to her this way? Who was he to behave so rudely? And maybe the Duke was used to living in such a world, but Caroline was not one to stand by and be treated as such. After all that she had been through... no, she did not think she could simply take it.

“I take it that you do not entertain very often, Your Grace?”

He blinked and leaned back. “What does that have to do with anything?”

“If you did, you might care to show me some sense of common decency. As I am a guest in your house, the least you could do is try and not behave like an oafish boar. Unless such a tame request is too much to hope for?” She raised a single eyebrow at him, forcing herself to hold his gaze.

She could see right away that her words were unexpected. His face contorted with surprise, his calm demeanor upended as he blinked and tried to recompose himself. Why, the way he looked at her now, she would not be surprised to learn that nobody in the history of the entire world had spoken to him in that way.

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“How dare you speak to me like that,” he growled at her, standing up straight again and leaning over her. “Who do you think you are?”

“I told you that, already,” she said, simply taking some pleasure in how caught off guard he was. “I might be a mute, but you are either deaf or you do not listen so well.”

“I...” He tilted his head, brow still furrowed, caught between anger and pure shock. “My grandmother’s companion, you said?”

“Ah, I see you have finally caught up.”

His upper lip curled into a smirk. “The Honorable Caroline Dowding? Your father is a viscount?”

“That is why I called myself as such.”

“It is no wonder you have chosen the life of a companion then,” he chuckled coldly. “No doubt, it was quickly realized that a life among the peerage was not suited to someone as...” His eyes flashed at her. “... unrefined as yourself. And when your father’s own stable hand turned you down, you came to decide that you had no other choice.”

Her eyes widened. “That is... that is not... you have no idea as to what you speak.”

He shrugged, evidently pleased to have the upper hand again. “Perhaps if you could string more than a single sentence together, you could enlighten me. A shame then

that even such a simple action as that seems beneath you.”

Oh, he was even worse than she had thought! Clearly his ego was even grander in stature than he was, and to have it attacked at all brought out a side in the man that Caroline was certain even Esther would not approve of.

The Duke still stood over her. Still leered as a means to intimidate and put her in her place. And while she was undoubtedly taken by his physical presence, forced to look up while doing all she could not to back away, Caroline steeled herself and fixed him in a glare because she had been through too much and suffered too often to let him simply walk over her.

“I must admit, Your Grace, I was surprised when the carriage pulled up outside this manor, nominating it as your home.”

The Duke’s frowned, again caught off guard by the parry in conversation. “Meaning?”

“Well, we passed a stable on the way—just a mile down the road. And from everything I have heard of you, why, I simply assumed that was where you might bed down for the night. Oh sure, the pigs might complain a little—the smell...” She curled her nose. “But for one as refined as you, I am sure they would be willing to accommodate.”

Caroline could not help but smirk proudly at herself. More so when she saw the outrage in the Duke’s eyes. Why, to look at him, one might have thought that she struck him across the face, such was the pure shock and surprise and inability to believe the words that had come out of her mouth.

“What is the matter?” she pushed on bravely. “Do not tell me that this mute was able to insult your fragile ego? Not bad for one unable to string a sentence together.”

“I...” His face was turning red, and she could see the anger in his eyes. “I would not say such things if I were you.”

“And why not?”

“It amuses me that you mistook a stable for my own home, for it is clear to me now that it is you, Miss Dowding, who belongs in one.”

She scoffed. “Is that the best you can come up with?”

“You should count yourself grateful that it is. I see that my grandmother has been kind to you... far too kind, letting your tongue wag without consequence. The same cannot be said whilst you are under my roof.”

A raised, derisive eyebrow. “That sounds like a challenge.”

His eyes flashed, and suddenly, he had a hand on her waist. She gasped and tried to wiggle free, but his hand was so large it wrapped half her body, and he squeezed tight, holding her in place as he stepped in close. His large body pressed against her own, blotting out the world so that she could look nowhere but upon his furious visage which locked her in with a snarl.

“You are my guest,” he growled as he leaned down close; his breath was warm on her face, and it made her shudder with a sensation that went beyond fear. So powerless. So helpless. “And because you are such, I am willing to ignore the slight you have just brought.”

“I...” she stammered, unable to speak for her heart beat such that it hurt.

“But I must warn you, Miss Dowding...” He fixed her in his stare, and she could not look away, “I am not one to be spoken to like that. Is that understood?”

“Y - yes,” she somehow managed.

“And while you are under my roof, you will treat me with respect. Is that understood?”

“I am sorry...”

“Good...” He bared his teeth. “If you behave, then there is no reason that you and I will not get along swimmingly. Correct?”

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All she had to do was say she understood. Another apology, and he would let her go, and she would be able to spend the next month avoiding this monster as anyone of sound mind might think to do. And yet... there was something about the way he held her and looked at her and bore down on her that had Caroline's mind going to a place she did not even know to exist.

Her heart rate was up. Her blood was running warm. The feel of his hand still wrapped about her waist had her body breaking out in tingles that made her shudder as his warm breath licked at her lips and swept down her throat.

Yes, he was scary. Yes, he was intimidating. But that was what had Caroline feeling the way she did. So much that when she opened her mouth to speak, the words that left her lips were not of her own making but formed by something else deep within.

“And if I choose not to behave?” she dared to ask.

He looked startled, blinking back his surprise, only to catch himself and growl again, his grip increasing so that it almost hurt. “Then you will be punished as is anyone who disobeys me is.”

“Punished...?” Her body was shaking although it did not feel as if it was from fear. “And how exactly will you punish me?”

There was a glint in his eyes. A sense of excitement brought about by her question. “Cross me, and find out.”

Her heart was still racing. The words spoken sounded like threats, yet there was an air

of something more to them. A sense that this so-called punishment might not be as bad as the Duke wanted it to seem. “Maybe I will.”

“Do not test me,” he growled, and she could feel it rolling over her.

“Do not tempt me.”

He narrowed his eyes and licked his lips. It was as if he were a lion looking upon prey he was about to devour. And oh, how she wished he would. Her eyes flicked to his lips, and she licked her own, held his stare, felt a fire brewing between them so hot that it might burn down this manor as Linfield Estate had burned.

His body was still pressed to hers as he leaned in close, his mouth moving to her ear where he whispered, “You play a dangerous game, and I would hate for you to get hurt.” And then, she felt his teeth tear into her earlobe.

“Ah...” she gasped as he nibbled her ear, biting down and tearing back.

“Frederick!” Esther’s voice suddenly cried from around the corner. “Where are you! This house! I swear to God!”

And just like that, it was over. The Duke released his grip on Caroline and took a hasty step back, hands folding behind his back as he straightened and fixed a smile on his face just in time for Esther to shuffle around the corner and appear behind Caroline.

Caroline, still standing in the doorway, did not notice her at first. Face flushed. Breathing stammered. Body shaking. She trembled as she looked at His Grace, trying to search his eyes as if she needed confirmation for what just happened—as if she might have imagined it. But His Grace, somehow, looked so at ease and composed that she very nearly thought it was all in her head.

“Grandmother,” His Grace beamed, “you made it.” A quick flick of his eyes at her in warning, that fire and heat clear behind them, and then he was back on Esther. “I trust the trip went well?”

Certainly not imagined. Certainly not in her head. That acceptance didn’t make things any better. And with the Duke before her and his grandmother behind, Caroline suddenly felt as if she had stumbled into the middle of a situation which might very well be the end of her.

She had been wary of living under His Grace’s roof for what might be as long as an entire month. But now the thought terrified her... or at least that was what she told herself as by now, Caroline had become rather adept at lying.

CHAPTER FOUR

“Well, this looks friendly,” Frederick’s grandmother said with a coy smile as she waded into the drawing room. Her eyes flicked from Miss Dowding to Frederick, suggesting that she knew exactly what it was that she had nearly walked in on.

“I was just becoming acquainted with your companion,” Frederick replied calmly, willing his body to cool down and his cheeks to return to their normal hue. “It surprises me that we have not met previously.”

“Oh yes, I suppose it is a little strange isn’t it,” she sighed. “But do not read too much into it. It is not as if I was hiding her.”

“I never said that you were.”

“Although, I wish that I was here when you two met.” She reached Frederick, leaning up to give him a kiss on the cheek which he accepted. “Can’t have you scaring her off now, can I?”

“Grandmother...” Frederick rolled his eyes. “I assure you that I have done no such thing. Isn’t that right, Miss Dowding?” He raised an eyebrow at Miss Dowding. “We were having a lovely chat, were we not?”

Miss Dowding hadn’t moved so much as an inch since Frederick’s mother entered the room. She stood frozen in the doorway, that same look of shock written across her face that worried Frederick, for he did not need his grandmother seeing it and then coming to conclusions.

And indeed, his grandmother looked at her, took note of the red cheeks and wide eyes, and frowned. “Is everything all right, dear? You look as if you have seen a ghost.”

“Oh!” Miss Dowding gave her head a shake. “I am just a little bit tired from the trip is all. It is nothing to...” Her eyes flicked to Frederick, and her cheeks flushed a deeper red as she looked away. “It is nothing to concern yourself with.”

“Is that right...” Frederick’s grandmother eyed her a moment, that coy smile returning.

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As annoyed as Frederick was with the obvious way that Miss Dowding was behaving, he was even more annoyed with himself. Annoyed and more confused than he had ever felt in his life.

What in the name of all things had just happened?! He could not explain it. He could not reason with it. He could not comprehend it, for it felt incomprehensible! By rights, what he should have been feeling was fury. The way that Miss Dowding had spoken to him just now was beyond anything he had ever heard. No one, ever, had dared to speak to him in that way. And not just standing up to him either. But insulting him as if he was a member of staff who had spilled a tray of drinks because he hadn't been paying attention.

The nerve of the woman to say such things. And in his own home! What was more, someone from her station should have known better. She was the daughter of a viscount, a member of the peerage, the same as Frederick. Yet she either did not know better, or she did not care to.

Again, it should have angered Frederick, but what he was feeling in the moment was about as far from anger as was possible. His heart still thumped in his chest. His blood still surged hot through his body. But despite his efforts to control himself, he could not keep his eyes from straying toward Miss Dowding, working over her body, fixating on her lips as he remembered the way she had felt shuddering in his grip...

"Do not worry about that now," Frederick blurted. "She says that she is tired, grandmother, and that is all it is." Frederick widened his eyes at Miss Dowding as a warning to compose herself and act naturally. "What I am far more concerned with is you."

“Concerned for what reason?” his grandmother asked, turning back to look at him.

“Your home burned down, grandmother. And please do not pretend that it is no big deal.”

“That is because it is not one. These things happen.”

“They most certainly do not,” he snapped, feeling annoyed at his grandmother’s dismissive attitude even if it was typical of her. “And I have told you time and time again that you need to hire more staff. That estate is far too large for you to live in alone.”

“I am not alone,” she said simply. “I have Caroline.”

“And the good that did,” he replied before he could stop himself.

It was subtle, but as soon as the words left his mouth, he noticed a flash of anger in Miss Dowding’s eyes. She glared at him, and for a moment, he worried she might lash back out. It seemed to be a commonality for her, and if she did such a thing... he worried how he might react. And in front of his own grandmother!

Luckily, she held her tongue, but still, she glared daggers his way.

“Oh, it was just an accident,” his grandmother sighed. “We are fine, and that is all that matters. Besides, I prefer to see the positive.”

“Which is?”

“That I get to spend some time with you, dear.” She stepped towards him, reaching up and stroking his face. She was farshorter than he was, having to really reach up. “It has been too long.”

He wasn't the cold, callous monster that everyone seemed to think he was. And seeing his grandmother again served as a good reminder. He loved her as he loved his own daughter, and any rancor that he showed her was purely brought on by worry. But to have her here now, the timing could not have been better.

"I am glad that you are here," he said with complete sincerity, taking his grandmother's hand and giving it a loving squeeze. "Truly, the timing..." He sighed and shook his head. "You will not have heard yet, but Isabella's governess quit just two days ago. Needless to say, Isabella isn't taking it too well."

"Oh, yes, I know it."

Frederick blinked. "You do? How could you possibly know such a thing?"

"She told me is how," his grandmother said with a shrug. "And let me tell you, Frederick..." She clicked her tongue. "... Isabella is not too happy with you right now. According to her, you have a vendetta against her. Poor girl."

Frederick groaned and rubbed his eyes. "She is too young to understand."

"And what am I? A toddler?"

He looked at his grandmother flatly. "She is a young girl now, grandmother, but she will not be forever. When she is older, she will need to learn how one of her station is to properly present herself in the world to which she has been born. One which she should be grateful for."

"She is a child," his grandmother sighed. "So what if she gets her knees a little dirty from time to time. She had years yet until she needs to worry about decorum."

"Lessons learned in youth inform adulthood," Frederick argued with a stiff upper lip.

“And I will not be lectured on how I raise my own daughter.”

“Well, someone has to!” His grandmother threw her hands in the air. “I know you have your heart in the right place, son, but at the end of the day you are but a man. The world you talk of...” She pursed her lips together “... you have no idea about any of it! And that is fact.”

He loved his grandmother... but that did not mean she did not infuriate him from time to time. And if there was one topic that they argued on more than any other, it was how he should raise his own daughter.

The topic was like an open wound to Frederick, simply because it always came back to the same point: he was a man, so he couldn't possibly know what he was speaking of. But it was not his fault! It was not as if he asked to be a single father, raising an only daughter as he was. And his mother knew that!

“Yes, well, there is little I can do about that now is there,” he snapped, trying to keep his anger in check. “Isabella had a mother once, she does not anymore, and there is nothing that can be done on the matter.”

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“Oh, Frederick...” his grandmother sighed, realizing that she had gone too far, “I did not mean to push. You know I did not.”

What had happened between Frederick and his wife was... it was not important. Not anymore. She was no longer with them, and that was all that mattered.

As a single father, Frederick swore to himself that he would do all he could to raise Isabella properly as she deserved. And it was for this reason more than anything else that he would not be spoken down to by his own mother on topics that she had no business putting her nose in.

“I understand that you care for Isabella,” Frederick sighed. “I do. But I must ask that you allow me to raise my daughter as I wish.”

“But what of?—”

“No!” he snapped at her. “The conversation is done with.” He widened his eyes at her in warning, and she responded in kind. “I do not wish to fight with you, so I ask that you drop it. Please.”

His grandmother pushed her lips together and held his glare. “Fine,” she said eventually. “As this is my first day here, I will... hold my tongue.”

“That will be a first,” Miss Dowding snorted under her breath, only to suddenly realize what she said. Her eyes went wide, and she covered her mouth. “I am so sorry. I did not mean?—”

“Ha!” Frederick’s grandmother cackled. “Watch yourself around this one, Frederick. She had a tongue on her. Oh, how she does!”

Frederick looked aghast at Miss Dowding, again taken completely by surprise by her loose lips. Although, he supposed he shouldn’t have been as surprised as that; knowing the type of woman his grandmother was, it was little wonder her companion acted the same way.

Again, his mind flashed back to earlier... and he could feel himself begin to grow hot under the collar. She was an attractive woman, Miss Dowding. Slender yet still with curves that her dress seemed to accentuate. Piercing green eyes framed by dark blonde hair. And a set of lips on her that were so thick and luscious that it was little wonder she used them as adeptly as she did...

“Is— Isabella!” Frederick stammered, tearing his eyes from Miss Dowding and giving his head a shake. “Where did you speak with her?”

“Her room, of course.”

“And she is still there?”

His grandmother sucked through her teeth. “Maybe.....”

“Grandmother...” he growled at his grandmother for he sensed that she was about to tell him something he did not wish to hear.

“Do not rise to anger, but...” She grimaced. “... well, once I was finished speaking with her, she asked if she might go outside and play, and I told her that of course she could.”

“Play with what?” Frederick felt his anger begin to bubble.

“She said she wished to climb a tree in the back yard and?—”

“What?!” Frederick did not stop to think but stormed past his mother as he made for the door. So incensed was he that he swept past Miss Dowding, nearly knocking her to the floor. “She knows better than that!”

“Frederick! Wait!” His mother went after him.

“Why does she do this to me!”

Why were things never easy? As Frederick stormed through the house and after his daughter, that was all he could think. His grandmother seemed to be put on this earth to test him while his daughter appeared to take pleasure in seeing what she could get away with.

People often asked Frederick if he intended to marry again, and his answer was always the same. He already had two women in his life who pushed him to breaking point at every chance they got, so why would he want to add a third? And if his recent encounter with Miss Dowding was anything to go by, never before had this statement felt so apt.

CHAPTER FIVE

Caroline ate supper alone that night.

Esther, as old as she was, was weary from a day of travelling and elected to go to bed early.

Isabella, from what Caroline was told, having not met the girl yet, was being punished and made to stay in her room until the morning.

And His Grace... well, quite frankly, Caroline was not certain where His Grace took supper that evening and was more than happy for it. Supper with just the two of them... somehow, she sensed that might not be the best idea.

She still could not believe what had happened earlier. The way he had held her. The way he had growled at her as he towered above her as a means to frighten and intimidate. And the way that he had leaned in and bitten her ear, likely because he wanted to scare her, but also...

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Eating alone, just thinking about it, her body shuddered, and she felt herself run hot. Not from fear, of course. Instead, the heat that built inside of her was an entirely alien sensation to her. One she had never felt before. But one that she did not need explained because it was obvious what had brought it about.

What was wrong with her? Why was she feeling this way? She hated the Duke. She despised him. Rude. Mean. A bully is what he was. The last person she should have wanted anything to do with. And yet he was so big and strong and powerful. So handsome and commanding and impossible to look away from. So long as Esther was about, Caroline was certain she could control herself, but if the two were left alone again, she did not want to think of what might happen.

The next morning, before breakfast was to be taken, Caroline decided to take a small walk around the grounds. Partly, she wished to get some fresh air and acquaint herself with her new home. And partly, she did not wish to be sitting in the dining room alone should His Grace enter. So, it was best to give it some time until everyone had come down.

She walked along the drive and then down the side of the house, taking in the sheer size of the estate, for it was even bigger than Esther's and the one she had grown up on as a little girl. From there, she made her way toward the back garden and in the direction of the stables. Not much of a rider, she liked horses and thought to take a look.

The carriage she and Esther had come in was parked beside the stables, and while, at first, it sat still and silent, nothing untoward or strange about it, on a second inspection, Caroline could not help but notice something... strange.

The carriage was rocking slightly, but the inside was empty, for she could see through the windows. Caroline narrowed her eyes as she studied it, a smile working its way over her lips when she came to notice what was causing the carriage to rock.

Ever so casually, Caroline strolled down the steps and toward the carriage. When she reached it, she leaned against the back, arms folded as if she was simply there to relax. The carriage now sat perfectly still and for good reason.

“How is the view from up there?” Caroline asked, pitching her voice up so that it would carry.

There was no response, save for a shocked gasp, the sound of someone shuffling on the carriage’s roof, and then perfect stillness.

“I suspect it is quite something,” Caroline continued pleasantly. “Is there room for one more? Or are adults not allowed?”

She turned around and looked up at the carriage roof, waiting patiently as she sensed that it might take a moment for her audience to appear. And sure enough, like a frightened mouse, a tiny head soon poked itself over the edge to see who had spoken.

“You... you want to join me?” she asked nervously.

“If that is all right with you?” Caroline replied. “I confess, I am not much for climbing, but surely you can teach me a thing or two?”

The little girl’s brow furrowed as she considered. No doubt she was trying to discern if this was some sort of trick, but Caroline smiled honestly, making sure to appear as innocent as possible. This, eventually, had the little girl beaming.

“All right!” she squeaked. “And it is not so hard as you might think. You see there—”

She shuffled forward and pointed at a foothold right by where Caroline was standing. “Use that to boost yourself up.”

“But what do I hang on to?”

“This.” The little girl indicated the railing of the carriage. “It is more than strong enough to hold your weight. All you need do is lift yourself up and trust the roof not to cave in,” she giggled.

Caroline’s eyes flashed with menace as she did what the little girl instructed. One foot on the foothold, she reached up and grabbed onto the railing. A deep breath as she readied herself, and then she pulled with all her strength, launching her body into the air so that she just about flew over the railing and landed on the carriage’s roof on her knees.

“Oooof!” Caroline grunted as she fell forward.

“You did it!” the little girl clapped excitedly.

“Somehow, I doubt that I was as graceful as you were.”

She giggled again as she sat herself cross-legged. “You did look a little clumsy, but that’s all right. Nobody saw.”

“You did!”

“I won’t tell anyone...” Her grin was mischievous. “I swear.”

Caroline narrowed her eyes at the little girl. “Promise?”

“Of course!”

There could be no doubt as to who this little girl was. Even if she had not been expecting it, Caroline could see that she was of the same stock as His Grace. The same dark hair. The same dark blue eyes. The same square face although the little girl's features were softer. Twelve years old was Caroline's guess, and full of life based on the way that her eyes lit up and the smile that crossed her lips.

As to what she was doing out here? Likely, hiding from her father. Not that Caroline could blame her.

"I take it that you are Isabella?" Caroline asked as she crossed her legs on the roof and steadied. It was not as solid a ground as she might have liked, but it would do.

"I am." Isabella beamed. "And who are you?" She frowned as she looked Caroline over... only for that frown to turn into a tremendous smile. "Oh, I know! Father has hired you, yes? You're to be my new governess?"

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“Guess again,” Caroline laughed, taken by how energetic this little girl was. She might have looked like the Duke, but she could not be further from him.

Isabella scrunched her face as she considered. “Oh! Oh! I know!” She clapped her hands together. “You are Grandmother’s companion, yes? She told me of you.”

“Good guess!” Caroline clapped her hands along. “I am Miss Dowding, but you may call me Caroline.”

“Caroline!” She could not have looked happier. “It is so nice to meet you. Grandmother was telling me all about you.”

“Grandmother?” Caroline asked.

“Oh, well, she is my great-grandmother, yes. But she has asked that I call her as such.” A shrug. “I do not know why, But she did tell me that the two of you are staying here for at least a month!”

“At least.”

“Oh!” She took Caroline’s hands. “Let’s be friends. Can we? Be friends. I would like that so much.”

“I don’t see why not,” Caroline laughed, feeling a sense of kinship with this little girl because her energy was intoxicating. Again, it was hard to believe that she was the Duke’s daughter. “And in the interest of friendship...” Caroline pretended to get low as she cast a glance about them. “I must ask what it is you are doing out here.

Something tells me that if your father found out..." She raised an eyebrow at the little girl.

The little girl grinned wickedly. "I am supposed to be getting ready for breakfast."

"And you decided to climb on the roof of the carriage instead?" Caroline laughed.

"I wasn't going to..." She then sighed. "... and I do not mean to be so disobedient, but when father came to see me this morning, I thought he might apologize for sending me to bed last night without supper."

Caroline had to stop herself from snorting, for she did not think His Grace was the type to apologize for anything. "And did he?"

"He wanted me to apologize!" she cried. "Can you believe it! I refused, so he left me to think about what I had done and..." She grimaced. "Here I am."

"So..." Caroline considered as she glanced about, "my feeling is that as of this moment, your father is looking for you? Probably up a tree somewhere."

Isabella's nose curled. "Oh. I have no doubt that he is, but he can keep looking for all I care. I hate him."

Caroline leaned back. "Oh, surely you do not mean that."

"I do!" she said again. Caroline raised an eyebrow at Isabella, and the poor little thing bowed her head as if in shame. "I do not hate him," she admitted, sounding embarrassed with herself. "I love him, I do. Just sometimes... he makes it so hard! It is as if he wants me to hate him."

"I promise you that he does not."

“Then why does he treat me like... like I am a prisoner! I am not a child anymore, yet he insists on making me feel like one. I cannot even go outside without his permission. He won’t let me have any fun!”

“I do not know your father so well,” Caroline began carefully as she considered what to say. A part of her agreed with Isabella’s assessment, for it did seem as if he was a tad harsh on her. But at the same time, Caroline could not help but remember what the Duke had said earlier, understanding well enough where he was coming from, for she was of the ton, also, and knew the pressure it brought. “But as I am to understand it, he is simply worried about you.”

“Worried?” she scoffed. “He wants to control me.”

“He wants you to be happy,” she corrected. “Remember, it is not so easy to be a single father, and he has seen what this world does to little girls...and young women,” she added bitterly. “My feeling is that everything he does, he does because he wants the best for you. He is just a little...” She smirked. “... hard around the edges.”

She could not believe that she was defending the Duke. And that she meant what she said! As cold and callous and awful as the man was, there was no doubt that he loved his daughter. A thought which warmed Caroline because that was something she had never gotten from her own father. Love.

“I’ll say,” Isabella sighed. “Did you know that he has fired ten governesses in the past two years. Ten! Some of them I did not care for, but some I did! And does he care? Does he even think of how it makes me feel?”

“I suspect that is all he thinks about.”

She grimaced. “I know that what you say is the truth, I just wish... Why is he so

mean to them? Did you know that some of them did not even need firing? They simply left because they could not stand to be around him. It is at a point now that it does not matter who he hires next as I know they will be gone soon.”

“Have you tried saying this to your father?”

“Of course!”

“With a level voice?” Caroline laughed softly. “I find that soft conversation is often a perfect replacement for shouting. And something about your father tells me he does not like being shouted at.”

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She winced. “Well... no. I guess I have not.”

“That is all right.” Caroline reached forward and took Isabella’s hands. “I am sure the next one he hires will be here to stay. And if not...” She winked. “Perhaps next time we can find somewhere higher to climb? Somewhere even your father cannot find you.”

Isabella’s blue eyes lit up excitedly. “All right! Although...” She squeezed Caroline’s hands back. “... I wish you were the governess my father had hired.”

She laughed at that. “Me too, Isabella.”

“Isabella!” the Duke’s voice cried out from around the side of the house. “Isabella! I am not playing with you!”

“Oh!” Her eyes widened with fear. “Oh no!”

“Quicky!” Caroline jumped to her knees. “If we hurry, we can have you back in your room before he finds you. And then when he does, I will attest that you were there the whole time.”

“You will?”

“Of course. But only if we hurry,” she said with a wink.

Isabella’s grin was wicked, and then, as if she was part monkey, she spun about and swung herself down from the roof of the carriage. For Caroline, it took a little longer

as she was forced to scramble and clutch at the railing as she slowly lowered herself.

But soon, the two were on their feet on firm ground, and then, Caroline taking Isabella by the hand, they hurried across the drive and back inside the house.

“Where is your room?” Caroline asked.

“Up the stairs—no!” She pulled Caroline back as she made to lead her toward the main staircase. “There is another way around the back. Quickly!” Holding Caroline by the hand, Isabella led them.

The two giggled as they hurried, for this felt like an adventure, fraught with danger as the evil duke chased them. But with any adventure, there is always the chance it will end in tragedy as so taken were the girls with their little game that they rounded the corner without looking, only to come upon the wicked duke.

Isabella was quick to see him, releasing Caroline’s hand and sidestepping her father so as not to charge right into his burly frame. But Caroline, not quite so nimble on her feet, could barely slow herself down, feet tripping, arms flailing, body tumbling at pace, and crashing right into the arms of His Grace.

CHAPTER SIX

She felt his arms wrapping around her, the strength of them so all-encompassing that it was no effort for him to take her falling weight and steady her as he pulled her body into his chest. And as he did, those large arms held her close, tight into him, protecting her and caring for her so that there was no chance she might fall and hurt herself.

It happened in an instant. She stumbled, and the next thing she knew, he had her. But time seemed to slow as she rested in his embrace, and rather than pushing back and

trying to force his arms from her, Caroline could not help but succumb for a moment to their feel around her, for it was a level of intimacy and intensity that she had never known and did not wish to end.

“What is going on here?” His Grace growled, still holding Caroline so that she was half-horizontal, one foot on the ground, the other up... dangling by his calf as if she meant to wrap her leg around him.

“Nothing!” Isabella cried. “We were just... nothing!”

He looked down at Caroline as he cradled her, no sense that he meant to let her go. And for a further moment, he simply held her close as his stare bore into her, a feeling that he was trying to see through her as he searched for the truth. And Caroline, her mind gone now as all she could think of was the way she felt in his strong and protective arms, met them and held them and forgot who she was and what she had been doing.

“Do not lie to me, Isabella.”

“I am not!”

“Miss Dowding?” he then asked, still looking at her. “Tell me, is my daughter a liar?”

“I...” Caroline’s mouth was bone dry, her tongue swollen in her mouth. “I... she... we...”

“Well?”

Caroline gave her head a shake. “She is not lying, Your Grace. It is as Isabella said.”

“Is that so?” Still holding her in his arms, he looked down at her, a warning glare that

was intended to break her resolve, but she matched it, refusing to give in... even if a small part of her wished to.

“What in the name of all things have I walked in on!” Esther appeared suddenly around the corner. She took in the scene, a smile split her face, and she threw back her head and cackled. “Perhaps I should do another lap of the estate if my timing is inappropriate!”

And just like that, the moment was broken.

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His Grace lifted Caroline up and planted her on her feet as if she were a piece of furniture. Then he stepped back, making sure to step around her and block Isabella from escaping, trapping the two women between himself and his grandmother.

“Do not be ridiculous,” he sighed. “I was simply helping Miss Dowding.”

“It looked as if you were.”

His expression was flat... even if there was a tinge of red on his cheeks. “She ran into me if you must know. They both did.” He widened his eyes at Isabella. “So, I ask again, what is going on here? Where are the two of you coming from?”

“Nowhere!” Isabella said immediately. “Right, Caroline?”

“Caroline?” His Grace raised an eyebrow at Caroline which had her cheeks flushing even more red. “I did not know the two of you were so close.”

“I... we... I asked that she call me as such,” Caroline managed, unable to meet the Duke’s eyes because her mind was still on his arms around her, and whenever she looked at him, she could hardly concentrate.

“Oh, leave the poor girl alone,” Esther said. “Both of them.”

“I simply wish to know where my daughter was,” he argued. “I was told she was outdoors, climbing trees...” He looked warningly at Isabella. “... but my daughter knows better than that.”

“I do!” Isabella said a little too loudly. “Which is why I would not do such a thing.”

“Is that right?”

“It is.” She firmed her gaze on her father, refusing to break it.

“Then tell me...” He looked right at his daughter, anger building. “... why is your dress dirty?”

“I—” Isabella caught her tongue because, indeed, the knees of her dress were scuffed with dirt from sitting on the carriage’s roof.

“I told you not to lie to me, Isabella.”

“I didn’t!”

“Another lie.”

“I... I was not climbing trees, father! I promise.”

He groaned and rubbed his eyes. “Go to your room. We will speak of this later.”

“But—”

“Your room!” he bellowed so loud that the hall seemed to shake.

It was heart wrenching to watch. Isabella winced and looked away from her father, her chin wobbling furiously as she tried to keep herself from crying. And while Caroline had only known the girl for a few short minutes, she felt responsible for some reason, as if she owed it to her to protect her from her father.

Not her job, she knew, but she wished growing up that she might have had someone to do the same, and in that, the feelings that were swirling about her concerning the Duke faded as new ones came about. That same heated feeling that she had experienced the last time the two had spoken.

“Oh, leave her alone, will you,” Caroline snapped before she could help herself.

“Excuse me?”

“You heard me perfectly well,” Caroline said, forcing herself to meet His Grace’s eyes. She glared at him, and he glared right back. “The poor girl is beside herself, and all you can think to do is yell at her.”

The side of his mouth twitched. “I will ask that you keep your nose out of business that does not concern you.”

“It does concern me,” she said. “Seeing as I will be living here for the foreseeable future, I think it concerns me greatly.”

“Yes, well, we shall see about that.”

“Excuse me, Frederick,” Esther interrupted. “Are you suggesting that you might throw my companion out onto the street?”

“What? No, of course not.”

“Then she is a guest in your house, and I suggest you treat her with respect.”

He clicked his tongue, and his jaw clenched. “All I ask is that where matters of my daughter are concerned, and that includes how I choose to raise her, that my guests mind their own business.”

“She did nothing wrong,” Caroline interjected, taking a step back so that she was closer to Esther. “I found her outside, sitting in the carriage, and when we were coming back in, she simply tripped. My fault, in fact, for I got in the way.”

“Yes!” Isabella cried excitedly. “That is what happened.”

“See,” Esther said rightly, “no need at all for all this nonsense.”

The Duke groaned loudly and ran a hand through his hair. “You would not be lying to me, would you, Isabella?”

“No! Never! Father, that is as it happened, I swear it.”

“As do I.” Caroline pointed up her chin and held the Duke’s gaze, doing what she could to keep her chin from wobbling. “We had a lovely little chat, and then I convinced her to go back to her room.” A smirk. “I noticed how upset you were earlier that she left it, so I thought it for the best.”

“What a silly turn of events,” Esther said, clapping her hands together. “Frederick, I

think you owe both Isabella and Caroline an apology.” She then folded her arms and looked sternly at her son.

“I...” His Grace looked caught between anger and confusion. “I most certainly will not apologize.”

“Typical,” Esther scoffed.

“Grandmother!”

“Father...” Isabella took her father’s hand, her voice soft now. “I was just thinking...” Her eyes lit up, and she grinned mischievously. “Seeing as you let the last governess go, would it not be a good idea if Caroline was to take over in?—”

“What?” He snatched his hand back. “Absolutely not.”

“What a wonderful idea!” Esther cried. “Caroline, what do you think?”

Caroline’s eyes went wide. Looking from Esther to Isabella—who looked pleadingly at her—she had no idea what to do or say or even think! “I do not know if that is such a good idea.”

“See,” the Duke seized on the chance, “she is not interested.”

“Why not!” Isabella stamped her foot.

“I am already the companion of?—”

“Oh, do not worry about me,” Esther said. “While we are here, I am perfectly capable of taking care of myself.”

“It really is not something that I know how to do.”

“What don’t you know?” Esther asked. “You are a lady of the ton, are you not? You know how this world works as well as anyone. And is that not what you wish for, Frederick? To find a young lady to raise Isabella as such? From where I am standing, it is a match made in heaven.”

“Say yes, father.” Isabella put her hands together. “Please! You must say yes.”

“A governess is not a role for someone of Miss Dowding’s station,” Frederick tired. “She is the daughter of a viscount, and a governess is certainly beneath her.”

“Semantics,” Esther said, blowing through her lips. “It is not as if she will be treated as a member of the staff. This is more about Isabella and her education than anything.”

Caroline was caught in two worlds. On the one hand, she did not entirely mind the idea of being the young girl’s governess. At the very least, providing her company for the time that she was here because Isabella clearly needed it. And further to that point, she got on well with the young girl so much so that it might even be fun. Yet on the other...

She dared to look at the Duke, whose face was contorting into an expression she could not recognize. Caroline wanted to avoid His Grace while she was here, to become invisible because the two times they had spoken so far, she had become lost to a side of herself that she did not wish to explore any further. If she was to accept this role, it might put her in situations that she knew she really should not be put in.

Thank God, the Duke seemed to understand this as she sensed he did not wish for her to take on this role either.

“Isabella...” Caroline started carefully, “I would love nothing more than to be your governess?—”

“See!” Isabella cried. “She wants to do it. Father, please!”

Caroline suppressed a groan.

“All right!” the Duke bellowed, silencing the room. “Isabella, do you want this?”

“Yes!”

“Grandmother, do you think this is a good idea, also?”

“I cannot see why it wouldn’t be.”

His smile was pained. “Miss Dowding...” He looked right at her, and she felt her stomach flutter as she was drawn into his eyes. “If you do not mind, I would like to have a word with you.”

She swallowed. “You would?”

“Alone.”

“Alone?” She swallowed again as her chest tightened.

“Yes,” he said, his voice deep and commanding. “Alone. Now.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

Frederick hesitated in closing the door once he and Miss Dowding entered the room.

She walked ahead, stopping in the room's center, looking forward as if she was purposefully trying to avoid his gaze. And Frederick, feeling more nervous than he had any right to feel, held the door with one hand, not entirely certain that shutting it and thus trapping them both inside, alone, was such a good idea.

It was for that reason that he left it open, striding into his study, side-stepping Miss Dowding, and then making for his desk. He sat himself down, fixing her with a stern expression because he knew that this moment required calm and command, and if he was to navigate it, he needed to be in full control of himself.

Even still... the sight of that open doorway stood as a reminder of just how precarious this situation was.

“So...” He cleared his throat. “You and my daughter.”

“Wh - what of us?” Miss Dowding stood before his desk, hands folded before her, eyes looking everywhere but directly at him.

“Tell me again how you both met.”

“It is as we said.” She swallowed, still not looking at him. “She was sitting inside the carriage that your mother and I arrived in. Seeing her there, I joined her for a moment and convinced her that she would do better to return to her room.”

“And that is the truth?”

A deep breath and she looked at him although he could see how much trouble it caused her. “It is.”

“And as the two of you were making your way back inside, she tripped and fell. Is that the way of it?”

“That is as it happened, yes.”

She was clearly lying, of that Frederick had no doubt. Raising a daughter as he had been doing for these past twelve years, Frederick had become rather adept at seeing through half-truths and discerning lies, and from the look on Miss Dowding’s face, she was spewing them at him... and doing a rather average job of hiding the fact.

But that wasn’t what concerned Frederick of the moment. His daughter and her shenanigans were a problem for another time. What he had to deal with right now was what was to be done about Miss Dowding.

“My daughter seems to like you,” he observed.

She smiled softly. “I confess I do not know her so well, but she seems lovely. Truly, a wonderful little girl. You should be very proud.”

“And this suggestion of hers,” he continued. “What are your thoughts on the matter?”

“To be her governess, you mean?”

“Did she suggest something else that I did not hear?” he asked flatly. “Yes, to be her governess.”

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She scowled at the sarcasm in his response but managed to hold her tongue. “I... it is an honor to even be considered,” she said evenly.

“But?”

She grimaced and then spoke carefully. “It is just that, well, the role of a governess is not one to be taken lightly—as you noted, she is to train your daughter in the ways of the ton and what is to be expected of her as the daughter of a duke. I would hate for you to choose the wrong person for such a serious role.”

“And you are the wrong person, are you?”

“I never said that.”

“So, you think that you are well suited for it.”

“I did not say that either.”

Frederick could not help but smile as he discerned Miss Dowding’s meaning even if she was attempting to speak out both sides of her mouth. It was obvious, now, that she did not wish to be his daughter’s governess while at the same time, she was refusing to say it outright. As to why she did not wish it?

Perhaps she did not want to disappoint Isabelle? The two had clearly formed a bond in the short time they had met, and for all his judgement of Miss Dowding’s character, it was clear that she was a kind soul who didn’t relish the idea of hurting his daughter. What was more, she likely knew that Frederick didn’t want her in the

role either, and she knew that regardless of what she said, he would refuse her.

Clever...he chuckled to himself as he watched her squirm under his stare. Make him out to be the villain while she escaped judgement. Frederick was used to being the villain, but that did not mean he enjoyed it.

“My grandmother seems to think that you are,” he continued, his stare fixed on her, “and she is rarely wrong.”

Her eyes went wide, but she was quick to recover. “I would hate to abandon her—your grandmother, I mean. I have been her companion two years now, and to suddenly leave her in the lurch?—”

“At her own suggestion.”

“It is still not something that I relish in.”

“She will be well taken care of while she stays here. Really, she has no need of a companion. Not as much as my daughter does a governess, anyhow.”

“I...” She went to speak, only to close her mouth and consider. She still fidgeted with her hands, and she could barely look at him for more than a second before looking away. “I am not trained.”

“That is no bother.”

“For a task such as this one, someone with expertise would likely be a far safer option than I.”

“So, you do not want the role?”

“I did not say that.”

“And yet you have said everything else you can to denounce your candidacy.”

Her cheeks flushed pink, and she looked at her feet. “If that is how you wish to interpret it, that is your decision.”

“You can say it, you know. You are allowed to admit that you do not wish to be my daughter’s governess. I do not mind.”

“I will admit no such thing.” She snapped her head up and looked at him, cocking a challenging eyebrow as she was starting to understand the game that he was playing.

“So...” He flashed his eyes at her. “... if I was to go back outside and tell my daughter that I have accepted you in this role...”

“I would be delighted about it,” she said with a cocky smirk. “In fact, I insist that you do as such. That is...” Her smirk grew. “... if you want it. If you do not, I would find some way to make my peace.”

“I bet you would.”

Frederick could see the impasse that the two had arrived at. Neither wanted Miss Dowding as his daughter’s governess, but neither was willing to accept the blame that would come from admitting it. And while Frederick knew he should have simply stood up to his daughter and told her no, he could not help but picture her earlier when she had winced at his rebuke of her and how she had shied away as if frightened.

He was sick of being the bad guy. He was sick of pushing his daughter away time and time again. Always wanting to do the right thing, there had to be a limit before the

right thing became what undid him entirely. What was the point in having a daughter respected in the ton if she hated him for it? Surely, there was a middle ground?

Annoyingly, Miss Dowding refused to yield. Something which he was not at all used to...

“I see what you are doing, by the way.” He pushed his chair back and stood.

Miss Dowding’s body stiffened, and her eyes flicked over her shoulder as if preparing for her escape. “Doing?”

“Oh, come now,” he sighed as he stepped around the table. “I know as well as you do that you have no desire to be my daughter’s governess, but you do not wish to be the one to say it.”

“I do not know what you mean.”

He rolled his eyes as he approached her which, he realized immediately, was a terrible idea. When he had been seated, it was as if a barrier was erected between them, allowing him to keep his mind focused on the task at hand. But the very second that he came closer to where Miss Dowding stood, he was reminded of the very reason he had not wished to be alone with her in the first place.

She did not shy away from him as others did. She did not back down. And while he could sense that she was afraid of him, it was not as if she feared him. More that she feared herself and what she might do or say.

Miss Dowding was different to other women. No sense that she cared one whit about his title. No indication that she cared what he thought of her. She was a wall, and he was a charging bull, and as he strode towards her, it became a question of which would buckle first.

“You do not think very highly of me, do you?”

She frowned. "That is your interpretation, not mine."

"And my daughter?" He stopped short of her, less than three feet away. Often, when he stood this close to a lady, she might take a step backwards or lean away as if his very presence was a force that pushed her back. But Miss Dowding held her place, even pointed her chin as she met his gaze. "Tell me, what do you think of our relationship?"

"I—" She caught her tongue. "I have not seen the two of you together often enough to make a comment on such a thing."

He laughed. "You think I treat her unfairly."

"I did not say that."

"That is the thing about you, Miss Dowding. You have a unique ability to say so much with so few words spoken. Maybe not a mute." He flashed his eyes at her, and her stare hardened. "... but that seems to matter little."

"And you have a unique ability to purposefully ignore everyone around you, regardless of the common sense they try and provide, because at the end of the day, you have managed to convince yourself that only your opinion matters, so who cares about what anyone else has to say?"

"Like my daughter, you mean?"

"I did not say that," she spoke through a clenched jaw, that stare of hers filled with fire, "but if that is the way you wish to interpret it, I think that says about as much as anyone else can."

There it was. That same rancor that she held for him from yesterday. He could see it

in her eyes. He could sense it pouring from her very being. Trying so hard not to overstep the line but unable to control herself because she was too stubborn and fiery to do such a thing.

But the line teetered before her, dangerously close. And with the way that she was glaring at him, Frederick felt his own sense of composure slip because, oh, how he wished to see how far he could push her.

“Make no mistake, I love my daughter. All I want is what is best for her.” He stood over Miss Dowding now, looking down at her, unblinking and commanding in a way that would have most shying away.

“You have a strange way of showing it.”

“By asking someone who is clearly perfect for the role to be her governess?”

“And I told you, I would love nothing more. The choice is up to you.”

“Just admit it...” he growled and took a step closer, expecting her to shy away but not at all surprised that she did not. “... you have no desire for the role. You would hate it. Admit it now, and I will happily tell my daughter as such.”

“The only thing I would hate would be having to spend more time with you.” He could sense her body shaking as she worked to keep her emotions under check. “That is a fate worse than any I can imagine.”

“Is that right?” He stiffened.

“Perhaps I should take the role. At least that way your daughter might be afforded a few hours a day where she does not have to worry about a... a bully of a father trying to control every facet of her life.”

“So, you want the job?”

“I. Did. Not. Say. That.”

As a duke, Frederick had been raised to understand that discipline and self-control were not an option in the way that he held himself but as expected as breathing. His coldness and his dispassion were direct consequences of this way of life. It helped too that most people were afraid of him, never standing up to or challenging what he said and wanted. It meant that he was rarely, if ever, tested.

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Miss Dowding was a different breed entirely. She did not baulk. She did not cower. She did not care! She challenged him in a way that nobody else had, and it infuriated him as much as it turned him on.

He could sense it happening as he held her eyes. He could literally feel his arousal peaking as he bore down on her, trying to bend her to his will while being rebuffed. This went beyond wanting her to comply with him. This was about an entirely different type of control.

Before he could stop himself, his hand shot out and grabbed her waist as he had the last time the two had spoken. She gasped but did not pull away. If anything, she stepped in closer, seeming to dare him as his grip tightened on her.

“What did I tell you?” he growled at her. “The last time we spoke.”

“Nothing I care to remember,” she shot back, licking her lips as she continued to glare at him.

“I told you that you were playing a dangerous game. One that, if you kept at it, would you see you get hurt.”

“Is that why you bit me?” she asked, her voice dropping. “A warning?”

His chest tightened, and his eyes flicked to her ears... and then her neck. When he had bitten her last time, it had been on impulse, and he had been unable to help himself because he had needed to show her that he was not one to be played with. And now...

“Admit that you do not wish for this role. Say it, so I can tell my daughter that you have turned her down.”

“No.”

He could feel himself begin to sweat, and his grip on her waist tightened. “I am not used to being denied. Especially by guests of my own household.”

“And I am not used to be manhandled.”

“Perhaps you ought to be.”

“Perhaps I should scream?”

“Finally, putting that tongue of yours to good use,” he responded through his teeth. “It would be the first time.”

“Oh, it has other uses, I assure you.”

“Is that right?” he chuckled.

Her eyes went wide. “I did not mean—I was simply referring to its use regarding defending myself against your boorish insults.”

“Is that so?”

“What else could I possibly mean?”

His body was shaking, and he could feel himself sweating through his clothes. The urge to lean down and tear into her neck was real. The desire to shut that door and ravish her until she succumbed to his demands was more than he could handle. And

as he looked from her neck to her plump lips, Frederick knew there was little he could do to stop himself.

“I have seen the way you look at me,” he said, unable to stop himself.

She half-pulled away without seeming to want to. “I do not know what you are speaking of.”

“Do not pretend that it has not crossed your mind,” he growled. “What it might be like to put those lips and that tongue to actual good use for a change.”

Her lip curled in anger. “I would rather have my tongue pulled out than consider such a thing.”

“What a waste of a good tongue.”

“That is not?—”

“So, if I was to kiss you now...” He stepped in closer, right on top so that their two bodies were almost one. “... what would you do?”

“Why don’t you try it and find out.” She flashed her eyes at him in warning, as if she meant to slap him across the face if he dared. And yet, she still stayed close and was not fighting him now was she looking as if she meant to.

“What did I just say about denying me?” And then, unable to stand it any longer, he pulled her into himself, unsurprised that she didn’t so much as feign resistance.

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Their lips met in a glorious clash of skin and saliva and tongue. Their bodies pressed together as if melting into one. Both hands on her waist, he squeezed as tightly as he could while biting into her lips and growling while she thrashed and tore her head back, only to then plunge forward again and kiss him as if her life depended on it.

It might have gone on forever if a crash from outside didn't snap them back into the moment. Enough that Frederick's eyes shot open, seeming to come into himself just as Miss Dowding did the same.

She pushed him away and stumbled, wiping at her mouth as if she had swallowed poison.

"How dare you!" she snarled.

"Me?" he chuckled, heart still pounding, temper flaring. "Do not pretend that you did not want it."

"I most certainly did not!"

"You have a strange way of showing it, Miss Dowding."

Her eyes went wide, and she opened her mouth to snarl, only for Frederick's mother to suddenly appear in the doorway.

"Well?" she said, a quick look at the two but unable to take them in properly, for Isabella came flying into her. "Oh!" she yelped as the little girl's arms wrapped about her.

“Did she say yes?” Isabella cried. “Did she?”

Frederick’s eyes went wide as he looked at Miss Dowding for confirmation. She looked back at him, mouth open like a fish trying to breathe on land. They had decided nothing! And with Isabelle buzzing excitedly, Frederick thought as quickly as he could.

“We came to a compromise,” he said, his tongue working faster than his mind could keep up. “Miss Dowding is in no way suited to be your full-time governess.”

Isabella let go of her grandmother. “But?—”

“But...” Frederick spoke over her, “... it will take some time before I can find a proper replacement for Miss Wanton. Which means that for the next few weeks at least...” He avoided looking at Miss Dowding entirely. “... Miss Dowding will happily fill that role.”

“Really?!” Isabella squealed. “You mean it! Does he, Caroline?”

It was clear that Caroline was as caught off guard by the announcement as Frederick was to have made it. A compromise? Frederick did not compromise! And yet, for the first time perhaps ever, he had been forced to do such. Miss Dowding... like a venomous spider, she had ensnared Frederick in her web, and it was all he could do to keep her at bay lest she devour him in ways that, to be honest, were more tempting than he liked to admit.

“Ye— yes,” Caroline stammered. “Temporary, of course. Only a few weeks.”

“Yay!”

“Wonderful,” his mother said and clapped her hands together. “Personally, I am just

glad to see the two of you getting along.”She looked between Frederick and Miss Dowding. “Truly, I wasn’t entirely certain that you would. But I suppose I need not worry.”

“Of course, mother.” Frederick was quick to compose himself, even if he could feel the sweat through his clothes. “Miss Dowding is a wonderful choice of companion, and I am sure she will make an excellent, temporary governess. Right, Miss Dowding?”

She was glaring at him as she spoke but was quick to recover. “I could not agree more. Truly, I cannot wait to start.” Another quick glare thrown in his direction, cut off as Isabelle charged the woman and threw her arms around her in an embrace.

This was only temporary... it was only for a few weeks... there was nothing to worry about. Frederick repeated these words in his head, forced to admit that never in his entire life had he told himself lies such as this.

CHAPTER EIGHT

“Good girl,” Caroline encouraged as she walked around the pianoforte, nodding her head along to the rhythm of the music. “Very well done.”

“You are just saying that,” Isabella grumbled, scrunching her face into a tight ball as if annoyed; her hands still moved ably across the keys of the pianoforte, doing a rather adept job at playing as she spoke. “You have to.”

“On the contrary,” Caroline chuckled, “I am the one person who does not have to say that. And believe me...” Caroline made sure to catch Isabella’s eye, winking at her. “... if you sounded horrendous, I would let you know it.”

Isabella snorted, and as she did, she accidentally struck the wrong key. “Oh!”

“Concentrate...”

“It was not my fault!”

“Are you not the one playing?”

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Making sure not to make another mistake, Isabella pushed her lips together and pulled a quick face at Caroline. “You made me do it.”

“I made you do nothing.”

“Yes, you did!”

“Why, if I had such control of your fingers as you claim, do you not think I would be doing a far better job playing this piece than you are right now?”

Isabella’s eyes widened, and she struck another wrong key. “You said I was doing well! You just said?—”

“Joking,” Caroline chuckled. She walked behind where Isabella was sitting, resting a hand on her shoulder and giving it a squeeze. “I am just joking. You are playing beautifully.”

“You think?”

“Now, concentrate...” She reached over Isabella’s shoulder and turned the page on the music sheets. “Here—” she then instructed, indicating a particularly difficult section that was coming up. “Remember what I showed you.”

To this, Isabella did not respond. Rather, she tightened her face as she focused on the keys before her, gliding across them in a way that almost looked effortless. Caroline knew that not to be the truth, however, as they had spent the entire morning working toward this exact task.

And indeed, she held her breath as the young girl played the melody, her heart pounding with excitement because she wanted nothing more than for Isabella to complete it without fault. So strange that she cared this much for a role she did not even want. So strange that she had grown into it these past few days the way that she had. So strange that... no, actually...

Not strange at all. Not anymore, anyhow.

For two years, Caroline had been a companion for Esther, and they were two wonderful years that she would not take back for anything. But she had never felt needed in the role—more that she was accepted in it. With nowhere else to go, Esther had taken her in and cared for her when it was supposed to be the other way around. But still she cherished it, such that when she took on this new role as governess, she had worried she might be leaving behind more than she realized.

As it turned out, nothing could have been further from the truth.

For three days only, Caroline had worked as Isabella's governess, and in that time, she had developed a relationship with the young girl that she might never have dreamed was possible. Such that she felt invested in the girl's life in a way that made her want to see Isabella do well, that made her feel needed, that made her feel special and appreciated like she never had before.

Three days only, and already Caroline dreaded the eventual day when she and Esther would have to leave and go back home. How very strange.

"I did it!" Isabella cried out excitedly the moment she got through the piece. "I did it! Did you hear!"

Caroline clapped. "Well done, Isabella! See, I told you it was not difficult."

“Well, it was,” Isabella said sheepishly. “If it was easy, it would not have taken me all morning.”

“Nothing worth doing should be easy.”

“Well, that doesn’t make any sense,” Isabella frowned.

Caroline chuckled. “It means that we should take pride in that which is hard to accomplish. If something is easy and everyone can do it, then why bother? Why feel anything other than resigned apathy if there is no challenge behind it? But if a thing is worked for, if you apply yourself, and then you achieve it... well, personally, I think that makes it all the more satisfying, don’t you?”

Isabella did not look as if she agreed. “It sounds like an excuse you have just come up with to try and make me study harder.”

“You got me,” Caroline laughed.

“I knew it!”

“Now, come on...” She turned the sheet of music back. “Again, thank you. Let us make sure the first time was not luck.”

Isabella’s eyes flashed, and she went back to playing, the concentration evident on her face. Caroline watched and listened, again unable to believe how invested she had become in this little girl’s life.

It was all Isabella, too—the reason for the way she had taken to this role as governess. The little girl was a marvel. Bright. Funny. Eager to learn. And the kindest soul Caroline had ever met. Really, she found it beyond incredible that a girl such as this had been born to someone as cold and malicious as His Grace... not that she

would ever say such a thing out loud.

“I want to show father!” Isabella decreed when she finished it for a second time, again without fault. “He will be so pleased.”

“Perhaps we should practice a few more times first?”

“What is the matter?” Isabella pumped her eyebrows. “Scared of what father will say if I make a mistake?”

Caroline looked at her flatly. “No. But are you?”

“Ha!” Isabella laughed. “Father does not scare me.” She tried to look brave but withered under Caroline’s cocked eyebrow. “Well... not always. But I can do it! I know I can! And he will be so happy if he sees. He always said that my pianoforte skills needed work. My last governess was hopeless at teaching me.”

“Is that right?”

“Oh, she was good at other things. Only musically, she was not so great.” She pushed her lips together. “Not that it would have made much of a difference...” Suddenly, she bowed her head, and her shoulders slumped. “Perhaps I should practice some more before showing him. I do not want him to think that you are not teaching me properly. What if he makes you leave like the other ones?”

Caroline chuckled. “I do not think there is much chance of that happening.” That was one thing she was certain of.

“But he will!” she protested, sounding worried. “He always does. It is as if he takes pleasure from it.”

“I am sure that is not true. He just...” She paused, making certain that she did not say anything negative to Isabella about her father. That simply would not do. “He wants the best for you.”

“I suppose so...” Isabella sighed, shoulders slumping further. “I just wish he was not so harsh, sometimes. Oh sure, when we are not talking of my education, he is as

loving as I could hope for. A few years ago, especially, I do not think I ever saw him yell. Not once.”

“Really?” Caroline frowned, finding that hard to imagine.

“Really,” Isabella said. “It is only recently as I have grown older that he has started to turn into a grumpy old man. And while I still love him—I do,” she insisted, making sure that Caroline could see it, “sometimes, I wish he was the same as he used to be. I miss him.”

Caroline rested a hand gently on her shoulder. “He does love you, still. Anyone can see it.”

“I know...”

“And take my word for it, a father who loves his daughter like that is a rare thing. I should know.”

“Oh?” Isabella perked up. “What was your father like? Forgive me for asking, but I have not heard you mention him. And grandmother told me not to be nosy when I asked.” She grimaced. “And now, I am thinking there is a reason for that. Sorry...”

Caroline’s mind flashed back to images of her own father. Not those from her childhood, for they were pleasant memories from what she could recall. Rather, the recent memories, the ones that had led her to run away in the first place. She could still hear her mother screaming... she could still remember the way she had cried when she had seen it... memories that brought physical pain to her being, such that she clutched at her stomach as if someone had stabbed her.

“Caroline...” Isabella asked softly, “are you all right? I did not mean to pry?—”

“No, no.” Caroline shook the memories away and forced herself to forget. “I just had a cramp.”

“A cramp?”

Caroline chuckled. “When you are a little older, perhaps. But to answer your question, my father was loving in most of the ways that mattered. But he was also a man of the peerage, and when my husband-to-be left me at the altar, he seemed to forget that it was his daughter he was dealing with, seeing me as a nuisance that he had to solve somehow. I still believe he loves me...” She thought again to her real father, wondering if those words were true. “I suppose he just forgot that.”

She hated lying. To Isabella of all people. But she had no choice, for the truth would not only put her own life in danger, but that of everyone she knew...

“Enough of that.” Caroline straightened up and indicated back to the pianoforte. “You wish to impress your father? Try impressing me first.”

“I want to show father,” she complained.

“One more time, and if you get it perfect, we will show him.”

“Today?”

Caroline hesitated. “Yes. Today.”

Three days, and Caroline had done well to avoid His Grace... a trend that she would very much like to continue with. Even supper had been taken without his indomitable presence as for three nights in a row he had been too busy to join them in eating. And each night as Caroline sat herself down, bracing for his appearance only to learn that he was not coming, she would breathe a sigh of relief, thankful that once again she

was able to get through the day without seeing him.

It was easy for Caroline to convince herself the reason for this avoidance was an avid dislike for the man. He was, after all, cruel and rude and arrogant and smug and cold and dispassionate and... choose your adjective, for they all fit. A more horrid man she had rarely encountered. And the way he spoke to her was enough to make her blood boil just to think.

And yet...

The kiss that they shared still lingered in her mind. The way it made her feel whenever she chose to remember it. Her body would flush. Her stomach would flutter. Her mouth would salivate, and more.

He had been commanding in a way she had loved. The threats he had made, and the implications behind them, had her tossing of a night to know he slept so close to where she did. She did not wish to feel this way, but as she had learnt the hard way, rarely did one get what they wished for.

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How had it happened? Why had it happened? Was it an accident? Was it a test? Surely, His Grace did not covet Caroline, for that felt like insanity. Likely, and this was what she chose to focus most on, it was a means to scare her away... a rather strange tactic, she had to admit, but one she would not fall for again.

“I did it!” Isabella finished, spinning about to find Caroline, who was standing behind her. A big grin on her face, eyes dancing, she could not have looked more pleased. “See! It was not luck at all!”

Caroline had not been paying attention, but she smiled nonetheless and nodded her agreement. “Very well done.”

“Shall I fetch father? I would very much like to show him.”

Carline’s chest tightened, and her stomach twisted. “Ah... yes, that is a good idea. I will just...” She looked about as if for an answer.

“Miss Holloway!” Isabella cried suddenly to which one of the manor’s many maids popped her head in to answer. “Fetch father, please. Tell him I have something to show him.”

“I am afraid he is out riding at the moment, Miss,” Miss Holloway answered. “But I shall inform him the moment he is home.”

“Oh...” Isabella’s face scrunched into disappointment. “Yes, will you please.”

“There we go then. On the plus side, it gives you plenty more time to practice.”

Caroline breathed a sigh of relief, thankful for His Grace and the horse ride he had gone on, hoping that it extended long into the afternoon, so she might manage at least one more day without having to see him again.

That, she knew, was for the best.

CHAPTER NINE

“Steady on!” the Earl of Fernside, known to Frederick simply as George, called out after Frederick, who was pushing his mount a little harder than usual. “What is the rush!”

“I told you that today was going to be a short ride,” Frederick responded without looking back.

“Yes, but when you said short, I did not think that we would be racing the entire time. I might have skipped that second helping of breakfast if I had known.”

Frederick chuckled. “Perhaps you should have skipped it anyway.”

“I shall pretend I did not hear that! Now—” George kicked his legs into the side of his horse, bringing himself in beside Frederick. “Will you please slow down. It is far too hot to be moving at such a pace. A leisurely ride was what I expected today. Leisurely being the operative word.”

On the horizon, across the meadow that the two men were riding, Frederick could just now see his manor growing into the sky as if rising from the dirt. It brought him some relief to see, knowing he was so close to home which was the only reason that he heeded his best friend’s command.

“Fine...” he sighed, pulling back on the reins and forcing his horse back to a slow

trot. “Is that better?”

“Much.” George exhaled and wiped the sweat from his brow, clearly relieved by the new-set pace, one which allowed him to lean back comfortably on the saddle and relax. “Honestly, man, you ride as if you have somewhere you need to be. Which I know for a fact that you do not.”

“Perhaps I am simply growing tired of your company.”

“Ha!” George chuckled. “We all know that is not true. I am a delight. Ask anyone who knows me.”

“I do not need to ask. I am here, bearing witness to it firsthand. And for your information...” Frederick looked to his friend and grinned. “Your company is nowhere near as pleasant as you may think. Even your horse is tiring of you.”

“Oh, you do not mean that...” He reached forward and stroked his horse’s mane. “He loves me.”

“Maybe it is just the extra weight it is forced to bear. Again...” A click of the tongue, and he eyed George’s belly. “You really do need to get that appetite of yours under control. Your seamstress must be beside herself with all the work she has to do every time you tear open the backside of your pants.”

George levelled a glare at Frederick. “Well, somebody is in a mood today. Such that I am willing to overlook these snarky comments about my weight—it is all muscle! You will remember that as a lad, I used to be able to pin you down with an arm tied behind my back.”

“Muscle, of course,” Frederick agreed lightly. “Simply in hibernation. Although winter has long since passed, George. So, I am wondering when said muscle will

reappear.”

“It is for you that I remain this way,” George said with a good-hearted chuckle. “If I was to return to my former glory, I fear that the shame you would feel just to be seen beside me would damage your ego beyond compare.”

“Is that right?”

“You are most welcome,” George added with a wink.

Frederick chuckled as he went back to looking ahead, his stare trained on his manor as it came closer and closer. He and George had been out riding for three hours now which was only about half as long as they often rode—Frederick loved riding, and if he had his way, he would spend days doing as such; the freedom it brought was unlike anything else in this world.

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Sadly, Frederick could not spend days riding. As things stood, even three hours felt like far too long a time to be away from home, such that he very nearly cancelled on his friend this morning and just may have if he did not want George to cause a fuss.

As to the reason for this need to be home so soon? That pestering sense of worry that sat in the back of his head, needling away so that he fidgeted in his saddle? The desire to ignore his friend, kick in his heels, and take off at a gallop so that he might be home sooner?

Miss Dowding was the reason... although, not for the reason some might think.

“Are you going to tell me?” George asked, watching the way that Frederick stared at his home as they came closer and closer. “Or am I going to need to guess?”

“Tell you what?” Frederick said dismissively.

“Guessing then...” George pushed his lips together and tapped them with a finger. “You have developed a rash around your thighs, and every second you spend in that saddle itches such that you might lose your mind.”

“Funny.”

“Perhaps a new maid has caught your eye,” he winked, “and you wish to spend the day watching her as she dusts the head of your bed.”

“Do not be ridiculous.”

“You suspect one of the staff is stealing from you, and you want to be home to catch them in the act?”

Frederick looked flatly at his friend. “Are you quite finished?”

“Are you going to tell me what is troubling you?” he shot back, raising both eyebrows in warning.

“Urgh...” Frederick groaned and rubbed his forehead. “It is nothing that exciting, I promise you, but...” He eyed his home, wondering how best to explain the circumstance to his friend without raising any unwanted questions. “... I have recently hired a new governess for my daughter?—”

“Another one?! You go through them like bottles of wine!”

“And—” he emphasized over his friend, “I wish to be close to home to keep an eye on her. That is all. If anything goes wrong—you know how my daughter is. I wish to be there, just in case.”

George did not speak for a while, and as they rode, Frederick could feel his eyes upon the back of his neck. He knew what was coming, for he knew his friend well which had him regretting that he’d said anything in the first place.

“A new governess is it?”

“That is what I said.”

“Huh.” A beat. “Is she a beauty?”

Frederick groaned. “That is neither here nor there.”

“Ah, so she is, then.” He chuckled. “And you wish to keep an eye on her is it? Very dotting of you, Your Grace...” He chuckled further. “The care you have taken in your daughter’s education is truly a marvel that other fathers should look to as inspiration for?—”

“Oh, enough of that!” Frederick snapped. “It is the truth. I did not want to hire the woman—my grandmother forced my hand is why. And while she is certainly fit for the role, I do not trust her.”

George snorted. “Somehow I doubt that your grandmother would be able to make you do anything you did not wish to do.”

“Meaning?”

“Oh, you know my meaning.” He grinned. “That your grandmother is not nearly as at fault as you wish for me to believe.”

Frederick scowled at him. “I could hardly say no—she is the daughter of a viscount, if you believe it. She is also verbose in the way she speaks, rude to a point yet seemingly unaware of it. The type of woman who enjoys testing the limits of what a lady of the ton can get away with for fun and—what? What is that look?” he accused his friend, noting the smile behind his eyes.

“I did not say anything!”

“She is trouble,” Frederick emphasized with finality. “And if any trouble should arise, I wish to be there to see it. For my daughter surely will not tell me...” He muttered bitterly, knowing that to be the truth.

Trouble... it felt like the perfect word to describe Miss Dowding. For so many reasons...

For three days, she had worked as Isabella's governess, and for three days, Frederick had spent more time thinking about her than he cared to admit. Oh sure, it was easy for him to repeat the lie he had just told George, that it was his daughter's education he cared about only and that was why she refused to vacate his thoughts. But that was only half the reason... less than half.

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Frederick could not stop thinking of that kiss! And not just the kiss but everything that happened before it. The way they had argued. The manner in which she had defied him—speaking to him in ways that nobody, anywhere, had ever dared to speak. The effect that this had on his self-control, the urges it boiled up inside of him, and his inability not to act on said urges.

Frederick prided himself on his control. He had spent a lifetime molding himself into the perfect bastion of the ton and everything it stood for. And yet all it took was being alone in a room with that woman, and his walls had come crashing down around him.

Even worse, deep down, he wished for it to happen again. Not that he would ever say such a thing out loud.

“You know,” George began carefully, “it is not such a bad thing to find a woman attractive.”

“What are you talking about?” Frederick snapped.

“I am just saying, if this governess is as beautiful as you said?—”

“I never said that.”

“Implied then,” he corrected. “Is that such a bad thing? You are single. She is single. You need a wife. She needs a husband?—”

“I never said anything of the sort,” he dismissed.

“But you do need one,” George pointed out. “And before you snap and snarl at me, even you must admit that it is high time that you married again. With but one daughter to your name, an heir is what you need, Your Grace. And what better way to produce one than through wedlock.”

Frederick turned in his saddle and glared at his best friend.

George held his hands up as if to surrender. “Just something to think about is all.”

Frederick had thought about it. For years now, in fact, he had thought long and hard on the subject of marriage. As a Duke, it was expected that he marry again if for no other reason than to produce an heir. But did he want to do that? His last marriage was such a disaster that he didn’t much relish the idea of going through such an ordeal as that ever again.

Although—and this was a thought that had come to him these last few days—if he could find the right woman—one who cared not just for him, but for Isabella also—it might not be the worst thing. Certainly, it would be something to consider.

“Come on.” Frederick gave his head a shake, dismissing those thoughts as he kicked his heels into the side of his horse, taking off. “It is time we got back.”

“Urgh!” George did the same, muttering under his breath as he tried to catch up to Frederick. “My stomach!” he groaned. “I really should not have had that second helping...”

CHAPTER TEN

Frederick returned home to the sound of music. An enchanting melody being played on the pianoforte; it drifted through the foyer and swept over Frederick as if it was being played just for him.

“Hhmm, not bad,” George noted. “Isabella?”

Frederick frowned as he took note of the song. A difficult piece, well above his daughter’s skill level. “I... I do not think so. Although, she was supposed to be having lessons today.”

George grinned and pumped his eyebrows. “It seems that this Miss Dowding knows her stuff. A good teacher as well as easy on the eyes...”

Frederick fixed his friend with an unamused expression. “Do not even say it.”

“Ha!” He hurried through the foyer in the direction of the music. “Come on then! Let us see for ourselves.”

“George!” Frederick shouted after him. “There is no need to—” George disappeared around the corner, leaving Frederick standing alone in the foyer.

He had spent three days avoiding Miss Dowding. Three days doing so because he did not wish to put himself in the same position as he had the first day they had met. Three days of convincing himself that he simply did not wish to see her because of how angry she made him, worried that if he saw her again, he might snap, snarl, and then she would quit as so many had done before her.

It was for his daughter that he did it! An easy lie to swallow. But left with no choice, knowing that he was going to have to speak with her again eventually, Frederick swallowed his pride and his worry and hurried after his friend.

He found him in the drawing room down the hall, standing in the doorway as he watched and listened. Coming in behind him, Frederick braced himself for the sight of his daughter sitting at the pianoforte, showing off skills that would have forced him to admit that maybe Miss Dowding wasn’t so bad for his daughter as he wished.

Only, as he stepped around George, he was perhaps a little too pleased to see that it wasn't his daughter playing at all. Rather, it was his grandmother.

She was laughing as she played, seeming to have the time of her life. Isabella stood beside her, watching as she did so, while Miss Dowding stood back in the middle of the room, arms folded, grinning to herself as she nodded her head.

And Frederick breathed a sigh of relief.

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“Ah, Frederick!” his grandmother cried when she saw him watching. “I still have it, do I not!”

“Very good, grandmother!”

“And you thought I was an old good-for-nothing crone. Admit it!” Her fingers moved effortlessly across the keys, and she winked at Isabella who giggled.

“I take back everything that I said...” He walked into the room, keeping a careful eye on Miss Dowding while careful not to get too close. “Although, forgive me for saying, but I was not aware that it was you who needed instruction?”

Miss Dowding’s back stiffened at the clear jibe shot in her direction, but she did not turn around, as if purposefully ignoring him.

“Just showing your daughter how it is done,” his grandmother chuckled. “But she was playing earlier, and I must say, she is quite the little musician.”

“Is that right?”

“I am, father!” Isabella agreed excitedly. “Caroline has taught me so much!”

“I am sure that she has done her best...” he trailed off as he reached the pianoforte, eyes drifting to Miss Dowding who was still not looking at him... even if he could see the way her jaw clenched at his comment.

“And...” His grandmother hit the final key and spun about in the chair. “There! I told

you these old fingers still have some tricks.”

“Yay!” Isabella clapped.

“Well done,” George clapped also as he walked into the room. “I must say, Your Grace, you are an expert. Far better than your son...” A grin. “... at most things, I would imagine.”

“Ah, Lord Fernside, I see that you are even more charming than I remember...” She looked over the pianoforte at him. “And still as dashing too.”

George beamed at the compliment, standing taller and prouder. Growing up, he had always been a strapping athletic specimen, known for his broad shoulders, large chest, and flat stomach. And while his chest was still thick, and his shoulders were still wide, his stomach had grown considerably. Not that this took away from his good looks in any way.

“You make me blush,” George said with a wink. “I only wish your grandson was so complimentary.” He then cast his gaze further, spotting Miss Dowding finally. “And who is this...” George fixed a most charming smile on his face as he approached Miss Dowding. “His Grace was speaking of his new governess, but not once did he mention her beauty.”

Miss Dowding frowned at the comment, looking caught between shock and embarrassment.

“I am the Earl of Fernside...” He reached out for Miss Dowding’s hand, and she offered it as if on instinct. “... and you are?”

“The Honorable Caroline Dowding,” she said with tight lips, trying to keep herself from smiling. “A pleasure.”

“Ah, Miss Dowding.” George’s eyes flashed as he kissed the back of her hand. “Her Grace must be furious with you.”

Miss Dowding frowned. “Why would she be furious?”

“Well to put it simply...” The look he fixed her with was wicked. “... with you here, she is no longer the most beautiful woman in the manor. A close second, sure...” His eyes flashed again. “... but I am afraid that you have her beat.”

“Oh, stop it, Lord Fernside!” Frederick’s grandmother clucked. “You are embarrassing the poor girl.”

“I did not mean to! And besides, the truth should not embarrass but be delighted in. Would you not agree, Miss Dowding?” He was still holding her hand, still looking into her eyes, stillflirting with her in a way that Frederick found himself not at all enjoying.

He should not have cared. If anything, he should have been happy for it. At least, if George took Miss Dowding’s fancy, it might distract him from his own wandering fantasies about the woman. What was more, it would nip in the bud any more comments about marriage and what have you.

But Frederick could not ignore the way his stomach clenched at the sight of Miss Dowding’s flushed cheeks. He told himself he did not like her in the least. That she was wrong for him and his daughter in every way imaginable. Yet as it stood, he had to resist the urge to grab his friend by the scruff of the neck and throw him from the room.

“Isabella!” Frederick barked, cutting through the tension. “Why is it that I return home to find my grandmother playing in your stead?”

“I was doing so earlier,” Isabella protested. “But grandmother wished to have a try. She told me that Caroline has been teaching her also and wanted to show off...” She nudged his grandmother.

“Is that right, grandmother?”

His grandmother shrugged. “She has been showing me a few things. She is an excellent musician.”

Frederick snorted. “And if I wished for my daughter to join the theatre, I would be so very happy to hear it.” He could not help but smile at the glare that Miss Dowding held him in.

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“She has taught me much!” Isabella cried. “Not just the pianoforte but... but... but...”

“It is all right, Isabella; do not feel the need to defend Miss Dowding. I am sure she is doing her best.”

Why did he enjoy poking at her like this? He could feel her glare fixed on him as if she expected to shoot fire from her eyes. And it wasn't that she was upset, for he did not think anything he said could upset her. It was more that she was rueful, a sort of fury that only he could bring out in her.

And, dammit, how he reveled in the sensation of it.

Even now, as she glowered, Frederick hoped that she might do as she was known to and respond with a scathing insult that he might rise to. A chance for him to bear down on her, to assert himself, to be reminded of how it had felt the last time the two had spoken. Just to think of it... he felt his pulse quicken, his mouth turn dry, and his eyes wander over her body which he wanted to reach out and grab and?—

His eyes went wide, and he looked away, careful not to let his mind wander to places it simply could not.

“It is quite all right, Isabella,” Miss Dowding spoke evenly. She stepped around George and walked toward where Frederick was standing in front of the pianoforte. “You must remember, most men cannot do more than one or two things well, so do not expect your father to believe how quickly your education is coming along. Likely, I suspect that in a few weeks you will be smarter than he is.”

Isabella's face dropped.

"I suppose that ruling the world is one of these things?" Frederick shot back. "Forgive me if my skills with the pianoforte leave something to be desired."

"That would make the other talent of yours riding your horse, yes?" Miss Dowding continued pleasantly, as if they were having a normal conversation. "So, now that we have that problem solved, if you need help putting your shoes on in the morning, do not hesitate to ask."

"Ha!" his grandmother cackled.

His daughter, however, could not have looked more shocked. And fearful. And confused. Eyes wide. Mouth hanging open. Her head swiveled between them as if she had no idea where to look... or if she wished to.

Frederick could feel that same sensation from before rising inside of him. Body running hot, shaking. Heat gathering between them. He found himself grateful that there were others in the room for all he wished to do right now was take a hold of Miss Dowding, pull her close, growl a warning in her ear, and then, if she insisted on badgering him, shut those lips of hers in a way that had already proven itself effective.

"And you are yet to demonstrate one thing that you do well," he responded somewhat coolly. "Forgive me if I do not take my daughter's word at your supposed talents."

She snorted. "A demonstration then?" She fixed him in a glare.

"I was just going to suggest it." He held that glare, refusing to break it.

Her eyes flashed rage, and she turned on her heel, face softening immediately as she

looked at his daughter. “Isabella, would you like to show your father what I have spent all morning teaching you?”

“N - now?” Isabella squeaked.

“You do not have to,” Frederick assured her. “The blame will not fall on you.” A quick smirk at Miss Dowding. “That, I promise you.”

“He is right,” Miss Dowding said which surprised him. “You do not have to do anything that you do not wish. But...” A caring smile, and her voice became encouraging. “... I know you can. After how well you played for me this morning, surely you wish to show your father? I know he will be as proud of you as I was.”

Isabella’s face grew determined, and she nodded her head. Then she hurried to where his grandmother sat, who was already standing and moving away. She was shaking, clearly nervous, but she steeled herself as she flipped through the sheets of music, brow furrowed, eyes set.

Watching her, Frederick felt a conflict raging within that he had not expected.

On the one hand, he wanted Miss Dowding to fail. To see her fall and then hold it over her as a sign that he was right about her all along would be a victory so very sweet. Perhaps even use this as an excuse to dismiss her, find someone else to teach his daughter, remove himself from temptation once and for all.

And yet, on the other hand...

He desperately wanted his daughter to succeed. She had struggled for some time with the pianoforte, not a natural musician, confidence being what held her back. But it was an admirable skill to have, one that any lady of the ton would be glad for. And if she was to succeed here, showing how far she had come... a lump grew in his throat

with pride at the mere thought.

She began to play soon after she had settled. Awkwardly at first, for she was clearly nervous, but she soon fell into rhythm, the melody flowing from her fingers as if she was born to it. And as she did, Frederick could see her confidence growing: she sat up straighter, she smiled to herself, she even laughed, such was her delight.

Watching her, Frederick could not believe he had even considered wanting her to fail. Dammit, he was so proud of her in that moment he could have cried.

“Told you...” Miss Dowding stood beside him, arms folded, a smug smile on her face as she watched Isabella.

He might have responded with a scathing remark. He might have defended himself. Heck, he might have scoffed and doubled down on his comment earlier about how learning the pianoforte was but one of many skills expected of her. But at that moment, none of that seemed important.

“You were right,” he said simply, still watching his daughter, unable to keep himself from smiling. “She is wonderful.”

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Miss Dowding blinked back her surprise. “Excuse me?”

“And you have done a fine job. I should never have doubted you.”

“I...” She could not have looked more shocked. “Ah... thank you?”

“Perhaps this time, I should be thanking you.” He smiled quickly for her, an appreciative nod of the head, and then he went back to watching Isabella play.

“That is...” She hesitated as she studied Frederick, as if she was seeing him for the first time. “That is quite all right, Your Grace. And thank you for saying.”

She turned back to finish watching Isabella, the smugness gone, the satisfaction faded. Rather, it was pride that he saw in her eyes.

“I did it!” Isabella cried with glee when she finished. “Did you see! Did you see!”

“Very well done,” Frederick said, clapping along.

“Good show!” George agreed. “We have a generational talent on our hands!”

“Isabella, I am so proud of you,” Frederick continued. He went to walk around the pianoforte and hug his daughter, only for Isabella to leap up and run for Miss Dowding instead.

She threw her arms around Miss Dowding and pulled her into a tight hug, and Miss Dowding returned it, laughing along as she did. “I told you that you could do it.

Didn't I? I am so proud of you."

Frederick might have been envious of the sight. If it had been Miss Wanton or one of the other governesses, he certainly would have been. But watching Miss Dowding hug his daughter, and his daughter relishing it, it was not envy that he felt. Not even close.

"She is something, isn't she?" George whispered in his ear.

"Yes, she really is..."

"I was not speaking of your daughter..." He winked and nudged Frederick in the side. "But neither were you, I think."

To that, Frederick had no answer. Only this time, he didn't feel the same sense of shame or denial as he might have before. Confused, certainly. Unsure, most definitely. But it was beginning to look as if there was more to Miss Dowding than he had originally thought. Much, much more.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

"Oh, this one," Esther said as she pulled a roll of fabric from the wall. The color was dark green, almost emerald, with lighter green stitching woven through it in a floral pattern and golden hems. "This coloring will go with your hair. I have always said that you look good in green."

"And I told you, there is no need for me to have a new dress made. I have plenty already," Caroline sighed... even if she could not help but eye the fabric in a way that made it clear how much she agreed.

"Nonsense, dear," Esther dismissed. "If you remember, when you turned up on my

doorstep, you had naught but the clothes on your back. And even those I would not dress a pig in.”

“Why on earth would you put a dress on a pig?”

Esther shrugged. “For a laugh, I suppose.”

“Please tell me, Esther, that this is not something that you have done before.”

“Of course not!” Esther said, only to smile sheepishly. “Well, maybe just one time. I thought it might look cute!”

“And?”

“Decidedly not cute. And it was not the dress that you wore, either. That, I threw in the trash the moment I got it off you.”

“Good to know,” Caroline chuckled.

“The point is,” Esther continued, still holding the green length of fabric out for her to see, “you do not have plenty of dresses. In my estimation, you have far too few. Less now that we lost half of them in the fire.”

Caroline clicked her tongue. “Then I shall pay for?”

“Nonsense!” she cried out. “And do not insult me by suggesting it.” She widened her eyes in warning at Caroline.

“Fine,” Caroline relented. She had been in this position many a time with Esther and knew better than to argue.

“Good girl.”

“Although I still think it is a waste,” she made sure to point out—a final effort to make her argument. “It is just a garden party. There is no need for me to put such effort into my dress. I doubt anyone will even notice me.”

“Now there you could not be more wrong. If you know anything about me, dear, you know that I do not do things by half measures. Do not think of it as a garden party but the garden party. And you, being my dear friend and ex-companion, are an extension of myself and this party. If you were to turn up in rags, it would be to announce to the world that the day ahead was not one to look forward to or to be enjoyed but to be run from, screaming. And that, I simply will not abide.”

Caroline rolled her eyes and shook her head. “Do you ever listen to yourself when you speak?”

“Of course not,” Esther said with a manic grin. “There are far too many voices in my head for that. Now, where is that seamstress...” She looked about the store for the seamstress, eager to begin the details of this dress-to-be.

They were supposed to be shopping for Esther. That was why Caroline had agreed to come to London. It was not somewhere she wished to be, for she feared that someone from her old life might still recognize her. And indeed, she had kept her head down as they walked from the carriage into the store, covering her face as casually as possible,

determined not to be noticed.

A foolish idea to travel into London like this, she knew, but Esther had asked for her help, and when it came to Esther, there was little Caroline would not do.

Of course, she should have known it was all a ruse, her elderly friend saying exactly what she needed to say to get Caroline to agree to come in the first place. And now that she was here, there was little to be done but agree with anything Esther requested and then hope to make it back to the Duke's home as quickly as possible.

As for the reason that Esther had wanted to go shopping in the first place? In three days' time she was hosting a garden party at His Grace's estate, and Esther needed to look her best! Or so she had said.

"Oh, I am so looking forward to this," Esther clucked as the seamstress busied herself pulling the fabric from the wall. "It has been an age since I have seen my friends. I would not be surprised if half of them thought I had died."

Caroline laughed. "You were here last Season, remember?"

"Yes, but at my age, a Season is a lifetime, dear. Ah, the folly of youth..." She sighed and reached out to touch Caroline's face as if admiring her beauty.

Caroline pushed her hand away. "Personally, I am surprised His Grace said yes to the party."

Esther raised an eyebrow at Caroline, a smirk on her lips.

Caroline, realizing how stupid it was of her to even mention His Grace, cleared her throat and looked away. Why did she bring him up like that? What had she hoped to achieve? She was endeavoring not to think of him... a seemingly impossible demand.

For a man whom she claimed to hate... she spent an awful lot of time wondering where he was, what he was doing, and if he might do such things to her—with her! No, that was no better. She did not want to be involved with him at all.

“He knows better than to say no to me,” Esther said eventually.

“That sounds like a nice little trick,” Caroline said with a coy smile, her heart fluttering a little too much, as the mere mention of His Grace seemed to have that effect. “Perhaps you could teach me.”

Esther’s eyes flashed. “Yes, I have noticed the two of you have a... certain manner of speaking to one another.”

“I am sorry...” Caroline grimaced, face turning hot as if Esther might be able to see what was on her mind... what always came to her mind when she remembered the way she and His Grace spoke to one another. “I do try to be polite but...”

“But Frederick has a way with words,” she chuckled. “No need to tell me, I have noticed—here.” She took Caroline suddenly and led her toward the center of the room where a small stool was waiting for her to stand on. “He is not the easiest man to get along with.”

Caroline obliged Esther by standing on the stool. And there, she stayed, waiting for the seamstress who was busying herself with pins and measuring tape and the fabric which now trailed behind her.

“Personally, I think you have done rather well,” Esther continued.

Caroline frowned. “Really? I would have thought ‘well’ was the exact opposite word to use. And I hate to fight with him like that in front of Isabella. It is not a good look.”

“Oh, not at all,” Esther said, waving her down. “The best way to deal with Frederick is through force. He does not respond to weakness. Like a bull charging at a red flag, it is best to meet him, rather than ducking away and hiding.”

“I will remember that...” Not that she needed to, for that point had been thoroughly proven already. But that was also dangerous, she knew, because the last time they had argued in such a fashion...

A shake of the head, and Caroline forced herself to focus! She could not stop thinking of His Grace, his grabby hands, his lips and how they had tasted, and the way he had made her heart race. She did not wish to, for she hated the man. And yet...

“I do worry about him, however,” Esther continued, thankfully not noticing the flush that was covering Caroline’s cheeks. She was walking about the store now, hands folded behind her back, nose poking into various fabrics. “Truly, once you break through his tough exterior, he is as kind a boy as you are likely to meet. You have seen the way he looks at Isabella. There is love there. A real sense of care...” She sighed wistfully. “The hard part is sticking around for long enough to break through said exterior. Few have the patience.”

Caroline did not respond to that, for her thoughts had drifted once again, going to the one place she had tried to keep them from these past two days, knowing by now there was little real point.

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Ultimately, she was having a hard time working through her feelings for His Grace. Two days ago, it was easy to say that she hated him. He was mean and rude and cold and arrogant and all those other things. A hard man, one who seemed put on this earth to frustrate her, Caroline was quite convinced that she would never like the man. And she was glad for it!

Even her attraction to him, as much as it pained her, could be written off as a misunderstood emotion, fury pretending to be lust. When she was not bickering with him, she could convince herself she felt not so much as a smattering of desire toward him and was happy to leave it at that.

What happened between them the other day had changed all of that.

What started off as a typical enough argument had changed dramatically when His Grace had shown her actual empathy. Why, he had thanked her! Apologized! Told her she was doing a good job. What was more, he seemed to mean it!

It had caught her off guard in a way she had not expected, forcing her to reconsider how she felt about His Grace—what kind of man he was. And now, listening to the way Esther spoke of him... was it possible there was more to the man than malice and dispassion? Had she broken through his shell, even if she hadn't been trying to? And what did that mean, exactly?

“Is... is His Grace attending the garden party?” she asked casually, not wanting to sound as if she cared while unable to look at Esther because she knew the old woman would be able to see right through her like a freshly cleaned window.

Esther spun about. “He’d better be!” Then she clicked her tongue. “But if I know Frederick, he will need some convincing.”

Caroline nodded along, feeling a spike in her heart at the thought of His Grace being there. A casual setting. Drinks flowing. A chance to see the man away from his daughter when he could be himself, when they might finally be able to pick up where they had left?—

“What? What are you looking at?” she demanded of Esther, who was watching her with a mischievous smile on her face.

“Oh, nothing,” she shrugged.

“Esther...” Caroline warned her.

“I was just thinking...” A giggle. “... we should buy some jewelry to go with that dress. I know Frederick will appreciate it.”

“And why would I care about such a thing?”

“No reason...” Another shrug, her eyes flashing. “Just a thought.”

Caroline narrowed her eyes at Esther in warning, an action which had exactly zero effect on the woman who had begun to hum casually. And she kept those eyes narrowed as the seamstress, finally ready, got about prepping her for measurements, so they might start on this dress.

Caroline had not wanted a new dress. Even this garden party was not something that she had been particularly looking forward to. Now... she could not stop but wonder how it might look on her, and if His Grace would like it. And if he did like it, if he really liked it, that is, whether he might demonstrate this admiration in ways that

she had pictured time and time again.

Such a nice dress, it promised to be. A shame then if it was to be torn from her body and discarded on the floor without thought or concern. Although, and Caroline could not help but grin at the thought, it would not be that much of a shame at all.

Honestly, what was happening to her?

CHAPTER TWELVE

“Itold you that I would be busy today,” Frederick sighed while doing his best to look as busy as he claimed. Head bent over his desk, papers strewed across the table, quill in hand, he thought he was making a rather good go of it.

“And I told you that I did not care,” Esther said pointedly. She stood in the middle of his study, door open behind her, bearing down on him as if she meant to grab him under the shoulders and drag him from his chair herself. “I have been planning this party for days, and the least you could do is show up.”

“Grandmother...”

“Oh, do not grandmother me!” He was not looking at her, but he could see out the corner of his eyes the way she crossed her arms and looked down her nose at him. “Think of how it will look if you do not show.”

“I suspect everyone will be glad for it.”

“They will talk,” she said. “A party at His Grace’s own home, and he could not even bother to come down. For five minutes! That is all I ask. Make an appearance. Shake some hands. Show off that charming smile of yours. Frederick!”

He suppressed a groan and looked up, caught off guard by how dressed up his elderly grandmother was. She looked as if she was going to a ball, wearing a frock of red and yellow with a pattern stitched into it that made the dress look as if it had caught fire. Elegant and regal, opulent and lavish, it was almost certainly too much for a mere garden party. But he supposed that had always been his grandmother's way.

"What?" She smirked when she saw the look on his face. "Surprised that your grandmother has still got it?"

He rolled his eyes. "Did you ever stop to think that there might be a reason I do not want to attend this garden party? Please, do not take it personally."

She frowned. "Well, I know how much you hate social engagements, but that is not a reason to avoid them all together. You are a duke, Frederick. These things are expected. And I guarantee you, half the people downstairs do not want to be here either."

"You are really selling it."

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“What I mean...” She sighed, her expression softening. “... you, as well as anyone, know the importance of title. Furthermore, you know the importance of appearances. Most people, dare I say, would rather spend their days locked away indoors, doing as they please, but you, as well as everyone else here, are not most people. And if you mean to set a good example for your daughter...” she trailed off, no need to finish that point.

He curled his lips. “That is a dirty trick.”

“A clever one though, no? If you expect your daughter to behave a certain way, should you not do the same?”

He groaned and ran a hand through his hair. “It is not that I do not wish to be seen nor that I would rather sit up here and work.”

“What then?”

What could he even say? Nothing that would change his grandmother’s mind? If anything, his reason for not wanting to go to said garden party was the exact reason she might insist. A point made often now, becoming more and more prevalent the older he became.

It was time that Frederick found a wife. It was time that he married, had a male heir, and went about securing his lineage as was expected. A mode of operation that even he could not find a reasonable argument against, even if he hated the idea to its core. But not because he was against marriage per say, rather, because he had tried it once already, failed miserably at it, and wasn’t sure he could go through it again.

His last wife had hated him. Despised him. Loathed the ground he had walked on. If not for Isabella, Frederick would have liked to have never thought of her or that marriage again. Especially the end of it... what had happened... the guilt he still felt and the pain it brought him when he even considered the chance it might happen again.

“Fine,” he sighed as he pushed himself back, collapsing into his chair, body sinking in defeat. “I shall attend. For one hour only.”

“Wonderful!” She clapped her hands together. “I knew you would see things my way.”

“Being as persistent as you are tends to have that effect. I need to change clothes first,” he said.

“Take your time; take your time,” she crooned. “We shall be here all day.”

“Do not say I never do anything for you.” He shook his head at her.

She laughed. “Oh, so magnanimous of you. And it might be nice if, for once, you chose not to be as you are and instead be as you should.”

He frowned at the cryptic comment. “Meaning?”

“These are my friends,” she said. “People who I admire and who admire you. They will be expecting to meet a duke who is the epitome of proper etiquette and poise—nice,” she emphasized. “A proper host.”

“I am not the host if you will remember.”

“Please, Frederick,” she pressed on him. “You know what you are like—you scare

people, dear.”

He snorted. “I hardly think that is accurate.”

“It is,” she said rightly. “People know of your less than hospitable demeanor, and I have seen grown men shake at the mere thought of speaking with you.”

Frederick could not help but smile at that. “Is that so?”

“It is not anything to be proud of, and... and if you insist on behaving that way, well...” She clicked her tongue. “Then you can stay here.”

“If that is the case...”

“I was speaking exaggeratedly!” she hurried. “But it should not be too much to expect you to be polite. And affable. At the very least, do not say anything that will force me to spend the rest of the day explaining away your behavior. Please, Frederick. For me...” She pouted at him.

“I promise I will behave,” he said with a bereaved sigh. “For you only, grandmother.”

“And...” She waltzed to the door, reached it, then stepped through before turning back. Her eyes flashed at him, and he knew exactly what she was going to say before she said it. “Just so you know, I have made sure to invite many a young lady too. Many a single young lady.”

He fixed her with a glare. “Do not even start.”

“What!” she cried. “I am just saying...” She pumped her eyebrows at him. “It could not hurt to meet a few. You are not getting any younger.”

“Neither are you.”

“Ha! Fine, have it your way.” She clicked her tongue, shook her head, and was about to leave when she poked her head back through. “Oh, and one more thing...”

“What?” he said, bracing himself.

“Caroline will be there also.” She winked at him and then, before he had a chance to respond, was gone.

Frederick sat frozen behind his desk, mind racing as he tried to puzzle out what his grandmother meant in saying that... not that it was not obvious. Frederick tried to tell himself that it made little difference, for he was not going to this party to meetwomen, and the idea of marriage was as far from his mind as was possible. And yet, the mention of Caroline’s name...

Perhaps he might bathe before choosing a new outfit, also? Yes, Frederick thought to himself as he rose from his chair, stomach fluttering in ways he did not like. A bath and a shave... just to be safe.

Frederick was having a hard time concentrating. While he was trying his best to be present as his grandmother introduced him to the various guests at her party, his eyes continued to stray across the garden at the one person he knew he should not be looking at.

“Your grandmother has not been able to stop speaking of you, Your Grace,” Lord Chesterfield said carefully. An elderly gentleman, Frederick had met his son on many an occasion but knew little about him. “Doting is the word I might use.”

“Oh, I have not been that bad,” his grandmother chuckled.

“Worse,” Lord Chesterfield said rightly.

“You cannot blame the woman,” Lady Chesterfield cut in. She and her husband stood back a small way, as if worried to get too close. As if Frederick might bite their head off should they do so. “It was such a kindness of you, allowing your grandmother to stay here with you as you have.”

Frederick did not respond, for his eyes were wandering to places they should not.

“Ah...” Lord Chesterfield looked to his grandmother for support. “Perhaps this is a bad time?”

“Nonsense!” his grandmother insisted. “Frederick—Your Grace,” she corrected, “Lord Chesterfield is speaking with you.”

“It is quite all right,” Lord Chesterfield hurried. “If His Grace is ah... indisposed, I do not want to distract.”

“What distract?” his grandmother said. “He wants nothing more than to speak with you. Right, Frederick—Your Grace.”

“Hhmm?” Frederick pulled his focus back, noticed the five pairs of eyes watching him, and forced a smile. “Oh yes, very much.”

“See!” his grandmother said happily. “Now, Lord Chesterfield, what were you saying earlier about you granddaughter?”

Lord Chesterfield’s eyes went wide. A quick glance at Frederick, panic seeming to take over. “Oh... nothing, really. Just ah... well, if His Grace might be amenable—honestly, it is not a bother if it is too much trouble.”

“Lord Chesterfield has a granddaughter,” Frederick’s grandmother explained for him, rolling her eyes at the shaking lord. “And he was saying she might be perfect for you,

Your Grace. At the very least, the two of you should meet.”

“Is that so?” Frederick said, feeling a sudden desire to free himself of this conversation. He curled his lip without realizing, an act which had Lord Chesterfield and his wife’s faces paling.

“He would love to meet her,” his grandmother said. “Perhaps later today if time permits.”

Lord Chesterfield looked hesitant. “That is... I cannot wait to tell her.”

Frederick fixed the man with a cold, dispassionate look. Not done purposefully, just one he was used to giving to men whom he did not wish to speak. And Lord Chesterfield, typically, jumped in fright.

This party was going about as well as Frederick had expected. That is to say, not well at all.

He had stepped outside exactly thirty-five minutes ago, expecting to spend an hour at his grandmother’s garden party. Surely that would give him enough time to say hello to a few people, have his face seen, not embarrass or anger his grandmother in any way, and then head back inside before anything untoward should happen.

Thirty-five minutes in, and he was beginning to get the impression that if he wished to leave this garden party at a reasonable time, he might have to start being rude... or more rude, for he was doing his best to be polite but dammit if it wasn’t hard to do.

From the second his foot touched grass, his grandmother was on him, forcing him to join various circles and meet various guests. That alone would have been painful enough were it not for the fact that none of these guests seemed eager to meet him. Oh sure, they forced themselves too, for he was a duke, and it was expected, but none

appeared happy about it.

They were scared of Frederick was why. Known for his cold temperament, his short temper, and his general lack of care when polite conversational formalities were concerned, it was little wonder that his reputation had proceeded him to such a degree that he was a pariah at his own home.

But his grandmother persisted, for she was his grandmother and loved him dearly... and was desperate to show him off. She led him by the arm from group to group, forcing him into monotonous conversation that always went down the same path. First, they would hesitate in speaking, shaking as if worried he would snap. Then they would find bravery and compliment him on his home—a safe topic. Next his grandmother would force their hand, always mentioning a daughter or niece or cousin whom the lord was related to that would be perfect for Frederick! And then, it was onto the next.

More than once, Frederick thought to lean into his reputation and simply scare everyone away. A steeled gaze. An angered glare. A snarl. Surely, these little groups that his grandmother was leading him to would dissolve before he arrived at them. But his grandmother kept a close eye on him, and he had made her a promise.

Also, and this was very important, he was a little too distracted for that.

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“Come!” His grandmother took his arm and pulled him from the circle. “It was lovely speaking to you all, but His Grace is a hot commodity.”

“Oh good—I mean, a shame,” Lord Chesterfield hurried to correct. “A shame, Your Grace, but ah... it was ah... excellent meeting you.”

Frederick looked at him plainly. “I highly doubt that.”

The man’s eyes went wide, but his grandmother was pulling him away before he could say anything else.

“Gosh, that Lord Chesterfield...” His grandmother clicked her tongue as she led him through the garden. “He could talk the ear off a corpse.”

“Shall we put that theory to the test?” Frederick muttered. “I volunteer.”

“Oh, nonsense...” She slapped his chest as she led him. “Admit it, you are enjoying yourself.”

“Is that how you see it?” he scoffed. “Or are you choosing purposeful ignorance.”

She chuckled. “Just a few more people, dear. Then, I promise you can leave. Now, where is Lord Harrowbrooke...”

Frederick’s back garden was a hive of activity the likes of which he had not expected when his grandmother had told him of her plans. Spread from the back door, through the garden, and onto the field that surrounded the back of the property, Frederick had

been to Seasonal Balls less lively than this.

He counted four separate awnings, each large enough to comfortably fit two dozen people. He guessed there to be at least thirty waiters walking about serving drinks and snacks to nibble on. There was an area set aside for a game of crochet, plenty of tables and chairs which had groups sitting about them as they gossiped and drank, a darn orchestra set up on a small stage, and of course, a space left exclusively for dancing.

“Who are these people?” he asked as his grandmother led them.

“I told you, friends and acquaintances—ah! Lord Harrowbrooke!” she called out, keeping a hold of him as she led him toward a small gathering of elderly lords and their wives. “You simply must meet the host!”

Frederick groaned but forced himself to smile as he was led into the circle, many of whom were quick to say hello and then make some excuse to leave. Thankfully. That was, unfortunately, save for Lord Harrowbrooke whom Frederick had known since he was a lad and thus didn’t scare as easy as the others.

As Lord Harrowbrooke spoke endlessly about some political nonsense that he was involved in, clearly trying to get Frederick involved, Frederick looked over his shoulder, beyond the row of hedges that wove through the garden, catching sight of perhaps the only person here who he might have liked to speak with.

Even if he doubted that she wished to speak with him.

“... and I know that you know the right ears to whisper into,” Lord Harrowbrooke was saying. “Nothing untoward, of course. I am certainly not suggesting bribery.”

“I would hope not!” another lord whom Frederick did not know chuckled bravely.

“Is that so,” Frederick said vaguely.

“Just a few of the right words spoken to the right people. You know what I am saying.”

“Yes, of course...”

“And if the votes should go my way because of it, happy days.”

“Very happy days...”

She looked better than Frederick could have imagined. More beautiful than he might have thought possible, even in his wildest fantasies. A picture of perfection. An angel come down from heaven to tempt him. The most beautiful woman at this party, and it was not even close.

Of course, he was talking about Miss Dowding.

The green dress she wore was elegant in the way it flowed down her body; seeming to shimmer in the light, spreading about her legs and fluttering in the breeze. But it was also tight, hugging her waist, cinching under her bosom, pushing her chest up. And with the very low neckline that the dress featured... it... was darn scandalous. No sleeves. Backless, also. As she turned, Frederick felt his chest tighten, his eyes skimming down her bare back and over her buttocks...

“Frederick, are you paying attention?” his grandmother nudged him.

“Hhmm?” He tore his eyes from her and focused them on Lord... Frederick did not even know the man’s name. Nor did he care. “I am sorry.”

“It is quite all right,” he tittered. “I was just saying, my granddaughter would love to

meet you. She is not here today, but there is a ball coming up next week. Blast, I cannot remember who is playing host.”

“Oh yes, a ball...” He could not help himself, eyes again drifting.

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“I shall have your grandmother let me know if you are going, yes?” the lord was asking. “And if you are, perhaps my granddaughter and you...”

Miss Dowding had been alone since he had come outside. For thirty-five minutes now, she had stood off to the side, a drink in hand, looking awkward and out of place in a way that he recognized only too well. It made him want to go and speak with her while knowing that he probably should not. It was dangerous to do. Darn irresponsible with how he was feeling whenever he looked at her. And yet the sight of her in that dress...

He did not even notice the conversation around him ending. Nor did he notice the other lords and their wives leaving him and his grandmother. He did, however, notice his grandmother watching him with a very unamused look.

“I thought you promised to be polite?”

He grimaced. “I am, am I not?”

“You call that polite?”

“I—” He bit into his lip. “I am sorry, grandmother, but can you really expect me to feign interest in such drab palaver as that? I am doing my best, I promise, but I can only do so much.”

She shook her head. “Well, at least you tried. I suppose that is all I can expect.”

“So...” He sighed. “Who are we speaking with next?”

“Nobody.” She half-turned from him and stuck up her nose. “You have made a terrible companion so far, and I would not wish to burden any of my friends with you. Be gone...” She waved him away. “... before I chase you out.”

“Grandmother...” He winced, feeling bad now. While he did not care what these lordlings thought of him, he did still care what his grandmother thought. “I will try to be more interesting, I promise.”

“No, no, you had your chance. I relieve you, Your Grace...” She took a step back and pretended to bow for him. “Thank you for coming.”

He pushed his lips together. “Well, if you say so...”

“Oh, before you go...” She smirked to herself, looking a little too pleased. “Do me a favor will you, stop by Caroline and make sure she is doing all right? She has looked as bored as blind man at the theatre, and I would hate for her to be having a bad time.”

Frederick swallowed, daring to glance at Miss Dowding. “You... you wish for me to check on her?”

“If you do not mind? That is, unless there is a reason that you cannot?” She knew what she was doing. Oh, how she did.

And Frederick, as stubborn as he was, would not back down because that would simply be an admittance of how he felt... was feeling... was certain to feel if he went and spoke with Miss Dowding.

“I would love to,” he said, doing his best to ignore his grandmother’s smug expression. “I would hate for Miss Dowding to be having as unpleasant a time as she is. Especially on such a fine day.”

“Wonderful,” his grandmother smirked and fluttered her eyelashes before waltzing away.

And Frederick, committed now, had no choice but to approach Miss Dowding. But it would only be for a moment. The conversation would be short and unpleasant, he knew. And hopefully, he would make it out the other side without saying or doing anything that he might come to regret. Whatever that might look like.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Caroline saw His Grace coming for her. When she did, she was certain at first that she was seeing things, for surely, he would not approach her of his own accord? Why, since the day that she had arrived, it had seemed as if he was doing everything that he could to avoid her.

Trying to actually naturally, she turned slightly, glanced his way, and saw that he was indeed making for her.

Her heart began to flutter, and she felt her body begin to run hot with nerves. A sudden impulse to turn away and walk off, pretending that she did not see him, hoping that he might change his mind and simply forget her. That was the smart thing to do.

Caroline took a deep breath and attempted this very action. One step taken... and she could not bring herself to take another. Despite what she thought that she wanted, she was unable to deny that desire she felt to speak with him again. To see finally who he was and confirm, hopefully, that the feelings which swirled inside of her whenever he was about were brought on by hate and loathing and not... well, the other thing.

The kiss they shared sat firm in the front of her mind. It made her salivate and her body tremble. What was more, she remembered their previous conversation, how nice

he had been to her. She wanted to hate him. She needed to hate him. But what if...

A sip of wine from the glass she was holding, for she needed the courage that it gave her. Not to mention helping her to relax slightly.

“Ah, Miss Dowding,” he said pleasantly as he reached where she stood waiting. “I thought that was you.”

“Oh?” she said the same air of pleasantness. “And still you approached me. How very brave.”

He chuckled, almost seeming to relax a little “It has been a while since I have been berated and insulted, so I thought it was well past due.”

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She forced herself not to chuckle. “Give it time, Your Grace, for I have no doubt it will happen soon enough. If not from me, surely someone else here is champing at the bit for it. You do make it so easy.”

“It is a gift.”

“Make sure you use said gift wisely,” she responded coolly, another sip of wine, “or else I cannot be held responsible for what I might say.”

“And here I had the impression that such worries did not concern you. Certainly, they have not so far.”

“Yes, well, I suppose that I am trying to set a good example for your daughter. How would it look if she was to see me insulting you for...” Another sip of wine and her eyes flashed as she looked him over. “Oh, I don’t know, walking about this party for the last thirty minutes as if you had a stick wedged up your backside.”

His Grace stiffened at the jibe, and she braced herself for his retort. “I suspect that she would find it amusing, likely filing it away to use on me later.”

She frowned at the coolness of his response, the way he managed to hold back his anger.

“The same goes if I was to ask that you slow down on the wine that you have been guzzling since I first saw you,” he suggested with a cocked eyebrow and a smirk, indicating the glass in her hand. “At the rate you are drinking, we’re bound to run out soon.”

Again, she forced herself not to react in the positive. A glare instead, and she took another sip while holding him in it. “Perhaps you could use one yourself? Although that might put you at risk of enjoying yourself. We would hate for that to happen.”

“Any more wine, Miss Dowding, and you might enjoy yourself a little too much,” he shot back, still cool and collected. “All the single men about, I might have to warn them to be on their guard.”

She widened her eyes at him, an effort to show a level of anger that she was not feeling in the way that she thought she might be. “At least we do not have to worry about giving you the same warning.” Another sip, this one finishing the glass; she could feel it swirling through her body, warming it, dulling her senses in a way that was dangerous and very much needed. “All the wine in the world would not be enough.”

His eyes flashed as if he was enjoying himself. “Is that a challenge?”

This time, she could not keep her smile down. “Fetch me another glass, and we shall see.”

They were still fighting. Still bickering. Still that sense that the two loathed one another, and yet, it felt different to the last time. This was playful, Caroline thought, almost flirtatious. It was as if His Grace wanted her to tease him.

Eyeing him curiously now, she wondered at what he was playing here. Even more so when he fetched a drink from a nearby waiter, getting one for himself, and then handing it to her without comment or derision. He held his up in a cheers, she returned it, and the two drank deeply, looking over the lips of their glasses as if waiting for the other to blink.

“Ah...” He smacked his lips. “I can feel myself loosening already.”

She snorted without meaning to. “It will take a lot more than that.” He took another, larger mouthful, and she laughed. “Careful, Your Grace. We do not want people thinking that you are enjoying yourself. I believe such an event as that is one of the signs of the apocalypse.”

“Ironical,” he chuckled. “As I would much rather attend that particular function than this one. At least, it would not be so dull.”

She frowned at the comment, for it was not something she might expect him to say. Caroline’s impression of His Grace was that he was the perfect lord, a bastion of social decorum and etiquette, the very type of man who sought these types of events because to them it was the very best of times. In other words, a total bore.

“I would have thought you would be enjoying yourself,” she said carefully... only to break into a smirk. “Well, as much as one such as you are able.”

He rolled his eyes and took another sip of wine. “Hardly. I do not know if you bothered speaking to any of my grandmother’s friends, but the words pretentious and insufferable are just some of the many I would use to describe them.”

“Are we speaking of them or you?” she frowned jokingly.

He looked at her flatly. “You cannot help yourself, can you?”

“What can I say,” she said with a shrug. “You make it so easy.”

Caroline was glad that she had not walked away when the chance had presented itself. Dammit, she was glad that she was giving His Grace a second chance. She had wanted to dislike him. She had needed to hate him, for that felt like the only option when they first met. But this snippet of a conversation they were having right now, one where His Grace was behaving like a normal person for a darn change, was a

revelation into the man who he was, not who he wanted people to see him as.

She took a coy sip of wine, eyes working over him quickly, only too happy to admit to herself this time that the attraction she had felt for him since the first time they had met was perfectly justified.

Even outside in the open like this, he was still undeniably large in size, his broad shoulders spreading far in both directions, his stature strong and intimidating and impressive. But it was his face that she focused on now, those dark blue eyes like deep pools, that strong jawline and his thick lips, his wavy black hair that he had combed down while still somehow managing to make it appear unmanageable and wild.

Feeling her heart begin to flutter, she looked away.

“Tell me,” he began conversationally, seeming to relax in a way she had never seen him do before, “how are lessons progressing with my daughter?”

“Oh.” She blinked. “Very well.”

“Do not oversell it,” he chuckled.

She scoffed. “Your daughter is a wonder. Truly. She is smart, capable, fun,” she said with emphasis. “But she is also kind and caring and empathetic...” Her mind drifted slightly, a smile working up her face as she thought of the young girl. “She knows what is expected of her and does not begrudge it; if anything, she feels guilty more often than she should.”

He frowned at that. “Guilty? What for?”

She grimaced. “I should not have said anything.”

“Please...” He reached for her but hesitated. “It might seem that I am somewhat harsh with Isabella, but I only ever want what is best for her. For her entire life, that is all...” He cleared his throat. “She is everything to me.”

“I know she is,” Caroline said, knowing it to be true. She met His Grace’s eyes and saw the need behind them and the worry. “She lives to please you is what I meant. And when she thinks that she has failed in doing so, it breaks her.” He winced. “You say that your entire life is for her; well, I think she feels the same way about her life and you. She loves you,” Caroline made sure to emphasize, “but love like that is never an easy thing to live with. Especially when it is not known whether or not it is returned.”

His Grace could not have looked more upset by her words. Truly, she could see the pain behind his eyes, and she thought to hurriedly explain that Isabella was aware of his love for her and that he should not take this as some sort of slight. The fact that

she felt the need to placate the Duke! A most shocking revelation.

“I will remember that,” he said finally, smiling to himself. “And Miss Dowding...” He hesitated, seemingly nervous. “... thank you.”

“For?”

“For one, being honest with me,” he chuckled. “You might be surprised to learn that it is a rare thing.”

“Not at all,” she laughed. “I do not know if you are aware of this, but you are somewhat intimidating. It is just lucky that I am not so easily intimidated.”

“I have noticed,” he smirked. “When you first agreed to be my daughter’s governess?—”

“Forced, you mean?” she winked.

He scoffed. “I sense that forcing you to do anything you did not really want to do would be an impossibility.” He raised an eyebrow at her, and she could not stop herself from grinning. “The point I am trying to make is that I was against the idea. But now...” He shrugged as he took a final sip of wine, finishing the glass. “Well, I cannot help but think it might have been one of my better decisions.”

“I think you have your daughter to thank for that,” she pointed out, taking a final sip of her own wine, also draining it.

“I will make sure to thank her,” he agreed.

A silence fell between them, but it was not at all awkward. Tense, perhaps, but for reasons that they both seemed to understand. His Grace stood over her, looking down

to meet her eyes as a smile grew behind them. And she matched his stare, smiling the same as she came to accept that all she had felt for His Grace up until this point had nothing to do with hate or dislike. Not even a little bit.

And for a moment, they seemed happy to watch one another, as if both coming to the same realization at the exact same time. His eyes flicked down her body. She did not shy away. They were not alone in the garden, but for a moment there, it felt as if they were... more than that, it felt as if they both wished that they were.

“Say...” His Grace began slowly, as if worried he might overstep, “would you care for a dance?” He indicated across the garden to the dance floor positioned in front of the orchestra.

She frowned. “I did not take you for a dancer?”

He shrugged. “I am a duke, remember? I have little choice in the matter.”

She hesitated, even if she wished to accept. Flirting was one thing, but a dance? In front of all these people? Speaking with His Grace like this had been dangerous. But dancing with him was positively irresponsible.

“My daughter is here, yes?” he asked suddenly.

She leaned back. “Yes, she is playing with some girls her age—appropriately,” she made sure to add with a grin. “Funny that most girls Isabella’s age do not like to climb trees as she does.”

He chuckled. “My meaning is, as her governess, teaching her to dance is one of the many lessons that she is to partake in. No?”

Caroline tilted her head and pushed her lips together. “I believe you are right in that.”

“So, it would behoove us both to show her how, do you not think? For the sake of her education...” He held out his hand for her to take.

Caroline eyed the hand, knowing that once she accepted it, she could not be held responsible for what happened next. A dance was one thing, but it spoke too so much more. And while her instincts told her to deny him as was smart... the wine she had drunk dulled her instincts just enough that she was able to ignore them.

“Well, if it is for her education...” She took his hand, a pulse running through her body at his touch. And as he led her across the party, as she felt the eyes watch them walk together, her heart fluttered, and her body flushed bright pink.

This was dangerous, she knew. But she also knew that she did not care.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Frederick's heart raced as he led Miss Dowding to the dance floor. Sweaty palms. A slight shaking of his knees. Even his stomach felt knotted in ways that might suggest that he was nervous. An avid dancer, more than able on his feet, the prospect of dancing before the party's guests had nothing to do with this sudden onset of palpitations. That was the result of his dancing partner.

It was just a dance, he told himself. Done for the sake of his daughter, whom he could now see watching him with confusion as he and Miss Dowding took up their places beside the other couples. She would watch, and she would learn, and Frederick would go to bed tonight able to convince himself that what was done here was for her education and her education only.

Not the first time that Frederick had lied to himself today. And it certainly would not be the last.

"Are you familiar with the waltz?" Frederick asked as he stepped into Miss Dowding, running his hand down her back until it rested on her hip.

He felt her take a sharp breath, body turning stiff at his touch only to slowly relax as their hands met, his on top, taking the lead.

"I am," she said, her voice shaking. "I am better at the cotillion, of course. And the scotch reel is my favorite. But I do not mind a waltz."

"Some say that it is inappropriate," Frederick said, his voice low. "But I find it far

more personal. All this changing of partners and the constant jumping about, far too boisterous.”

“Yes, a little too much fun,” she ginned wickedly.

“My meaning is I invited you to dance.” He looked right at her, and she swallowed as his meaning became clear. “Not another.”

“I...” She swallowed again. “I could not agree more.”

Silence fell between them as they readied for the music. So close, his body pressed against Miss Dowding’s, that he could feel her heart beating as if she had run a mile... or perhaps that was his own? Indeed, she was shaking in his grip, but she stayed close, like she was nearly wrapped around him, the thin linen of her dress providing little protection for her bare skin which he could feel.

And then the music started slowly as did their waltz. To and fro they moved, him leading, her following. They did not speak at first, almost purposefully, as if both had suddenly come to realize how terrible of an idea this dance was.

But was it such a bad idea?

His conversation with Miss Dowding just now had caught him by complete surprise. And not just because of how honest they had been with one another but in how easy it was too. The same bickering that they had become known for, but with a casual air to it, a comfort that he had rarely felt with anybody before.

Frederick had thought her to be rude and highly stubborn. He had assumed that she hated him and that he might dislike her just as much. An attraction brought about by fire and nothing more, it seemed, hardly worth pursuing. Only... now he wondered if he had been wrong.

And what was more, as they danced, and as he felt people watching them, not even caring that they were, Frederick began to consider what his grandmother had spoken about and been so eager to bring up whenever she could: that it was time he found himself a wife.

“I think you undersold yourself,” he said as they danced, the tempo increasing. “Your dancing skills, I mean.”

She looked at him flatly. “Are you mocking me, Your Grace?”

“For once, I am not.”

“Oh...” She blushed and looked away. “Thank you. And you also, very adept.”

He laughed. “Careful, pay me too many compliments, and it might just go to me head.”

“And it is big enough already,” she grinned.

“Easy...” he warned her jokingly. “I can only be so forgiving.”

“Oh, Your Grace, you have seen nothing yet.” Her eyes flashed suggestively, and he felt his pulse quicken.

He hadn’t seen anything yet... Frederick could not help but think of the implication. What he had not seen and what he would very much like to. With Caroline’s body pressed so closely, with that darn dress she had on, his eyes flicked south, mind now picturing how she might look out of that dress, on top of him, moaning and panting and?—

Frederick snapped himself out of it. This frame of thoughts was a bad idea with so

many people watching, so Frederick concentrated again on the waltz. His grip was tight around her waist, and he held her close, leading her to the right. Her feet moved with his, their rhythm matched perfectly, and they were one and the same.

“So, tell me...” He cleared his throat, attempting to keep the conversation light. At least for now. “If you do not mind me asking, my daughter told me a little of your circumstances, and I was wondering if it was true? Or how much of it was.”

A flash of worry behind her eyes, and Frederick thought for a moment that he had asked the wrong question. But she was quick to recover, shaking her head and scoffing. “Likely, it all is.” A beat. “What did she say?”

“That you were set to be married, only to be left at the altar?”

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She nodded her head solemnly. “Alas, your daughter speaks the truth. Frankly, I am just impressed she didn’t make me out to be some sort of sob story, for I would prefer if it did not come across that way.”

“And your father,” His Grace continued, “was planning on sending you to a nunnery? To avoid the scandal?”

She clicked her tongue. “Another truth. Two for two.”

“Which is why you ran away,” he pressed, sensing that he was being given an opening to do such a thing, “finding yourself on my grandmother’s doorstep.”

“It seems that nothing has been left out,” she chuckled. “Unless you wish for me to detail the last two years spent with your grandmother? I promise you there are some stories there that will make your hair curl.”

“No, no, I prefer to imagine,” he laughed. “Forgive me for saying, but you seem to be taking it all rather well. I know if such a thing was to happen to Isabella... well, I do not know what I would do. But if she ran away as you did...” He hesitated. “I think I would tear the world apart looking for her. With worry is my meaning.”

To that, Caroline frowned... and for a moment he could see a look behind her eyes that spoke of worry, a suggestion that she was putting on this air of humor to cover for something. Likely, how right Frederick was.

“My father is not like you,” she said simply... a little vaguely, her mind clearly elsewhere. “Hopefully, he does not care where I have gone.”

“That is not...” Frederick leaned back. “That cannot be true. Surely, he must be worried.”

“Worried?” she laughed bitterly. “Angry, more like. Tearing the world apart for a different reason.”

“But—”

“No, no,” she cut him off, raising both eyebrows at him in warning. “You asked your question, so now, I get to ask mine.”

He knew what was coming, and his stomach twisted as was to be expected. “Which is...?”

“I have not asked Isabella because I did not think it was something that she wished to speak of. But she has mentioned her mother a few times in passing, never actually saying what happened to her. Where she is or why she left. Forgive me, but I was hoping you might...” She bit into her lip. “I would very much like to know. If that is all right?”

If she had asked him this just an hour ago, he would have denied her. A few days ago, and he might have snapped at her, for that was what usually happened when Frederick’s wife was mentioned. Followed, of course, by pain and misery and regret.

But this wasn’t an hour ago. It wasn’t a few days ago. It was here and now, and for that reason, Frederick felt comfortable enough to tell Miss Dowding the truth, knowing that for once it might not break him.

“You know that I was married,” he began with a sigh, making sure to keep his rhythm as they danced. The tempo was still fast paced, contrasting greatly with the sorrowful story he was about to tell. “And that Isabella was the product of this marriage.”

“I had guessed,” she tittered.

“Sadly, Isabella was the only good to come from that marriage...” He tried to keep his voice from turning bitter. “I thank God every day that she came into my life, and nothing will change that. Only, deep down, a small part of me wishes that when I think of Isabella, I did not have to pair it with what may have been the worse years of my life.”

Miss Dowding’s brow creased. “It was that bad?”

“My wife hated me,” he sighed, looking away. “Despised me, more like. And she was not shy in letting me know it. In fact, I suspect the only reason that she stayed around as long as she did was so that she could give birth, hoping most likely that Isabella was a boy and her duty to me would be done.”

“Stayed around?” she asked, her voice hesitant. “What does that...” She trailed off when she saw the look in Frederick’s eye. “Oh no.”

“Isabella believes that her mother died due to sickness,” he said, voice cracking. “It is easier on her, so please do not begrudge me. The truth is...” He swallowed the lump in his throat. “She killed herself. She killed herself because of the hate she bore me. So much loathing that even the birth of her daughter was not reason enough to stay her hand.”

“Your Grace...” Her chin wobbled, and he could see the pain in her eyes. “I am so?—”

“Do not say you are sorry,” he cut her off. “I have heard that enough from people who are most decidedly not sorry. I am sad for what happened, but as awful as that marriage was, it brought me Isabella. So, for that, I am grateful.” He hated speaking of his ex-wife. Partly it was anger for what had happened and partly it was guilt, for

he could not escape the feeling that he was to blame, even if he did not want it.

“And that is why...” She hesitated at the question, a look on her face that suggested she was about to go too far.

“Speak your question,” he commanded of her, making sure to smirk so that she might see he was not angry.

“Isabella,” Miss Dowding started carefully, refusing to look up and meet his eyes.

“That is why you are so harsh with her?”

“Am I?” he asked. “Harsh?”

She scoffed. “I was being kind in my wording, Your Grace. Some might say that you are rather, how best to put this? Strict. And then some. It just seems a tad overzealous is my thinking.” And then she added quickly, “Forgive me for saying.”

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Frederick nodded his understanding, not at all upset at the question, for he was feeling far more comfortable with Miss Dowding than he could have possibly imagined. “You are right, strict is perhaps the term I would use. But it is not meant to be malicious.”

“I did not say it was.”

“I want what is best for her,” he said rightly. “That is all I wish for. You were fortunate not to meet my father...” A bitter chuckle. “A cold man if there ever was one. The way he raised me would make the way I treat Isabella look lax, even uncaring. I want her to be happy, Miss Dowding, I do. But I also wish for what is best, and I suppose that something...” He could not help but smile at the admittance. “... sometimes, I may go a tad too far.”

“Only a tad?” she grinned.

“Careful,” he warned jokingly. “I did just tell you a heartfelt story about my deceased wife, remember? Surely, I am owed some sympathy.”

Miss Dowding did not speak for a few moments after that. Brow furrowed. Face pained. She studied Frederick in a way that suggested she was seeing him for the first time. He tried to appear brave, as if the story did not crush him, but he could only do so much.

Why had Frederick not wished to marry since the death of his wife? Driving a woman to suicide, knowing you were to blame, was as good a reason as any.

“Let us not dwell on that,” Miss Dowding said eventually. “It is too nice a day for such stories.”

“I could not agree more,” he chuckled just as the music began to slow. Still holding her tight, they matched pace as they came to a gentle stop. And once they did, Frederick did not let Miss Dowding go, and she did not step away. They stayed close, holding the other, alone in the world it seemed for the way they stared...

“Say,” he began, if for no other reason than to break the tension, “would you care for another drink?”

“I thought you would never ask,” she said with a smile.

He stepped back, keeping a hold of her hand, and led her back into the garden party. As he did, he caught sight of his grandmother watching him, a knowing smile on her lips, but Frederick did not care. If anything, he relished it.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

It was early in the evening, and Frederick found himself alone in his drawing room. The garden party was still in full-swing, and even with the door closed, he could still hear it. Strangely, a small part of Frederick wished to go back outside and join in the festivities—a truly bizarre notion, he knew. And the reason for that desire was even stranger.

He had to get away from Miss Dowding. It was as simple as that. They had been drinking together, somehow enjoying their conversation with little to no argument or hostilities, and Frederick was forced to concede how terrible a situation it was that he had found himself in. Worse than anything he might imagine.

Frederick could not afford to feel that way around Miss Dowding. He could not let

himself succumb to not only the temptation that besieged him whenever he thought of her but to simply enjoy her company was more than he could bear. It was dangerous was why. Fraught with consequence. And what was more... guilt.

Since his daughter had not even been old enough to speak, Frederick had known that he would one day need to take a wife again. It was expected and proper, and he really had no choice in the matter. But after his last marriage, and how tragically it had ended, he had to be careful with whom he got close to and whom he chose as a mate. Deep down, he believed that whoever that was would end up hating him as his last wife did which would only lead to... well, nothing good.

And while it was far too early to consider Miss Dowding in this way, he knew it was better to be safe than sorry. If not for his own sake, for hers.

So, he disappeared when she paid visit to the washroom, knowing that such an act would annoy her enough that she would likely leave it be, happy to simmer with anger as it would serve as a reminder that he was no good, that they were no good together, and she would do better to simply avoid him.

A glass of brandy in hand, he sipped it lightly, content to wait until the party ended, and he might retire to his room without being seen or?—

A knock at the door had him sitting up. Frederick froze, careful not to make a noise.

“Your Grace...” The voice was unmistakable, and it had Frederick nearly calling out as he felt that pull and desire begin to bubble within. But he held his tongue, begging that she might leave. “Your Grace,” she called again. “Are you there...”

A moment’s pause. Certain that she was going to give up. Only... no. The door cracked open, and Caroline poked her head inside. She saw him sitting there and grinned at the sight.

“Now, if I did not know any better, I would have guessed you were trying to hide from me.” A little titter, and she stepped inside.

“Perhaps you do know better,” he said shortly, forcing himself to be stern and curt. “For why else would I be here?”

She paused at that, half-way into the room, the harshness of his remark catching her by surprise. “Well... I suppose I assumed that one of Esther’s guests was trying to force his niece upon you, so you decided to go into hiding.” She laughed awkwardly, seeming to pray that he was only joking and would pick up on the humor.

“No, you were right the first time.” He levelled a glare at her. “I suggest that you follow those instincts of yours before you get yourself into trouble.”

He needed her to leave. He did not care how it happened, what he had to say to see her turn and walk away. That she would be gone from here was good enough, better if she left with her tail between her legs and confirmed finally that he was a no-good sort who was better to be avoided. They had started off hating one another, and barring this single day, there was no reason it should not continue.

Things were just safer that way.

“Well, that is not very nice.”

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“You seem to have me mistaken for somebody else,” he sneered, taking another sip of brandy. “Hello, have we not met?”

She looked at him as if she was seeing him for the first time. Standing in the open doorway, brow furrowed, leaning back as if the room had a putrid odor she was trying to avoid, there was no doubt on his mind that for all the joy the two had shared in this day, those old feelings she felt for him of disgust and loathing were slowly starting to creep back into her frame of conscience.

“Forgive me,” she said, a slight sneer. “The man whom I was speaking with earlier, he must have left.”

“No, he is still here. He is just bored with playing your little game is all.”

“And what game is that?”

“Pretending that the sight of you doesn’t make him want to wretch.” He hated saying it, but he stayed strong...

“Is that what you were doing, was it?” she sneered at him, taking a step into the room, seeming to ready herself for his attack. “Because you sure had me fooled.”

“Is it my fault that you are simple?”

“I must be that. For only a true dolt could have mistaken you for anything close to a gentleman. What I should have realized was that the dogs kept as pets by the stable hands might have made for better company.”

His eyes widened at the slur. For as rude as he was being, Frederick was still not used to being spoken to like that. And while deep down he knew he deserved it... that did not make it any easier to bear.

“Too good for you, I am afraid. I heard some of them howling earlier, and I can only assume the cause was that they saw you walking by, and unable to literally tear their own eyes out, they became lost in a frenzy.”

Her eyes flashed. “How dare?—”

“Now please,” he spoke over her and waved her away, “begone from my sight. Do us both the favor.”

There, that should do it. Not a pleasant experience, but Frederick allowed himself to breathe a sigh of relief, certain that this here would be the end of their little dalliance. It had to be!

“No.” She stepped into the room fully and crossed her arms.

“No?” he baulked.

“No,” she said again. “Not until you tell me why.”

“Why what?”

“Why you are acting this way.” She raised both eyebrows at him. “For I do not believe for a moment it was some... some act.” She scoffed. “Unless what they say about you is true.”

Sensing that he was not going to like the words she brandished, Frederick put down his glass of brandy. “And what do they say?”

“Many things,” she sneered. “But some choice words thrown around—today, mind you. I heard them all. Arrogant. Pigheaded. Egotistical to a point where I heard two men wondering how you managed to stand with a head that large. And, oh yes, an eyesore that would make the Hunchback of Notre Dame blush.”

Fury. White hot anger. It flooded Frederick in that moment for never in his life had he been insulted like that. Without thinking, without being able to, he stood quickly and strode toward Miss Dowding. A big man, he bore down on her like a monster from myth, fully expecting her to retreat and flee as he wished.

But she stayed firm, arms still crossed, glaring up at him as if her eyes might spew fire and set him alight. And oh, how dangerous it was.

He could feel it happening again. As with the first time, as with the second, it was her cantankerous nature which pulled on him like nothing he had felt before. That desire to take her in his arms, to hold her down, and to remind her who was in control here was more than he could bare.

And the way that she looked... the tight green dress, how it pushed up her breasts and hugged her curves. The fire in the room’s hearth too, flickering off her white skin, making it glimmer from a light sweat. Her eyes were mischievous, her lips were tempting.

“Is that what you think?” he growled, feeling his blood pulse through his body, his legs shaking, his mouth salivating. “Is that how you see me?”

She scoffed. “That and worse.”

Even in her rage, he caught her eyes flicking over him. He saw a look behind them that he recognized because he had the same in his own eyes. A hunger behind them, a yearning that was the very reason she did not leave when he told her to. Oh, she

might claim to despise him, but in that moment, he understood well enough the real reason she had followed him here.

Dangerous... and so very, very tempting.

“Is that so,” he snarled at her. “And when we first met? Somehow, I doubt you held me in that same view.”

“And what does that mean?” she snarled back.

He laughed as he took a step closer, standing over her now, so close that he could feel the heat of her breath. “That first time we met, it was lucky that my grandmother interrupted us when she did. Luckily for you, I mean.”

“I have no idea what you mean.”

“And the second time?” he pressed on her, daring to reach out, his hand gripping her waist in a way that should have had her pushing him back only she stepped into it.

“Ah, you mean when you attacked me...” She flashed her eyes at him and licked her lips hungrily.

“Is that what I did?” he pretended to think. “You did not seem to mind.”

“I was caught off guard,” she said warningly, still allowing his hand to grip her waist. “I will not make the same mistake again.”

“I do not remember you pushing me away.”

“Would that stop you.” Her eyes flicked to his hand and then back to meet his eyes. “I never took you for one who liked being told what to do.”

“I could say the same of you.”

“And the punishment you threatened me with? Perhaps...” A smirk which she turned

into a scowl as she held his gaze. “Perhaps I was scared.”

“I would not take you for one to cower so easily.”

“And I would not take you for one to back down, regardless of how repulsive I find you.” Somehow, she stepped in ever closer, almost under him, looking up now so as to hold his stare.

“I am not used to not getting what I want,” he growled, his heart beginning to rise as his arousal grew. Even if she could not see it, surely, she could feel it, the way his pants tightened, threatening to burst. “And I meant what I said.”

“You’ll have to remind me for you have said so many things.”

“About...” Hesitation, for he had reached a point of no return. He could feel her heart racing with his own. He could feel her breathing tremble. She wanted this as much as he did, both seeming to know how wrong it was, both not caring. “About having to punish you.”

She hesitated at that, seemed to consider. “Wh - what sort of punishment?” Her voice trembled.

“One that you most deserve,” he breathed. “But I suppose that depends on how bad you have been. Tell me, Miss Dowding, have you been bad?”

He could see it in her eyes, fear mixed with temptation. She didn’t know exactly what he spoke of, but she wanted it. “I followed you in here, did I not? I refused to leave.”

“You will have to do better than that.”

“And if you let me leave right now, I will... I will...” she considered. “I will tell

everyone at this party what a monster you are. That you... that you threw me out. Mistreated me, even.”

“You would not dare.”

She raised an eyebrow. “Care to take that chance.”

His other hand moved to her waist. “I best not let you leave then.”

“You best not.”

That was when he broke.

Still holding her by the waist, still glaring down at her, teeth bared and vicious, he moved one hand to the back of her head, gripped it firmly, and then pulled her forward to meet his lips. They pressed together in a glorious combination of skin and saliva and tongue, mouths opening, tongues lapping, breath catching as they devoured one another right there on the couch.

His other hand squeezed her tightly, and she gasped but did not move away, both her hands around his face now, holding him there as they continued to kiss. It was ecstasy, the taste of her, the feel of her trembling and purring and moaning as they melted into one another. Such an intoxicating sensation that Frederick did not want to stop.

In the back of his mind, thoughts of punishing her raged. What he wanted to do. How he wanted to do it. And as his mind whirled with the possibilities, one oh so tantalizing idea came to mind.

Frederick tore his lips free, loving how she followed him like a hungry puppy.

“Wh—”

“You followed me in here,” he growled, stroking her face and looking into her eyes.
“And we both know why.”

Her eyes flashed. “Even though you told me not to.”

“I should kick you out of my house for such behavior,” he said with a vicious smile.

“Is that...” She swallowed. “Is that the best you can think of?”

He grinned. “I know how to treat women like you.”

“I would like to see you try.”

He chuckled, stroked her face, and then moved his hand down her neck. Pausing, his hand gently wrapped around her throat, only to continue down, cupping her breast. She breathed in as he squeezed it; eyes shut, she then moaned, taking his hand and squeezing it harder.

“Come here,” he commanded suddenly, taking her hand and leading her to the couch.

“What are you?—”

“I did not say you could talk.” He pulled her around and guided her to the couch. “Sit. Now.”

He could see the realization dawn and the excitement in her eyes, as if she knew what he was going to do. Only he very much doubted that, for she was a lady, and this here was certainly the first time she had ever been tempted with such a thing.

Frederick stood over her, bearing down on her in a way that gave him utter and complete control over her. She was helpless to him, leaning back and looking up, seeming to know that he could do with her whatever he wanted. But she liked it; he could see that fire in her eyes and that smile on her lips.

“Do not move...”

He fell to his knees, shuffled forward, and put himself between her legs. She gasped as he took her thighs with both his hands, spreading them open. Next, he held the hem of her skirt, meeting her eyes and holding them, so she could see the hunger as he slowly lifted the skirt up her calves, over her knees, and up her thighs.

“Remember,” he said, his voice a throaty whisper, “there are people outside, so you best not make a sound.”

“And if I do?”

He flashed his eyes angrily. “You will not want to find out.”

Her eyes widened as she now seemed to understand what he was doing. And then, unable to resist for any longer, not wanting to, Frederick lowered his head and dove between her moist, warm, thighs.

“Oh... God!” she gasped.

His tongue met her lips, tasting her with a soft kiss and a lick, just enough to make her body begin to shake. Another lick, wet, harder, all the way from the bottom of her

lips to the top. She took a hold of his head, if for no other reason than to keep herself from collapsing, and he chuckled to himself, pulled back to wet his lips, and dove back in.

His mouth wrapped around her next, latching on as he started to suck. He found her sex, his lips working to the rhythm of her breathing and panting and moaning. Softly at first, increasing his speed as he felt her entire body spasm.

“Your Grace... Your... Your... Oh God!” she cried out, falling back on the sofa as she gave herself to him fully.

This was so unlike Frederick. Everything about this situation!

Seducing a woman like this. Giving himself over to temptation. Abandoning protocol and social etiquette and what was expected because he simply could not control himself around her. The danger inherent did not scare him. The fear of getting caught only excited him. Miss Dowding had brought out a side of him he did not know but very much enjoyed.

And going down on her, also, for no other reason than he wanted to taste her. He did not care about his own pleasure as this right here was pleasure enough. Hearing her scream. Feeling her spasm. Tasting her and relishing it was an entirely new sensation that aroused him more than he had ever been before.

He held her by the thighs as he continued to lick and suck. He pressed his face in as far as he could, devouring her in ways that were unthinkable. Her thighs squeezed his face, suffocating him, yet still he did not pull away. He did not want to!

“There...” she begged him. “Do not... oh please, do not... keep going... oh!”

Suddenly, Frederick pulled away. She gasped as he did, her breathing stagnated and

broken as if she had just run a mile.

“What are you?—”

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“Oh, I am sorry...” He chuckled. “Were you enjoy that.”

“You... you monster!”

“You have no idea...” He licked his lips as he stared deeply into her eyes. Her body began to quiver as his fingers traced lightly up her thighs. She gasped as he touched her sex... stroking it as gently as he could. “Would you like more?”

“Please...”

“Tell me what you want.”

“I want more, Your Grace. Please... give me more...” Her voice trembled as he continued to stroke her wetness.

“As you wish.” And again, he dove between her thighs.

Her body twisted and turned. Her thighs shook. The build inside of her, he could feel it coming: an explosion that he wanted nearly as much as she did. Tongue licking. Lips sucking. She dripped down his chin, filled his mouth, tasted even sweeter than he could believe was possible.

“Yes...” she panted. “There... please... please... keep going...”

She was on the brink, the edge, about to erupt for the way her body shuddered and shook about his head. She throbbed in his mouth, pulsating as his tongue continued to work. All he had to do was keep on going...

“That is enough.” Frederick pulled back again.

“No!” she sat back up, looking at him pleadingly. “You can’t!”

He chuckled coldly. “I told you that I would punish you, did I not?”

“But... but...”

“What?” He looked at her quizzically. “Did you think this was going to be all pleasure? After what you did, do you think that you deserve it?”

Her body was coated in sweat. Her chest heaved and dropped as she tried to catch her breathing. Hair messy. Face exasperated. Confused. All she had to do was ask for more, to beg for it, to give him no choice but to finish...

“You’re... you’re right,” she said, taking a deep breath as she tried to calm, as she seemed to realize what this was and how to play this game. “I don’t deserve it.”

He could not help but smile. “Ah, somebody is learning. Very good.”

“After what I did, I...” She bit into her lip, the fight evident on her face. “I am sorry. But maybe...” Her expression turned pleading. “... if I... if I am good, and I... and I do as you please?”

“Maybe,” he said with a shrug. “But we will cross that bridge when it comes. If it comes.”

Her legs were open before him. Her chest glistened from sweat. Chest still heaving. Cheeks flushed red. Lips wet and moist and so tempting. The self-control it took for Frederick not to take her then and there as he so very much wanted to was unbelievable. Yet somehow, he pushed himself back and stood.

The time would come. He might tell himself it would not. He might convince himself that this was as far as he would err, but... well, one look at Miss Dowding, and he knew that to be false.

“Good evening, Miss Dowding. Perhaps I will see you tomorrow.” He turned and started to walk away, leaving her there wanting.

“I hope not,” she called after him. “I hope I never see you again.”

He did not rise to the bait but smiled as he stepped outside and closed the door behind him.

Was this dangerous? Was it a bad idea? Was this the very last thing that Frederick should have done? Yes to all. But did Frederick care? Not even a little bit.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Caroline was surprised to hear the next morning that His Grace had left the house early and headed into London on ‘business.’ Surprised, but not at all upset. If anything, she was glad for it.

The previous evening still sat with her, resulting in a sleepless night and a restless morning. She tossed, and she turned, unable to stop thinking about what had happened between her and His Grace. How it had happened. Why it had happened. And, most importantly, what she was going to do about it.

Oh, it was easy enough for her to say that it was a one-off occurrence, and she could not afford to let it happen again. It was the right thing to say—her circumstances demanded it!

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Yet, as she lay in bed staring at the ceiling, she felt a little tingle between her thighs as memories of His Grace's tongue came flooding back. Worse, the way he left her, unsatisfied and wanting more, had it so that more than once she wondered if she should reach between her thighs herself and finish what His Grace had started...

She did not, strangely, because she felt that she should not. As if that might be to betray His Grace as he had a hold over her, a sort of power that she did not want to test or break. So, she was left frustrated.

When the morning came, feeling bedraggled and worn, she slunk from her room and made for Isabella's, needing to get the young girl ready so they might break their fast and start a day of lessons. She was still a governess after all, and despite what had happened, that would not change. Or she did not think it would.

"Isabella," she said softly as she knocked once on the door and stepped inside. "Are you—Isabella!" she cried in shock.

There was blood! So much blood. It covered Isabella's bed sheets as if an animal had been slain during the night. And Isabella, in the midst of tearing the sheets from the bed, froze at the sight of Caroline stepping into the room, a look on her face that spoke of guilt... and fear.

"Close the door!" the little girl cried. "Please!"

"What happened?" Caroline cried again.

"The door! Please! Before father sees!" Her chin trembled, her big eyes were wide set

and brimming with tears. “I do not... I have no idea—I did not do anything!”

Caroline was quick to close the door, her heart racing with panic.

“I woke up and this... it happened in the night,” Isabella was trying to explain, but the panic that had taken her made her explanation a rambling mess of incoherent, jumbled words. “I—I do not know from where it came! I promise! But there is so much blood! Please, Caroline! You must... I do not... Help!”

Not only were the sheets covered in blood, but Isabella was also. Wearing a white nightdress, the bottom was coated in red as were her hands and her legs. Her skin was pale, and she looked drained, as if she had been awake for days. Sheets still in hand, her entire body shook.

“It is all right, Isabella.” Caroline went to her, ripping the sheets away and pulling the little girl into a hug. “I am sure everything will be fine.”

“How!” she cried in fright. “The blood... Caroline... it is... I think—I do not know how, but... but it is coming from me. I’m bleeding! Oh, God!”

Truthfully, it took Caroline a little longer than it probably should have to figure it out. Were it not for the shock of the scene that she had walked into and the little girl’s panic, she might have realized immediately what had happened. Thankfully, she did before any real harm was done.

“You are bleeding?” Caroline asked, pulling the girl back from her and holding her at arm’s length. “You are certain?”

“I must be! But this blood... I do not know how—what is happening!”

In response, all Caroline could do was smile. She might have laughed, had it not been

so inappropriate to do so. But between Isabella's panic and her understanding of the situation, she felt a strange swelling in her chest as if from pride.

"What!" Isabella asked. "What is it?!"

"Isabella..." Caroline continued to beam. "There is nothing to worry about. And certainly, there is no need to panic. Or cry, for that matter."

"How can you say such a thing!"

"Because me dear, sweet little girl, what has happened here happens to everyone. Every girl, even I, have gone through a similar experience as this." She looked about the room quickly, eyeing the mess. "Well... maybe notquite like this but close enough."

"I don't understand!"

With a deep sigh, Caroline quickly explained to Isabella that what had happened here was a sign that she was becoming a young lady. Trying her best to avoid too much messy detail, for she did not know what was appropriate or not to tell her, she was careful to let Isabella know that the bleeding she was experiencing was a natural and good thing. Wonderful, in fact. Even if it did happen every month.

"Every month!" Isabella exclaimed, eyes growing wider by the second. "But how—I cannot do this every month! Surely!"

Caroline chuckled. "We have ways of making sure that the next time..." She pushed her lips together, smiling at the little girl's ensuing delirium. "... that it won't be so messy."

"But father?—"

“Will understand,” she assured her. “He knows of this, and likely, he is expecting it. As I said, this happens to all women and is nothing to be ashamed of.”

Isabella did not look convinced. “He cannot know—you do not know what he is like. Please, Caroline, if he finds out... he is likely to get mad.”

“I promise you that is not the case.”

“He will!” she pleaded fearfully, truly believing it. “He hates it when I scrape my knees. I cannot imagine his reaction when...” She looked at the sheets again, and her chin began to tremble. “He will be furious.”

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“Isabella...” Caroline sighed, pulling the little girl back to her. “I promise you that?—”

“Please do not tell him,” she then asked. “Please. Not yet. Not until... not until I have no choice but to do so.”

Caroline grimaced. “I do not know if that is such a good idea. He has a right to know.”

“He will just grow upset; I know he will. Please, Caroline.” She fixed Caroline with a pleading look, eyes wide and brimming with tears. Impossible to say no to. “I will tell him, of course. But not yet. Not until... until... until I am ready.”

It was a bad idea, Caroline knew. To keep a secret like this from His Grace... it could only lead to trouble. But alas, in the week or so that she had been Isabella’s governess, Caroline had felt a kinship form with the sweet little girl, and she relished it for what it was. A friendship that she could not imagine, a bond she did not wish to break. If Isabella wished to keep this secret, then Caroline would do as asked.

“All right,” she sighed, stroking Isabella’s head. “If that is what you wish.”

“Thank you!” she threw herself at Caroline. “Thank you!”

“But I must insist that we tell him before this time next month,” she said rightly. “Otherwise, he will certainly find out for himself, and that is a conversation I am certain you do not want.”

“I will,” she assured Caroline. “I promise.”

The little girl was still covered in blood, and now, hugging Caroline as tightly as she was, so was Caroline. Luckily, she had not bathed yet this morning and was still wearing her gown from bed, so at least an outfit had not been ruined.

“Now...” Caroline peeled herself free. “Let us get you cleaned up. And we best get these sheets washed too. In secret,” she finished with a wink.

It was a bad idea. An idea that if discovered would likely lead to His Grace’s wrath being unleashed upon both Isabella and Caroline. Strange then that just the thought of this elicited excitement in Caroline for reasons that were only too obvious. So much so that a small part of her almost hoped that he found out...

Consequences be damned and most likely, enjoyed.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

What a difference a day makes. Or in Frederick’s case, a night.

He pushed his horse forward at a slow trot, his manor appearing on the horizon, slowly growing from the earth in a way that felt ominous. He had a task before him that he did not look forward to, but it had to be completed, nonetheless. There would be shouting. There would be tears. There would be regret. But, as he had been telling himself all day, it was necessary and very much needed.

Yesterday had been unreal. A situation ripped straight from fantasy—his own. He had tried to fight it. He had tried to ignore it. But in the end, he had succumbed to a desire which had spent a week bubbling away beneath the surface, only to explode in glorious, erotic, completely uninhibited fashion.

At the time, he had convinced himself that there was nothing wrong with what he had done. He and Miss Dowding were adults, it was consensual, so what matter if they took liberties and explored one another's desires, and bodies, together. Consequences be damned!

But a night of contemplation and reflection had changed all of that.

He woke the next morning to crushing guilt, the realization that the previous day had not been as innocent as he hoped. No doubt, Miss Dowding was going to become infatuated with him now: she would pester, she would pursue, and he would break as he was want to do. Naturally, it would be found out, his grandmother and others would insist that they wed, and Frederick would be forced into a situation he wasn't certain he was ready for.

It was for this reason that he woke early the following morning and headed to London. And it was for that reason that upon arriving back home later in the evening, he felt his stomach twist as he contemplated what he was about to do.

Best to get it over with, he decided as he steered his mount down the drive. No sense delaying the inevitable. This was a good thing. It was the only thing. It was... going to be harder than it should have been.

The sight of his grandmother ducking out the front door and waving him over had Frederick's chest tightening. She had a look on her face that suggested she wished to speak with him urgently, and considering where Frederick's mind was at, he did not need to guess at why.

"There you are!" she called to him, arms folded, eyebrow raised. "I was beginning to worry!"

"Afraid I might have been attacked by bandits?" Frederick joked plainly. He pulled

the horse up then he dismounted, looking about until he spied one of the stable hands hurrying to take the reins.

“You left without saying goodbye,” his grandmother said. “And you have been out all day.”

“And what of it?” He handed the reins to the stable hand and started past his grandmother toward the front door. “Should I alert you each time I visit the washroom, also? And when I am hungry? Perhaps every time I have a drink of water, I shall make sure that you are alerted.”

“Do not be facetious,” she said as she followed after him. “I was hoping to speak with you is why.”

“Oh?” He did not look back, taking the steps two at a time to the front door.

“I have not seen you since yesterday!” Despite her old age, she hurried up the steps and cut him off, blocking the front door. “And I wished to speak with you about something.” Folded arms, a raised eyebrow, and Frederick’s stomach twisted itself into knots.

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So, she hadn't guessed about today, at least. Frederick's reason for visiting London at such short notice. Not that this made him feel any better.

Had she found out about the previous day, and what he and Miss Dowding had done? Surely not! Unless Miss Dowding had told her, but that seemed unlikely also. Best to play it cool, Frederick decided... even if just the mention of yesterday had his heart pounding and his manhood stiffening as he remembered the taste of Miss Dowding and the way he had made her moan...

"Wh - what of it?" he managed, a shake of the head to center himself. "I am not in trouble, am I?" He then laughed.

She rolled her eyes. "I wished to see if you enjoyed yourself is all. You left quite the impression on those who you were willing to speak with. And..." she scoffed, "those willing to speak with you."

"Somehow I doubt that."

"And..." She smirked. "... if I remember correctly, I seem to recall more than one offer of potential courtship suggested by many a respected friend of mine. Lord Chesterfield, if you will remember?—"

"I am going to stop you there, for now, I see what this is really about," he cut her off. "In fact, I am starting to wonder if the garden party itself was thrown for nefarious reasons that had nothing to do with you wishing to see your friends."

"What are you suggesting?" she touched her chest as if insulted.

He looked at her flatly. “I will take a wife when I am ready, grandmother. And until I am, I do not need you playing matchmaker.”

“Well, somebody has to!”

“No, they do not.” He looked warningly at her. “While I appreciate the concern, I will remind you that where my love life is concerned, you should not be.”

“You are a duke!” she protested. “And to be single for this long is?—”

“My choice,” he said, keeping his calm the best that he could. “Now, if you do not mind.” He stepped around his grandmother and stormed inside with his mood thoroughly plummeted.

Why was he even surprised? With his mother and father both having passed, his grandmother clearly thought the task of finding him a mate now fell on her shoulders. Which it did not! But try telling her that. In fact, with the way she had been pestering him these last few days, Frederick was beginning to wonder if she had started the fire herself! Forcing her to move in with him, giving her closer access to his personal life and a greater chance to badger.

A ridiculous notion, he knew, but he would not put such a thing past the old woman.

“And Miss Dowding?” his grandmother called after him, her voice echoing throughout the foyer.

Frederick froze mid-step, pulse rising. An attempt to flatten the shock and fear that swept over his face at the mention of Miss Dowding’s name, he turned back to find his grandmother smirking.

“And what of her?”

“Nothing...” Her smirk grew. “I just saw the two of you together is all. It looked as if you were getting along. Quite well.”

Flashes from yesterday. Their argument. Frederick throwing her on the couch. His face between her thighs. Her body writhing from pleasure as he sucked and licked and?—

“I was just doing as you asked,” he somehow managed, forcing those thoughts down. “Being polite.”

“It sure looked it.” Her eyes flashed knowingly.

“I know what you are implying,” he spoke carefully, “and I ask that you stop right now. Miss Dowding is...” He grimaced. “... my daughter’s governess, and that is all she is.”

“The daughter of a viscount.”

“And your companion, meaning that when it is time for you to leave, I fully expect her to go with you.”

“But—”

“Enough!” he snapped, an action which had little to no effect on his grandmother. “I will not have this conversation with you. Is that understood?”

His grandmother could not have looked more pleased with herself. “Food for thought, Frederick. Food for thought...” She giggled lightly, folded her hands behind her back, and walked on by without another word. Not that she needed to say anything, for her meaning was only too clear.

Frederick groaned and ran a hand through his hair as he watched her go. He had enjoyed yesterday—and not just what had happened in the drawing room but everything before that. The pleasant conversation. The banter. The realization that Miss Dowding was far more than he had originally thought... so much more. But for all of that, Frederick realized now more than ever that it could not go on.

His grandmother was becoming persistent. She would continue to badger. The only way to stop her was to announce unequivocally that he had no desires whatsoever for Miss Dowding, and to do that...

Again, this did not promise to be a pleasant conversation.

It was nearing early evening which meant that Miss Dowding and his daughter should be taking a lesson together, likely one of the main reading rooms. Frederick was about to go searching, steeling himself for the conversation ahead, when Mr. Bonnet, one of the many valets in his employ, appeared from around the corner.

“Your Grace!” he cried as if from shock.

“Mr. Bonnet.” He approached the valet. “I am looking for my daughter and Miss Dowding. Have you seen them recently?”

Mr. Bonnet’s eyes were wide set, his hands fidgeted at his waist, and his chin trembled from what could only be read as fear. A common enough reaction from most of the maids and valets when they were forced to speak with Frederick, only this was a little worse than what even he was used to.

“Mr. Bonnet, is something wrong?”

His eyes somehow grew wider. “I... I should not say.”

He leveled a glare at her. “Speak, Mr. Bonnet. Now.”

He sucked through his teeth and looked away, hands still fidgeting. “Earlier... I was checking on one of the maids, Mrs. Tibbs, Your Grace, double checking that she was up to date on her daily chores—and she was, Your Grace. She was working admirably.”

“All right...”

“She was hanging out the bedding, Your Grace. Freshly cleaned, they were. Only... well... I do not want to cause alarm but... but... but...”

“Speak, Mr. Bonnet,” he growled, jaw clenched. “Now!”

“There was blood on them! Not a lot, most had clearly been washed off, but there were stains, Your Grace. Fresh ones.”

“Bl - blood?”

“I have seen your daughter since,” he made sure to say. “I checked on her, and she seems fine. But the blood, Your Grace. I thought you should know.”

Frederick might have felt a surge of fear. He might have felt a pang of panic. Worry, for blood on his daughter’s sheets should have caused great alarm. Only... well, he knew his daughter well enough to know the reason for said blood stains. This was not the first time that blood had been found in her washing, and in his mind, he could think of but one reason why.

Slowly, Frederick felt his anger rising. Slowly, he felt his fury gathering. His daughter... for how much he loved her... again and again she disobeyed him. Worse that Miss Dowding had allowed such a thing!

All thoughts of his reason for needing to see Miss Dowding vanished in that moment, swept away by a far more pressing concern.

“Where is she?” he growled, body shaking. Mr. Bonnet gasped. “Where!”

Unable to speak, Mr. Bonnet turned and pointed a trembling finger down the hallway,

and Frederick was off and charging.

“Isabella!” he called in fury. “Isabella!”

He stormed through the house until he came upon his daughter and her governess. They sat together in a small reading room, evidently in the middle of a lesson as a needle and thread rested on their laps. Laughing and joking together as they worked, the sight of Frederick sweeping into the room like a tempest put a stop to that.

“Father!” Isabella gasped, dropping the needle and thread. “What is?—”

“I have warned you, Isabella.” His body shook, despite how desperately he tried to control his temper. “Time and time again, I have warned you.”

“Warned me?” she swallowed and glanced at Miss Dowding. “What are you... I do not understand what you mean?”

“Blood,” he hissed. “Mr. Bonnet told me of the blood stains in your bedding.”

His daughter’s eyes went wide, confirming immediately the truth of the matter. A quick glance at Miss Dowding as if for help?—

“Do not look to your governess for support.” He made for her. “I will deal with her in a moment.”

“Father! Is it not what you...”

“Not what I think?” he scoffed, stopping before the two, body still shaking. “Tell me then, daughter. What is it? Why time and time again must I hear from the help of your actions—after time and time again of me commanding you not to partake in them.” He looked down at her for an answer.

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He almost relented when he saw the fear present in his daughter's eyes. A fear of him and what he might do. Frederick hated that his daughter was scared of him, reviled by the very concept. He wanted her to love him. To know how much he loved her. But he needed her to understand that this was not a game, that what he did was for her benefit, and while she might hate him for it, one day she would thank him. He hoped.

"I... I..." She could hardly speak, again looking for support from Miss Dowding.

"Isabella is right, it is not what you think," Miss Dowding spoke up. "And I would ask that you stop scaring your daughter."

He turned on Miss Dowding, happy to level his gaze upon her instead. Baring his teeth, he was reminded suddenly of the previous evening... the way he had stood over her before diving between her legs. And the determined look she returned at him...

"I was speaking with my daughter," he growled at her.

"My student," she responded coolly. "And we were in the middle of a lesson."

"Yes, that is why I hired you, is it not? To teach her—to show her what it means to be a lady of the peerage. But from what I can see, all you are interested in is fostering the side of her which I had expected you to quell."

She snorted. "That is not at all what?—"

"Do not argue!" he bellowed, forcing her to fall back. "There was blood in her sheets,

and unless you can give me a reason beyond what I know, then I have no choice but to... to... assume that you have failed her.”

He looked at them both for an answer, not that he expected one. What could they possibly say? He knew the blood to be caused from some scratch or wound she had taken climbing a tree or running when she shouldn't have been or playing a game not meant for little girls. That was all it could be.

“Well?!”

Isabella looked desperately at Miss Dowding. Eyes wide, it seemed that they were having a silent conversation of some sort; pleading was what it looked like. Such that Frederick fully expected Miss Dowding to lie for her again. Only...

“You are right,” Miss Dowding sighed regretfully. “The blood was caused from...” She clicked her tongue. “We were playing earlier, and Isabella fell and cut herself. I thought I had cleaned the wound well enough, but evidently, I had not.”

His eyes flashed fury, and he was back on his daughter. “You are not to leave the manor without my say so.”

“Father—”

“And I do mean the manor,” he warned her. “You are not to step foot outside unless you are in my presence. Is that understood?”

His daughter looked at him defiantly, anger and fury and loathing in her glare. He matched it, bearing over her, and she relented and dropped her head from shame. “Fine.”

“I really think that is too much!” Miss Dowding spoke up. “The fault lays with me,

not?—”

“Oh, I am not finished with you!” He turned on her next, working overtime to separate the feelings of arousal that swarmed him when their eyes met. Again... yesterday evening... the desire to punish her for what she did. Oh, how he wished to. “I told you what is expected,” he said through a clenched jaw.

“And I have done that,” she responded just as acidly.

“You have not.” The side of his mouth twitched. “While I admit that in some facets you have been a boon, they pale in comparison when put beside your failures.”

“That is not—” She caught her tongue, biting back her response in a way that he could see she struggled to do.

“Not fair?” he scoffed. “I knew you were wrong for this role from the first day. And it seemed that I have been vindicated.”

“Father!” Isabella cried. “That is not fair?—”

“Quiet!” he snapped at her without so much as a glance, all attention focused on Miss Dowding. His trip to London and the conversation he’d needed to have with Miss Dowding had plagued him all day, for he had wondered how he might brooch it without breaking. Now, with all that had happened, that hardly seemed a concern. “This role of yours, it was only ever meant to be temporary.”

“I am aware,” she said, unblinking in her gaze.

“It is for that reason that earlier today I travelled to London where I have started the hiring process for a new governess?—”

“Father! Please!”

“—which I expect to be completed within the week,” he continued. “Which means that come that time, your services will no longer be required. You are my mother’s companion, and I think we can both agree that is a role which suits you best.”

Oh, he could see the shock. He could feel the anger. Her eyes widened, glaring white-hot daggers as if she expected to cut him. Fists curled into balls. Jaw clenched. If his daughter was not present, he could only imagine what she might say... and what he might say in response.

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Thank God his daughter was present, for Frederick needed it. If it was just the two of him, he had no doubt that this conversation would end the same way it had yesterday. A tempting prospect but an unrealistic one.

“Is that understood?” he barked.

“Is that what you wish?”

“It is what I command.”

Her eyes flashed again. “Then there is nothing left to say.”

“Father!” Isabella leapt up and took his hand. “Please, it is not what you think.”

He pulled his hand free. “It is done, Isabella. And you should be glad that your punishment is so lax. You wound me, daughter. Time and time again I have asked you to behave, and time, and time again you have disobeyed me.”

“But—”

“There are not buts,” he cut her off. “Now...” A final, fixed glare on Miss Dowding. “I suggest that the two of you return to your lesson. Unless there is anything you wish to say?”

There certainly was, and he could only imagine what was going through Miss Dowding’s mind. Was she feeling that same pull as he? Was she struggling to control herself just as much? His eyes flicked over her body, remembered how it felt in his

hands, how it had tasted. He needed this conversation done with, to be away from here so he might breathe.

“No,” she said in a snarl. “You have made yourself perfectly clear.”

“Good.” A final rueful glare for the two of them, and Frederick stormed from the room, desperate to be gone from there before anything else might happen.

Once free of that room, Frederick continued through the house, up the stairs, into his room where he stumbled inside and slammed the door closed. Then he fell backwards, pressed against the closed door, breathing heavily as his body shook.

He had done it. He had managed to get through that hazardous situation without doing anything he would come to regret. A necessary situation if a painful one. But it was done, and now, all he needed to do was avoid Miss Dowding as much as he could until she was gone from here. And most importantly, not find himself alone with her.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

It was later that same evening when Frederick found himself in his study, hiding, even if he had managed to convince himself that he was in fact working. But after the way he had shouted at his daughter, and insulted Miss Dowding, the mood in the manor was tense, and he figured it might be best to avoid them for the rest of the night.

A soft knock at the door, and Frederick groaned, certain it would be his grandmother come to scold him.

At least after today, she might finally desist in her incessant insistence that he and Miss Dowding were good together. Surely, after the way he had spoken to her, even

his grandmother must admit that where the two of them were concerned, only trouble would follow. And not the good kind either.

“Yes,” he called as a second knock followed the first. “Come in.”

The door opened, and in stepped Miss Dowding... almost. She pushed the door open but stayed by the doorway, refusing to cross the threshold as if an invisible barrier was stopping her.

“Miss Dowding—” Frederick baulked at the sight of her, suddenly feeling his chest tighten and his breathing stagnate. “What are you...”

“We need to talk,” she said simply, completely devoid of emotion.

She was dressed simply, nothing overtly scandalous or tempting. A loose-hanging garment, hair left flowing, face hidden in shadow. It made it easier to look at her without wanting to tempt fate for the reason she was here ... well, no need to guess.

“Do we?” he responded coolly, feeling safe behind his desk.

“We do.”

He nodded and indicated for her to come in. “And close the door behind you.” He almost didn’t say that, and as soon as he did, he regretted it. Dangerous, he knew. Another temptation that he needed to avoid?—

“No,” she said, cutting through his thoughts. “I think it is best if I stay here.”

He frowned. “Oh. And why is that?”

“What you said today,” she began, ignoring him. Standing in the doorway, she looked

right at him but kept her face free of emotion. No anger. No malice. It was as if he was a stranger who she had come to see. “You must know that it was completely uncalled for.”

“I will not be told how to speak to my own daughter in my own home.”

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“And I am not telling you how to,” she continued simply. “The reason for your ... tantrum.” A slight sneer on her lips, quickly masked as she went back to acting neutral. “It was unfounded.”

He scoffed. “And again, I will remind you that how I speak with my daughter is none of your concern. You were hired to teach her, and that is all that is expected of you. Leave the parenting to me.”

He was trying to goad her. He knew that he shouldn't be. He knew that it was foolish to do—dangerous. But he could not help it. In his study, all she had to do was close that door, and they would be alone once more. They could restart the argument, he could threaten more punishment, he could drag her to this table and?—

“What I mean is, the blood that was on your daughter's sheets,” she cut through his imaginings once more. “The reason for it...” Hesitation as she bit into her lip, deciding something. “It had nothing to do with her playing.”

“It ... it didn't?”

She glanced nervously behind herself and then back on him. “Your daughter is becoming a woman.”

“A woman?” He frowned, not sure what she meant.

“Yes.” A raised eyebrow. “A woman.”

“What are you...” It took him longer than it should have, but the look on Miss

Dowding's face, the situation, and how subtle she was trying to be eventually hit him like a slap in the face. "You are joking."

"I most certainly am not."

"So, the blood?"

"That was the cause," she said.

He groaned and ran a hand through his hair. "Then why did you not just say that?"

"Because Isabella asked me not to. She made me promise."

"And why would she do such a thing?"

She scoffed and folded her arms. "After the way you behaved today, is it any wonder she does not trust you to have a reasonable reaction. She is scared of you is why."

Frederick flinched. "She is not scared of me."

"Is that what you think?" she snorted.

The truth was painful to hear, so Frederick decided to look past it. "And you? Why did you not tell me? Why did you... why did you lie?"

"Your daughter asked me to is why."

"That is hardly a reason."

She shrugged. "Unlike you, I do not wish to betray your daughter's trust. She asked me for a favor, and I was willing to give it. Even if it meant being spoken to you

like..." Her lip curled. "... likethat."

Again, he flinched as memories of what he had said and how he had said it came roaring back. He had shouted at his daughter and Miss Dowding. He had belittled them. He had acted like an enraged bully for reasons that at the time seemed right, but he now knew to be far from that. Even worse, he had upset his daughter.

But still, that did not mean Frederick was going to apologize. That simply wasn't who he was.

"You should have told me," he said. "Regardless of what my daughter might have asked, I have a right to know."

"And she had a right to tell you in her own time."

"You are not her mother."

"And you are hardly behaving like her father."

His hands clenched, and his body stiffened. A pulse ran through him, and he could feel that familiar sensation rising. "I would watch the way you?—"

"I did not come here to argue with you," she said quickly, making sure as she did that she was still out of the room. "I do not want that. I simply wished for you to know the true reason behind what happened and ask that even now you respect her wishes and allow her to tell you in her own time."

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“And my daughter? I cannot very well take back the punishment. She would know that I know.”

Miss Dowding sighed. “Sadly, that is true. But perhaps the next time you see her...” Her expression softened, a sense of sadness in her eyes. “You might try apologizing. Be mad at me if you must, but she does not deserve it. She is a sweet, wonderful little girl, and I would hope that you know it.”

It was hard to fathom exactly how to respond to that. The way that Miss Dowding was speaking of his daughter, things that he knew already but could not believe to be coming from a near stranger. The look in her eyes, the worry on her face, she cared for Isabella, perhaps even loved her. So much so that she kept her secret and took the brunt of his anger and...

“Miss Dowding...” He clicked his teeth as the regret began to set in. “What I said today, about the governess. I am... I still think it is for the best.”

She nodded once. “I suspected as much.”

“You and I, what happened...” He tried to look at her, but for the first time, she refused to meet his eyes. “The role was only ever meant to be temporary,” he pivoted. “My daughter needs a real teacher. And when my grandmother goes home, I suspect you will be returning with her.”

A moment’s pause. A beat passing between them. The near hope that maybe, just maybe, Miss Dowding might for once argue with him. She had come here with the obvious intention not to, clearly a desire not to repeat what had happened yesterday.

And while he respected that, oh how he prayed she might change her mind.

“I could not agree more,” she said eventually. And then, without another word, she turned and left, leaving the door open behind her.

This left Frederick alone in a state of confusion and despair, unable to convince himself that he had done the right thing. And not just where his daughter was concerned but Miss Dowding. Earlier today, he had known it was in his best interest to replace her as soon as could be. It was smart. It was right. Only now...

She was more than a governess for his daughter. She was Isabella’s friend, she loved her it seemed, she was perfect in so many ways, and Frederick, the fool, refused to see that. Caught up in the games they played, he had failed to see the true nature of this woman from whom he was so desperate to escape yet so unable to.

Amongst it all, too, he felt a crushing sense of guilt. For what he had done. For how he had spoken to her. For his refusal to apologize. Sitting alone in his study, Frederick had never before felt as rotten as he did just now.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

“Is everything all right, dear?” Esther asked Caroline.

“Hhmm?” Caroline had not been paying attention, a thousand-yard stare fixed on the horizon, her mind a million miles away.

“And that pretty much answers my question,” she chuckled as she nibbled on a piece of cake. “Mmmm, have you tried one of these by the way? Scrumptious.”

Caroline rolled her eyes. “I thought you said you weren’t going to be eating any sweets?”

“That is what I told Frederick,” she said with a devilish grin. “But I do not see him anywhere here, do you?” She took another bite, and her eyes lit up. “I will not tell if you do not.”

“Do not worry, I can keep a secret as well as any other.”

Esther looked at her knowingly. “There is a difference, you know, between keeping a secret and simply not speaking to a person so that there is no chance to reveal said secret. They are hardly the same.”

“And what does that mean?”

“I think you know.”

A flat expression. “Oh, just come out and say it, will you? So that I can dismiss whatever it is on your mind, and we can get back to enjoying the day.”

“All right.” Esther put the cake down and looked upon Caroline with a simple, emotionless gaze. “You and Frederick.”

“What of us?” A pang in her chest ignored as she had been doing the last few days.

“It has not escaped my keen sense of observation that the two of you have not set foot in the same room for, what is it now, three days? That must be a record.”

Caroline looked away. “I have no idea what you are talking about.”

“Is that so?”

“It is.”

“And that is how you wish to play it?”

“There is nothing to play.”

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Still looking away, she could feel Esther's eyes on her, watching closely, looking for the chink in her armor to exploit. Slowly, the woman reached for the piece of cake and took another bite, chewed just as slowly, and swallowed.

"If you say so," she said eventually. "I won't push."

"Good," Caroline said rightly, her chest still feeling tight. "That will save me asking you to drop it."

Had it really been three days? She supposed it must have been, even if it somehow felt longer than that. Three whole days since she had approached His Grace in his study, told him the truth about Isabella, made sure to keep her distance and control her emotions, and then walked away without doing anything that she might come to regret.

Three whole days since she had last seen or spoken with the man who she could not stop thinking about. Three whole days, and... well, as said, it felt a lot longer than that.

Caroline had not expected to not see His Grace in that time either. It was not as if she was avoiding him purposefully. If anything, he was the one avoiding her! His reasons were his own, ones that she was infinitely grateful for as she knew that to see him again would not bode well for either of them. A good thing, she told herself determinedly. The right thing. A thing she should be happy for. And yet...

Three whole days, and with each setting of the sun and rising of the moon, she found her mind wandering more and more to His Grace, thoughts of him she did not want,

desires she wished she did not feel, a pull to go and speak with him again that she fought incessantly.

And all through it, she could not help but wonder, was he feeling the same way?

“I agree that he had no right to speak to you that way,” Esther continued.

Caroline eyed her. “I thought you said that you were finished with this topic?”

“I am just saying...” She put the piece of cake down again and wiped her hands clean. “I agree with you. The way he spoke to you...” She clicked her tongue. “That man has a temper on him.”

“That is an understatement,” she said bitterly, even if a part of her loved that side of him... what it brought out in the two of them.

“But if it is an apology that you are expecting from him, I worry that you will be waiting forever.” She tittered. “I do not think that Frederick has ever apologized in his life. I would not think that he knew how.”

“I do not expect him to apologize,” she said... a half-truth, boarding dangerously close to a lie.

“What then?”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, is this how it will be then? The two of you avoiding one another until it is time to leave? I hardly think that is conducive to a hospital environment.”

“I am not avoiding him,” Caroline said simply. “It is just that we have not seen one

another. It is hardly the same thing.”

“Ha! Semantics.”

“Facts.”

It was a conversation that had been threatening to happen for three days now. Ever since that first morning after she had approached His Grace when he had walked into the dining room, seen Caroline sitting there, and then walked back out. Esther had taken note, frowned quizzically, but had not pressed. Thankfully.

Likely, the only reason that she hadn't brought it up until now was because there had not been time, for the two women had not been alone together since.

Today was different. Isabella and Frederick were spending the day together, giving Caroline and Esther a chance to get out of the manor for a change. Esther had wished to visit London, but Caroline had nipped that in the bud. She claimed that she wanted fresh air... obviously, unable to tell Esther that she wanted to avoid London in case she saw someone from her past life, the one she was running from. Another conversation they would one day have... likely, even more awkward than this one.

Rather, a picnic was suggested, away from the estate, near the surrounding forest, just the two of them alone in the wilderness to enjoy what was a beautiful day.

Although now, Caroline was very much beginning to regret it.

“You're not upset that he has begun to search for a new governess, are you?” Esther asked.

“What? No, of course not.”

“Because that was always the plan. And yes, the way he went about telling you was a little... rude. And even I was surprised by how quickly he began the process.”

“I told you, that is not a bother.”

“Are you sure?”

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“Of course!” she cried to which Esther raised an eyebrow to which Caroline sighed. “I am going to miss Isabella when the time comes—you know it as does Isabella—but we will be returning to your estate sooner rather than later, so it is a necessary evil. I do not begrudge him of that.”

Again, Esther eyed her curiously. “If you say so, dear.”

Strangely, that wasn’t as much of a lie as it could have been. While Caroline was indeed saddened that within the week a new governess would likely be hired to replace her, she knew in her heart that it was the right move. And while she would indeed miss Isabella more than she could bear to admit right now... again, it was something that had to happen.

But Esther was right in her assessment that something was wrong. For three days now, it had plagued her. For three days now, it had harried her. For three days now, she had felt her mood plummet, knowing what she needed to do to fix it, unable to do just that because in her mind it was not up to her to do so.

Ultimately, and this was what hurt the most, she was beginning to concede the very real fact that things would stay this way until she and Esther returned home finally, away from here. It pained her to think of such a thing. The regret she felt literally hurt. But she also knew it was for the best.

Caroline’s life was a lie. She was running and hiding. To become entangled in any way with His Grace would only force that lie to the fore, and that was a fate she could not allow to happen. No matter what. No matter how much it hurt.

“If that’s the case,” Esther continued warily, “I might suggest that you be the bigger person and?—”

“I am not going to apologize,” Caroline snapped suddenly, sick of the probing. “I have nothing to apologize for.”

“Not apologize,” Esther hurried to explain. “But an olive branch. If you were to... oh, I don’t know, go and speak with Frederick the next time the two of you are home. Just to make sure there is no ill will, I am sure he will happily put this horrid business behind you.”

“How very big of him.”

“Just a thought, dear. Just a thought.” She exhaled, half-reached for the piece of cake, and then sighed. “I know that it would mean the world to Isabella if you did. She hates seeing the two of you fight.”

“We are not fighting.”

“You know what I mean. Isabella worships you, dear, and if she was to see you and her father speaking on good terms again, I can only imagine how happy she would be.”

Caroline narrowed her eyes at Esther. “That is a dirty trick. Using Isabella like that.”

She winked. “We use the tools we are given.”

“Why do you even care?” Caroline sighed. “You know we will be heading home in the coming weeks, and I hope that you expect me to come with you...” She looked at Esther for confirmation, but the old woman was back to her piece of cake, acting as if she hadn’t heard. “And now that His Grace is intent on finding a new governess,

there is no good reason that we need to be on such good terms.”

“Even for Isabella?”

“As if that is the true reason.” Her eyes narrowed further, for she knew why Esther was bringing this topic up, and while it might have elated some sense of excitement within her before, Caroline had long since resigned herself to the impossibility of such an idea.

Esther pretended to look hurt. “I have no idea to what you mean.”

“All right, play the fool if you wish. Frankly, I would prefer it. It makes it easier for me to ignore you.”

“The same way you are ignoring Frederick, you mean.”

A final rueful, warning glare shared for Esther, and Caroline went back to looking into the vast emptiness of the wilderness as she had been doing before Esther had brought this topic up. And while she might have liked to have thought of anything else, typically, her mind went straight to His Grace.

Funny that for a short time there, she had wondered, even hoped at what might become of them. After what had happened the day of the garden party, her mind had been awash with fantasies and fancies over what he had done, how it had felt, and how much she wished for it again.

Truly, right up until he had come storming into the room, shouting and snarling at herself and Isabella, Caroline had dared to dream what might be. But that day had changed everything.

She and His Grace could not work. And not because of his temper. Not because he

refused to apologize for it. And not because of Isabella. At the end of the day, Caroline was living a lie, running from a past that she would not speak, hiding from those who wished to do her harm. Nobody knew of this, and if anything more was to happen between herself and His Grace, that truth might come out, and the consequences would be dire.

For that reason, she was almost happy that he had done what he had done and that he now hid from her. At least that saved her from temptation. At least now she did not have to worry about her lack of self-control and her true feelings.

Caroline had long ago accepted that she would live and die alone. Best that she accepted it now for good and moved on. As hard as that was to do...

CHAPTER TWENTY

“I still think you should apologize,” George said lazily, as if he was only half listening to his own words.

“And I still think that you should drop it.”

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“And I still do not care what you think.”

“And I still wish that you would keep your mouth shut, regardless of what you think.”

“And I still?—”

“Oh, will you just be quiet!” Frederick snapped at his best friend. “When I invited you in for a drink, I did not think you would spend the entire time pestering me.”

“Is that what I am doing?”

“Annoying me. Frustrating me. Driving me insane! Pick one.”

George frowned and considered as he took a sip of brandy. Smacked his lips. Took another sip. “So, that’s a no on the apology?”

Frederick groaned and ran a hand through his hair. George might have been the only person in the world who would risk arguing with and annoying him like this, knowing that he could do and say pretty much what he wanted without risking Frederick’s wrath, but even he was pushing it.

The man had turned up unannounced just thirty minutes ago, perfect timing as Frederick had just returned from London with Isabella. After the incident three days previously, he wished to show that he was sorry by giving her a day out—a day which she appreciated greatly.

Oh, how Frederick had appreciated it also. Although he did not tell her that he knew

her secret, he was happy that she was willing to forget how he had yelled at her and let him treat her as her father again. They laughed all day. Enjoyed one another's company in ways that reminded him of how things used to be. Shopping. Treats. Long walks through the park. It was a day well spent.

Deep down, Frederick had also hoped that she might finally open up to him and tell him the truth as she had Miss Dowding. He was her father, after all, so surely, she would want to do such a thing. Sadly, she had chosen not to, a fact which stung his pride a little more than he was willing to admit—especially seeing as she had told Miss Dowding without pause.

But he had lifted his punishment from her nonetheless, and when they returned home, he was happy to let her take a book outside and read without needing to be watched. That was when George arrived which saw the two men move to the drawing room for said drink.

It should have been a pleasant enough soiree, for he had not seen George in days, but George being George meant that such a thing was not possible. Not even close.

“And how does it feel?” George asked casually as he lounged on the couch, one arm spread over the back, his leg folded casually before him.

“How does what feel?” Frederick braced himself.

“Having to sneak around your own home like a mouse being chased by a persistent cat. It must be tiring.”

“I am sure I have no idea to what you are referring.”

George chuckled. “Oh? So you have not spent the last three days in hiding, then? My mistake.”

“Who have you been talking to?” he asked with narrowed eyes.

“The easy way to solve this dilemma is to do what you should have days ago,” he continued as if Frederick hadn’t asked him a question. “Apologize and be done with it.”

“I will not apologize,” he growled in anger.

“Then extend an apologetic hand. You don’t need to say the words, just make it obvious that you are sorry.”

“But I am not sorry. Nor should I be.”

He snorted and took another sip of his brandy. “Is that what you think? You really do not understand women, do you?”

Frederick groaned. “Why on this God’s green earth do you even care, George? Tell me that.”

George shrugged. “Maybe it is you who I care about; did you think of that.”

“Doubtful.”

“You are clearly in a mood, more so than usual. And from what I can gather, this is the reason why.”

“The same reason you came to visit me, I am now beginning to wonder.”

“Well, it certainly wasn’t to bask in the warmth of your company.”

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Frederick had wondered why George had appeared unannounced as he had. Because they were friends, perhaps, and he wished to see him? Because it had been a few days, and he missed his company? Because he was out of liquor and knew Frederick would have some handy? All possible options but far from the truth.

No, the reason he was here was becoming plainly obvious, and it had Frederick's grandmother written all over it.

Oh, she was meddling as was her want. For some reason, his grandmother had gotten it into her head that he and Miss Dowding might make a perfect pairing, and despite recent events, she was doing everything she could to see it come to fruition. Frederick had thought his little outburst three days ago might have nipped her romantic idealism in the bud, but from the looks of things, it had simply kicked it into a new gear.

"You've been speaking with my grandmother, haven't you?" he asked as he fixed his friend in a glare.

"I will never tell," George said with a cheeky grin.

"Well, if the two of you should happen to cross paths in the near future, feel free to pass on a message for me, will you?"

"I suppose I could."

Frederick opened his mouth to speak only for the sound of the front door opening to catch his attention. This was followed by his grandmother screaming at the top of her

lungs, “We are home!”

“Ah, perfect timing,” George chuckled. “I wonder with whom she is with.”

If only it was so easy as George made it out to be. If it was that, Frederick might have done so already, simply to dispel the tension that hung in this household. It was intangible, growing worse each day, hovering over him like a cloud wherever he went.

Alas, it was not so simple. Apologize to Miss Dowding? Grovel to her? And for what? Because he had correctly chastised her for doing something which she did not even claim at the time to have not done? Oh sure, if she had told him then that he was mistaken, he might have said he was wrong and left it at that, but she had not, and so it could not be.

Further to that point, and even George did not know this, but the reason Frederick was avoiding Miss Dowding had nothing to do with an apology. Perhaps that was a small part of it, certainly it was likely why she thought he was avoiding her, but it was half the reason. Less than that.

He simply could not risk being alone with her. He could not take the chance that seeing her and speaking without anyone else about would present. Even if he tried to apologize, she would likely rebuke him, he would grow angry, they would argue, and...

God, how he wanted to, though. God how he craved it. Even now, picturing her walking back inside his house, Frederick could see in his mind's eye what might happen if he was to go to her... if they were to speak alone... if they were to pick up where they left off and?—

No. He could not risk it. To do that would be to give her false ideas. It would lend

credence to his grandmother's pestering. It would force him down a track he did not wish to go because the last time he did that... it had ended in death and misery.

"So, this is what you have become?" George sighed. "A scared little mouse in his own home."

"I am warning you, George..."

He scoffed. "You do not scare me, perhaps the only man who you do not. And for that reason, I will say one last thing and leave it at that." He pushed himself up and fixed Frederick with a stern gaze. "Hide from her if you wish. Pretend that you are not—lie to yourself. But do you know who you cannot lie to?"

"Who?"

"Your daughter," he said simply. "You know as well as anyone how she admires Miss Dowding, and if you truly wish to grow closer to her, your daughter that is, this is the way to do it. Right now, she assumes the two of you hate one another—as she should, based on how you treated her. But if the two of you were to grow friendly again..." He shrugged and took a final sip. "I imagine that might go a long way."

Those words were exactly what Frederick needed to hear. He didn't want to hear them, but he needed to.

"Sometimes, George, I really do hate you."

"I know," he chuckled. "Now go, before you lose your bravery, as fragile a thing as it is."

Frederick groaned and stood up. "You best be gone when I come back."

A wink. "If you come back."

To that, Frederick stiffened as his pulse increased as his heart began to thump. This was not about that, he told himself. He would seek Miss Dowding out. He would be nice. They would move on from their little quarrel, and then he would leave her before anything else might happen. He had to.

That was the plan, anyway...

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Frederick found Miss Dowding in her bedroom. The door was left open which allowed him to stand in the doorway for a moment and watch her as she fiddled with something in her wardrobe, back facing him.

This was a bad idea, and he knew it right away. Her dress was backless, tight around the waist, hugging her body and buttocks, and seeming to tempt him personally. He had still not seen her fully unclothed, and the sight of those curves as he tried to picture them released from their confines was enough that he very nearly stormed in, closed the door behind him, and took her without hesitation.

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Luckily, she turned before he had the chance.

“Your Grace?” she said, startled by the way he was lurking. A step back, deeper into the wardrobe. “What—what are you doing here?”

His eyes swept over her front, from her sumptuous breasts to her pouty lips, mind still caught on images of her?—

He gave his head a shake. “I was hoping we might talk for a moment.”

“Is that a request or a demand?” she shot back.

His jaw clenched, for already she was testing him. “Would it make a difference? From what I know of you, Miss Dowding, you do not take so well to demands.”

“A request then?”

“Yes...” A deep breath as he worked to calm himself and concentrate. “A request.”

She hesitated, her eyes flicking past him to the empty hallway and then about the room, seeming to realize the situation she was about to put herself in. Obviously, she too was aware of the danger of being alone with him, and a small part of Frederick hoped that she denied him... and if she did that, he might have it in him to accept said denial.

“Of course...” A resigned smile. “Please.” She indicated for him to enter the room.

Frederick hesitated, again only too aware of the fragility of being alone with her, but this conversation they were to have needed to remain private, and he could not afford to speak from across the room with the door open where he might be heard.

A final moment's pause. A deep breath. A reminder to himself that control was what was needed here. And then, he stepped into the room and closed the door behind him.

"I wanted to..." The side of his mouth twitched. "... to make it clear that what occurred three days ago—there is no need to dwell on it. I said some things that may have gone too far, you said some things that certainly did, and I believe it would be best if we leave it at that."

"Is that so?" she said plainly.

"It is," he said with a nod of his head, looking past her rather than at her. "These past three days have been more tense than I had hoped, and for the sake of Isabella, it would behoove us to put them behind us and move on. Do you not think?"

She took in his statement, mulled it over, crossed her arms, and scoffed. "Is that your idea of an apology?"

His body stiffened. "I never said that it was."

"No wonder, as it was perhaps the worst apology I have ever heard."

"Again..." he spoke slowly and carefully, "it was not an apology. It was a statement of fact, for what happened between us was?—"

"Yes, yes," she cut him off sharply which only worked to frustrate him. "I was there, remember? I know what happened."

“Then you know an apology is not necessary.”

She snorted. “From you? I would not expect one.”

“Yet you are still upset.”

“I did not say that.”

His mouth twitched again, yet still he refrained from looking at her. “When I spoke with my daughter, I was under the impression that she had deliberately disobeyed me. Further to that point, I had assumed that you aided her.”

“Both of which were incorrect assumptions.”

“Which I had no way of knowing as you, Miss Dowding—and I will remind you of this—lied to me.”

“For the sake of your daughter.”

“A lie is still a lie,” he shot back. “And considering that, I think my actions were perfectly justified. I am sorry if I offended or upset you, but you gave me no cause not to.”

“Ha!” she scoffed. “That was almost an apology. I suppose that I should take it.”

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“I am not—!” His eyes flicked up and met her own, fire in them both, but he caught his tongue and stilled his temper. Another deep breath. “I am not apologizing. I am simply asking that we put that moment and the last few days behind us. For Isabella’s sake.”

And it was done. Frederick breathed a sigh of relief, for he had done what he needed to do and said what he needed to say. Now, all that was left was for Miss Dowding to accept his words as they were, and he could leave without doing anything rash or... well, dangerous.

He forced himself to look at Miss Dowding, hoping that she might see his desperation and accept it. Surely, she did not want him in this room with her any more than he wanted to be? Acceptance was what he needed to see in her eyes—anything other than that fiery temperament that he yearned for so much.

Her arms were still crossed, her expression set into an angered rictus as she stalked forward and deeper into the room; the way her arms were crossed pushed her breasts up higher, as if she was doing so to purposefully tempt him. Frederick did his best not to look, stealing a quick glance before again looking past her.

“For Isabella’s sake, is it?” she asked.

“That is why I am here,” he replied. “It will not do for her to see the two of us fighting.”

“And you care that much, do you?”

He frowned. "Of course, I do. Everything I do is for Isabella."

"Including hiring a new governess?"

That had his frown deepening, forcing him to look at her for the first real time. She was still angry at him, that was clear. But there was something else there, a look behind her eyes that spoke to how upset she truly was. For all Frederick's assumptions that she had been upset with how he had spoken to her, was it possible that he had been wrong this entire time.

"You are... you are upset that I am replacing you?"

"What? No," she said quickly and dismissively. "I never wished for this role in the first place."

"Yet you are clearly upset that you are being replaced. Even if you do not want this role."

"I—" She moved to argue but caught her tongue. "I know that replacing me makes sense," she said carefully, her eyes looking over his shoulder as if on purpose... likely for a similar reason that he was doing the same thing. "It is just that..." She sighed. "Isabella is turning into a woman."

"I know that..." A smirk. "No thanks to you."

She ignored that. "It has only been a week or so, but I am already seeing her grow before my eyes in a way I never..." She bit back the statement and swallowed. "After you dismissed me, and after I spoke with you, I suppose I just realized how much I am going to miss her when I am gone."

"You are?" Frederick tilted his head, feeling a strange tightening in his chest that for

once had nothing to do with attraction.

“Of course, I am,” she snapped. “And while I might have made my peace with it, being shouted at by you for reasons that were nobody’s fault save your own rush to judgment didn’t make it any easier.”

Even that rebuke didn’t put Frederick on edge like it might have. Still, he could not get past the way she was speaking about his daughter, almost... almost as if she was her mother.

“You really care that much for Isabella?”

“I just said I did!” she snapped again, her anger rising to boil. “You do not listen so well, do you!”

Again, the remark was one that should have set Frederick on edge, had him feeling the desire to respond in kind, even stepping toward her and attempting to intimidate her as he so often did—to remind her that he was in charge here, and she needed to see it. Only...

He could not get past the way she was speaking about his daughter. The love in her eyes, the warmth in her voice, and the hope in her heart. More than a governess. More than temptress. For the first real time, Frederick dared to see her as his grandmother had been so insistent upon him doing.

“I hadn’t considered that,” he said softly.

She scoffed. “I am not surprised.”

“I...” He almost didn’t say it. Words that he couldn’t recall ever saying before in his life. But with how upset she clearly was, with all that had happened between them,

Frederick knew that for once it might not be taken as a sign of weakness. If anything, the opposite was true. "I am sorry."

She baulked. "Excuse me?"

"I am sorry," he said again, stepping further into the room and toward her. No longer avoiding her gaze, he met it instead, hoping that she might see the truth of his words. "I am sorry for shouting at you. I am sorry for not considering how you felt about Isabella. And I am sorry..." He chuckled lightly. "I am sorry for treating you like a stranger in this house when I see now that the opposite is true."

She leaned back, brow furrowed as if searching for the lie. "You are trying to trick me."

"I most certainly am not." He reached where she was standing, forcing himself not to reach out and stroke her arm.

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“You are trying to get me to admit to something.”

“Is there something you need to admit to?”

“You...” She swallowed as she met his eyes and saw the truth behind them. “You are serious?”

He laughed. “Deadly. Although I ask that you not tell anyone, for I am not in the habit of apologizing.”

Her eyes flashed. “Is this your first time ever?”

“It just might be.”

The tension that so often surrounded them was still there, only this time it was different. Only this time, they didn’t fight it. Alone in Miss Dowding’s bedroom, standing mere feet apart, looking into one another’s eyes, there was no fight in them, no anger, no efforts to dismiss what was growing between them. Certainly, no awkwardness either.

Miss Dowding dropped her arms, smirked to herself, eyes flicking from his lips to his eyes and back to his lips. He could see her chest growing red, her cheeks flushing, her mind struggling to remain on track... to not go where his mind had already gone.

Frederick had always assumed that his attraction to Miss Dowding was borne from her cantankerous nature, that it was her willingness to fight him that was the cause of his desire and passion for her. But right now, without that heat and fire, still he

wanted nothing more than to take her as he had pictured so many times.

Only this time, it didn't feel as wrong as it so often did.

"And what will you give me if I do not?" she asked with a coy smile, a bit of her lower lip, a hungry look in her eyes.

"If you do not...?"

"Tell anyone," she clarified, her voice turning to a throaty whisper. "I cannot imagine it will bode well for you, people finding out how soft you have become."

He chuckled deeply. "Is that a threat, Miss Dowding?"

"A statement of fact," she shot back.

Standing over her, Frederick felt that pull again. That urge to chastise her, to threaten her with the same punishment he had the last time. And how she looked at him in return told him that she was of the same mind. But with how he was feeling, no rage in him, punishment did not feel right.

"So, it is a reward that you are after?" he asked. "For your silence."

She shrugged. "Maybe."

"I am sure I can think of something..." Slowly, carefully, he reached out, his hand moving to her waist. She stepped into it, coming in close, her curvy body pressing into him. "Something that will hopefully convince you to keep this little secret."

"Wh - what did you have in mind?" Still biting her lip, she looked up and met his eyes. The want and desire were in them. Her breathing was heavy and deep and

uncontrolled. He could feel the heat coming from her as her body shook.

“Last time...” His other hand moved to her waist so that he was holding her; he squeezed gently, she gasped, and he grinned. “I punished you for speaking out of turn.”

“You did.”

“This time...” He moved one hand up and rested it under her chin. “... I shall reward you.”

“And how shall you?—”

He did not let her finish, moving down quickly and planting a kiss on her lips. She accepted it, breathed it in, melted into it as her lips parted and his tongue dove inside her mouth. The beast within roared its approval, hungry for more, and Frederick promised it flesh and everything else it craved.

Tongue lapping, one hand under her chin, his other moved around and cupped her ample buttocks. Her hands found his waist and held him as she licked and nibbled and devoured his face. Hearts beating. Breathing heavy. For a moment, they kissed in a way that was beyond anger and fire... that was filled with passion and want and spoke volumes to what this truly meant.

Frederick pulled away, eyes flashing. “Your bed. Now.”

She frowned coyly. “Giving commands again?”

“Are you questioning me?”

In response, she stepped back, holding his gaze as she sauntered to the bed and sat

down. Then, leaning back on her hands, she spread her legs while holding his stare.
“Like this?”

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He chuckled deeply as he went to her, licking his lips as he fell down to his knees before her. “Just like that...” Hands moving to her thighs, he began to rub them. “Now, about this reward...”

“Yes?”

He held her hungry gaze as his hands gripped the hem of her dress, lifting it up past her calves, over her knees, and up her thighs. They shook and quivered, more so as his fingers lightly traced over them. And when he leaned down and placed a soft, wet kiss on her right thigh, she yelped as if from pain.

“Do you think you are deserving?”

“That depends on how good the reward is.”

He chuckled as his hands moved inside her thighs, tracing lightly, fingers stroking deeper and deeper. She was already warm, and he could feel the moisture the further up her thighs he went.

“I suppose we best find out.” He licked his lips and held her gaze as his fingers found her wetness. She sucked in, bit down on her lip, and tried her best not to cry out as one finger slipped inside of her.

“You... you will... you will have to do better than that,” she sputtered through the moans of pleasure.

He laughed. “If you say so.” And then, he dove his head between her thighs.

His tongue found her lips immediately. His lips wrapped around her sex, the button that was already throbbing. So wet. So moist. So sweet. It pulsed and thumped as his lips sucked and sucked and his tongue licked and licked.

Miss Dowding fell backwards. Out the corner of his eyes, he saw her snatch a pillow and hold it over her face to keep herself from screaming. He grinned as he increased his rhythm, making sure to suck and lick and taste to the rhythm that her body shook.

Last time he had done this, Frederick had purposefully denied her. Bringing her to the edge, he had taken pleasure in stopping and leaving her wanting more. This time, he would take just as much pleasure in the opposite.

And as he continued to suck around her lips, a finger inside her now and pressing at the roof of her opening, he could feel it coming. The way her breathing increased. How violently her body shook. Her thighs, quivering until they snapped around his head, and there was no doubt what about to happen.

“Your Grace...” she moaned through the pillow, tossing it across the room. “Urgh! Do not... you must... keep... please!”

His large hands gripped her thighs and held them down as he pleased her with his tongue. She dripped down his chin. She pushed her pelvis into his face. She cried out, she spasmed, she went stiff, and then she exploded.

“Oh God!!” she cried out so loudly he was certain that the entire house could hear. “Oh my God! Yes! Yes! Yes!”

And all Frederick could do was laugh, taking a little too much pleasure in what he had just done, feeling for the first time not shame or embarrassment or guilt. Rather, he felt vindicated, assured in his actions, a sense that for once he had made the right decision.

But not in making Miss Dowding come as he just had. Rather... finally, he was through pretending that she meant nothing to him. Finally, he was finished denying the truth. Finally, he was beginning to consider if this right here was what he had been waiting for these past twelve years.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Caroline's body was still shaking. Her legs, especially. Twenty minutes after His Grace had given his 'reward' as he had jokingly referred to it, and still, her body refused to behave itself. Perhaps it never would again?

The fact that she was wrapped in his gigantic arms like a butterfly in a cocoon did not help either. He was so big and so strong, his body so large and comfortable and safe feeling. She snuggled in close, her hand stroking his forearm, running a little hot in temperature but in no way willing to move.

As to her mind, where that was at? Well, that was a different story...

"You're awfully quiet," His Grace said softly, his voice a whisper in his ear.

"Am I?"

He chuckled, and she could feel it reverberate up her body. "I do remember referring to you as a mute when we first met, yes. But I do not think I have ever been so wrong."

"Save for right now," she responded with a smile.

"A rare instance," he laughed again. "But I choose to take it as a compliment." He kissed her shoulder and pulled her in closer somehow. "So enraptured by what just happened that you have forgotten how to speak."

She snorted. “Is that what you think?”

“Mind a million miles away as you replay over and over again in your mind?—”

“And it’s time for me to go.” She pretended to pull away from him.

“You’re not going anywhere.” His grip around her tightened.

“I will if you insist on stroking that ego like you are right now.” She snorted. “I have heard when men usually do such a thing, they prefer to be alone.”

He laughed and kissed her on the shoulder again. “All right, all right, I will stop. Just making sure that everything is all right.” He waited for an answer, the expected, ‘Of course, it is,’ but Caroline’s mind had started to drift to a place she should have expected, even if it was as frustrating as it was terrifying. “Caroline...” A pang of worry in his voice.

“Of course, it is,” she assured him, kissing his hand which dangled by her face. “Everything is perfect.”

“Good.” He breathed a sigh of relief. “Same here.”

Another kiss on the shoulder, a tighter embrace, a sense that for the first time the two had managed to overcome the tension and perceived antipathy that they had held one another in for so long. A real step forward for the two of them that should have been a cause to celebrate, to relax at the very least. And yet, while Caroline was working overtime to tell herself that everything was fine and that this was good... a sense of unease began to settle on her shoulders that even the bulky form of His Grace could not protect her from.

Something had changed between them earlier. He had come to her room, and she had expected another confrontation. That was how it had always gone with them, and she was glad for it as it made it easier for her to explain their attraction. More than that, it

made it easier to convince herself that when the time came for her to leave, she could do it without pause or guilt.

Only this time, the confrontation never happened. At the mention of Isabella and her feeling for the little girl, His Grace seemed to recognize something in Caroline, a sudden realization that dawned on him and had him seeing her in a new light.

He apologized! He calmed himself. He accepted wrongdoing and while the attraction felt was still there, the cause for it was something that neither had seen coming.

Worse that Caroline had liked it. Dammit, she had loved it. They didn't need to fight and spew fire to want one another, and they certainly didn't need to hate to find that passion. Even now, with it all said and done, His Grace held her in a way she would have never expected him to. A true indication that his feelings for her had grown into something new.

And as to her feelings for him? Ones she had spent nearly two weeks denying? Now she knew there would be no denying them. But that just made things harder.

"I have been thinking..." His Grace began hesitantly.

"Do not hurt yourself.

He laughed. "Concerning you and my mother and Isabella. When it is time for you to leave with my mother, Isabella is bound to be hurt. No doubt, she will blame me for it."

"I will make sure she will not."

"Still... it is going to be hard," he continued carefully. "And I do not relish the proceeding weeks following your leaving."

“I will make sure to write,” Caroline assured him, her chest tightening because she could sense where this was going. “And visit as often as I can.”

“I expect it,” he said, another kiss on the shoulder. “But still, I fear it will not be enough...”

He was nervous, maybe for the first time ever. Even worried about what he was about to say. And Caroline, forcing that guilt down, ignoring the way her stomach twisted, could see exactly where he was going with this. Oh, how much had changed and how quickly.

He was going to ask her to stay. Dammit, he was going to use Isabella as a bargaining chip, one he knew she would find impossible to deny. And while Caroline would have loved for nothing more, things were not nearly as simple as His Grace seemed to think they were. That, after all, was the reason that Caroline was feeling so uncomfortable in the arms of the man who she knew deep down she was starting to fall for.

But it wasn't so simple as that.

In fact, simple was about as far from the reality of her life as existed.

Caroline Dowding, daughter of Lord Viscount Scriven, was an invented identity that only she was aware of. Her entire history, everything she had told Esther and His Grace, was falsified. Her reasons for doing so were just, and she did not regret it. What she regretted, what pained her more than anything, was knowing that the lies she had created, when they eventually came out, would only serve to hurt those whom she loved.

And if His Grace did indeed ask what she knew he was about to, then she would have no choice but to tell him the truth. Was she ready to do that? And could she face the

consequences? Both the hurt it caused... and finally having to face what and whom it was whom she was running from.

“I have been thinking...” His Grace cleared his throat nervously. “How would you feel—what are your thoughts, rather, that instead of leaving with?—”

“I should really be leaving!” Caroline announced suddenly, pushing herself out of His Grace’s arms, half-making to leave as if a most urgent business just came to her.

“Wh - what?” His Grace made to follow her. “Leave? Where?”

“It has been over an hour since you came to see me.” She spoke quickly, putting the pieces of an excuse together as they came, trying to make it appear justified. “If your absence or mine is noticed, we will have to answer some rather awkward questions.”

He frowned at her, and she could not look at him. “I suppose so...”

“It is for the best.” She climbed from the bed, completely naked, and feeling very much that way. And with His Grace watching her, his confusion turning to hurt, it was not an easy thing for her to collect her clothes under his watch.

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“This is your room,” he said carefully. “Unless you plan on walking the house naked?”

“Oh!” She straightened up and grimaced. “Yes, I forgot...”

An awkward pause until finally His Grace shifted in the bed. “I suppose that leaves it to me, then, does it not.” An even more awkward chuckle as he slowly climbed from the bed.

“I am sorry,” she apologized.

“It is fine,” he assured her as he began to collect his clothes. “You are right to worry.”

“I do not mean to throw you out.”

“I think you enjoy it.”

“I—”

“Miss Dowding.” He turned towards her, stepped into her, took her in his arms again, and kissed her. If there were any doubts about how she felt, that kiss dispelled them in an instant. His strong naked body against her. His lips, full and wet and perfect. Breathing him in, feeling him, it was all she could do to not drag him back to bed.

Of course, that didn’t help the matter.

“I will see you at supper?” she asked.

He smiled. "I am looking forward to it." He quickly dressed and then hurried for the door. "And Miss Dowding..." He turned back to give her one more appraising look.

"Yes?"

He smiled. "Nothing. I just wanted to look at you one last time." A wink, and he slipped through the door and shut it behind him.

Caroline collapsed back in bed, heart racing, mind whirring—frustrated because this should have been one of the happiest moments of her life, and yet, it was fraught with danger and misery and despair. But then again, she supposed, what else was new in her life?

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

It was two days later, and Caroline was as confused now as she had been then. Perhaps even more so, as so much had changed in such a short amount of time. Still wondering what she needed to do, still knowing that she could not keep lying, for every day that passed only made things harder, and tonight promised to be a test like no other.

Her mind was fractured, but she needed to stay focused because for the first time in two whole years, since she had fled home and never looked back, she was being thrust into the public eye once more.

The Westchester Ball was the event in question, and Caroline was given no choice but to attend. Her fate, her secret identity, balanced itself on a knife's edge, and her nerves were slowly eating away at her so that she could hardly breathe.

"You look rather nervous," His Grace whispered in her ear as he came in beside her. Careful not to touch her, his hand stayed a mere inch from her waist.

“I am not,” she said with little conviction. Nervous, yes. Terrified, certainly. Unable to concentrate when His Grace stood this close, when she could feel his warm breath on the back of her neck... obviously.

“Good,” His Grace said, flashing her a cheeky grin. “Because someone as beautiful as you are tonight has no right to be nervous. Unless the thought of being the most stunning woman in the room is not one that is to your liking.”

She laughed awkwardly with a quick glance about them because she sensed that people were starting to notice her arrival. “Oh, I am hardly that.”

His Grace continued to smile. “Look around, see how everyone stares. What other reason could it be, except jealousy and wonder.”

“Wo - wonder?” she choked on the word, again looking about, indeed noticing the odd pair of eyes watching her. This had her heart racing, her chest turning red, that desire to turn and run mounting...

“Wondering who this angel is that has seen fit to grace them all with her presence,” he crooned, walking beside her, bent over, so he could speak to her and her alone without anybody else hearing.

“Oh... stop it.” Nerves mounting, she hoped His Grace mistook it for simple modesty.

“And I must say...” Gently, his hand rested on the small of her back, and she stiffened at his touch. That hand... the things she knew it could do were they alone. She felt herself begin to sweat for reasons that went beyond panic. “I have never seen you look so tasty.” He breathed the final word, letting it drip from his tongue and into her ear. She shook from it, wanted it.

“Is that so?”

“But you already knew that?—”

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“Frederick!” Esther called suddenly. “Your Grace!” She stood just a few feet away, already among friends. “Will you come here a moment!”

His Grace sighed. “Will you be all right on your own?” he asked her.

“Somehow, I think I will manage.”

Again, his hand traced her back lightly. “Do not go too far.” He looked right at her; she felt her heart seize, for she thought he was about to kiss her... a most dangerous act. But then he winked and pulled away, stalking to where Esther stood waiting.

The group of lords whom she was with did not look too pleased at having to meet His Grace. In fact, they looked terrified! Caroline chuckled at the sight, knowing the reputation His Grace had while knowing it was far from reality.

Once she was certain he was busy, however, Caroline acted quickly. Head down, one hand covering the side of her face, she moved through the busy ballroom, heading for the corner where there was a small alcove. It was hidden and remote, a perfect spot to hide without it being obvious that she was doing so. With any luck, she might spend the rest of the night there and make it out of here in one piece.

Caroline had not wanted to attend the ball tonight, and if she had not wanted to draw attention or cause a fuss, she might have stayed home. Alas, Esther had insisted—demanded, more like—complaining nonstop that it was expected of them until His Grace eventually relented and agreed to go.

Funny that if this was three days ago, he might still have denied his grandmother, not

caring one way or the other about what was expected. But his mood had soared these past two days such that it barely took any convincing at all. If anything, he seemed to look forward to it!

The irony was bitter to swallow, and Caroline could not escape the realization that she was the reason for this good mood, and thus she was the reason that he seen to her agreeing to come, and that she was thus the reason that she was here at all. Fate, it seemed, had a sense of humor.

Through the ballroom she moved, not daring to meet faces. It was a mass of colorfully dressed bodies only, swirling and dancing and moving to and fro, music playing, drinks flowing, laughter had by all. Hopefully, the cacophony of people packed into the small room would be enough that she would go unnoticed.

She made it to the alcove unmolested, ducked into it, pressed herself against the wall, and took a deep breath. Although this ball was smaller than those she had attended in her old life, it was still busy enough that there was bound to be somebody here from London who might recognize her. The hosts, Lord and Lady Westchester, were names that she recognized but did not know well which meant that her father likely knew of them which meant?—

Her chest began to grow tight. Her breathing became labored. Surely, her father would not be here? He hated balls. And without a daughter to parade about as he used to do, there was no reason for it. But what if...

Despite herself, Caroline found her head peeking out from around the alcove, glancing quickly, searching the mass of faces to make sure that indeed her father was nowhere in sight. If he was... that was not something she wished to?—

“Hiding from someone?” A voice spoke from right behind her.

“Oh!” Caroline just about had a heart attack as she spun about, clutching her chest, and then scowling to see Lord Fernside standing there, grinning stupidly. “Lord Fernside! What do you think you are doing, sneaking up on me like that?”

He shrugged. “I would not have to sneak if you were not hiding.”

“I am not hiding,” she said, keeping the scowl. She liked Lord Fernside enough, even if he was a tad childish. “I am simply...” She clicked her tongue as she considered.

“I will wait,” he said with that same grin, “until you come up with an answer.”

“Getting some space,” she finally managed. “It is rather crowded here, and I am not a fan of crowds.”

“Ah... of course.” His eyes flashed, an indication that he did not believe her. “So, you’re not hiding then, let’s say, from someone whom you would very much rather avoid this night...” A raised eyebrow, and Caroline felt her heart race.

Did he know? Had he somehow figured it out? Surely not! For if he had, he would tell His Grace as they were best friends. Unless he wanted something? Unless he meant to blackmail her.

“From Frederick,” he chuckled. “Or His Grace as I should call him. Never much got used to the title though, truth be told.”

She breathed a sigh of relief. “Oh—I mean, oh. Ye - yes. How did you know?”

“I am perceptive like that,” he said simply. “Although I must say...” He stepped in closer to her. A big man, much like His Grace, his presence made the alcove feel suddenly cramped. “... it hurts me that the two of you are still not getting along.”

“It does?” She glanced over her shoulder, not sure if she was looking for His Grace or making sure they were not seen.

“He is a good man, His Grace,” Lord Fernside said with an honest cadence. “A little rough around the edges but a good man, nonetheless. The best of men, in fact.”

“I know it.”

“Do you, though?” he sighed. “Would you be hiding here if you did—and I know, it is none of my business,” he then hurried. “And I assume that the two of you are still fighting over that little quarrel from last week.” A roll of the eyes and another forlorn sigh. “But I ask that you see it in yourself to look past that singular transgression. I know Frederick... His Grace would appreciate it if you did.”

Caroline frowned as she began to understand what this conversation, and this ambush, was about. Lord Fernside had sought her out to ask her... to beg, just about... to forgive His Grace and give him a chance. Likely, with romantic implications.

It was so out of the blue and unexpected that Caroline almost laughed. She managed to stifle that notion, however, and tried for a smile instead. “I appreciate what you are saying, and I know...” She tittered. “And I understand what you are saying.”

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“Consider it, please.” A soft, pleading smile. “Tonight, for example, is a perfect opportunity to put the past where it belongs and move on. Wouldn’t you say? To better tidings.”

“I could not agree more.”

Of course, Lord Fernside had no idea about what had happened. Nobody did.

Caroline and His Grace had decided to keep their actions a secret for now, the reasons for such being obvious. No need to get Esther excited. And no need to get Isabella’s hopes up. Best to keep things subtle until... well, they had not gotten that far yet.

But just because they were keeping their secret hidden did not mean they were avoiding one another as before. In fact, the opposite was true. To those watching, it would appear that Caroline and His Grace had made amends and had agreed to a sort of truce, happy to be in the same room together, prepared to speak pleasantly to one another, even being friendly and damn jovial. Not romantic. Not suggestive. Simply, companionable.

However, once they were alone... as they had been several times these last few days... that was a different matter.

“Thank you,” Lord Fernside said with some relief. “In fact, let us go find His Grace? A drink, perhaps? It seems like you might need a buffer, and I am willing to provide said buffer,” he chuckled. “The least that I can do.”

Caroline actually felt herself smiling, for despite her insistence on hiding, she did

very much want to see His Grace again. Why, the way they flirted secretly, teasing and testing the limits of what they could do, was half the fun, and she loved how HisGrace took liberties with her once they were alone—the things he would make her say and do! Oh, how she relished it.

She cast her gaze back into the room in search... only to catch a quick glimpse of a face that made her stomach sink, her face pale, and the walls of the room seem to close in around her.

It could not be.

Surely, she was imagining it—seeing things!

She searched again, desperate to prove herself wrong. Eyes scanning from face to face, panic mounting, heart threatening to leap out of her throat. No! There was no way!

“Miss Dowding...” Lord Fernside touched her gently on the shoulder. “Is everything all right.”

“Fre - fresh air,” she stammered, stumbling forward. “I need fresh air.”

“I will join you?—”

“No!” she cried, fixing Lord Fernside with an apologetic look. “I mean, perhaps if you find His Grace and let him know I will be there shortly? I just... I need a moment alone.” A forced smile and a fluttering of her eyelashes.

“All right... I will?—”

She did not hear what he said, turning and stumbling from the room in search of the

balcony, her mind racing as she tried to convince herself that she had just been seeing things. She must have been. There was no way he would be here. But the more she considered, the more she was forced to admit that among the crowd, meeting her eyes and seeing her as had been her fear now for two years, was her father.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Frederick found Miss Dowding standing on the balcony by herself. With her back to the door, she stood over the railing, looking out at the garden that surrounded the back of the manor. Seeing her there, noticing that the balcony was empty save for her, he took a moment to watch and admire her.

God, she was something else.

The moon was waning tonight, yet it still shone brightly upon Miss Dowding, illuminating her as if it shone purposefully to entice him. Her porcelain skin glimmered. Her dark hair glistened. Her dress, ocean blue in color, was strapless and sleeveless, hanging down her back and softly kissing her skin. From where he stood, he could make out her curves clearly, round and supple, soft and tempting, crying out for him to sneak in behind her and wrap his hands around them.

Behind him, Frederick could hear the ball in full swing, but out here, he felt alone with Miss Dowding, as if nothing else mattered, as if the world and all the people in it were nonexistent save for them.

“See something you like?” he asked as he started toward her.

She jumped and spun about, eyes wide in fear—more than he had expected. Indeed, she looked frightened, as if she had come out here to hide and was terrified at being caught. It had Frederick pausing, worried now that something was wrong.

“Your Grace...” She breathed a sigh of relief. “You scared me.”

“I did not mean to.”

She smiled for him, a sign that everything was fine, and he went to her. “You take pleasure in sneaking up on me, don’t you.”

He reached her, a quick glance to make sure that they were alone, and he stepped in and kissed her on the cheek... and then moved to her lips. She did not fight him, her hand moving to his waist and holding him there as her lips worked. The kiss, that was supposed to be a quick peck, grew to something more, and Frederick had to force himself to pull away.

“I had considered watching you and saying nothing,” he admitted with a grin, “but then I would not have been able to kiss you.”

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She rolled her eyes. “A fair trade, I think.”

For a moment, the two said nothing and simply looked at one another. Staring in their eyes, drinking it in, relishing this little tryst they had found themselves to be a part of. And again... God, she was beautiful.

What was wonderful two days it had been. Even the sneaking around and hiding had added a certain flavor to the situation that was as much fun as it was arousing. Speaking pleasantly in public and treating her in a most friendly manner, only to get her alone later on so that she might see his darker side.

Exploring her body each night had been a most magnificent thing. From tasting between her thighs to sucking on her glorious breasts to kneading her buttocks to licking her stomach and devouring every inch of her that he could, Frederick was ravenous around her. Uninhibited! Two days, and he knew the hunger he felt would not stop any time soon. Two days, and even here and now with so many people nearby, it was all he could do not to taste her once more.

Even still, he had not taken Miss Dowding to bed yet. Not in the proper sense. It was a decision he had made early on, to wait and enjoy Miss Dowding in other ways first. No need to rush. No need to bridge that final gap until he had confirmed that the two wanted the same thing. But oh, how hard it was to control himself each night he was with her. The sheer will power needed for such a thing...

“How did you find me?” she asked, stroking his arm, her smile soft.

“Lord Fernside told me you had stepped outside for some fresh air.” He paused as he

met her eyes, worried now because Lord Fernside had said something else...

“Oh, yes,” she chuckled. “I saw him earlier.”

He frowned. “He also said... he said that you seemed upset. Or nervous.”

“D - did he?” She laughed awkwardly, her eyes flashing over his shoulder. “I am not.”

“Because if something is wrong, Miss Dowding...” He reached up and rested a hand under her chin to make sure she was looking right at him. “... you know that you can tell me anything. Anything at all.”

A shadow passed behind her eyes, a clear indication that something was indeed upsetting her. Her brow furrowed, her jaw tightened, and for a moment there, Frederick worried that perhaps what was wrong had to do with him... that she was already moving past this little affair of theirs.

That, as much as anything, made him realize that they needed to speak again soon. He had tried to brooch the topic days ago, but she had panicked and fled the room—or made him flee it. Knowing what he was about to ask her, she had made her thoughts on the matter clear without having to say anything.

It had stung at the time, for Frederick had been about to ask if she wanted to stay when his grandmother left. A tad hasty, perhaps, but he truly felt that it was the right call. Clearly, she did not agree. Only now... should he ask her again? Was the timing right? And would she say yes or panic again and maybe even put an end to his yearning?

“It was just Lord Fernside,” she said quickly, another awkward chuckle. “He was...” She rolled her eyes. “He was trying to convince me to forgive you.”

“What?” Frederick frowned. “Forgive me for what?”

“He still thinks that we are not talking after the other day,” she laughed. “And he was adamant that I go out of my way to do something about it.”

Frederick groaned. “The man is a busybody. As is my grandmother for that matter.”

“How so?”

Another chance to broach the topic, presented to him perfectly. And while Frederick knew he should take it, when he looked at the smile in Miss Dowding’s eyes, recognizing how happy she was in this moment with him, he decided that for now there was no need to say it.

The time would come when he would need to ask her again. Likely very soon as surely his grandmother would be leaving anyweek. But for now... best to simply enjoy the moment as it was while things were perfect.

“Never mind,” he said with a smile, touching under her chin again. “I don’t want to talk about that.”

“Then what shall we talk about?”

“Who said we needed to talk...” He flashed his eyes at her, and she did the same back, sensing his meaning, leaning in, and kissing him fully.

And they continued to kiss. Ravenous. Hungry. Tongues lapping. Teeth biting. Mouths sucking. He moved his hands to her hips, pushing her back against the balcony, squeezing her because he loved the way that she moaned when he did.

It was dark out here... dark enough. Not thinking. Not caring. Frederick moved his

hand down to her dress, lifting it up above her knees.

“Wa - wait.” She moved her hand to stop him. “We should not.”

He raised an eyebrow at her, his hand still gripping the hem of her dress. “Are you denying me, Miss Dowding? You know that is not a smart thing to do.”

She glanced behind him, back toward the ball. “What if people see?”

“It is too dark for that,” he assured her softly, leaning in and kissing her on the neck.

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She moaned, the hold on his hand softened. “But... it is dangerous.”

“I thought you liked that.”

“If we are seen...”

Frederick smiled as an idea came to mind. For the past two days, they had played a game of sorts, vacillating between punishments and rewards—depending on what the mood called for. He had learned that Caroline liked being punished, that she relished his power over her, forcing her into positions where he had all the control, and she was left at his whim. This gave him an idea...

He let go of her dress, his hand moving to the dark blue cravat around his neck. “You are worried about being seen?”

“I am simply saying that it might not be the best idea...” She smirked. “At the moment. But I will make it up to you, I promise.”

“But if you cannot see them, then it is the same thing, yes?” He pulled the cravat free.

She eyed it curiously. “I suppose so...”

He flashed his eyes at her. “Do not move.” Then, he brought the cravat up to her eyes and moved to wrap it around her head.

“What are you doing?” she pulled back, pushing his hands down.

“What did I just say,” he growled a warning at her, letting her see the hunger and command in his eyes. He stepped in close, holding the cravat up to her face again, and this time, she understood.

“I should know better than denying you,” she said in a whisper, dropping her hands.

“That you should,” he chuckled as he tied the cravat around her eyes, blindfolding her. “Now I am not even sure if you deserve what I have in mind.”

“Please,” she begged, eyes covered. “I want it so badly.”

“How badly?” He kissed down her neck, biting into the skin so that she yelped.

In response, even blind as she was, Caroline took his hand in hers and moved it back down her dress. Then she lifted it up slightly, raised her leg, and guided his hand between her thighs.

“I am yours,” she said between kisses, “to do with as you please.”

“You better be,” he growled as his fingers slipped inside of her.

“Urgh...” She wrenched her lips free and then moved to shove her face into his shoulder, but Frederick stopped her, a hand around her neck, holding her face up so that he could see the blindfold.

She gasped as she took a handful of hair, pulling on it as his fingers slipped in and out of her, rubbed and massaged, made her shake.

“Be careful not to scream...” he breathed in her ear.

“Do not... tell me... what to... oh God!” She shoved a hand in her own mouth as her

body went rigid. Frederick pressed himself against her, making sure to cover her if anyone was to look outside.

Her body went stiff and then spasmed. Her legs shook and closed around his hand. How wet she was... he could feel it dripping down her thighs and coating his wrist. But she writhed and breathed and moaned before finally collapsing in his arms.

Once that was done, he gently pulled his hand free and wiped it on the back of his pants. Then he removed the cravat and put it in his pocket before kissing her softly on the lips and making sure to fix her hair. She laughed as he did so, he kissed her on the nose, and together, they laughed some more.

“Shall we go inside?” she asked him finally.

“I think we best. You know, before people begin to talk.”

“I shall go in first...” She winked and started slowly away. “Just in case.”

“Yes, best to be safe,” he chuckled, watching her go, mesmerized by the way her hips swayed back and forth as she disappeared inside and through the crowd.

Frederick grinned from ear to ear, unable to believe his luck in finding such a woman. She was everything he could ever want. Fun. Free. Challenging. Wicked. And that she and Isabella got on so well was a bonus he thanked God for.

Now, all he had to tell was convince her that they should tell people and that she should stay. But that was for tomorrow...

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Walking back inside, Frederick looked about for his grandmother, certain that Miss Dowding would be with her. Frustratingly, he soon made eye contact with a woman whom he had no desire to speak with, and the moment he did, she made a beeline for him.

“Your Grace!” she called and waved as she swept in.

“Lady Tattershell.” Lucky his mood was transcendent, for it made it easier to smile gracefully as she came to him. He took her hand and gave it a kiss, and she crooned. “I am glad that I ran into you, for it is always a pleasure. At least most often,” he then added bitterly.

“Wonderful to hear,” she said with excitement, ignoring the added comment. “I was hoping to see you tonight; it has been too long, Your Grace.”

Lady Tattershell was not a woman whom Frederick knew well but one he knew of. Although to be fair, everyone did. She was a renowned gossip, the type of woman who knew everything about everyone... and who loved to let everyone know that she did. To tell her a secret would be to see it spread through the ton within a week, likely exaggerated by the time it reached whoever was being spoken about.

For that reason, Frederick had little cause or wish to speak with her and every reason to be rude trying to get away.

“As lovely as it was seeing you,” he began, “I am afraid that I must find my grandmother.”

“Oh yes, of course,” she said with a slippery smile. “Give her my best, will you?”

“I will.”

“And Miss Dunn, too,” she said. “Strange seeing the two of you together, however...” She tittered. “I hesitate to even ask.”

Frederick paused mid-step and turned back. “Who?”

“Miss Dunn,” she said again. “The woman I saw you and your grandmother arrive with.”

Frederick frowned. “You mean Miss Dowding.”

“No...” She furrowed her brow and tilted her head. “Blue dress. Brown hair. You arrived with her, Your Grace,” she chuckled and slapped his arm playfully. “Unless you are simply picking women up off the street now. Miss Dunn, daughter of Lord Edgerton, of course. I assumed you knew him.”

“Miss Dunn...” He looked through the crowd and caught sight of Miss Dowding, who smiled, winked, and then looked away. “That is... her name... Are you certain?”

“Very,” Lady Tattershell said before her eye lit up. “Why? Did you not know? Oh!” She grabbed his arm, and the excitement was evident. “Then you must not know of?—”

“Oh, Miss Dunn.” He pulled his arm free. “I am sorry, I misheard you.”

“But you just said?—”

“Of course, I know her.” He looked warningly at Lady Tattershell. “Unless you wish

to suggest otherwise.”

She smiled wickedly, knowing better than to push the matter with him. “Yes, Your Grace. Misheard. Of course. But do give her my best, won’t you. MissDunnand I... we know one another a little. Not well, but she will know my name. I assure you of that.”

“I shall...” he said carefully, a forced smile, an effort to not look as if his world was caving in.

Miss. Dunn? Lord Edgerton? Frederick pulled himself away from Lady Tattershell, mind spinning as he tried to reckon with what he had just been told and if there was any truth to it. The woman was a gossip, a liar, a rumor monger to say the least. But to make up something like that seemed beyond even her own reputation.

But if she wasn’t lying, then what did that mean? Was Miss Dowding lying about who she was? Or was something else going on here? He wanted to dismiss it because that seemed the easiest thing to do. And yet... as he approached Miss Dowding and his grandmother, as he really looked at her, he could not divorce himself from the notion that there was more here than he knew.

Miss. Dunn? Miss Dowding? His world cracking around the edges in a way he was all too familiar with. Why could things never just be simple?

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

“Idon’t care!” Isabella crossed her arms and turned her nose up, looking away from where Caroline was standing.

“Isabella...” Caroline sighed, doing her best to be understanding because she knew that was what the moment called for. “You know it is not my fault. Or my decision.”

“I don’t want somebody else!”

“You knew from day one that this was going to happen,” Caroline continued carefully, wondering if reason and logic were the best tools for the current situation.

“We told you so.”

“But you can change his mind!” She spun about, looking pleadingly at Caroline now.

“If you go to father and tell him—tell him that you want to continue, I know he will agree with you. He has to!”

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Caroline sucked through her teeth for she could see where this was heading.
“Maybe...”

“He will! Oh, Caroline, you have to speak with him! Before it is too late!”

Speak to him? Unfortunately, whenever Caroline ‘spoke’ with His Grace, they ended up doing little talking. Somehow, she figured that if she did do as Isabella asked and went to speak with him, few words would be exchanged.

“But it is too late,” she tried. “Your new governess starts in two days. There is nothing I can do.”

“Nothing you will do, you mean!”

She winced. “That is not true.”

“It is!” she said, face scrunching into an angry ball. “If you told father the first day that you wanted to stay on as my governess, he would have listened. But you didn’t! You want to leave me!”

“I—”

“Why, Caroline!” she begged, chin beginning to wobble, eyes welling. “I thought you liked me. I thought... I thought...” She sniffed and wiped her nose. “I thought we were friends.”

“We are friends!”

“Then why are you leaving?”

“I’m not leaving.” She swept into the little girl, sat down beside her, and wrapped her arm around her shoulder, pulling her into a tight hug. “I promise you that I am not going anywhere. And while you may have a new governess to teach you, that does not mean you and I won’t see one another.”

“Re - really?” she sniffed.

“Of course. And look at it this way, now that I will not be your teacher, it means you do not have to behave around me like you might—like you should.” She raised a warning eyebrow at her, and Isabella giggled. “If anything, this will make us even closer friends.”

Isabella’s brow scrunched as she considered this possibility. Her face was red and blotchy. Her eyes brimmed with tears. Her chin trembled. The girl was in the midst of a tantrum, and Caroline was working overtime to keep it from exploding and ruining their lesson.

Although, what lesson? A lesson implied learning. Instruction. A teacher guiding her student and the student actually listening to what was said. So far today, none of that had been the case.

They were supposed to be working on Isabella’s pianoforte skills—the girl had improved in leaps and bounds lately, and Caroline was looking forward today to really testing her. But no sooner had she walked into the room than Isabella accused her of leaving her, of making it seem as if she wanted to. As if it was her own choice!

Word had come through the previous evening that His Grace had finally hired a new governess to begin her instruction in two days’ time. It was expected as it had now been a week since he’d told them of this eventuality. And while Caroline was glad

about the fact as she could not continue in this role, she was also sad because she would miss the time spent with Isabella more than she might have thought possible. The two had bonded greatly in these past few weeks, more than student and teacher but friends, also.

“So, you’re not leaving me?” Isabella sniffed.

“Of course, not...” Caroline’s stomach twisted at the lie, for that was what it felt like. Not that she would say such a thing now. “How could you even think such a thing.”

Isabella sniffed and laughed softly. “I will miss our lessons.”

“Lessons?” Caroline frowned and then widened her eyes as if from shock. “Oh, is that what we’re meant to be doing. I was wondering what this pianoforte was for.”

Isabella giggled and wiped her nose, sitting up to face the pianoforte finally as she was beginning to move on from her sadness. “You’re silly.”

“And you’re a terrible student,” she winked. “Unless you wish to prove me wrong?” A raised eyebrow which was met with a determined look from Isabella.

Caroline laughed as she stood and stepped back, giving the little girl room to show her what she had learned so far. But then, before she had the chance to begin, Esther skipped into the room with a look on her face that brimmed with positivity.

“There you are!” Esther said merrily. “I was looking all over for you.”

“Grandmother!” Isabella cried.

“Esther, can whatever this is wait? We have lessons.”

Esther came to a stop by the pianoforte, pouting as a child might who was told they could not have a treat before supper. “But I wanted to give you the good news. And I wanted you to hear it from me.”

“Good news?” Caroline frowned as for some reason she could not fathom what this so-called good news might be. Although perhaps she should have, for it could only be one thing. And if she had, she might have thought twice before asking.

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“I just got word from Mr. Jenkins! And it seems that we will be able to move back home even sooner than we thought!”

Caroline’s eyes went wide, and she fixed them on Esther in a bid to stop the woman from talking.

“Less than two weeks!” Esther continued merrily. “Oh, it will be good to be home. Not that I do not love it here, but I like my own space, you know? And?—”

“You lied!” Isabella was up, pointing an accusing finger at Caroline. “You said you weren’t going to leave!”

“Isabella!” Caroline spun around, caught between trying to explain and simply denouncing Esther’s claim. “It is not as simple as?—”

“I knew you were leaving!” the little girl cried. “I knew you were!”

“Isabella, please, if you will just?—”

“You’re not my friend!” She turned and sprinted from the room. “Friends don’t leave one another!” Through the door she fled, the sound of her tears echoing off the walls as were the loud clomps made from her shoes as she ran.

“Isabella!” Caroline shouted after her, hurrying around the pianoforte but not chasing her through the house. Somehow, she didn’t think there was much point right now.

“Oh no...” Esther grimaced. “Was this bad timing?”

“It was.” Caroline bowed her head. “But I don’t think it would have made much difference. She was going to find out eventually, and somehow, I get the feeling that the reaction would have been the same, regardless of the circumstances.”

“She really loves you.”

Caroline chuckled. “She will get over it.”

“Maybe...” Esther walked to her, running her fingers idly over the top of the pianoforte. “Maybe not.”

“Is that supposed to make me feel better?”

“Just a statement of fact, I am afraid,” she sighed. “Although perhaps there is no need for her to. Get over it, I mean...”

Caroline bristled for she knew to what Esther was implying. And now that she did, she wondered if the old woman’s timing was as accidental as she claimed. In fact, the more she thought about it, the more she came to realize that it very likely wasn’t.

Esther had made no secret about her desire to see His Grace court Caroline. And while previously she had been subtle about it, dropping small hints here and there as if it was not obvious what she wanted, now, she had reached a point where subtlety simply would not do. She wished for Caroline and His Grace to be together, and she mentioned it as often as she could.

Funny that even she did not know about Caroline and His Grace’s secret romance, for they had managed to keep it hidden for close to a week now. It added to the passion, they both decided. The danger made it more fun. And while neither of them needed an excuse to do ungodly things to one another whenever they got the chance... why change what was working?

Just the thought of it... imagining His Grace's strong hands around her body as his lips kissed down her neck, wrapped around her breasts, nibbled them, sucked as her own hand wrapped around his?—

Caroline pulled herself from that thought as she could feel her cheeks flushing as Esther watched her. "I told you, that is not an option," Caroline dismissed instead, turning away and walking back around the pianoforte.

"I didn't say anything!"

She fixed Esther with an unamused expression. "And yet your lack of words says so much. I told you, when you return home, I am coming with you, and that is the end of the matter."

"And Frederick?" Esther asked. "What does he think about this?"

Caroline was an adept liar by now, but even she could not hide the obvious look on her face. So, she cast her eyes downwards, pretending to fiddle with the keys on the pianoforte. "I imagine he does not care one way or the other."

"Is that so?"

"He has hired a new governess already, so likely, he is counting the days until I leave. You have seen how tragically we get along..." She dared a glance at Esther, who was grinning triumphantly. "No doubt he cannot wait to be free of me."

"Perhaps..." She shrugged as she turned and began to waltz back across the room. "But while you may have everyone else in this household fooled, Caroline, I am not so slow that I cannot see what is before my own two eyes."

"And what is that?"

She reached the door, turned, and winked. “The way my grandson looks at you. One would think that the sun shines from your...” She chuckled. “Well, from somewhere, the way he gawks when you are not looking.”

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Caroline felt her cheeks flushing, her smile growing. “Oh, now you are being silly.”

“I am many things, but silly isn’t one of them. Well... not always, anyhow.” She made sure that Caroline was looking at her so that she might see the knowing look in her eye. Another wink, a soft giggle, and Esther disappeared around the corner.

If the circumstances were different, Caroline might have felt a thrill at Esther’s words—confirmation that His Grace was as infatuated with her as she was with him. Because she was verymuch that and had been since they began their tryst nearly a week ago now. He was not the man whom she thought he was initially, and day by day, Caroline felt her feelings for His Grace growing stronger and stronger. Only that was the problem.

He wanted her to stay here when Esther moved home. He had not said as much yet, but she could sense it on the tip of his tongue, there to be spoken when the timing felt right. The reason he had not said anything yet, she assumed, was because whenever the conversation veered that way, Caroline was quick to dismiss it... often distracting him through other far more tantalizing means.

But it was a conversation to be had soon. And now that Esther’s home was nearly ready to move back to, it was a conversation that could not be put off any longer.

Caroline knew that deep down that she wanted the same thing as His Grace. She wanted to live here. She wanted to explore the romance blossoming between them. She wanted to develop her relationship with Isabella. She wanted to stop running and settle down in a way she never thought possible! She wanted... she wanted... she wanted what she simply could not have.

Caroline had not forgotten what had happened three nights ago when she had thought that she spied her father at the Westchester Ball. For three days now she had worried about it, fretted that he might come and find her. The fact that he had not suggested she had imagined it which should have been a relief if it didn't impress upon her the fear that was growing daily... the worry that one day soon her secret would be revealed.

In short, Caroline knew that she could not keep living a lie. To tell His Grace the truth would risk ruining what they had, for surely, he would be furious at her for deceiving him? But to not tell him would force her to leave with Esther, to pretend that this last week had not happened, to hurt the man she was starting to fall for all because of the fear that wrapped her like a disheveled blanket.

What to do... what to do... what to do. No easy answers. Wrong decisions only. That was the reality of Caroline's life of the moment.

She sighed to herself as she tried her best to ignore the weight of expectation resting upon her shoulders. For now, she would simply continue on as she had been doing for the past two years, pretending that her life wasn't in shambles. Running is what she was doing. Hoping that a solution might present itself while praying the walls did not close around her.

"Isabella! Isabella, please!" she called out as she left the room, figuring that she should try and console the poor girl.

Like Frederick, Isabella would surely hate her when the truth came out, but for now, it was a friendship that she both cherished and needed as there was a good chance it would be her last.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

George sent word ahead to let Frederick know that he would be arriving shortly. There was nothing in his message to suggest bad news... and nothing to suggest good news either. Simply a statement of arrival, leaving Frederick's imagination to turn as it had been doing the last three days.

He paced his study as he waited. Hands folded behind his back. Strides long and purposeful, as if he had somewhere he needed to be. Expression determined. Jaw clenched tight. Mostly, he was trying his best not to let panic overtake him, a constant reminder to himself that this was all in his head and a few minutes from now he would be laughing at how silly he had been.

But still... he could not escape that feeling deep in the recess of his mind. He could not outrun the sense of inevitability which haunted him. For three days now, he had done what he could to ignore it, but now, it was finally time to learn the truth.

A knock at the door brought him back into the room.

Frederick strode around his desk and forced himself to sit, even if he was beginning to tremble with anticipation. He settled. Straightened his back. A deep breath... and then another.

"Enter!" he called finally.

The door opened slightly ajar, and George stepped inside. The moment his large body was through the gap, he turned and closed it gently, an innocuous action but the need for absolute privacy inherent in the act had Frederick's hair standing on end.

"You weren't waiting long, were you?" George asked as he crossed the room.

"Did you find anything?" Frederick asked, not at all in the mood for small talk.

"What did you learn?"

About to sit across from Frederick, George paused and looked about. “Do you have anything to drink?”

“Brandy.” Frederick indicated to the liquor cabinet across the room. “Help yourself. But make it quick.”

George hurried to fix himself a drink. “And one for you?”

“I would rather not. Unless...” He swallowed. “Do I need it?”

George’s back straightened. Hesitation. And then, he poured a second glass. The sight of such an action had Frederick’s stomach sinking, for it was proof enough of what he feared, what he had been expecting, and what he had prayed to not be the case.

This was not going to be a pleasant conversation. Worse than that, if what he feared turned out to be reality, it was but the beginning of what promised to be a very unpleasant evening.

“I would not begrudge you...” George put the glass of brandy down before Frederick took a sip of his own and then fell into his chair with a groan. “My legs...” He groaned again and stretched them out. “Two days of riding, and I can hardly stand. Ironical, as all I have been doing these last two days is sitting.”

Frederick said nothing. He took a sip of his brandy, forcing himself to swallow as his stomach was already beginning to turn.

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“And the heat...” George shook his head to himself. “Have you been outside at all today? It is absolutely monotonous how hot?—”

“George,” Frederick growled at him, a scowl fixed on his face. “What did you learn?”

George looked at Frederick hesitantly. Another sip of his brandy. A twitching of the side of his mouth. A shadow passing behind his eyes that spoke to just how bad the news he had was.

“Nothing good,” he said with a sigh. “Nothing good...”

And Frederick, bracing himself for the worst, took another sip of his drink. A long and deep one, for he knew now that he was going to need it.

It was three nights ago now that Lady Tattershell had claimed to know Miss Dowding. Only, the busybody gossip had claimed that Miss Dowding was in fact named Miss Dunn, and her father was Lord Edgerton, not Lord Scriven! An obvious mistake, for it had to be, and Frederick was happy to pretend as such for there was no point giving in to such lies.

Try as he might to shake these mistruths from his conscience, Frederick had spent the following day looking at Miss Dowding a little closer. He began to take note of the way she acted whenever he breached the possibility of her moving in with him, a ploy which he had assumed meant that she did not have the same feelings for him as he did her. Now seen in a different light, what if the reason she was so eager to leave with Esther when the time came was because she didn't want her past coming up? A past that wasn't the one she had given...

He could not believe it to be true. There was no way! But it ate at Frederick such that he felt he had no choice but to confirm it for the lie it was so he might be able to move on once and for all.

With no other option before him, Frederick had reached out to George to do some digging on his behalf. For two days now, George had ridden throughout London and across the country in search of the truth. And now that he was back, it was time to learn whether Lady Tattershell was mistaken or if there was more to Miss Dowding than anybody knew.

“I started with Lady Tattershell,” George began seriously. “As requested, I kept my reasons for wanting to learn about this Miss Dunn to myself—even if the old bat may have suspected. But Lady Tattershell did not mind telling me what she knew either way. She was eager for it!”

“And Miss Dunn...” A lump grew in Frederick’s throat. “What do we know of her?”

“She is indeed Lord Edgerton’s daughter—the woman is real, if that is what you mean. From what I was able to learn from Lady Tattershell, this Miss Dunn has been missing for two years now.”

“Two - two years?” He could feel the walls closing in.

“Apparently, she ran away from home. Nobody knows the reason, not even Lady Tattershell. Even if she did have her theories.”

“Which were?”

George shrugged. “Apparently, Lord Edgerton is in tremendous debt although strangely Lady Tattershell could not recall any sort of marriage arrangement prior to Miss Dunn fleeing. Even more bizarre...” He hesitated, biting into his lip as if he was

not sure whether or not to speak.

“George...” Frederick braced himself. “What is it?”

“Lord Edgerton, or so Lady Tattershell claims, has made little effort to try and find his daughter. In fact, most assume that he sent her away himself. Now, clearly, if she ran away, he might have started the lie to cover himself and not bring embarrassment, but the way Lady Tattershell spoke, it was as if he promulgated it. Although why he would do such a thing...” He clicked his tongue in thought.

“What else?” Frederick asked stiffly.

George’s expression softened, a look of concern, even worry. “You asked me to be careful in my research, so I opted not to visit Lord Edgerton himself. Rather, I visited his sister-in-law’s daughter, for I know her a little and thought it might be a little easier to explain my sudden interest in her cousin.”

“And?”

“I told her that Miss Dunn was thought to have been seen on my estates in the north—that I was there to find a painting of the girl, so I could confirm if it was her or not. Her cousin, a Miss Galpin, was happy to provide me a portrait of this Miss Dunn from when she was roughly sixteen. Not a perfect facsimile as it was a landscape with her in the foreground, but...” He leaned forward, expression soft, even pained. “Frederick, it was her. There could be no doubt.”

“Wh - who?” he asked, knowing the answer.

“Miss Dowding is Miss Dunn. I do not know why. I do not know how. But it is her. It must be.”

The world turned.

Frederick fell back in his chair as his nightmares shifted into reality. As the lies compounded on top of him. As the deceit opened and made itself known. He thought to finish his brandy but felt sick, like he might vomit. He thought to deny the claims but could not see the point as he had suspected this for days. He thought to shout. To let his emotions roar! So many things he wished to do, none of which materialized.

Rather, he simply sat there, struck to silence as the weight of everything came crashing down on top of him.

“I have been doing some thinking,” George continued as Frederick sat in silence. “Why Miss Dowding—Miss Dunn, whatever! Why she might have done this.” He looked at Frederick for confirmation to continue, but Frederick was barely able to register it. “Money. It has to be money.”

Frederick forced himself back into the room. “Money? What do you mean?”

“Think about it. Her father is broke—everyone seems to know it. Likely, he was struggling to arrange a suitable marriage for her, a dowry that would cover the extreme debt he is in. What if this entire thing, the charade, was all part of his plan?”

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“Plan? What...” Frederick could not even finish the question, for he understood completely what his friend meant.

“You, Frederick. You are the plan. She becomes your grandmother’s companion through what appears chance but is anything but. She bides her time, waiting until you two meet—heck, she might have set the fire that burned down your grandmother’s estate in the first place! And now that she is here, she is free to trick you into a marriage, secure her fortune, and then snatch it right out from under you.”

“No... that is... that is impossible.”

“I have looked into this Lord Edgerton,” George continued, “and believe me, from what people say, nothing is beneath him. I do not want to sully Miss Dowding—Dunn’s, name. I do not want to throw allegations at her, but it fits. She is using you, Frederick. She and her father are using you.”

“No...” He felt the anger rising.

“Think about it,” he continued. “Really think. Your initial attraction to her was by design. She knew the type of man who you were, that you would like a little fire to stoke the flames of attraction.”

“No... she did not...” He felt the fury brimming.

“And even Isabella, she has been using her to get to you.”

“I can’t believe that she would...” He felt himself beginning to shake as the reality

settled in a way he could not deny.

“Everything she has done, sadly, has been to tempt you. To trick you. To use you?—”

“Enough!” Frederick roared finally, jumping from his chair, bearing down on his friend as if he meant to tear his throat out with his own two hands. “I will not sit here and listen to this... this slander! The things you say, you have no proof! You have no... no idea as to what you speak! Lies! They are all lies!” Spittle flew from his mouth as might have fire, were it possible.

George did not look phased. Or fearful. He stayed seated, meeting Frederick’s angered glare, perhaps the only man in the free world who could do such a thing. “I am just the messenger,” he said.

“You have no proof! And I refuse to believe anything you have said!”

“That is up to you,” George agreed. “But please, please, do not ignore what I have told you here today. She is Miss Dunn; that is fact, Frederick. Why she has lied to you...” He sighed. “...you must find out.”

Frederick’s body was still shaking. His heart raced, and his breathing roared. He could not believe what he was being told! He refused. After all that he and Miss Dowding—for that was still how he thought of her—had been through, there was no way. Only...

Why lie? Why hide who she was? And yes, he told himself that she was the one who seemed hesitant to move in with him, but what if it was an act, a longer part of the con? She knew him as well as any and might have known that her denial would only tempt him further. Was she playing him? Could she do such a thing?

“I have to go,” George said suddenly. “I have been away from home for two days,

and I feel that you might need some time to think.”

Still standing, Frederick looked past George to the closed door. “Yes,” he said absently. “Perhaps that is for the best.”

George nodded once and turned to leave. When he reached the door, however, about to open it, Frederick had a thought. Yes, he could be subtle about this, and he could poke and pry and try and learn the truth in his own time. But that was never his way. He had been made to look like a fool, and it was time to find out why.

“George,” he called after his friend, “on your way out, might you do me one last favor?”

George frowned. “Anything.”

“Seek out Miss Dowding for me, will you? And send her to me. It is time that she and I had a little chat.”

“Of course...” George bit into his lip, again that sense of worry building. “And good luck, Frederick, with whatever happens.”

He left after that, giving Frederick some time to think. Sitting back down, his foot tapped, his arms shook, his body ran hot such that he could barely sit still. No idea what he was going to say. No idea how he was going to say it. He knew one thing to be true: by the time that Miss Dowding left this study, he would know the truth.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

By the time that Miss Dowding appeared in the open doorway, Frederick had managed to calm down considerably. It had been hard to do, but he had forced himself, sensing that calm was needed for what was about to happen... at least for

now.

She smiled at the sight of him, her eyes flashing as she stepped into the study and closed the door behind her... and then locked it. The sound of that lock clicking had Frederick's chest tightening and his blood running hot for an entirely different reason to what one might think.

"Before supper?" Miss Dowding smirked as she walked into the study, a look in her eyes that he recognized only too well. "How scandalous. Not that I am complaining, of course..." She licked her lips suggestively.

Of course, that was the reason she thought that Frederick had sent for her. Why else would he do such a thing? This past week, the two had snuck around this manor like a couple of teenagers in the throes of their very first romance. Unable to keep their hands off each other, they had sought solace when they could, often finding excuses to be alone so that they might devour the other in ways they had both come to relish.

And every time they had been alone, literally every single time, it had been the same.

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She stood back from the table, hands folded behind her back in a way that pushed her chest forward. She wore a simple gown, loose but easier to pull off quickly because of it. Just yesterday, in a similar circumstance, Frederick had pulled her into this very study, lifted an identical gown over her head, sat her on the edge of his desk, and buried his head between her thighs until he had her screaming.

His heart began to race as he thought of doing the same. His hands around her body. His lips over her heaving breasts. Perhaps a hand over her mouth to stop her from screaming as he slipped his fingers inside of her. So easy to do... to forget why he had asked her here... to live in ignorance... to taste her one final time?—

No! He gave his head a shake, set his expression to a more stern one, and ignored the way his member throbbed between his legs.

“I am sorry to pull you away from my daughter’s lessons,” he began simply.

“Oh...” She sighed. “That is quite all right. To be honest with you, they were not going so well today.”

He frowned. “And why is that?”

She clicked her tongue. “Isabella was not happy to learn about the new governess starting in two days’ time—she accused me of trying to leave her, as if it was my idea. Worse was when Esther came skipping into the room to announce that her estate would be ready to move back to sooner than we thought.”

“Is that so?” he asked, studying her now for her response.

“I have just spent the last hour with Isabella assuring her that I was not leaving her, but...” She looked away sheepishly. “... I can only lie so much.”

He almost scoffed at that—the irony of her not wishing to lie—but kept his cool for he saw an opportunity. “And is it a lie?”

Her eyes went wide for a moment, clear surprise at the directness of the question, but as had been her way these last few days, she was quick to cover it. A sly smile, and she walked close to the table. “Let us not talk about that right now...” She reached the table and perched herself on the edge, tracing her fingers across the top. “Surely, there are other things on your mind?”

Again, Frederick felt that same pull that was so common when he was alone with Miss Dowding. To reach out and take her hand. To pull her onto his lap. To kiss and taste her and have her as he so wanted to do... A growl escaped his lips, but he forced himself to smother it.

“Answer the question,” he said instead; his voice was sharp and commanding.

She blinked and pulled her hand back. “Excuse me?”

“You have avoided answering it for a week now.” Slowly, he forced himself to stand, so he was looking down at her. “And I would like to know. When my grandmother leaves, will you be joining her?”

“Oh...” She leaned back, taken by surprise, her cheeks flushing and nerves growing. She looked away, half made to stand...

“I... I have not really thought about it.” An obvious lie.

“Yes, you have,” he said as he stepped around the table. “Do not say otherwise.”

“Your Grace...” She leaned back further when she saw him coming. “What you ask is... it is not any easy question to answer.”

“But you have thought about it.” He stopped in front of her, careful not to get too close. “I know that you have.”

Was that excitement behind her eyes? Eagerness? As if she had been waiting for this moment, for him to press her. She licked her soft lips, moisture forming on them. He yearned to reach out and run his finger along them, to slip that finger back in his mouth and taste her...

“I will admit I was upset when Isabella accused me of leaving her; I - I have grown very fond of her these last two weeks.”

“I have noticed.”

“And us,” she continued. “When we first met, I admit that I did not like you very much.” She was looking away, but a soft chuckle, and she looked up at him, meeting his eyes, letting him see what she thought looked like truth in her words. “But a lot has changed.”

“It certainly has.”

“And you...” She licked her lips again, reached out, and stroked his arm. He stiffened at her touch but did not pull away. Even he was not so strong as to do that. “What would you like?”

“That was not the question I asked.”

She laughed softly, nervously. “But it is a relevant one.”

“Still, not the one I asked.” There was an angry growl in his voice, one she clearly took as arousal.

Her eyes flashed. “I do not want to leave Isabella...” She spoke carefully, as if choosing each word specifically. “I fear what it might do to her. And as for us...” She took his hand and held it. “I... I admit that I would like to see where...” She was shaking, struggling to control her breathing, breasts heaving beneath her dress. “Yes,” she said finally. “If you wish it, when Esther leaves, I will stay.”

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And there it was. Now that Frederick was paying attention, he could not believe how obvious it all was.

She was playing with him. Using him. Using Isabella! She clearly had no intention of leaving, but she did not want to make that obvious. Rather, she had chosen to dance around the possibility, coaxing the answer out slowly, teasing him so that he would think that she was doing something she might not want, as if he was the one making the decision.

Everything George had told him was the truth, and it broke Frederick's heart. For how attracted he was to Miss Dowding—Miss Dunn as it was, there was more to this relationship than that. He had cared for her like no other. He had been open with her like never before. He had actually wanted her to stay because he thought there might be a chance that... that... that... honestly, it didn't matter now.

She was still sitting on the table before him. Still holding his hand. Legs spread open slightly as if inviting him. She was looking down at her lap, and he could see her working up the courage to speak, knowing that she was going to say something along the lines of being in love with him, pulling him further into her web.

“Before we agree to anything,” she said softly, almost hesitant, “there is something else...” She swallowed. “One more thing I need to say.”

“You know you can tell me anything, Miss Dunn,” he said.

She nodded and looked up to meet his eyes; they were almost pleading which he did not understand. “I— wait. What did you just say?”

He pulled his hand free, his expression impassive. "I called you Miss Dunn. That is your name, is it not?"

Face stricken with panic, she leaned back, might have jumped from the table if there was room. "I—that is not—I do not know why you would?—"

"And your father is Lord Edgerton, yes?" He spoke firmly, little emotion, facts and nothing more. "You ran away from home two years ago. Home, not an altar where your betrothed left you."

"Your Grace..." She laughed nervously. "I do not know what you... that is not true. My name is Miss Dowding, and it is as I said..." Her eyes flicked about, unable to even look at him. "My father is Lord Scriven, and I was left at the altar?—"

"Liar!" he roared, his anger finally getting the better of him. She nearly fell back, face paling. "Do not insult us both with your lies," he snarled. "They are beneath you. They are beneath me!"

Eyes still flicking everywhere. Breathing ragged and harsh. Body shaking. She looked down at her lap, struggling to control herself, struggling to keep any semblance of calm. No doubt her mind was racing with thoughts of what to do next if there was even anything. And all through it, Frederick watched her, forcing the hate to rise even if he was not feeling it as he wanted.

Finally, she took a deep breath. Still looking at her lap, she spoke softly and into her chest. "When did you find out?"

"Lady Tattershell told me," he said coldly. "And I have just had it confirmed. Everything."

"Ev - everything?" she stammered.

“Enough to know that you are not who you say you are. That you have been using me and my grandmother and my daughter to your own end. That nothing you have told us is real. That you are a liar. A fake. A fraud!” He took a deep breath, again forcing calm. “Am I missing anything?”

“It is not what you think,” she said softly, still unable to look at him. “I never meant to... I never meant?—”

“For us to find out? I am sure you didn’t.”

“No!” Her head snapped up, and she looked right at him, her big eyes red, welling with tears. Chin trembling. Pain on her face like nothing he had ever seen. It was almost enough to break him... “It is not what you think. I swear, I did not mean to—you and Esther and Isabella! You were never meant to... this was not about...”

“If you wish to say something, Miss Dunn, say it,” he hissed. “This is your last chance.”

He almost wished that she might have an explanation. That she might laugh and tell him how silly he was being, that nothing he said was true. That somehow, in some way, she could prove him false and realign his fears, for this was not what he wanted. Not even a little bit.

And as she struggled to find the words, he begged silently, hoping...

“There is nothing to say...” She bowed her head again. “You are right. I am a liar and that...” She sniffed. “... that is the truth.”

Frederick’s heart broke in two. Strangely, as the anger surged, so did the despair. Oh, he wanted to hate her. He wanted fury and rancor and malice like nothing else. But he could not bring himself to find it. His legs shook. His stomach imploded. He might

have collapsed if he did not want to look weak.

“But please!” She was on him now, looking back up, she reached out and took his face in her hands, holding it so he was forced to look at her. “You must know that I am sorry. I never wanted any of this—for you or anyone to be involved. I am so sorry.”

“And yet we are,” he said softly. Her hands on his face, still so soft and warm. He reached up and rested one hand on hers, held it there for it would be the last time he felt her. “You did this, Miss Dunn. You brought this on yourself.”

“Please, tell Isabella that?—”

“You are not to see or speak with my daughter again.” His voice cracked, and he could see her soul break at the words.

“Tell her I am sorry... and Esther too. Tell her... tell her... tell her...”

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Frederick could not explain what came over him in that moment. Thoughts, memories of the last week flooded him, the realization that as happy as he had been, he would never feel that happiness again. Her hands on his face, her breath filling his nostrils, her body shaking mere inches away, and all he could think was that he needed to kiss her a final time, to know how that felt because he would never get to again.

And he did.

He leaned in and brought her face to his own. His lips touched hers softly. She sucked in as if breathing him in for the last time, body stiff, still shaking but calming slightly as their tongues lapped and their hands held one another. They kissed passionately and deeply. They kissed as if it was their first time, not their last. They kissed as if the world was about to end, and they were the only two in it.

And when Frederick pulled away, he knew that it would be the last time that he ever tasted Miss Dunn on his lips, and that, perhaps, hurt the most.

“I want you gone,” he said, his voice a whisper, speaking past her because he could not bear to look at her.

“Your Grace...” she sobbed gently, body heaving.

“When I leave here, I will collect my grandmother and daughter for supper,” he continued, forcing the words, each one like acid on his tongue. “Once we are in the dining room, you are to pack your things and leave.”

“Please...”

“Take one of my carriages. Direct the driver to wherever you need to go, I do not care. But you are to leave here tonight. And do not dare come back.”

He could see her trying to talk. Between the sobs. Between the moans of pain and agony. He could literally sense the words forming on her lips only to fade into nothingness before leaving them. Unable to look at him, head bowed, she wept and shuddered and withdrew in on herself—a sight that broke Frederick like nothing else.

In the end, all she could do was nod her understanding, for words and reason had left her.

And Frederick, knowing he had to leave now, for he was not strong enough to stay, turned and strode toward the door. He made sure to stand tall, to look in control and powerful as he unlocked the door, threw it open, and stormed out. But incontrol, powerful... these were as far from how he felt as was possible.

He had no doubt that Miss Dunn was hurting. Even if she had been lying, he sensed that her pain was real, that perhaps the lie had become lost in her reality, and there were feelings there that she did not expect. But it did not matter as Frederick was surely hurting even more than she was.

And for that, he would never forgive her.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Caroline’s entire body hurt such that she thought she was going to die. That she wanted to die! The way she ached. The way it felt as if her chest was about to cave in, as if her lungs were about to collapse, as if her heart might burst. Surely, even death could not be as bad as this?

She wept openly. She let the tears pour down her face, not caring how it might look,

for she was alone, so why not let them come? Alone in this world so suddenly, not so much as a soul to turn to. Alone where she sat, the walls of the carriage slowly closing in around her so that she felt suffocated, so that she could barely breathe.

The world was not ending, but it felt as if it might. And what was more, she welcomed it.

It was only five minutes ago that she left the Dukedom of Thornton for what she knew would be for the last time. Once His Grace had stormed from the room, she had somehow managed to stumble back to her room and collect her things—not that she took much, only the little money she had and a cloak to keep her warm. It was more than she felt that she deserved.

From there, she had made her way outside without being spotted. Walked to the stables and asked for a carriage to take her. When asked where she wished to go exactly, she had frozen, for she had realized suddenly that she had nowhere to go. No friends. No family. Nothing in this world whatsoever.

“An inn,” she had managed to say through her ever-present sobbing. “The closest inn to the estate.”

The stable hand had looked at her curiously. “Perhaps I should ask His Grace if?—”

“No!” she had cried, forcing herself to act more composed. “He is aware of my leaving. A carriage, thank you. And be quick about it.”

Two minutes later, and she was tucked into the back of a carriage, feeling it rattle as it raced from the estate to places unknown. Alone in said carriage for the first time, Caroline was given time to think... to understand the true hopelessness of her plight and how epically she had failed.

It was always going to come to this, and as she sat in the back of that carriage crying for what was lost, Caroline realized that this was all her fault. Oh, she might have liked to have blamed His Grace somehow, perhaps Lady Tattershell too for telling him who she was, but those accusations felt hollow and underserved. This was on her and her alone, and her only regret was that she hadn't told His Grace herself.

She thought of that kiss and what it meant, still feeling him on her lips, the love that she knew he bore for her but was unable to give because he no longer trusted her. And rightly so.

She thought of Esther and Isabella, what they would think when His Grace told them the truth. Esther would be shocked. Isabella might not believe it at first. But eventually she would, and she would come to understand that she had been lied to, thinking that their friendship was not real, for how could a real friend lie like that?

She thought of all the times that she could have and should have told His Grace the truth. Even just now, when he gave her a chance to explain why she had done what she had done, and she had baulked for fear had held her back. She was a coward, she knew, running as always because it seemed easy. While deep down she could wonder if perhaps things would be different had she told him earlier who she was, she also knew that was never really an option. This here was the end that she should have always expected.

As to why she could not tell him the truth? Why she was so afraid? Who she was and what she was doing? That was a story perhaps even sadder than this one.

Caroline hadn't been left at the altar by a man who had fallen in love with a maid. And her father hadn't decided to ship her off to a nunnery to save the family name embarrassment. That concocted tale, told the first night she met Esther, was almost pleasant compared to the truth.

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Caroline Dunn's father, Lord Edgerton, was as cruel and despotic a man as Caroline had ever known to exist. While she couldn't remember the early years of her life, she was told once by her mother that for a time there, her father was in fact loving and kind and generous. That she had in fact loved him when they married because he was a different man to the one whom Caroline knew. But that seemed almost irrelevant, really.

Caroline grew up in a house of horror, a constant state of fear, a world in which she truly feared that any day might be her last. Having fallen into extreme debt even before Caroline was born, her father took up drinking as a means to soften the burden and embarrassment of what he had become. The constant nights of drinking changed him, making him petty and abusive and cruel, traits he would demonstrate by abusing Caroline and her mother.

It became worse the older Caroline got. It became more dangerous. It became so bad that two years ago, on a night that was ordinary compared to some, Caroline bore witness to her father murdering her mother right before her eyes. An accident, he had claimed in a drunken stupor, she had made him do it—he had pushed her hard, she had tripped, her head had smashed into the side of a table, and that was where her mother lay. Dead.

It was a scene that still lived in Caroline's nightmares, and she had known that if she stayed under that roof any longer, she might be next.

So, she fled. She ran away. She determined to leave her old life behind, knowing that if her father ever found her, for the fear that his secret might get out, he would likely do to her what he did to her mother.

Sitting in the back of that carriage, still weeping for the agony and pain that radiated over her entire being, Caroline wondered if she should have told His Grace this when he had asked. Surely, if he knew the truth...

No. The truth? It was laughable to think he would believe her. What was more, she feared her father so much that she worried what he might do if he found out where she was. Esther. Isabella. His Grace. They were in danger so long as she was around them, and this running was her only option.

None of this made her feel better, of course. And so, she cried and cried and cried. For a brief while there, a week it was, Caroline had been as happy as she ever was. In the throes of love, loved in return, able to ignore reality because when one was that happy it was hard to think of anything else.

But that was the past now, and there was nothing she could do but run.

As to where she would run? That was a decision to be made tomorrow. Tonight, she would find an inn. She would lie in bed and cry until she could not keep her eyes open any longer. And tomorrow when she woke, she would be forced to consider what to do next. Where to run. How she might restart her life. Allwhile begging forgiveness for what she had done and those she had hurt.

“Whoa there!” The carriage came to a sudden stop. Caroline started, falling forward from her seat and onto her knees. “Who goes there?!” It was the coachman, shouting into the night.

“Thank God, you stopped!” a voice responded. “I have been walking for hours! Please, you must help me!”

“Begone!” the coachman commanded. “And out of the way, you!”

“Please!” the traveler begged. “A lift to the nearest village is all I ask! I have money!”

“I said—wait! What are you doing? Get off! No! Wait—” A loud thud cut through the coachman’s commands, followed by another that sounded like something heavy falling into the mud by the door.

Caroline listened to the commotion, feeling caught between panic and apathy. With how she was feeling, it was hard to worry about much of anything, and she wondered if perhaps she was imagining it.

Only then, the door to the coach flew open. Stepping out of the dark and into the light, Caroline saw the face of the traveler, and his malevolent smile of triumph spreading from ear to ear was the stuff of nightmares. Caroline’s face paled at the sight. She gasped and scrambled backwards. Tried to cry out but her words caught in her throat.

No... it couldn’t be... it was impossible...

“Hello, Caroline, dear. My, you have grown.”

“N - no!” she stammered as she pressed herself against the back of the carriage as if she meant to sink through the wall. “No! Please! It can’t be!”

“I’ve been looking for you. For much, much too long now.” Still smiling wickedly, his eyes gleaming with malice and a sense of violent delight, he climbed into the carriage and closed the door behind him. “We have much to catch up on.”

It was Caroline’s father. Impossible to imagine, but somehow, he had managed to find her.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

“Where is Caroline?” Isabella asked as she looked about the dining room. “We should wait for her.”

“She is feeling ill,” Frederick responded without looking up from his plate. He purposefully cut into the shank of lamb, dipped it in the thick gravy which pooled beside it, and took a bite as if it was the most casual of things. “She will not be joining us.”

“Oh no,” Isabella gasped, pushing her chair back as if she meant to stand. “What has taken her?”

“A common cold, I am sure,” Frederick continued thickly, swallowing and then washing it down with a mouthful of wine. “Nothing to worry with.”

“I should see if she is all right.” Isabella made to stand.

“Isabella...” Frederick warned her, a pointed look. “I told you, she is ill but otherwise fine. Bed rest is what she needs, not distractions.”

“But—”

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“And I would ask that you leave her be until she feels up to leaving her room. I do not want you coming down with an illness also. Is that understood?” He raised an eyebrow at her, making sure that she saw the look he was giving.

She pushed her lips together in argument, looked toward the ceiling as if she could see through it and into Caroline’s room, but then relented and sat back down. “All right. I suppose it is for the best.”

“Ill, you say?” his grandmother pressed on him casually. “That is most strange.”

“And why is that?”

“I saw her just a few hours ago, and she seemed fine to me.”

“Well, she is not.”

“Me too,” Isabella added, again looking to the ceiling. “I was with her all day, and she did not say anything.”

Frederick bristled, keeping calm because that was what was needed at the moment. “I do not know what to tell you. I saw her myself, and believe me, she is not in a state to join us for supper.”

A moment passed between Frederick and his grandmother and Isabella. His grandmother eyed him curiously. Isabella still looked worried as she cast her gaze upward. Frederick had hoped to at least make it through tonight before he was forced to deal with the consequences of all that had transpired this evening, and he readied

himself to snap and command that the subject be dropped if it came to that.

“I will see her tomorrow then,” Isabella sighed as she settled back in and picked up her knife and fork. “I do hope she is all right.”

“As do I...” Frederick could feel his grandmother eyeing him, a sense that she wasn’t buying what he was selling.

“Let us discuss something else,” Frederick said, clearing his throat with another mouthful of wine. “Your new governess, Isabella. She is set to arrive in two days, and I expect you to treat her with the same kindness you showed Miss Dun – Dowding,” he hurried to correct, grimacing silently to himself for making the error.

Luckily, his daughter did not notice. “She best be nice to me,” Isabella pouted. “But I promise I will do my best.”

Again, Frederick could feel his grandmother eyeing him, and again, he ignored it. Another forkful of lamb, more wine, and he went about discussing the newly hired governess with his daughter and what was expected.

Of course, his mind was barely present in the conversation, and he was glad that Isabella was so dour so as to not be too argumentative. She accepted the fact that a new governess had been hired, knowing there was little she could do about it, resolved to at least do her best for her father’s sake.

And as they spoke, Frederick’s mind continued to drift to the most obvious of places, thoughts which made him feel sick to his core, queasy and as ill as Isabella thought Miss Dunn to be—that was how he was choosing to think of her now, forcing that name whenever she came to mind so as to not forget...

He still could not believe what had happened. And if Miss Dunn had not confirmed it

for herself, he might have refused entirely. He did not want to believe it. The pain and heartache that swept through him even right now was more than he could bear. Strength was forced to the fore, a desire to look as if he was fine in front of his daughter, knowing that later tonight when he was alone, the suffering would come.

How could she do this to him? That was what troubled him most. To lie like that. To use him—to use his family! Again, she had confirmed it as a truth, so there could be no debate, yet... something just didn't feel right about it all. It was as if something was missing, yet Frederick could not see what.

Although, and this was the reality that he assumed most likely, Frederick was simply hoping that there was more to it, an excuse that he could get behind, a reason for what she did to explain it all, allowing him to forgive her because to hate the woman who he had started falling for was a tragedy unlike any he had ever known.

“Father...” It was Isabella, speaking softly.

“Hhmm?” Frederick gave his head a shake and looked at his daughter, who was watching him curiously. “Yes, dear?”

She tilted her head, clearly sensing something was wrong. “May I be excused?” She indicated her empty plate.

“Oh.” He blinked, for in his own head he had not even realized how long they had been eating. “Of course,” he said with a forced smile. “And thank you for asking.”

Isabella nodded once and rose from the table to leave.

“And leave Miss Dowding alone,” Frederick made sure to call after her as she hurried from the room. “I mean it, Isabella!”

She did not respond which had Frederick wondering if he should go after her... although doing so would only raise suspicion. Tomorrow, he would be forced to sit his daughter down and tell her the truth, a task he was not looking forward to one little bit. He would need strength for it. Command. He would need to have moved on himself, something which he hoped tonight would see done.

“So...” His grandmother sat forward, folding her hands on the table. “Are you going to tell me the truth now that Isabella is gone?”

“The truth?” Frederick pretended to look confused. “And what truth is that?”

“What has really happened to Caroline—and before you lie to me,” she hurried when she saw Frederick open his mouth to object, “please do not insult me or my intelligence. I may be old, but I am no fool, Frederick.” She looked right at him, fixing him in her no-nonsense gaze. “She is gone, isn’t she?”

No point in lying, Frederick realized. What was more, for how he was feeling, how confused and rotten, what he needed more than anything was someone to talk to. A chance to confirm he had made the right decision, as if that would somehow make him feel better.

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“How did you know?” he sighed, bowing his head and looking at the table.

“I heard yelling when I walked past your study earlier,” she explained simply. Strange that she didn’t sound upset, for surely, she would be. Nor surprised by the looks of things. “And I caught a glimpse of her as I made my way to supper—hurrying from your study with tears in her eyes and cheeks as red as freshly plucked tomatoes.”

Frederick winced. “I had no choice.”

“I am sure you did not.”

“She lied to me, grandmother.”

“I do not doubt it for a second.”

“I—” Frederick went to press his argument, as if that was what he and his grandmother were doing. But he took note of her words, the tone of them, the at ease expression she wore as she looked at him. There could be no doubt that none of this was coming as a shock to her. “You... you knew?” he gasped.

His grandmother sighed, looking as resigned as she did upset. “I did, sadly.”

“But... but how?” he studied her, unable to fathom what was going on. If his grandmother had known the truth, why would she let it go on? Especially knowing that Miss Dunn was trying to take advantage of him. It was absurd to think!

“I assume you are referring to her true identity, then? Miss Dunn, daughter of Viscount Edgerton? Oh, of course, you are,” she then dismissed with a wave of her hand. “Why else would you throw the poor girl out.”

“Grandmother...” Frederick gaped. “How... how is it that you knew? And that you did nothing!”

“Did nothing?” she frowned. “What was I to do?”

“Tell me is what!” he cried. “To think, you were... you were pushing her on me from the beginning. And yet, you knew?” He leaned back, as if to get to close might see him succumb to some sort of poison. A curled lip of revulsion, still unable to fathom that his grandmother was involved. “You supported it!”

“Of course, I did. She is a lovely girl, despite circumstances.”

“Circumstances!” Frederick exclaimed. “She was using you, grandmother! Using us! Lying on her father’s behalf to get her hands on my fortune. And you knew! I don’t... I cannot... I—What is that look?” he cut through his stammering at the sight of his grandmother’s brow furrowing.

“Is that what you think she was doing?”

“Yes! She told me as much.”

“Oh, Frederick...” she sighed as she reached out and took Frederick’s hand, pity now, a look that had Frederick’s stomach dropping because he sensed that the story he knew wasn’t near complete. “I should have told you sooner, and I might have if I thought it was my place. Now, I wish I had.”

“Told mewhat?What on earth is going on!”

“When Caroline first came to me two years ago, she accidentally let slip her real name. She didn’t think that I caught it, and her desperation to pretend that she was somebody else led me to believe that there must have been a good reason. Naturally, I wasn’t about to let it go unchecked.”

“So, you’ve known the entire time?”

“I did a little digging,” his grandmother explained. “I learned that her father was Lord Edgerton, a man who I had never heard of until I looked into him. And when I did...” She sighed and shook her head. “... I realized there was a good reason that Caroline had lied.”

Frederick’s stomach turned. “Wh - what? What was the reason?”

“His wife, Caroline’s mother, died only a week or two before Caroline turned up on my doorstep. The general consensus is that she died of natural causes. An accident.”

“What does that?—”

“She slipped and hit her head on a table, or so they say. However, I asked around, and there were more than a few who theorized that this Lord Edgerton might have had more to do with it than he claimed. He was a cruel man, many said. Vindictive. Rumors of his abuse were told with few even suggesting they might have been exaggerated.”

“He murdered her?” Frederick said as if it was fact.

“I think so,” his grandmother agreed. “And Caroline—now, this is only a guess, of course. But I assumed she fled the household rather than risk her father’s wrath. When I put all of this together, I saw no harm in letting her stay and playing along with her cover story. The girl was clearly terrified.”

“But why lie?” Frederick pressed, his mind spinning, the guilt growing. “Why not tell you? Or tell me—if her father did kill her mother, and she saw it happen, then surely, she would want to seek justice?”

His grandmother sighed and then shrugged. “That is a question for Caroline, I am afraid. Perhaps she was scared? Perhaps she was feeling guilty? Perhaps she thought we would send her back if we found out, so she thought it safer to say nothing. As said, only Caroline knows the truth.”

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That had Frederick reeling, feeling now that he might be sick. “And I sent her away...” he said to himself, the disgust he felt present in his tone.

Strange that Frederick had wanted an excuse for why Caroline had lied to him. A reason that he could latch onto that might give him a chance to go after her because he still did not feel right about what happened. Strange that now that he had one, he felt even worse than before. That sense that he had condemned her to death, that she was in danger, and it was all his fault.

His grandmother smiled. “Oh, I am sure that she will not hold it against you.”

“But grandmother...” He looked at her pleadingly. “I told her to leave. To never come back. I... I accused her of using me.” He spat that final word out like poison.

“And if you explain to her now that you know the truth and that you are sorry, I see no reason why it should matter. You are sorry, are you not?” She looked at him.

“Of course!”

“And if you were to send for her, and she agreed to come back...”

Frederick felt his resolve growing. “Then not only would I seek forgiveness, but... but I would assure her that her father could no longer hurt her. She must think he is still searching for her—it is no wonder she was hiding. Oh...” He pushed his chair back and rose. “I must go after her!”

His grandmother beamed. “I was wondering when you would get to that.”

Frederick half made to rush from the room, his blood surging now with a sense of excitement. Yes, Caroline had lied to him, but it had been for good reason! If he found her, told her he knew the truth, explained that she was safe, there was no reason they could not get past this evening.

What was more, there was no reason that they could not be open finally about their feelings for one another. No more lies. No more secrets. Tonight would see the end of their past and the beginning of their future.

Only... he stopped after taking just a few steps.

“I do not know where she has gone.” He bit into his lip as he looked about himself as if for answers. “I told her to take a carriage, but I know not where.”

“When the coachman returns, he will know,” his grandmother assured him. “Think about it. This late at night, she has likely taken shelter at an inn. There is still time, Frederick. There is no need to worry?—”

“Your Grace!” a voice called suddenly from beyond the dining room. “Your Grace! Your Grace, quickly! Please!”

Frederick’s eyes widened, and he strode from the dining room, somehow knowing already what the calls of panic were regarding. Into the foyer he marched where a valet, Mr. Bonnet, helped lead what looked to be a drunken stable hand through the room.

“What is this?” Frederick commanded. “Explain yourself!”

“Your Grace, this is William; he works in the stables.” Mr. Bonnet led William carefully through the foyer, one arm slung over his shoulder as the drunk-looking stable hand could barely stand. Covered in mud. Knees buckling. Frederick had half

amind to take him by the scruff of the neck and launch him out the front door himself.

“And what is he doing in my home—explain yourself, Mr. Bonnet! Now is not the night for whatever this is!”

“Your Grace!” Mr. Bonnet cried in panic. “I found him wandering through the front gate, dazed, barely able to speak, and?—”

“He is drunk!” Frederick swept toward the stable hand and grabbed him by the collar. “And he ought no better than?—”

“He was attacked!” Mr. Bonnet cried over him. “William! Tell him what you just told me!”

Frederick paused, still holding William by the collar, lifting him so his feet were just about off the ground. William’s eyes were bloodshot and unfocused, one side of his mouth hung loosely, and the mud that was on him covered well over half his body.

“It was... it was Miss Dowding, Your Grace...” William spoke slowly, barely able to string the words together. “She came to me not an hour ago, demanding that... It was a carriage she wanted, Your Grace. Told me you gave her permission to... that you allowed her take one.”

Frederick released William and stumbled back, his face paling as he began to understand what had happened... where this story was heading.

“I was doing just that...” William staggered, and Mr. Bonnet rushed to him, helping him stand the best he could. “There was a man on the road, Your Grace. He begged me to take him... he wanted a ride into town, Your Grace. I told him... told him no!” He gave a shake of his head, gasped, and then shoved a hand into his forehead as if in pain. “So he attacked me, Your Grace. Hit me... my head... he threw me from the

carriage and left me to rot.”

“And Miss Dunn—Dowding!” Frederick corrected, again taking William by the collar. “What of Miss Dowding!”

“Woke in the mud, Your Grace...” William swayed, eye rolling back. “Walked here, somehow. Don’t know how I made it.”

“Miss Dowding!” Frederick cried. “What of Miss Dowding!”

“I have not seen her, Your Grace. The carriage... he took it, he did. Must have... she must have... she was in it, I am sure.”

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The foyer seemed to turn around Frederick as he released William and stumbled backwards. He reached desperately for something to hold on to, eventually grabbing Mr. Bonnet by the shoulders which kept him standing, even if the walls and ceiling continued to spin.

Someone had attacked the carriage that was transporting Miss Dowding. Someone had taken it—taken her! Because of Frederick, his actions, his haste to judge and condemn, now she was in very real danger. Even worse, Frederick sensed that this was only the beginning...

CHAPTER THIRTY

Caroline heard the lock to the door clicking open, and she gasped and scrambled from her bed, backing away until she was pressed against the opposite wall. It was nowhere near far enough for her liking, not safe in any real way, but it was the best that she could do.

Her body trembled with fear as the door swung open, and she recoiled at the sight of her father stepping through the door, making sure to close the door behind him. But he did not lock it, and she took note.

“Hello, dear,” he purred when he saw her cowering. “How did you sleep?”

He looked just as she remembered him, strange as mostly she saw him in her nightmares; in these nightmares, he had always seemed monstrous and disfigured, a creature of terror who could not possibly exist in the real world. Now, she understood that there was no need for exaggeration or distortion, for the reality was just as

haunting.

Not a tall man. Not a particularly large man either. He stood perhaps an inch or so taller than Caroline and was skinny, even lanky, with a hunched back and rounded shoulders. His face was angular and gaunt, his hairline receded and worn long; thin and wispy, his hair fell loosely by his shoulders. A crooked nose. Beady eyes. A smile filled with yellow teeth, some missing, and thin lips that curved into a sharp smile that had her blood curdling.

“Stay away from me!” she cried, back pressed into the wall.

“That’s no way to greet your father,” he said as if hurt, walking toward where she pressed herself into the wall. There was a wildness in his eyes as he took her in. “I would have thought that after all this time you might be glad to see me.”

“I said stay away!”

“I missed you, you know.” He came within a few feet of her and stopped. Slowly, he then reached out with his bony hand, stroking her face as if taking her in and admiring her beauty. “Two years, and you have not aged a day.”

“I wish I could say the same for you!” She could smell the alcohol on him, as if he had bathed in it. No doubt his less than healthy appearance was a result of two years spent getting drunk day in and day out.

He chuckled. “Ah, there’s that cheek I remember so well. I see not much has changed.”

Caroline tried to be brave. She tried to stare the man down as if in warning. She tried to stand up, to stand over him, to show him that she was not the little girl who she used to be. But seeing him again after all this time, she returned to whom she used to

be whenever her father was near: frightened, terrified, praying silently that she did not do anything to upset him.

Perhaps that was why she had struggled so little last night when he had brought her here? It was just a small inn located in a little village north of London, but even with the diminished population, she might have cried out for help when he had led her inside. But fear had trapped her, allowing her father to lead her placidly into the room like a silent prisoner.

“They will find me,” she said with little real force. “His Grace will?—”

“Likely be glad to be rid of you,” he chuckled. “Oh, I know all about him. Do not think I do not. What was it you were doing out alone last night, the way you were? Running, by the looks of things. And you expect me to believe His Grace will come for you.”

She went to argue but caught her tongue as that most unsettling of realities hit her. “He... he will...” she said with no conviction. How could she have any? After what had happened, she knew that His Grace rescuing her was not an option. That was one bridge she had burned beyond reparation.

“You wound me, daughter. For two years I have looked for you, praying that we might be reunited. And this is the reaction I receive? Visceral hate by the looks of things.” He clicked his tongue. “Not very daughterly of you.”

Putting aside his looks, the way he spoke to her, the coyness in his voice, was just how she remembered him. He liked to play with her. To pretend at being caring and loving. The perfect father... until he wasn't.

“I am almost inclined to be upset that you ran away,” he continued, still stroking her face as he looked at her. “But that is behind us now, and I hope that we can leave it in

the past where it belongs.”

“You... you killed my mother,” Caroline stammered in disgust. “How can you think that I... that I can forget?”

“Caroline,” he sighed and dropped his hand, “that was an accident. Surely, you know that.”

“You pushed her.”

“She tripped and fell.”

“You laughed when you saw what had happened.”

“You are remembering it incorrectly,” he said with a sincerity that made her shiver. “I wept that night, dear. And I wept when I learned that you had left. For a time there, I was angry, but now, well...” He smiled a sickly smile. “As said, I hope that we can put it behind us. This here should be a celebration, finally together again after all this time.”

“You killed her...” she said in a whisper, voice trembling.

“I loved your mother,” he said. “And she loved me.”

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The lies that he spun, as if she might somehow have forgotten. Caroline remembered the way her father beat her mother. She remembered the bruises left on her the next day. She remembered the way her mother promised to protect her against him, how she begged Caroline to behave so that his wrath would not find her instead.

It was all coming back to Caroline now. In the past, when her father would behave this way, Caroline would do as her mother asked and behave as a means to placate him. She would agree and apologize and promise to behave. She would do whatever she needed so that he would not grow angry. And indeed, from the way he was acting, she knew that was what he expected. Only...

That was two years ago. So much had changed since then. And while Caroline did not think that she would be saved, knowing that she was now at this man's mercy, she simply could not bring herself to play his game as he wanted it.

A sudden surge of bravery swept through Caroline, and she forced herself to stand up straight, fixing him with a look of disgust that he saw and snarled at.

"No," she sneered, ignoring the way her body shook. "You killed my mother, and nothing you say will change that."

His beady eyes flashed with anger. "So, that is the way it is going to be?"

"It is the way that it is. You wish for a happy reunion? How about you leave and find me again in two more years? Perhaps then I will have the stomach to deal with you."

His thin lips curled into a sneer. "So, some things have changed then."

“More than you know.”

Suddenly, he leapt at her. She gasped and recoiled, expecting to feel his hand across her face, but it slammed into the wall beside her head as he leaned over her, teeth bared. “You have no idea what you speak of! You never did! The lack of gratitude that you have shown me... I would be within my rights to kill you.”

“I wish you would!” she snarled back somehow. “Save me having to live with you.”

He chuckled coldly and pushed himself back. “Your mother was the same. For all I did for her, not once did she thank me. And she wondered why I drank! Ha!” He turned about and stalked across the room. “My marriage to her was supposed to cover the debts I’d incurred, but it barely put a dent in it! I ask you, what good is a marriage if all I get out of it is a no-good, spoilt brat of a daughter who doesn’t understand her role!”

“Then why even look for me?” Caroline asked, daring to take a step forward. Her eyes glanced across the room, toward the door... unlocked. “Why not leave me be!”

“Perhaps I meant to?” He wandered across the room, toward the window which he gazed out of; it was early in the morning, and the light from the sun was soft and cool. “Perhaps I was glad that you left? More trouble than you are worth, truth be told. Like most women, I can’t help but think we would be better off without you.”

“Then why?” She stepped deeper into the room, eyes flicking to her father’s back and then to the closed door. “Why not leave me?”

“I saw you at the Westchester Ball, you know. And I know you saw me,” he chuckled, gaze still fixed firmly out the window. “The fact that you didn’t flee as soon as you recognized me... why, I cannot help but wonder if you wanted to be found.”

She ignored that, her heart racing as she stepped closer and closer to the door. What she would do when she ran through it, she had no idea, but she had to try something!

“Before you left me as you did, you might be surprised to hear that I had a marriage arranged for you—yes, yes, I had managed to find someone willing to burden themselves with you. Someone who, mind you, would have covered my debts in full once the marriage was confirmed. But you robbed me of that. Oh, how you did...” He shook his head to himself, and she could imagine the sneer on his face.

Still, Caroline did not say anything. Another step toward the door, well over halfway across the room now. A few more steps taken, and she would run for it.

“As luck has it, he is still interested. Ha! Do you believe that? I wrote to him just a few days ago, and the same deal applies as we had before. Come tomorrow, you and I are taking a little trip north to Scotland where you will meet your future husband, and finally, you will begin to be of real use to me. Better late than never.”

Caroline froze when she heard the words. So close to running... the shock of the announcement struck her in a way that even she had not expected. Violence, she had prepared for. Terror, of course. But a marriage? To be carted away and sold like cattle? No. There was no way she could allow such a thing.

“You are nervous,” he said softly, almost sounding regretful. “Scared, perhaps. But I must warn you, this time you will do as I ask, Caroline. His Grace is not coming to save you. Nobody is. So, you best get used to it.”

She snarled at the back of her father, wanting nothing more than to shout at him and tell him that she would rather die than do his bidding. But the way to the door was open, and it was now or never?—

“Go on then,” he said without turning around. “Run for it. While you have the

chance.” She gasped, and he turned around and smiled wickedly. Triumphantly. “If you think you will make it.”

Caroline didn’t hesitate. A final rueful glare, and she sprinted for the door as fast as she could go. Reaching for the handle, she took hold, turned it, and?—

“Argh!” she cried out when her father grabbed her by the back of the head, a fistful of hair, and wrenched her back into the room.

“You are a fool girl!” he snarled as he propelled her across the room. She tripped and stumbled, falling onto the bed. He stormed toward her, grabbing her by the throat and pushing her down onto the bed. There, he climbed on top, bearing down on her, spittle flying from his mouth as he seethed, his hideous face inches from her own. “Do you not realize that you belong to me! There is nothing you can do that I cannot stop!”

“I hate you!” she cried out, writhing under him, trying to force him back, but he was too strong.

“Hate me all you want,” he snarled. “I do not care. Tonight, we leave for Scotland, and a few days following that, you will no longer be my problem!”

“I will not marry him! You can’t make me!”

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“Ha!” he cackled. “Just try and run again...” The grip around her throat tightened. “This is me in a good mood, girl. You donot want to see me in a bad one.” His grip tightened further... her breath caught... her lungs tightened... her face began to turn purple as she felt the life leaving her body...

Suddenly, he let her go, and she gasped for air, hacking and coughing and sputtering as he climbed from her and walked back across the room. The pain in her chest was great, but she was weak, barely able to push herself to her knees.

“I suggest you get your rest,” he said calmly as he strode to the door and opened it. Then, he looked back, a pleasant smile on his face as if the two had just engaged in a loving conversation. “You are going to need it for our little trip later. And then some.” And then, he stepped through the door, closed it behind him, followed by the click of a lock.

“No!” Somehow, Caroline managed to scramble across the room. She threw herself at the door, trying desperately to open it to no avail. “No! Please!” she cried, hammering on the door. “Let me out! Let me out!”

She screamed, and she shouted, and she cried out for help. For hours, it felt like. Until her hands hurt from beating the door, until her throat hurt from crying, until she could no longer stand, collapsing in a broken heap where her cries for help turned to wails of pain and misery.

For two years she had run. But now, there was nowhere left to run. Alone. Trapped. Without options. Her father had won. She had lost. And her fate was decided.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Frederick found the carriage roughly five miles down the road from where William, the stable hand, had been attacked. It was parked on the side of the road, empty and abandoned although the horses were left tied to it.

Naturally, upon finding the carriage, Frederick rode in every direction, screaming Caroline's name. "Miss Dowding!" he shouted as loud as he could, choosing to use the name that he knew her by. "Miss Dowding! Miss Dowding!"

He rode up the road, at least two miles along its length, then he turned back. Then he rode east of the road, across the pastures that ran toward the horizon, again shouting her name. From there, he rode west through the forest, calling for her, his voice bouncing off the trees until they were swallowed by the night.

He knew it to be a hopeless gamble, for Frederick did not think that the kidnappers had simply stolen the carriage without any intent on keeping Miss Dowding for themselves. Wherever they were, so was she, and that was very unlikely traipsing by foot through the forest.

It was late at night when he came back to the carriage to reassess his plan. The moon was covered by cloud so dark that he could barely see two feet in front of him. There would be tracks to follow, he guessed, some sort of clue. But as dark as it was, there was little he could do until the morrow.

Needless to say, Frederick did not sleep well that night.

He spent most of it pacing his room in thought, fear taking over, worry weighing him down, guilt crippling him. This was his fault, he knew. He was the one who sent her away. He was the one who left her defenseless. He was the one who had put her in this position in the first place. He should have trusted her! He should have given her a

chance. But old wounds took time to heal, and after his first marriage, trusting was not something that he was very good at.

Dawn could not come soon enough. Only this time, he did not search for Miss Dowding on his own. He had sent word the previous night for George to meet him on the road as soon as he woke, and he was pleased to see his old friend riding its length as he made his way back toward the abandoned carriage.

“Frederick!” George cried. “Is everything all right! I came as quickly as I could!”

Frederick rode up beside him. He had not told George exactly what had happened, simply begging for his help, knowing that George would not hesitate in giving it.

A quick explanation of all he knew, and George’s reaction was as expected.

“Dear God,” the man gasped. “Taken by whom?”

“I have been thinking about that,” Frederick began as the two men began at pace along the road, “and it can only be her father, Lord Edgerton.”

“Lord Edgerton?” George said, sounding unconvinced. “But how?”

“It does not matter how,” Frederick growled, his anger not aimed at George but himself.... and Lord Edgerton. “When we find the man, however, feel free to ask him.”

“And how do you suppose we do that?”

It was a good question.

The carriage was as it had been left the night before, parked on the side of the road as

if abandoned in a hurry. On first inspection, it appeared as Frederick remembered, and he worried for a moment that the day's delay might have cost him everything. But then he looked a little closer...

"See here!" he cried quickly; down from the horse now, he bent down on the other side of the road. "These markings—tracks!" He indicated to the deep, muddied tracks that lined the side of the road.

"Another carriage?" George asked, picking up on what Frederick was implying.

Frederick bit into his lip as he studied them, noting the way they moved off the road and headed south toward London. "He parked his carriage here and made down the road where he intercepted Miss Dowding." He pictured it in his mind as he put the pieces together. "Then he brought her back and transferred her to his own carriage, and he took off again..." His eyes searched down the road, following the tracks the best he could.

"And then what?"

"Let us find out!" He was quick to climb back atop his horse and take off in the direction of the carriage tracks.

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The road ran in one direction, and for several miles they were able to follow it clearly, knowing that the carriage had to have gone this way. But the further they travelled, the less obvious the track marks became until Frederick was forced to admit that they were simply following the road and hoping for the best.

Even worse was when the road forked in two directions.

“Dammit!” he cried as he pulled his horse up.

“What now?” George asked as he pulled up beside him. “He could have gone either way.”

Frederick considered, biting hard into his lip as he tried to puzzle out what a man like Lord Edgerton would do. Hopelessly in debt. Searching for his daughter for two years. Knowing that to simply take her home would be pointless as she would either run again or be found. Likely, he was taking her somewhere. Possibly hiding until then...

“How many villagers are there within, say, a thirty-mile ride of here?” Frederick asked.

George frowned. “Villagers?”

“With inns.”

“Oh...” He clicked his tongue as he considered. “Half a dozen, perhaps? Somerset is the closest, about two miles down that way—” He indicated to the fork in the right

side of the road. “And Bellend is about ten miles that way—” An indication to the fork in the left side of the road. “Beyond that though, they are spread.”

“We check them all—” About to kick his horse forward, George was quick to grab the reins.

“Check them all? How do you mean?”

“I mean that we ride from village to village and search every inn that we can. Any keeper worth his salt will know if a viscount and his daughter checked in the previous evening. That is how we find her.”

“Village to village...” George frowned as he considered. “That will take—it could take days!”

“Is that a problem?” The way he posed the question, the answer he required of his friend was obvious.

George’s expression tightened. “Not at all.”

“Good.” And then, having wasted enough time already, Frederick kicked his heels into the side of his mount and took off in the direction of Sommerset. And George, the good friend that he was, followed closely behind.

They reached Sommerset ten minutes later. Frederick, well and truly ahead of George by that point, pushed his horse down the main road in the direction of the inn—he knew roughly where it was, having ridden through Sommerset several times before. When he pulled up in the front, he was forced to wait for George to catch him so that he might hand his friend the reins, then he stormed in and demanded to speak to whoever was working.

Within one minute of questioning, he learned that Lord Edgerton and Miss Dowding had not been there the previous night, nor were they there right now.

Back outside, he found George still standing with the horses as he waited to hear what Frederick had learned.

“They are not here,” Frederick said without breaking stride. He was quick to grab hold of his horse’s saddle and pull himself up. Leg thrown over, buttocks firmly in the seat, he kicked the animal back into action.

“Frederick!” George called after him, slower to climb back atop his own horse and follow. “Where are you—will you slow down!”

“No!” Frederick called back without looking. “I won’t!”

It was much the same way for the rest of the day. Sommerset was reached less than two hours after sunrise, giving them plenty of time to ride up and down the countryside in search of the inn where Lord Edgerton had to be keeping Miss Dowding. It became an obsession for Frederick, a certainty that he was right. For if he was wrong... he had no idea what he might do.

He simply could not be wrong.

They travelled to a small village known as Wells next, much to the same result. From there, they headed further south, finding a hamlet by the name of Scotsdale. After that it was Greenshade, Coventry, and then Dibbley. With each arrival, Frederick felt a swelling of hope for surely this would be it... only for that hope to crash inside of him like an avalanche as he was forced to question yet again if he was too late.

And as he rode, he thought to Miss Dowding and what he would say when he saw her. He would apologize—a smile brought to his lips when he thought of that, for that

would be two apologies that she had gotten out of him. He would ask her to return with him. And if all went well, he would ask her to marry him. After all that had happened, he saw no sense in ignoring his feelings any longer. He loved her. He was certain she loved him. And it really was that simple.

But it was not so easy a hope to hold onto as time and time again they rode into a small village which sat outside of London, only to find that nobody that matched Lord Edgerton or Miss Dowding's description had come through the previous evening. And with each failing, Frederick could sense George wanting to question if this was a horrible mistake.

Frederick's body was sore when he rode in the village of Bellend, and his determination was waning. Having ridden thirty miles south, they had turned about and were now heading back toward the original fork in the road. Bellend was the last town they needed to check, and if Miss Dowding was not here...

The sun was beginning to set too. The town sat quiet. A few glances at the two lords as they rode through the main street, whispers behind hands, a sense that the sight of such esteemed members of the peerage was unexpected and rare. Not a good sign.

"Wait here," Frederick commanded George as he came to a stop by the door to the inn.

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“No arguments here,” George said, sitting low in his saddle, looking well and truly ruined from a day of riding.

Frederick strode through the door to find a near empty inn. A fire burning in a hearth in the corner. A few tables peppered about a common area. One or two patrons already well into their mugs of ale. And the innkeeper, standing to attention at the sight of Frederick striding toward him.

“M’Lord, welcome!” he cried nervously. “My name is Oliver, and this here is my inn, the Bearded Lady?—”

“I am searching for somebody,” Frederick cut him off with as much force as he could, but he was tired now, unable to muster the same amount of command he had earlier. “A man by the name of Lord Edgerton and his daughter, Miss Dunn. Although they may have been using different names.”

“Lord Edgerton?” Oliver frowned. “Miss Dunn?”

“He is roughly fifty years of age while Miss Dunn is twenty and six. She has dark blonde hair, green eyes, freckles covering her cheeks, and...” A smile touched his lips. “She might have been the most beautiful women you’ve seen in these parts in all your life.”

“Well...” Oliver chuckled. “I have seen many a beautiful woman, let me tell you that, M’Lord. As to this Miss Dunn...” He bit into his lip. “Last evening it was, there was a Lord Chester, he said his name was, checked into two rooms. Didn’t see who he was with, mind you, but I had the feeling it was a woman. Strange that hewanted two

rooms, but if it was his daughter, that would make enough sense.”

Frederick’s heart leapt. “Which rooms?” He spun about as if to run for them. “Where are they?”

“Oh, they left, M’Lord. An hour ago now, it was.”

“What?”

“Took a carriage as I saw it. Headed north, I believe. I think I heard him telling someone last night over a drink that he was making for Scotland and?—”

Frederick did not wait to hear the rest. Determination returned. Hope surging. That sense that he was right, that he wasn’t too late, that he still had a chance, giving him such energy that he felt as if he could fly. And indeed, he flew through the entrance and back on the street.

“Frederick,” George started when he saw his friend charging the way he was. Again, he was standing by the two horses, holding them together by the reins. “What did he say? No— whoa!” he yelped when Frederick leapt onto his horse without pause, kicking his heels and shooting down the road as if a fire was lit under him. “Frederick!” George called. “Frederick!”

But Frederick did not slow his pace. He did not look back. He did not waste time with an explanation. Time was not something he had the luxury of, for Miss Dowding was still in danger. Although not for much longer, if he could help it.

And with how he was feeling, the way his heart beat and his chest exploded, Frederick knew that he would die before letting anything happen to her. Now, if that wasn’t love, he didn’t know what was.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

There was nothing that Caroline could do. Sitting in the back of the carriage, listening as it rattled its way slowly down the road—toward her doom, it sounded like—she was beginning to accept the inevitable defeat in ways that she hadn't been able to until this moment.

For a while there, as she waited in her room for her father to come and collect her, she had tried to work up the bravery that she knew she would need to try another escape. Once he led her outside and to the carriage, she was going to run and scream for help. Surely, a concerned citizen might step in and help her. Only, when her father opened the door, he put a stop to that notion.

“And if you try anything...” He reached into the pocket of his coat and pulled out a small revolver and showed it to her. “... you might consider what I am willing to do.”

And that was the death of the fight left in her.

All Caroline was able to think about now was how she might have done things differently if she had a second chance. Certainly, she would have told His Grace the truth. She might have told him, too, that she loved him as she knew he loved her. She would have put herself at his mercy, rather than her father's. She would have taken that chance, for it did not feel like a chance at all.

It was painful to think on these things, for there was really no point. It brought her nothing but sorrow which for the rest of her life would be a thin blanket to keep her warm from the misery that her life was sure to be.

Outside, through the window, she watched as the sun slowly sank beneath the horizon. The sky was cast in deep purples and dark reds, as if the sun was bleeding into the earth. It felt apt, she thought, for it was how her heart felt inside her chest...

And as she looked outside, as she lamented, she thought that she heard something in the distance. The sound of horse hooves racing along the dirt road. She laughed bitterly, not letting herself succumb to such fancies. No one was coming to save her, so why even bother imagining...

The sound of the horse hooves grew in intensity. So loud now that she could not ignore them. Her brow furrowed as she listened... she dared to lean out the window and look back down the road. Off in the distance but coming closer, she spied a rider. Too far away to make out who it was, the way he rode, it looked as if he was being chased by a demon.

Her heart leapt. She quietened it. She dared not dream...

But he came closer and closer, and that was when she saw him. It was His Grace!

“Frederick!” she cried without thought.

He rode up on the carriage, veering off the road and riding around it so that he was out in front. A second or two passed, her heart caught in her throat and then?—

“Whoa!” she heard her father cry out as the carriage came to a sudden stop. “What is the meaning of this—off the road, now! Do you have any idea who I am!”

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“I know who you are,” the deep, commanding voice of His Grace boomed like the thunder of a cannon. “Although soon, you will pray that I did not.”

“Your Grace!” her father cried in shock.

“Step down from the carriage, Lord Edgerton! Quickly.”

“What is the meaning of this! I demand that you move your horse from my way immediately.”

“Again!” His Grace barked. “Step down from the carriage. Now!”

“On who’s authority.”

“My own!”

The carriage had come to a standstill. Caroline swung about, caught between waiting to see what happened and taking action. His Grace had come for her, and she could not believe it! It must have meant that he forgave her, that he understood! Surely, there could be no other reason?

But her excitement entered deep dread when she remembered the revolver hidden in her father’s jacket.

“No!” she gasped and leapt for the door.

“This is unheard of,” her father was saying. “You have no right to?—”

“Miss Dowding!” His Grace gasped as Caroline stumbled from the carriage. She nearly fell into the dirt but kept her footing, spinning about just in time to see Frederick, still atop his horse, smiling wonderfully at the sight of her.

“Your Grace!” she cried.

Oh, he was a sight that dreams were surely designed for. Sitting atop his horse, broad shouldered and large, she had never seen someone look so powerful. Dark hair whipping in the wind. Handsome face stern without fear. He may have only had the single horse to support him, but he imposed it on her father, who looked small and pathetic by comparison.

“That is my daughter, Miss Dunn!” her father snarled, still seated in the driver’s chair of the carriage. “And I will ask that you not speak to her!”

“You came!” she hurried around the carriage, coming in beside where her father was sitting. “I cannot believe you came.”

“Of course, I did...” His smile grew, and her heart leapt. “I only regret that I did not come sooner, that I said those things to you—that I accused you of?”

“Enough of this!” her father shouted. “Caroline, back in the carriage, now! And Your Grace, I ask that you move your horse otherwise you will leave me no choice but to run you down.”

“You may try, Lord Edgerton, but it would be unwise.”

“Unwise?” he snarled. His hands gripped the reins, ready to whip them and force the horses forward. But there was no point, and a glance at Caroline confirmed that he knew it. “Back in the carriage! I will not ask you again.”

She ignored him. “Your Grace, I should have told you the truth. I should have told you?—”

“It is all right,” he assured her, his smile soft now and loving. “There is no need to explain. I am the one who should be sorry.”

“I cannot believe you came for me...” Her heart swelled in her chest such that she thought she might float.

“I cannot believe you thought I would not.”

“Enough!” Her father was on his feet. “Your Grace, will you remove your horse from the road? Yes, or no?”

“No! Not without Miss Dowding.”

“Her name—” He reached into his coat and pulled out his revolver, pointing it at His Grace; his arm shook from the anger that flooded through him. “—is Miss Dunn! And as you are here to steal her from me, I am within my rights to shoot you!”

His Grace’s eyes flashed as he eyed the gun. But not with fear, even if that would be the natural reaction. Anger brewed inside of him, his lip curling back to reveal bared teeth.

“I would not do that if I were you, Lord Edgerton.”

“Ha! And what could you possibly do about it!”

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“You have already killed once,” His Grace said. “Will you do it again? This time, you might not be so lucky to get away with it.”

“Is that what she told you!” His arm shook, but he held the gun pointed and ready to fire.

“It is what I know!”

“It does not matter!” he cried hysterically. “Let her see me shoot you dead! Let her scream to the heavens what I did! Nobody will believe her! She belongs to me! She is mine! And I will do with her, my daughter, as I please.”

His Grace growled. “Over my dead body.”

“As you wish.”

It all happened so quickly.

Caroline’s father cocked his gun and aimed it. His Grace’s eyes went wide, and he kicked his horse forward. Caroline screamed! The gun went off with a loud bang! And Caroline screamed again as a single bullet struck His Grace in the stomach.

It would have been enough to fell a normal man, but His Grace was no normal man. Taking the bullet in stride, His Grace rode his horse toward the carriage, pushed himself up in the saddle, and dove forward with his arms flung out to tackle her father from his perch.

Her father gawked at the action, unable to believe what he was seeing as His Grace's body flew through the air, crashing hard into his torso. Arms and legs tangled together, His Grace grabbing ahold of her father, refusing to let go as the two came crashing down from the carriage with a loud thud.

"Your Grace!" Caroline screamed as the two men rolled in the dirt.

"Argh!" her father yelped, somehow pulling himself free from His Grace's grasp. Blood covered her father although it was not his. He stumbled to his knees, attempting to scramble away, only for His Grace to grab ahold of him around the waist and pull him back into the scuffle.

She could see the wound from the bullet in His Grace's stomach. Blood pooling and spreading over his shirt. Yet somehow, he managed to keep her father on the ground as he pounded him with his fists.

"Your Grace!" she cried again, running to where the two men rolled about. There was blood everywhere. Fists and legs punched and kicked. Impossible to tell who was getting the better of the other.

And beside them, sitting idle, was the revolver.

A loud smack sent His Grace back as her father wrenched himself free. Bloodied still, clothes torn, face covered in dirt and mud, he fell backwards, scrambling on his hands as he put distance between himself and His Grace.

"You—!" He pushed himself to his feet and charged His Grace, who was struggling to stand. "I told you to stay away!" He drove a boot into His Grace's stomach.

"Argh!" His Grace's body reeled back, collapsing in the dirt.

“But you would not listen!” Another boot, this time aimed for the bullet wound. The sound of the boot crunching into his ribs was like the crack of a whip.

His Grace roared in pain and collapsed to his face.

“I will make sure that she pays for this!” Another kick. “Every ounce of pain visited on her is your doing. I hope you know!” Another kick, right into his bullet wound.

His Grace lay prone on the ground, face in the mud, surely passed out... maybe even dead. Caroline watched on in fear, stricken with worry, not knowing what she could do. If anything.

Only... somehow, His Grace was able to push himself back to his knees. Slowly. Painfully. His entire body shaking, he groaned as he forced himself up. Caroline could see the hate in his eyes, the determination, and the will not to give up.

“He’s a fighter!” her father laughed as he walked around His Grace. “Some don’t know when to give up!”

Caroline looked about desperately, again spying the gun. It was out of ammo, but that was not the only use she could think of for the heavy metal object. With her father concentrating on His Grace, she leapt for the revolver and picked it up.

“Leave now,” His Grace seethed, breathing heavy and ragged. “Or you will be sorry.”

“Sorry, will I? How about this—” Her father leapt forward, kicking again with his right foot, but His Grace was ready, somehow turning and catching the foot between his hands. “What?!” her father cried in shock.

He tried to kick his leg free, unable to, and in that, Caroline saw her moment.

Fear enveloped her—a lifetime of memories, all cowering to the man before her. Running. Hiding. Hating but unable to do anything. With His Grace near death and her father close to victory, Caroline decided then and there that she was through being afraid.

The revolver clutched in her hand, hate flooding her and giving her strength, she ran up behind her father, held the revolver by the butt, and smashed it over her father's head as hard as she could.

It rang out with a loud thud.

Her father's body went stiff. His Grace dropped the leg, and her father turned around, looked at her as if he wasn't quite sure what happened, opened his mouth to speak... and then collapsed into the dirt in a heap.

"Nice shot..." His Grace chuckled only to then fall onto his back, this time, not moving to get back up.

"Your Grace!" Caroline dropped the revolver and ran for him. There was blood everywhere. His body was pale white and cold, covered in sweat, shaking as if he were freezing. She scooped up his head and rested it in her lap, not knowing what to do. If there was anything she could do! "Your Grace, please! No!" she wept. "You cannot die! I won't let you die!"

He laughed softly. "What did I say about giving me commands..."

She laughed too, for it felt like she should. "Now is not the time to argue."

"With you?" he chuckled, his eyelids closing. "It is always the time to... to... to argue..."

"Your Grace!" She slapped him on the face. "No! Please! Don't go!"

She could not believe it. She refused to believe it. Finally, after all they had been through, they had a chance, a real chance to be together. Her father would no longer be a problem. Her secret was no longer a problem. Open and honest and willing,

finally, only for this... this... for this to be how it ended.

She bowed her head and cried, holding his body close, heart breaking asunder as the world ended around her. The sun had officially set. Night had come. And as far as Caroline knew, the sun would never rise again.

And it was because she was so broken and filled with despair, because she cried the way she did, eyes closed and body rocking, that Caroline did not hear the sound of horse hooves racing down the road toward them. Dozens of them moving as fast as any horse could.

In the distance, through the darkness, if she had been looking, she might have seen George coming for them with six men in tow. But she wasn't looking, so she did not see, so she assumed that His Grace had died in her lap, and her life was as good as over.

Love lost... now, she knew that pain.

EPILOGUE

It took Frederick a while to understand what was happening.

Pain was the first thing he recognized. He could feel it in his stomach; nothing too crippling but a dull thud that was persistent and severe enough that when he tried to shift himself, the pain increased.

Next, he noticed that he was lying down, somewhere soft and comfortable and warm. He could feel sunlight on his face and see it through his closed eyes. In the distance, there was the sound of birds singing and the ever-present noise of the wind rustling through the treetops.

Slowly, memories came back to him. The carriage found on the side of the road. He and George riding all over the countryside in search... of something. Riding his horse as fast as he could. A confrontation—yelling. Vague images of a gun... a fight... strangely, a moment of peace that followed as if he was truly happy for the first time.

The pain still throbbed in his side as he lay there, half-dreaming, not certain he wanted to wake up. That was until?—

“Is he doing any better?” a familiar voice asked. It was soft and scared—his daughter, he knew right away.

“Hard to say,” another answered. It was right by his head, a voice he would recognize anywhere for it was like a tonic being poured into his ears. “But I thought I saw him smiling a moment ago.”

“That is a good sign?” his daughter asked hopefully.

“I like to think so.” He felt a hand resting on his arm, squeezing it gently. The hand was comforting in ways that were indescribable, and Frederick considered keeping his eyes closed so that it might never move. “I will let you know if anything changes.”

“All right...” A pause in her voice, worry that he recognized, and Frederick thought to open his eyes. Only then, he heard the sound of her footsteps fading, and he decided to wait a moment longer...

Silence fell, and in that silence, Frederick came to remember everything. The secret he learned of Miss Dowding. The realization that he had misjudged her. Finding out that she had been kidnapped. Tracking her down. Saving her... before she saved him. And now, he guessed himself to be home, and the fact that she was by the side of his bed told him too that this right here was to be a happy ending.

That smile from earlier spread up his face again, for he realized that any fears he may have had about himself and Miss Dowding—as he still chose to think of her—were for nought.

“Frederick...?” Miss Dowding asked hesitantly, surely seeing his smile.

“I was hoping to sleep a little longer,” he said, eyes still closed, “but you and my daughter woke me up?—”

“Frederick!” she cried, taking his hand and squeezing it. “You’re awake! Alive! You’re alive!”

Frederick opened his eyes finally, the light burning them, forcing him to shut them again. Then, slowly, he opened them once more, turning his head to look up at where he knew Miss Dowding to be sitting. And while he knew himself to be alive, the sight of her might have had him thinking he had died and gone to heaven, for surely, only angels could be that beautiful?

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“Hello there” he said weakly. “Fancy seeing you here.”

Her face scrunched into a ball as she tried to keep herself from crying. She half stood as if to throw herself over him, only to keep herself from doing so... for obvious reasons.

“I thought... I thought... I did not know...”

“If I would live or die?” he chuckled which made his stomach hurt enough that he groaned.

“Careful,” she chastised.

“Sorry for laughing.”

“Sorry for making me worry, you mean?”

“What was I thinking?” he laughed, bringing about more pain.

She smiled, her hand stroking his head as she gazed upon him with a look in her eyes that could only be described as love. “In this, I think for once I might be willing to forgive you.”

“All right, who are you, and what have you done with Miss Dowding?”

She laughed softly... only to grow quiet, her expression changing. “You mean, Miss Dunn...”

“I suppose I do.”

“Your Grace?—”

“Please.” He reached up and rested a hand under her face, an effort to be sure but a worthy one. Her skin was soft and warm, and the feeling of it beneath his hands had him feeling stronger than he had even a second ago. “You do not need to explain.”

“But I do.”

“Perhaps one day,” he agreed. “But for now...” A smile grew on his lips, one he knew to reach his eyes. “Let us not talk about it. Truthfully, I just want to look at you for a while.”

“Oh...?” She raised an eyebrow. “Is that all you wish to do.”

Funny that even with how weak Frederick was feeling, the implication of her words was enough that it didn’t seem to matter. The look she gave him, that sparkle behind her eyes, was one that he knew well. Holding her by the face, she took his hand and kissed the back of it—this sent a pulse through his body, radiating down his legs so that they began to shake. He had no idea how long he had been unconscious, and all Frederick could think was how they needed to make up for lost time.

“I can think of a few other things,” he growled as he forced himself to sit—able to ignore the pain quite easily. His stomach was wrapped in bandages, he saw, but he did not care. Nothing in this world could stop him.

“But... your wound.” Even as she spoke, she stood up and then sat on the bed beside him.

“Will heal.”

“You have not eaten.” Her hand moved beneath the blankets, gripping his naked thigh.

“I have time for that later.” He stiffened as her hand moved down his thigh, wrapping around his member that was already engorged.

“And the door is open...” she purred as she began to stroke him beneath the covers.

“Then... you best... you best close it...” He moaned, eyes closing as he relished the feel of her hand around him.

“Are you sure about that?” she giggled, leaning in and kissing him on the neck as she continued to stroke him. “I will have to stop if I do.”

“It... it is... for the... for the best,” he stammered, gasping as she bit into his neck and?—

“Daddy!” Isabella appeared in the doorway suddenly. “You’re awake!”

Miss Dunn was quick to let him go and pull her hand free and just as quick to take her seat beside the bed again. Done in a matter of seconds, not seen by Isabella as she was too busy running across the room and throwing herself at him.

“Urgh!” he groaned as she fell on him.

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“Isabella!” Miss Dunn cried. “Careful!”

Frederick could not help but laugh at that. After what she had just been willing to do...

“Sorry!” Isabella gasped, pulling herself back. “I did not think—I am just so glad you are all right.” She paused where she stood, tears in her eyes already, a look that suggested it was taking all the self-control she possessed not to fall on him again.

“It is fine,” he chuckled, his eyes flicking to Miss Dunn who could not have looked more guilty. He cleared his throat. “Now that you are here, I suppose I ought to ask what happened. I confess, I do not remember much.”

“You have Lord Fernside to thank for that,” Miss Dunn said quickly. “Soon after you passed out, he arrived with the constable from Bellend and five locals for support. Seeing the state that you were in, they were quick to transport you back to the village. I confess, for a while there I did not think...” She sniffed, her chin beginning to wobble. “I did not think you would make it.”

He took her hand. “But I did make, and while I should probably thank George in time, I cannot help but think that you are the reason.”

“Me?!”

“Yes, you,” he laughed. “I do remember you knocking your father over the back of the head with a revolver. Unless I am mistaken.”

She grinned. “Perhaps.”

“Speaking of which...?” He looked at Miss Dunn.

“Oh, he is being taken care of,” she said with a coy smile. “Arrested, is my meaning, and he is waiting to be charged with shooting you and...” Her smile grew. “... and the murder of my mother.”

It was as good news as Frederick could have hoped to hear. For two years now, Miss Dunn had been running, fear being the cause. But now that her father was behind bars, Frederick hoped that her days of running were behind her. And if that was the case...

“Ah, Miss Dunn, although the timing might seem a bit inappropriate, I was wondering—thinking, really, that I might ask you something.”

“Yes?” she asked, leaning forward as if she knew the question.

“When my mother goes back to her estate, which I assume she will shortly now that I am awake—and I want you to know that there no pressure on you whatsoever but... well...” He could feel his face turning red with nerves which should not have been the case, for he knew the answer already. Surely, he did! “If you might consider—if you would like to stay here with me and Isabella.”

She tilted her head. “Are you asking what I think?”

He smiled. “I think you know exactly to what I?—”

“There he is!” Frederick’s grandmother suddenly appeared in the doorway. “Why did nobody tell me you were awake!” She rushed into the room, but showing far more constraint than Isabella had managed, she came to a stop by his bed. “You’re awake!

And alive!”

“Good observation, grandmother.”

“And a fool!” she continued. “Caroline has told us what you did and...” She shook her head. “... you could have been killed!”

“But I wasn’t.”

“Luck!” she said, crossing her arms. “Pure luck is what it was. Honestly, if you had gotten yourself killed, I don’t think I could have forgiven you.”

“Grandmother!” Isabella protested. “Father was just asking Caroline something.” She looked eagerly at Miss Dunn. Hopeful. Brimming with excitement at the answer that was forthcoming.

“Oh?” his grandmother said, looking between them. “And what was it, exactly?”

Miss Dunn was smiling. Laughing in fact. “Esther, although I have thoroughly enjoyed being your companion these past two years, I am afraid that I must leave you finally.”

“And why is that?”

Miss Dunn looked at Frederick, love in her eyes that he returned in kind. “I have decided to stay here is why. I get the sense that His Grace might need me even more than you do.”

“Yay!” Isabella cried and clapped her hands.

“Well, it’s about time,” his grandmother sighed, smiling also, even tearing up.

“I could not agree more...” Frederick beamed, and his smile grew when he caught the look Isabella fixed him in. Reading said look, knowing what it meant, Frederick felt a sudden impulse. “Grandmother, might you take Isabella outside for a short while?”

“But I want to stay with you!” Isabella pleaded.

Frederick chuckled. “Really? Even if I was to tell you that I expect to see you later covered in dirt... with scratched hands from a day spent climbing. Anything short of such a thing and I will be disappointed, for it means that you have not been playing as you ought.”

Isabella balked. “You want me to...” She looked to Miss Dunn for confirmation. “I am allowed to climb trees?”

“You can do whatever you wish,” he said with a smile that was as genuine as it was loving. “Truthfully, after what has just happened, all I want from you, Isabella, is to know that you are happy. Now, can you do that for me?”

“Yes!” she cried joyously. “Thank you!” A quick hug, one that had Frederick groaning, and then she took his grandmother’s hand and practically dragged her from the room.

“Who would have thought,” Miss Dunn laughed once they were alone. “A near death experience is exactly what you needed.”

“What Isabella needed, you mean?”

“No, I do not.” She was sitting beside him, gazing upon him with that same look that had been the cause for his dismissing his daughter and grandmother.

Feeling his heart begin to race, Frederick leaned forward and kissed her full on the

lips for what was the first time in only a few days but felt a lifetime in the making.

Kissing the woman he loved, knowing that the past was behind them, and the future was one to look forward to, he moved a hand to the back of her head and held her there, feeling life pour into him as if his wounds were healing on the spot.

He did not care that Miss Dunn had lied to him.

He did not care that it had almost gotten him killed.

He did not care about much of anything, save for the woman whose lips he kissed passionately, the woman he loved, the woman he would continue to love for as long as there was breath left in his body. Despite nearly dying, Frederick, in that moment, was as happy as he had ever been, and with the way that Miss Dunn kissed him, he sensed the same could be said of her.

The End?