



# The Duke's Vice

**Author:** *Scarlett Osborne*

**Category:** Romance, Adult, Historical

**Description:** "You must do everything I say, no questions asked. Can you be a good girl for me, little mouse?"

Intimidating Duke by day, deplorable rake by night, Ezra keeps his worlds separate. Until a brazen minx begs for his kiss, leaving something behind...

When Beatrice loses her Scandalous List of Spinsterhood, she never expects to find it in the hands of the infamous Duke of Graham... or his offer to help her complete it.

All he needs is her obedience.

Yet it is her defiance that becomes Ezra's vice... And her complete surrender to his discipline that threatens to destroy him...

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

**Total Pages (Source):** 107

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## CHAPTER 1

Beatrice wrinkled her nose as the smell of stale ale and sweat filled her nostrils. She picked up her skirts to step over what she hoped was a sleeping man.

She let out a sigh of relief when the man didn't stir when her heel landed next to his head. She didn't know if she should stop and check on him or if she should continue on her mission. With a quick look around she noticed the square was becoming more crowded as the night dragged on. She was running out of time.

With one last look at the man she heard a soft snore escape through his lips.

"Oh, thank God, he's just lost to his cups." Beatrice gathered her skirts and skittered to darkened alley in between two rows of rundown homes.

She leaned up against one wall to settle her nerves. She tugged at her sleeves and felt the familiar square of paper tucked into her right cuff. Knowing it was there gave her the courage to sneak out during the midnight hours on her journey.

Beatrice peeked around the corner and squinted, trying to read the numbers on the buildings. Her mother always warned her against reading in dim light, she cautioned Beatrice it would lead to bad eye sight.

Beatrice chuckled to herself.

Her mother would lose herself to fits of apoplexy if she knew where her youngest daughter was. She was brought up to be a shining diamond in polite society. Her

etiquette and elocution lessons were designed to make her the most desirable and respectful woman a Duke's money could afford.

She looked down at the dark clothing she wore and her now muddied shoes. Well, at least her late father's money could afford her new clothes. Hopefully, her brother-in-law, the new Duke of Graynor would allow her a small allowance for new shoes.

After making sure no one was paying attention to her, she slipped back out into the main square to find the building number that was written on the piece of paper safely tucked in her cuff. She had a moment's thought to take the paper out and look at it, but it would prove pointless. She could recite the address under immense duress. She had no doubt of her memorization of the address, she had been staring at it for the past 48 hours, ever since she caught wind of the party and her plan took shape.

She weaved in and out of the crowd, going with the flow to not cause any unwanted attention to herself. She only lifted her head to quickly look at the numbers on the buildings before she dipped her head again to conceal herself within her hood.

People began filtering through random doors, some had a man standing in front of them, others were unguarded.

Her fingers itched to pull out the paper to look at the address again but she didn't want to risk losing it. Besides, she knew the address by heart. 112 Water Street.

"108, 110..." she whispered as she passed each door. She came to a stop where 112 should have been, but instead of a building she found an empty lot.

She looked back to the thinning crowd and unease crept up her spine. With a crowded street this area didn't seem too untoward but as the people dispersed into buildings and the streets emptied, she began to see why the area was known as a part of the slums.

Beatrice shook off the nerves and turned to head further down the street when she rammed into a wall.

A wall with arms.

Beatrice looked up, and up, and up some more, until her eyes finally met the annoyed ones of a man much taller than her.

“My apologies, good sir. I didn’t mean to run into you.”

A corner of the man’s mouth quirked up. He was wearing a mask that covered his eyes leaving a sharp nose and strong jaw on display. She had seen several masks as she made her way down the road. Beatrice ran through the directions she was given by her maid, at no time was she told she would need a mask. Hopefully, he was not going to the same party she was.

“Good man?” The man laughed. His eyes drank her in causing her to blush. “You are obviously in the wrong part of town if you think anyone here is good.”

Beatrice huffed and pulled her coat tighter around her. “My mistake.” She dipped her head and took a step to the side. The brute of a man matched her step.

“Isn’t it a bit late for you to be out? Shouldn’t you be tucked away in your warm bed by now, dreaming of white nights and ivory towers?” The man’s voice teased.

Beatrice rolled her eyes, though she doubted the man could see them with her hood pulled over her.

“I’m of no concern of yours, sir. Now, let me pass or else I shall scream.”

As if called on cue, a scream sounded from behind her startling her. She jumped at

the sound and found herself clinging to the man in front of her.

His hands seemed to react on instinct and held her towards his body. The scream had melted into a fit of feminine giggles.

Beatrice realized her hood had fallen in her haste when she looked back up to the man.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean... the scream startled me.” The words tumbled from Beatrice’s lips. She had read many books of midnight dalliances with strange men. She often wondered how she would react if she ever caught herself in a similar situation.

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Little did she know she would feel completely out of sorts and woefully unprepared.

The man shrugged. "I'll never complain about having a beautiful woman in my arms.

When he reached up to brush a stray curl off of her face she noticed a thin scar that ran along the man's hand.

"So tell me, mistress of the night, what has you out and about in the devil's hour?"

Beatrice bristled. "If you must know, I'm going to a party."

The man's eyes lit up. "A party you say?" A wolfish grin widened on his lips and Beatrice was sure he could hear her swallow.

She could only shake her head. Her nerves were getting the better of her.

The man looked past her to the now empty street. "Well, I don't see a mask so you're not heading to the establishment I am enroute to. And the houses along this street are particular about their invitees..." The man took a breath as he looked her over again causing little pricks of electricity to fire off in her blood.

She lowered her head, hoping the dark of the night would hide her blush.

"I assure you, sir, I have an invitation, it's just my first time at this particular party and I was just making sure I was in the right area. But I am, so you can leave me be."

Dark eyes narrowed on hers. "I have no doubt this is your first time."

Beatrice rose an eyebrow in defiance. “Again, just as my plans, my experience is none of your concern. Now, good day, er night.”

Once again she tried to step around the man only for his arm to jut out and stop her from moving.

“Have you even kissed a man before?”

Embarrassment and horror bubbled within her. “How dare you ask a lady such things!”

The stranger’s laugh echoed off the surrounding buildings. “As if I needed any more proof that this is definitely not the place someone like you should be, you just gave it to me.”

Beatrice’s brows furrowed. “What do you mean, someone like me?”

The man gestured to all of Beatrice. “You. All of you. You are far too young, naive, and innocent to be traipsing around Water Street this time of night.” The man looked up into the night sky. “Actually, any time of day to be exact. Come, I’ll see you to the main road.”

He took her by the elbow and started her towards the way she came.

Beatrice pulled from his grip and stood her ground. “No. Thank you for your concern, but I am more than capable of handling myself. I have gotten myself this far haven’t I? I may be new to the area but I am not new to this type of scene.”

Beatrice crossed her fingers beneath her overcoat. She had hoped the fake bravado she mustered was enough for this man to leave her alone.

She didn't even care about the party any more. Truth was the more she stood within this man's presence the more her senses became aware of her surroundings. Every scrape of litter that skittered across the street raked down her spine. Her heart beating within her chest sounded like a bass drum between her ears.

Even the curious smell of sweet and smokey infiltrated her nostrils.

What is that smell?

It was much more pleasing than the first smells she encountered when she first reached Water Street.

Beatrice gave herself a little shake to bring herself back to the moment. She could not afford to be mindless on a desolate street with a masked stranger.

She had every intention of leaving after this conversation but her stubbornness would not let it be because a man told her to.

The man tilted his head. "Yes, look at you. All alone, unchaperoned on one of the most dangerous streets in London talking with a masked man twice the size of you. Well done. Your parents should be proud."

His words dripped with sarcasm. Beatrice rolled her lips and thought of her options. There was no doubt in her mind this man had the ability to pick her up and sling her over his shoulder and carry her out. But what if he didn't carry her back to the main road? What if he carried her off to a hideout where he planned his nefarious deeds.

Beatrice sighed. She was starting to sound like her older sister. Their mother constantly berated them for reading too much. Once again, her mother proved right twice in one night. This did not bode well for Beatrice.



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“What if I just tell you the address of where I’m going and you see me there?”

The masked stranger held up his hand before she could continue. “Because you should not be at any parties that are being held on this street, regardless of what you’ve been told.”

Beatrice scoffed. “How do you know I am not aware of the goings on in these parties.” She lifted her arms. “I’m here, aren’t I? I’m well aware of what I’m walking in to.”

The man’s laugh was getting on her nerves. “What’s so funny?”

“You.” The man said as he picked off a phantom piece of lint from his jacket. His demeanor was cool and collected, as if he were having this conversation in a parlor on a Tuesday afternoon not in a desolate street smelling of piss and ale.

“You nearly choked from swallowing your tongue when I asked if you had ever been kissed by a man and you expect me to believe you are not only aware of what is happening behind those doors but are willing to participate in it?” The man’s snort was adding insult to injury.

“Again, I don’t see how it is any of your concern.” She bit out through gritted teeth.

The man considered her words. “You called me, ‘good sir,’ so it is only right that I act the part.”

Beatrice was unmoved. “So if I called you a dirty scoundrel you would have acted

accordingly?”

His eyes sparkled with mischief that had Beatrice taking a step back. Curse her and her loose tongue.

“We’ll never know, will we?” He purred.

Beatrice sucked in a breath before letting it out. He was playing with her.

“What if I offer you a trade?”

Beatrice narrowed her eyes. “A trade?” He was definitely playing with her. “What could you possibly give me that I would want and what would I be trading?”

“You allow me to escort you back to the main road and away from Water Street...”

Beatrice folded her arms over her chest. “And?”

“And I’ll give you a kiss.”

Beatrice let out a laugh. “A kiss. From you?” Her laughs came out in little puffs of air against the cool night. “How is that a trade?”

The man took a step closer effectively stopping her giggles. She tilted her head up to meet his eyes. “Because then you can at least say you got a taste of what one of those parties had in store.”

Beatrice sputtered. Defiance settled at the tip of her tongue, ready to spat a disgusted response in his direction when the tiny square of paper scratched at her wrist.

My list.

“I agree.”

The man’s face matched her own surprise.

“You agree?” The man questioned.

“Are you changing your mind? Is your word not good?” She chided.

The man’s features darkened at her insinuation. “I assure you, little mouse, I say what I mean.”

He towered over her as he stepped into her space. Her eyes trailed up his broad chest, past his well-defined jaw line and stopped when they met his doubting eyes.

“As do I, good sir.” The words barely left her mouth when his lips crashed down onto hers.

She felt the pressure of his tongue pushing against her lips and throwing caution to the wind she opened allowing him in.

Their tongues crashed against each other as she reached up to wrap her arms around his neck. She moaned into his mouth when he wrapped his arms around her, pulling her tighter against his hard body.

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She shifted in his grasp, emitting another moan which had the man pulling back from her.

Her heavy lidded eyes blinked up at him, trying to refocus on the world around her. The tips of her toes were brushing the ground beneath her.

His grip began to loosen and she silently slid down his body as he aided her back to earth.

He cleared his throat. "It is time to see you back to safety."

Beatrice blinked a few more times to settle back into her body. The kiss lasted a mere moment but it had electrified her blood and sent her body careening through the atmosphere. She needed a moment to settle back into her body.

"There is no need. I can see myself to safety. I know the way." Her voice shook and sounded odd to her own ears.

The man looked around. "Hurry then. I don't want to read about a young woman being found in a back alley."

Beatrice tried her best to keep her cool and not giggle like some childish school girl. Energy was pumping through her blood at an alarming rate. She had no doubt she could run home and not feel an ounce of exhaustion when she reached her doorstep.

"I will be fine, I promise."

The man dipped his head. “Go then.”

Beatrice turned to go. She only got a few steps when he called out to her.

“Oh, and little mouse?”

She turned at the sound of his voice.

“Must you call me ‘little mouse’?” She questioned with confusion.

His head dipped with a sly grin. “You were the one scurrying around where you don’t belong.”

She wrinkled her nose at his description. “What is it then?”

“I don’t want to see you here again.”

She smiled but made no promise. She had a list of things to do and fortunately for her, she just crossed an item off of it. Unfortunately for her, she was unaware the list had slipped from her cuff when she reached her arms around the stranger’s neck and it was now securely tucked away in his pocket.

## CHAPTER 2

Beatrice rolled onto her side.

A small smile formed on her lips as she stared out at the new day just beyond her window. It took her a while to calm down after her rendezvous with the handsome stranger last night but she felt more awake than she ever had. She sat up in bed, stretching her sore muscles.

She practically ran all the way back from Water Street last night. Her feet hurt and her calves were sore, but she would do it all over again in a heartbeat. She may not have made it to the party, but she did manage to cross one item off of her list.

Her eyes widened.

My list!

Beatrice scrambled out of bed and scurried to the chair she threw her overcoat on before she fell into bed last night.

She picked up the heavy cloak. It was unbearably hot during the cool summer night, but it was all she had that had a hood that allowed her to hide her face.

However, the hood turned out to be pointless. The masked man saw her face. Chewing on her bottom lip, Beatrice let her mind slip back into the memories from last night.

She could feel his warm breath on her when she fell into him when that woman screamed. She laid her hand over stomach where she felt his hard body as he held her closer as they kissed.

Beatrice's eyes fluttered shut as her body began to heat.

Knock! Knock! Knock!

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Beatrice let out a yelp as she jumped.

“I’m sorry Lady Beatrice, I didn’t mean to startle you.”

Candace, her maid. Beatrice looked at her father’s time piece she kept on her desk. It was almost time for breakfast.

“No, it’s all right, Candace. You just startled me.” Beatrice opened her closet and threw the coat in, slamming the door shut just as Candace opened her bedroom door.

“Are you all right?” Candace was just a few years older than her which Beatrice loved. She was so used to having older sisters around that when both Eleanor and Sarah were married she missed having them with her. Candace helped fill that void.

And she was good at keeping secrets. When Beatrice came to her with the gossip she overheard about a party on Water Street It was Candace that got her the details.

Candace looked over her shoulder as she closed the door. “So? Did you go last night?” Her voice was just above a whisper.

Beatrice smiled and squealed as she ran over to her maid. “I didn’t, but...”

Candace’s owlsh eyes grew wider. “But what?” She squeezed Beatrice’s hands as she pulled her to the bed.

“I met a man.” She squeaked as she plopped down on the bed.

Candace let out a squeal of her own.

“Hush!” Beatrice raised her hands to cover Candace’s mouth. “Where’s Mama?”

Her maid pulled away and waved Beatrice off. “She’s in the breakfast parlor reading the letter from Sarah for the umpteenth time.”

Beatrice scowled. “Is she still insistent that I go to the ball this afternoon?”

Candace chewed her inner cheek and nodded. “I’m afraid so. The Duchess says there will be plenty of young men there and you’re all any one can talk about.”

Beatrice threw herself back onto her bed.

She didn’t want to be married like her sisters. Sure, they both seemed happy and in love with their life, their husbands, even the adorable little cherubs they both produced in their respective marriages. But, if Beatrice was honest with herself, which she usually is, and her mother, which she usually is not, she would say that the life of spinster didn’t seem so bad.

“Her Grace wrote how excited she was to see you and your mother today and,” Candace’s brow furrowed in concentration. “How did she put it?”

Beatrice rubbed her temple in a failing attempt to stave off the headache that was forming thinking about the afternoon’s ball. “She can’t wait to see me shine as the season’s diamond she knows me to be.” Beatrice said with a growl.

She sat up with a huff. “Which is ridiculous. Everyone knows this seasons diamond is Lady Cecilia and her perfectly golden hair. And she can have it. Sarah knows I don’t want to be this season’s diamond. She just wrote that because she knew it would work Mama up into a frenzy and make my life miserable. I swear she’s getting back



at me for all the times I was a brat to her.”

Candace smiled. “Your mother is very... let’s go with energetic, this morning.”

Beatrice rolled her eyes and made her way back to her closet. She threw her overcoat in there quickly just in case Candace was not alone. She didn’t need her mother seeing her coat thrown on a chair and not in its proper place.

She opened the door to the closet and pulled out the coat.

“Well, I’ll give Mama the afternoon. I promised her this season, so this season she shall have. But I had last night.” She pulled the coat to her face and inhaled. It smelled of the summer night and the sweet smoke smell her mind now associates with her masked man.

Candace stood from the bed and started to put the room to rights. “Please tell me you didn’t do anything unbecoming of a respectable woman last night.” She chastised.

Beatrice let her mind drift for a moment and saw the handsome masked stranger before her. She sighed into the coat.

“I may have kissed a man.”

Candace dropped the pillow onto the bed. “May have?” She asked with a raise of her eyebrow.

Beatrice felt her blush deepen. “Most definitely did.”

Candace’s eyes widened. “Who? When? Where? At the party?”

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Beatrice shook her head. “I didn’t make it to the party. I was looking for the address, keeping to myself like you told me to and I accidentally bumped into a man. He took one look at me and no matter how much I pretended that I belonged there he knew I didn’t. He ordered me home and I refused.”

Candace gasped. “Lady Beatrice! You promised me that you were only going to take a quick peek at the party and leave.” She started to worry her bottom lip. “Maybe you shouldn’t do this anymore. I was worried sick about you last night. If your mother found out-”

Beatrice walked over to where Candace started to pace. “Candace, look at me. I’m fine! I followed your directions to the letter. I think I walked right past the house and while I was looking I accidentally walked into a man.”

Candace peered into Beatrice’s eyes. “He didn’t take advantage of you?” Her voice held a slight tremor.

Beatrice extended her arms and pulled Candace into a hug. “Of course not! And if he would have tried I would have put those self-defense moves you showed me to work.”

Candace giggled. “Oh heavens, if your mother truly knew all of our conversations she would have me fired immediately.”

Beatrice placed a kiss on her maid’s cheek. “I would never let that happen.”

Her maid sighed and walked over to the closet. “Are you going to tell me about this

mystery man?”

Beatrice sat at the dresser and began to brush her hair while Candace pulled out her dress for the day.

“Mystery is right. He was wearing a mask that covered the top half of his face so I didn’t get a clear look at him. It was also after midnight and it’s not the most well lit area of London.”

Candace groaned. “The more I hear of this the more I’m rethinking helping you with your escapades.”

Beatrice smiled at her reflection. “You love it.”

She heard a muffled laugh from behind her. “I do. I shouldn’t. But I do.”

“Still, he had this formidable presence, like he could be dangerous if he wanted to be, but he was holding back for me.”

Candace appeared behind her. “I think you’ve read too many of your sister’s romance novels.”

Beatrice scrunched her face at her maid’s comment. It was true her sister Sarah was the romantic and her books of choice usually dealt with broad chested men saving the poor damsel in distress. While Beatrice didn’t mind those stories, her tastes lied with mysteries and adventure.

“As I was saying, he demanded I leave at once and I refused. So he offered me a trade, one kiss for me to go home.”

Candace’s jaw dropped. “And how did he know you were looking for a kiss?”

Beatrice raised a slender shoulder. “I have no idea. I guess I looked like I needed a kiss.”

The two women giggled until a knock sounded at her door.

“Who is it?” Beatrice called.

“Ms. Adams, miss. Your mother is wondering where you are.”

Beatrice dropped her shoulders. “Please tell her I’m getting dressed. I’ll down soon.”

“Of course, miss.”

The two women waited until Ms. Adams’s steps receded before bursting into another fit of giggles.

“In all seriousness, Lady Beatrice, please be careful. I know you have concocted this list of things to do in your mind, but you can’t check anything off if you’re dead.”

Beatrice guffawed as she stepped into the dress Candace held. “I think you’re being a bit dramatic, don’t you.”

Candace helped tie the silk ribbon at the back of her dress and met Beatrice’s eyes in the mirror. “Not dramatic enough, miss. This is not one of your story books. There is not always a happy ending out there.”

Candace hesitated and dropped her eyes.

“What is it?” Beatrice asked.

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Her maid chewed her bottom lip before responding. “You have tried your plan, why don’t you give your mother’s plan a try? I’m sure there are plenty of young men out there that want a wife that is more than a household figure. Perhaps there is someone out there that is looking to travel with his bride?”

Beatrice took in a breath and released it. They have had this conversation many times over the past few months.

“All I’m saying is to consider it.” Candace pleaded.

Candace gave Beatrice one more look over before she turned towards the door.

Beatrice’s eyes landed on her overcoat from the night before. “Can you tell my mother I’ll be right down? I need a moment to collect myself.”

Candace hesitated before dipping her head and making her way downstairs.

Beatrice picked up the coat and fished through the sleeves. Nothing but the satin lining. She checked the outer pockets and the inside one. Nothing.

Her heart began to beat and the world slowed down.

My list is gone.

“No. No. No. No. No. This cannot be happening.”

She dropped to her knees on the floor to look underneath her bed and chairs. She

crawled over to the closet and rummaged through the bottom of it to see if it had fallen out of the cuffs when she threw it in there this morning.

A sinking feeling in her stomach told her she had lost it, most likely when she was kissing the masked man.

As long as I didn't lose it anywhere Mama can find it.

Looking at the door, then back to her desk she decided breakfast could wait. She felt naked without her list of things she needed to do before she either wed, or died. To her, the two felt interchangeable.

1. Kiss a stranger
2. Recreate the "opera scene"
3. See the Wild Side of London

Beatrice's pen hovered before writing the fourth item.

4. Be intimate.
5. Gamble/drink
6. Fall in love

She was supposed to check off number three last night, possibly number five, but in a surprising twist, thanks to a midnight stranger, she crossed off the first item with a smirk on her face.

"One down, five to go." Beatrice studied her list. She brought her pen down on

number six and crossed it off. “No need to fall in love.”

“Ah, there you are. I was about to send a search party for you.” Charlotte’s voice rang out across the breakfast room.

Her mother was dressed up in her finest, already ready for the afternoon’s ball. Beatrice took a deep breath to steady herself and walked into her mother’s embrace.

“I’m sorry I kept you waiting, Mama, I couldn’t fall asleep last night.”

Charlotte jumped back with a gasp, inspecting her daughter’s face. “Are you well? Oh, I knew I shouldn’t have let you and Sarah go for a walk yesterday afternoon with the chill in the air. Today is ruined!”

Beatrice bit her lip to stop from sighing. Her mother was notorious for her dramatics. Normally she found humor in her mother’s hysterics, but she was in no mood for it with the afternoon’s ball looming over her.

“Mama, I’m not ill, I just couldn’t sleep.” She said with a shrug.

Charlotte cast a judging look over her daughter once more. “You don’t look ill. Ah! You must be nervous. After all, in Sarah’s letter she said people are starting to tire of Cecilia and you are the one that the marriage mart is leaning towards.” She said with a clap of her hands.

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Beatrice inwardly cringed. She was sick of hearing about her sister's letter. Beatrice made a mental note to find a way to incapacitate her sister's writing hand so she could never write another letter.

She was fine not being the season's diamond, she preferred it even. The less attention she got the better her chance of becoming a spinster became. The further she got in her season the more she realized she was not only capable of living on her own, but craved it.

"Come, sit down." Charlotte urged. "You need to eat to build up your energy. I foresee a lot of dancing in your future." Her mother said with a wink as she pushed Beatrice down into a chair. "I heard Lord Devlin's son will be in attendance, he always seemed like a nice young man. Oh, and Lord Dancary, he's available, which is odd. He is so well liked, I wonder why he hasn't settled with anyone yet."

Beatrice speared a strawberry and ate it. "Perhaps he isn't looking for a wife."

Charlotte's shrill laugh startled Beatrice. "Oh, Beatrice. You say the most nonsensical things some times."

Beatrice scrunched her nose. "It's not unheard of for people to want to live out their lives without a spouse. Some may even prefer it."

Beatrice's comment was met with a blank stare. Her mother sat opposite of her with a curious look on her face.

Her mother's eyes narrowed. "Beatrice. I can never tell when you're joking or not."



Beatrice swallowed another strawberry. "I'm not joking, Mama."

She watched as the wheels in her mother's head began to turn. "Well, men are a different breed. They can live out their lives alone, but they shouldn't. Regardless, us women do better as wives." She picked up her tea and took a sip, most definitely thinking that was the end of that conversation.

"Mama. It's not just men who can have the opportunity to live their lives alone. There are women who do it as well. Women can live out their lives alone and be quite happy and well off."

Charlotte sputtered over her tea. "Beatrice!" She huffed. "I knew it." She pointed her tea spoon across the table at Beatrice. "I told your sister you and her read too much! Thankfully for Sarah her tastes worked in her favor. But you, you read about adventures that only exist in books for fancy."

Beatrice felt her cheeks heat. This was not a new argument with her mother. Unfortunately, it has become almost a daily conversation since this season started.

"I have always said I should take those books from you and I'm starting to think I should finally do it." Charlotte sat back in her chair, distraught.

Beatrice rolled a blueberry around her plate. "Mama. You wouldn't do that. I think deep down you are proud of the fact that your daughters are well versed in all kinds of literature."

Charlotte grimaced. "Only when I forget it interferes with my goals for my daughters."

Beatrice leaned towards her mother. "Exactly, Mama. Your goals."

Her mother sat up, tilting her ear to her daughter. “My goals are your goals, love. Your father and I made sure you and yoursisters had the best schooling we could afford to ensure you had the best chance at a fruitful and happy life. In our society that means married to an honorable man. It worked for your sisters.”

“I’m not my sisters, Mama.” Beatrice took another deep breath. She always tiptoed around not wanting to be married, but she never came out and told her mother of her plans. It was time she finally told Charlotte.

“I want more than that. I want more than to be a wife. I would... I would rather live alone.” Beatrice dropped her eyes.

You would have thought Beatrice had dropped dead in front of her mother’s eyes. Charlotte dropped her tea cup with a loud gasp that had Ms. Adams running to her side.

Charlotte grasped her chest and heaved in air.

“Your Grace!” Ms. Adams yelled.

Charlotte put her arms up in a dramatic fashion, holding off the housekeeper. “I’m fine, Ms. Adams. Beatrice’s joke fell flat and startled me.”

“I’ll clean this up right away, Your Grace.” Ms. Adams started picking up the broken fragments of the cup.

“I’m not joking, Mama.” Beatrice’s voice barely made it over the din of collecting the broken porcelain.

Ms. Adams’s eyes bounced from Beatrice’s to Charlotte’s. “I’ll bring you another cup, Your Grace.” The housekeeper then turned on a dime to hurry out of the room.

Beatrice sighed. Ms. Adams was young for a housekeeper and no doubt going to spread the word that Beatrice was dead set on ruining her life.

“Explain.” Charlotte’s voice, usually so melodic and whimsical, was cold.

Beatrice swallowed and licked her suddenly dry lips.

“I am not like my sisters. They are happy being wed, I just don’t see that for myself.”

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Charlotte took a moment to consider her daughter's words then breathed a sigh of relief.

"Is that all?" She laughed. "Beatrice, how short is your memory? Neither one of your sisters wanted to get married when they were your age. Remember Eleanor? She was adamant against even getting to know Derek and now they have two children and are very happy."

Beatrice chewed her bottom lip. "Mama, you're not understanding me. This isn't some wayward thought because of my age. I'm not saying this to convince myself I'll be all right if I don't find a match. I'm saying this because I truly believe in my heart of hearts that I will be better off alone."

Beatrice's words hung in the air between them.

"Are you saying your sisters have a pitiful existence?" Charlotte sneered. Her tone full of pain. "You're too good for their lives? For my life, is that it?"

Beatrice's eyes flew to her mother's. "No, Mama! How could you think that? What I want for my life has no reflection on how you or my sister live your lives. It's just not for me."

Charlotte shifted uncomfortably in her seat. "I don't understand. We have given you everything and this is how you repay us?" Tears welled in her mother's eyes.

"Don't you see, Mama, it is because you gave me everything that I want more--"

Charlotte's sob cut her daughter's words off. "So this is my fault!"

Beatrice rubbed her temples. This was getting her nowhere.

"No, Mama, this is no one's fault. This is just who I am. I'm happy. And thanks to Derek and Eleanor I can have a sustainable future, one where I—"

"Enough." Charlotte slammed her hand on the table rattling the breakfast plates.

Beatrice gasped. She had never seen her mother lose her temper. Her dramatics always swayed towards the lighter side of life, never the villain. Guilt and shame settled in Beatrice's bones as tears gathered in her eyes.

"Mama, I am so sorry. Perhaps I am just nervous." The words felt like sand on her tongue. She knew what she wanted, but to see the distress it caused her mother was too much.

Charlotte's shoulders dropped. "Of course, that's it. It's just like I always told your sisters, you need to trust the process."

Beatrice met her mother's eyes, both women knowing that was not the true cause of Beatrice's woes. Regardless, it was enough for both women to pretend it was so they could steer the conversation into safer waters.

"Now, we'll have no more of this talk."

Beatrice watched as her mother took a deep breath and change back into the soft, matronly woman she was expected to be. "Where is Ms. Adams with my new cup?" She said with a forced laugh. "I can't get my day properly started until I've had my tea." She said with a smile.

Beatrice focused on the plate blurring in front of her eyes. She willed the tears back and swallowed the lump that had formed in her throat.

“I’m very excited to see your sister Sarah at the ball today. It’s a shame Eleanor wouldn’t be able to join us.” Charlotte’s voice was clear as if the previous conversation did not just happen.

Beatrice could only shake her head in agreement as she forced herself to chew and swallow a strawberry. The lead weight in her stomach grew with every swallow. This was going to be a long day.

### CHAPTER 3

“Iknew it. Everyone who is any one is here today.” Charlotte whispered in Beatrice’s ear as the women entered the ballroom. “Look! There’s Lord Devlin’s son, I wish I could remember his name. Do you see Sarah? She would remember, that girl was always so good remembering people’s names.”

Beatrice’s eyes were trained on the floor in front of her. The weight that had started in her stomach over breakfast had grown and felt as if it were settled in her feet. With each step she took towards the ballroom she felt as if she were walking towards a guillotine.

“I haven’t seen her. Perhaps she got caught up with Maisie, I can’t imagine having a two year old makes it easier to get ready on time.”

At the mention of her granddaughter’s name Charlotte melted. “Ah, that sweet child. She certainly has those two wrapped around her little finger. Her aunt, too.” Charlotte nudged Beatrice.

She couldn’t help herself, she smiled. Thinking of the curly hair of her darling little

niece never failed to make Beatrice smile. She may not want to be a mother, but she couldn't deny the love she felt when she was around her nieces and nephew.

Beatrice looked up into the swaying crowd of the dancers and the onlookers. If she had to be here, she might as well try to enjoy herself. It helped that the ball was being thrown by Lady Swanson, she always had the best biscuits and her punch was the most refreshing.

“Come, let's take a walk around, see if we can find your sister.”

Her arm entwined with her mother's as they made their way around the ballroom. They didn't find Sarah, but her mother ran into several friends. Beatrice had to laugh. Her mother made friends wherever she went and therefore she was always stopping to talk to someone.

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The occurrence was always curious to Beatrice. Beatrice may always be up for an adventure, she always scoffed at the idea of meeting new people within the peerage. In Beatrice's book, meet one person of the peerage, you've meet them all. Yet with Charlotte, she treated everyone as if they invented the printing press.

The doors to the gardens were open letting the cool summer breeze to waft through bringing in the sweet smell of honeysuckle, one of Beatrice's favorite smells.

Although, there was something else in the air. Beatrice looked around to identify the smell. It was sweet, yet kind of smokey. She took a step to her right and leaned around a portly man who was now talking to her mother.

Her eyes landed on a tall man who was talking with another couple. His head turned and his eyes clashed with hers.

Beatrice gasped. She knew those eyes. She slowly moved back to standing straight. He looked directly at her. Could it be the masked stranger from the other night?

She shifted her feet. She wanted so desperately to lean over and get another look but she didn't want to be noticed.

"Now that's just awful news, isn't it Beatrice?" Her mother's raised voice brought Beatrice's eyes to her mother's.

She raised her eyebrow at her mother. Charlotte hated when Beatrice's mind wandered, she always blamed the books Beatrice read as crowding her mind causing it to wander. Admitting she wasn't paying attention would do her more harm than



good.

Thankfully, Charlotte knew the confused look well and repeated what she had just heard. “I hope Cecilia gets well soon, but I’m glad her parents sent her to the country for some fresh air. It always does a body wonders. It’s a shame she’ll miss the rest of the season though, right Beatrice?”

Charlotte’s elbow pushed into Beatrice’s side enough for Beatrice to lose her footing causing her to step to the side.

Beatrice’s body hit a familiar brick wall. The smell of sweet smoke filled the air.

The world around her slowed down as her mind caught up with her body. All she had to do was tilt her head up and to the right and she would no doubt be staring into the eyes of the masked stranger from last night.

“Your Grace! How nice it is to see you here.” Lord John, the rotund man with whom Charlotte was speaking with piped up. “I was just telling Her Grace how Lord Granville’s family seem to have taken ill and they are retiring to the country for the rest of the season. Poor things.” The old man coughed into a handkerchief before wiping his nose and tucking the used material into his sleeve.

He extended his hand to the unmasked masked stranger who just looked at it and turned his body towards Charlotte.

“It is nice to see you, again, Your Grace. Will Stoleton be joining us this afternoon?” His voice was deep and soothing, with a light air about it. Nothing like the dark and dangerous tone he had last night.

Perhaps it is not him.

Charlotte shrugged. “He should be. But with a toddler at home their schedules get behind sometimes. And Her Grace insists they be involved in every aspect of that child’s life.” Charlotte waved her hand with a laugh. “These new parents and their new ways. All my girls had governesses and nannies to handle the day-to-day things and looked how well they turned out.”

Beatrice felt all eyes turn to her. She was lost in her thoughts dissecting the man next to her, wondering if he was the masked man from last night. Her cheeks heated and her palms began to sweat. She hated being the center of attention.

Her eyes bounced between her mother and Lord John before landing on the man next to her.

She wanted to stand there and study him. There was something about his eyes that drew her in. She heard her mother’s not-so-subtle cough and returned her gaze to Charlotte.

“Um, yes. I think we all turned out just fine, Mama. But I don’t see a problem with parents being more involved with their child’s upbringing. I mean, the child is theirs, they should want to be a part of how he or she grows up.”

Her mother bristled. Beatrice knew she was tiptoeing into dangerous territory considering how their earlier conversation veered into the differences between how her and her mother live their lives.

The older man snorted. “Everyone thinks they know how the world works when they’re still wet behind the ears. What say you, Graham? You’re a man about town and knows a thing or two..” The man eyed the stranger next to her. “You look a bit young but not as young as some of these dandies who don’t know their way around a ledger.”

Beatrice's heart thudded hard against her chest when the man standing next to her smiled.

"Well, as I am not married I can't speak for how others parents. But, yes, I do know my way around a ledger, amongst other things."

Beatrice's eyes widened and to her horror she let out a squeak.

"Oh, where are my manners?" Charlotte said reaching out towards her daughter. "Here we are talking and I haven't properly introduced you to my daughter. Your Grace, this is my daughter Beatrice. Beatrice, this is His Grace, Ezra Dean, the Duke of Graham."

Beatrice dipped her head in the Duke's direction. When she raised her head she found his eyes on her. His pupils were blown, turning his green eyes a darker shade of emerald. She was completely captivated by them.

He dipped his chin without breaking eye contact causing Beatrice's heart to thud again.

Her clothes suddenly felt too tight and she was having trouble breathing. Did she always stand this way? What should she be doing with her hands? Nervous laughter threatened to bubble out of her. It was as if she forgot how to act in public.

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“Nice to meet you,” he said before taking a sip of the punch he was holding. “Although you look familiar. Have we met before?” There was a glint to his eye and a hint of amusement in his question.

Thankfully for Beatrice, who was busy remembering how to form words, Charlotte stepped in. “I don’t think so, Your Grace. Not officially, that is. However, we’ve been to many balls so far this season and there has been much talk about her. Isn’t that right, Beatrice?”

Beatrice’s heart thudded again, however this time was not because of infatuation, but out of embarrassment.

She opened her mouth only to close it again. Heavens, how could this be any more embarrassing for her. First she’s caught ogling this man and now her mother is parading her out in front of him.

“And now that Lord Granville’s family is out sick, I hear Beatrice is the one to watch for. Quick, Your Grace, you should ask her for a dance before her card gets filled up.” Charlotte teased.

Beatrice could feel the color drain from her face. This is it. This is how she would die. Not on some grand adventure in the Serengeti but here, in Lady Swanson’s ballroom.

The nervous laughter erupted out of Beatrice and she waved her hands in front of her face. “Oh no. I’m sure the Duke has already committed himself to other dance partners. I wouldn’t want to impose-”

“I would love to.”

“We just got here and I’m sure he… wait. What?”

A smile widened on his face. “I said I would love to.”

Beatrice blinked, completely shocked at the turn of events.

Charlotte clasped her hands tightly. “Wonderful!”

“Let me just put down my cup and I’ll be back to join you.” The Duke tilted his head and made his way to the refreshment table to set down his glass.

The two women watched as he walked back to them.

Beatrice leaned into her mother. “Mother. I don’t know this man! What are you doing?”

Charlotte rolled her bottom lip in thought. “Now is not the time to worry about all of that.” Charlotte tucked an errant curl behind Beatrice’s ear. Beatrice must have looked out of sorts. “Look. Like most men his age and background some view him as a rake, but nothing scandalous.” Charlotte glanced back to the approaching man. “Nothing that I have caught wind of at least.”

Memories of tongues touching and gripping hands flashed before Beatrice’s eyes. Charlotte eyed her daughter. “Just go and dance with the man. It’ll be fine.”

Graham returned and offered his arm. “May I?”

With one more look to her mother she slipped her arm through his and let him lead her into the center of the dance floor.

She usually liked to dance on the outside, that way when the dance ended she could make a quick escape. Whenever her partner pulled her to the center she felt as if all eyes were on her.

However, with Graham leading her, her eyes were only his broad back. When he turned back to her she forgot the rest of the room was there.

He stepped closer to her and wrapped his arm around her waist pulling her in. The familiar scent of sweet smoke and something else she couldn't quite put her finger on surrounded her. This had to be the man from last night. She has never smelled this combination before last night.

She tilted her head up causing the curl to break free again. He reached up and tucked it behind her ear. She saw the slight silver scar across the back of his hand and gasped.

It was him.

Ezra watched as the realization spread across Beatrice's face. When her brow furrowed followed by her brown eyes widening he wanted to laugh but thought better of it.

He tightened his hold on her and began the dance. His fingers stretched along her back, his body humming with the way her curves fit against him.

Much to his dismay he hadn't been able to get this little vixen out of his mind since last night. Here in the light of day she appeared to be the perfect daughter of the town. But the woman he met last night was one for danger and adventure. He had trouble reconciling the two in his mind. But he had a feeling he would enjoy the challenge.

"How are you faring today, Lady Beatrice?" He kept his tone conversational,

although it was taking every bit of his self-control not to ask her about last night.

She eyed him curiously. She could sense a trap which meant she was smart. He liked that.

“I’m well, thank you.” Her response was curt.

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He got the sense she didn't like not having the upper hand. The thought delighted him immensely. His eyes stayed focused on her as she started to nibble on her bottom lip. Oh to be that lip.

The thought surprised him, but then again, it has been some time since his last tryst. He may want to settle that soon. He looked over Beatrice, her brown hair perfectly curled and styled. Other than that one curl he tucked away, which his fingers were still buzzing from touching, everything about her was perfectly positioned. What would she look like a little disheveled and undone?

Ezra gave his head a slight shake. Those were extremely dangerous thoughts, especially during a mid-afternoon ball.

"Do you enjoy dancing?" His voice was getting harder to control and keep light with her in his arms.

She snorted. "Do you like propositioning young women in the dark streets of London in the middle of the night?"

His laugh was so loud it drowned out the music and had people turning towards them in curiosity.

Her smug look was quickly replaced with reddened cheeks as she dropped her head in embarrassment.

So she was quick-witted and had no problem asking hard questions, but was not a fan of attention. He had learned more about this girl in thirty seconds than he had learned



about most women he'd spent weeks with.

"You embarrass me, Your Grace." She whispered.

He lowered his head towards hers. "Come now, where is the brazen girl I met last night? The one who challenged a stranger with no care for her safety?"

Her brown brows tightened on his. "I had care for my safety. And, may I remind you, my safety was and is none of your concern." She sniffed as they continued to turn around the dance floor.

Ezra wanted to smile at her naivety but he couldn't help but to think of what could have happened to her if she had run into anyone else on that street. His grip tightened as they twirled.

"I wonder if your mother has the same opinion." Beatrice's body stiffened within his arms. "I would assume she is not a fan of your midnight strolls. Actually, I think one would question if she even knew about them."

He lifted one eyebrow as he looked down at her. Fear had frozen her features.

"You wouldn't." Her whisper was harsh.

Ezra lifted a shoulder. "It's not a concern of mine what your mother knows. That's between you and her. But I assure you, Lady Beatrice,," he leaned down, his lips whispered just beside her ear. "Who walks my streets at night is very much a part of my concern."

Beatrice shuttered in his arms. "Your streets? I was unaware you were the Constable of Water Street."

This time his laugh was more subdued. She really did have a tongue on her.

“I am not, however, I frequent that area enough to be held in high regard and I take that privilege seriously. We don’t need some curious spoiled brat ruining our good time. We lead hard enough lives, we deserve a chance to let loose without the eyes of thetonwatching our every move.”

Beatrice’s feet stopped as she stared up at him in shock.

Ezra, bewildered, looked down at her feet, then around the room. “What is it?. Are you well?”

If his laughed drowned out the music, her laugh reached the Queen. She doubled over in laughter, wiping tears from her eyes.

“Really, Lady Beatrice,” he chided. “Now who is embarrassing who?”

He reached his arm back around her waist to draw her back in and started dancing again. She was still giggling. He didn’t know whether to chastise her for her outburst or enjoy the lightness her laugh brought him.

“I’m sorry, Your Grace, it’s just you speak as if you have the weight of the world on your shoulders. You do realize there are people in this world who can’t afford food or a place to sleep and yet you were just drinking out of a crystal glass.”

Ezra rolled his lips. He was right, she was a smart woman. Smart women were dangerous, and too much of a challenge. Pity he loved challenges.

“While it is true I am far better off than the common man, that does not mean I do not know the pain of hardships.”

Beatrice rolled her eyes. “What? Have they run out of your favorite brandy? Your favorite silk cravat was lost? Oh, I know,” her voice rang out in mirth. “Your favorite hunting dog has fallen ill.”

Ezra was not amused. “Are you done?”

Beatrice squinted her eyes as she looked up towards the ceiling. “Wait. I can come up with more if you just give me a moment.”

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The familiar refrain sounded throughout the ballroom, the song was coming to its end.

“Lady Beatrice, I have seen and experienced more in my twenty-seven years than most men have in their entire life times. I have seen and done things that would make you, yes, you, the daring little vixen that you are, blush in desire and in derision.”

With each word he slowed his steps and lowered his head and voice. They were barely swaying to the music now as he leaned in to whisper in her ear.

“I have tortured men with the same hands I use to play Beethoven. I have seen death, destruction, beauty and passion all within moments of each other. I think it is safe to say that I have embraced all walks of life and take very little for granted. I know pain and pleasure go hand in hand very nicely.”

Beatrice’s chest quickly rose and fell against him. Her eyes were wide, unblinking as his words penetrated her shield.

“And something tells me you are more curious about that side of life than you care to admit.”

Ezra refused to move until the right moment. The song had ended and common decency be damned. She needed to know who she was playing with.

“And how could you possibly know that? Because you saw me out one night?” Her words did not fool him, her voice shook with fear.

“Because I have your list.” His whispered before he placed a soft kiss on the shell of her ear. He stepped back to see the reaction he was waiting for. Triumph and victory sang in his blood. Her facial expression changed from confusion to shock, then horror, to defeat before finally settling on his favorite one, absolute fury.

Her eyes fired at his as she pursed her lips. He dipped at the waist and turned on his heel. He had a feeling he’d been seeing Lady Beatrice again and, if their interaction would be anything like last night’s or today’s, he couldn’t wait.

## CHAPTER 4

Beatrice stood with her heart beating in her head. The world spun around her as she watched the midnight stranger, this Duke of Graham, walk away from her. Colors and shapes blurred around her.

He had her list.

Reality crashed down on her when a hand grabbed hers. “Mama said you were dancing with the Duke of Graham but I didn’t believe it. Imagine my surprise when I look out and not only do I see you dancing with him, but enjoying yourself!”

Beatrice turned and tried to focus her eyes on her sister, Sarah. She shook her head. “I was not enjoying myself?” Beatrice tsked, ignoring the parts of her body that were still tingling from his touch.

Sarah tilted her head. “Well, when I arrived I heard him laugh, I’m sure the whole room did. Then your laugh...” Sarah stopped to look at her sister. “Beatrice? Are you well? You have the strangest look on your face?”

Beatrice was back to staring in the direction the Duke walked. “What? Oh. Yes. I’m fine.”

Sarah tried to step in front of her line of sight and Beatrice pushed her out of the way. “Actually, I need some air. Will you excuse me?”

She didn’t stay for Sarah’s response. Beatrice picked up her skirts and marched past the refreshment table and onto the veranda when the Duke was leaning on the railing with a glass in his hand. He was looking right at her with a blasted smile on his face.

“What do you mean you have my list?” She placed her hands on her hips to stop herself from swatting at him.

The Duke stood and set his glass down on the nearest table. “Would you care for a walk, Lady Beatrice? Perhaps where prying eyes are not?”

He nodded to a group of giggling girls in the corner of the veranda who were currently doing a piss poor job of pretending not to be eavesdropping.

Beatrice huffed and took a step closer, lowering her voice. “I’ve been alone with you previously and I wish not to repeat that mistake.”

Graham smiled a devilish grin. “Ah, something tells me you’re lying.”

Beatrice shifted her weight and crossed her arms over her chest. “How could you possibly know that I’m lying? You barely know me. This is only our third conversation.”

Ezra’s eyes drifted over to where the giggling girls had settled down and had now focused their attention on an equally annoying group of young men.

“You’d be surprised what I’ve gathered about you in the few moments I’ve had the pleasure to be in your company.”

His compliment shook Beatrice's resolve. Why did he have to be so charming? She inhaled and pushed out the intrusive thoughts. She tried grabbing ahold of the anger that propelled her out here, but to her dismay, it was quickly dissipating.

“Regardless of any common traits you think you have picked up about me, the truth of the matter is you know nothing about my true intentions or desires.” She glanced at the girls who were now fully invested in the group of young men. Still, she lowered her voice again.

“You have my list, you know what's on it, you were merely a checked box to me.” She lifted her nose in the air.

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Graham chuckled. “You wound me, madam.” He said in mock jest.

Beatrice dropped her arms, suddenly feeling as if she was walking into a trap. “Don’t mock me.”

Graham held his hands up in defense. “I am not. You just have to remember, I was there last night.” He took a step closer and Beatrice’s eyes danced between the door to the ballroom and the gaggle of girls in the corner. They were by no means alone however, since they weren’t alone, any behavior that could be described as untoward would be described as untoward. She did not want to be tied to this infuriating man.

“Your point being?” She refolded her arms in defense. This man disrupted her senses, she never knew if she should attack or protect. With the current look in his eyes, she definitely felt the need to protect herself.

“I was as much a part of our kiss as you were. I felt your body heat under my touch.” His words were like soft velvet along her skin, causing her skin to to gooseflesh even in the warm summer afternoon air. “I felt your tongue tangle with mine in the most delicious way imaginable. You can’t kiss like that if you didn’t feel something.”

Beatrice’s blood ignited within her, sending fingers of fire licking up and down her body. She shifted on her feet, trying to calm the raging inferno that was taking over her mind, body, and soul.

Think, Beatrice! This is a game to him. Play that game. Come on! What would the heroine say in one of Sarah’s books?



Beatrice's eyes lighted. "Well, if one can't kiss that way without feeling a certain way, then we know that I affected you as well."

She licked her lips as her body started to hum in triumph. He was not the only one who could throw someone off their game and cause a misstep. She was proving herself to be a worthy opponent of any man. If only her mother could see her.

The thought horrified her as her eyes darted to the door.

No. Mama should be nowhere near this conversation, both for her sake and mine!

Graham shook his slowly, seemingly in defeat.

Ha!

Beatrice's back straightened as she relished in besting him in their little tête-à-tête.

"I could see how someone as naive as you would think that." He started with a shrug.

Beatrice's heart dropped as unease washed over her. He should be sulking, men hated when they were bested, especially by a woman. Isn't that's how it was supposed to be? Beatrice's face went numb. Unless his body didn't react to her as hers did his.

"You see, unlike you, I have done my fair share of kissing." He said with a cocky grin. "I know what women like and I know what I like. If I'm going to kiss someone, I'm going to do it for both parties enjoyment. However," he tucked his hands in his pockets as if they were discussing the weather and not scandalous behavior. "I am experienced enough to be able to make the act enjoyable without the feelings that usually accompany the act to perform it pleasantly."

Beatrice was lost. She shook her head in confusion. "What are you talking about?"

Graham laughed as he walked back to where he set his drink down. “Just because I kiss like I enjoy it does not mean I did. I’m just that good.” He lifted his shoulders in a smug shrug.

Beatrice’s eyes flashed before her skin heated with embarrassment. It was true that night was her first kiss, but as far as kissing went, she felt she did her part adequately. “You can try to hide behind experience, but you’re not that good.” Her pointed words did nothing to sully his good humor.

“That’s your naïveté talking.” He gestured to her with his glass.

Her hands balled into tight fists, so tight she could feel her nails digging into her palms. The audacity of this man! She refused to pout in front of him and give him more validation to his opinion of her but he was right. She was out of her league when it came to these matters.

It bothered her that he bothered her, that she felt embarrassment over her lack of experience. She knew she was ignorant to the more mature matters of womanhood, but that was why she had her list.

A list that this stranger currently had access to.

“Let us return to what brought me out here in the first place. You have something of mine and I want it back, with the promise that you will not mention it to anyone out of respect for my reputation.”

Beatrice hoped for her sake that the man had some sense of decency and would not spread word of her list of goals. Beads of sweat started to gather amongst her hairline at the thought of people reading what she wrote.

What would they think of me? What would Mama say?

Once again her eyes drifted to the door. Her mother would go into hysterics if she knew not only did her daughter have a list of scandalous behavior, but she was talking to a Duke about it.

If this morning's conversation didn't irrevocably change her view of her daughter, this conversation would.

Graham took a sip from his glass, his eyes scrutinizing her over its rim.

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He licked his lips, a movement Beatrice couldn't help but notice.

“No.” He said plainly.

Beatrice reared back. “What do you mean ‘no’? It is my list. You must at least destroy it. It is of no use to you.”

“Correction, it was your list. It's now in my possession, therefore it is mine.”

Beatrice ran her hands down her face. “Possession has nothing to do with it. I wrote it, it's mine. I demand you either give it back or you destroy it.”

The Duke snorted. “As a landowner, and a Duke, I can legally justify the claim of possession as ownership. Shall we consult a solicitor?” He teased.

Beatrice was losing patience with this conversation and thankfully, Graham must've sensed her frustration.

“I'll give you your list back, and you have my word no one will find out its contents from me, but,” he held up a hand that quelled her excitement, “you need to answer a question first.”

Beatrice groaned. “Why must everything be a transaction with you?”

Graham smiled. “I'm a businessman. It's what I do. Why must everything be an argument with you?” He countered.

Beatrice's blood began to boil. Never had a man, or anyone for that matter, been able to get under her skin to the point of driving her to madness. She quite literally began to worry for her sanity.

Beatrice took a deep breath and pushed it out. "Fine." She held out her arms to her side in question. "Ask your question."

The Duke's eyes lit up causing Beatrice to instantly regret her decision.

"There are some rather scandalous items on your list." He started.

"Is that a question?" She deadpanned. This man was insufferable.

Graham rolled his lips. He knew he was getting to her and she hated that. She needed to be better at hiding her feelings, her facial expressions and body language always gave her away. It's one of the reasons why she never played cards with her sisters.

"My question is why."

His question was simple in nature, but the answer had sent her mind reeling. She had only just told her mother about her life's plan of being a spinster, there was no way she was going to admit that to a man she just met.

Although, he promised not to tell anyone about the list, would he give her the same allowance with this information? But would it matter if he disclosed this information to others? She had every intention of retiring after this season so soon everyone would know she was destined for a life of spinsterhood.

The Duke waved his hands in front of her face. "Lady Beatrice? You're not blinking. Are you well?"

Beatrice pushed his hand away from her space. “Yes, I’m well. What do you take me for?”

Graham shrugged. “I don’t know. I asked you a question and you just stood there staring at me like I had grown a second head.”

“I was processing my response.” She said, defensively.

“Well your processing face looks like you lost all sense of consciousness.” He quipped.

Beatrice’s vision turned red. “You have a lot of nerve-”

“I do.” He said, quite pleased with himself.

She grumbled. “Must you interrupt me!”

Her voice carried across the veranda and had the now mingled group of young men and women turning to look at the pair.

Graham raised his glass to them in amusement.

“Is something amiss, Lady Beatrice?” One of the girls asked.

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Graham returned his gaze to the now fuming Beatrice. “Yes, Lady Beatrice, is all well?” He asked with false concern.

Beatrice narrowed her eyes at him before schooling her face to the facade of calm. “Yes, Claire, all is well. Just a misunderstanding between the His Grace and I. Thank you for your concern.” She dipped her head and turned back to the Duke who was leaning against the railing with the air of indifference.

“Must you be insufferable?” She whispered.

Graham considered her words with pursed lips. “If the situation calls for it. Now. Have you had time to process your reply to my question or do you need another minute?”

Beatrice rolled her eyes. With a quick glance to make sure the group on the other side of the veranda returned to their own conversation she finally answered.

“I have concluded you do not need to know in order to understand it is of sensitive nature it would be indecent of me to disclose such intimate information to a man I had just officially met.”

Graham studied her with a peculiar look on his face.

Beatrice smiled and repeated his words in jest. “Hello? Are you still in there?”

His eyes cleared and a knowing smile spread across his face. Something about the change in his demeanor unnerved her.

“What is it?”

Graham stood and slowly shook his head as he considered her. “Spoken like a true businessman. Or, I should say businesswoman. You are quite intelligent, Lady Beatrice.”

His praise felt like a trap.

She raised an eyebrow. “Thank you?”

“No need to question it. It is a compliment I do not offer to many.” He continued to look at her, setting off alarm bells in Beatrice’s mind.

“I have another proposition for you.” He offered.

Beatrice took a step back. “I don’t think that’s wise.”

Graham noted her retreat but stayed where he was.

“You didn’t hear the proposal.”

Beatrice folded her arms across her chest. “After last night’s proposal I think I am safe to decline before this goes any further.”

Graham rocked back on his heels. “Odd response considering my proposal helped you check off an item on your list. And while I do not know the reasoning behind the list the fact we are having this conversation reveals this list means a lot to you. My new proposal will help you with the entirety your list.”

Beatrice couldn’t help but feel there was a trap someone in his response, but the thought of having someone help her check off the items was too good to pass up.



Plus, it would relieve her poor maid, Candace, from the guilt of going behind her mother's back to aid her.

"How so?" She cautiously took a step forward.

Graham pulled out the familiar piece of paper and unfolded it.

Seeing her list in his hands caused her heart to race. Her fingers itched to reach out and grab it but she was afraid any sudden movement would cause a scene.

"I could easily get you into the party you were after last night." His eyes scanned the page. "There's definitely drinking and gambling that will be easier for you to take part in with me at your side"

The image of him at her side did something to her insides. Her clothes began to feel odd against her skin. She shifted her feet as she tugged the ribbon around her neck.

"You were technically in the 'wild side' of London last night, but there is definitely more to be seen there. And well," he dropped the paper to look at her, "I already helped you with the first item on your list, it only seems fair that I help with the rest."

Beatrice blushed and tried to look anywhere he was not but he seemed to take up the entire space in front of her.

Her eyes couldn't help but wander back to him.

"I can help you accomplish every item on this list... except for the last one."

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Beatrice tilted her head in confusion. The last one? She ran through the list in her head. She had just rewritten it this morning.

Kiss someone, the wild side of London, drinking and gambling. What one is he referring to?

Her eyes drifted down to the paper that he now held in front of him. Through the paper she could see her handwriting and although it was backwards she could see it as clear as day.

6. Fall in love

Her eyes widened in embarrassment.

“I have no intention of having you fall in love with me, Lady Beatrice.”

“No need to worry about that, Your Grace. I have no intention of falling in love with you or anyone, for that matter. It is not for me.”

She cringed.

Drat. Did I just give my reasoning away?

Graham shook his head and offered his hand.

“Do we have a deal, Lady Beatrice?”

Beatrice looked at his hand then back up to him.

“No.”

Graham clucked his tongue and lowered his hand. He picked up his glass and finished his drink.

“Come find me when you change your mind.” He started past her.

“You mean if I change my mind.” She said defiantly.

He stopped at her shoulder and leaned into her. His breath tickling her neck.

“When.”

Then he was gone.

## CHAPTER 5

Ezra parried Frederic’s attack, using his shoulder to throw his friend off his weight. He turned and feigned to the right, opening Frederic up for Ezra to strike.

“Dueces. What has gotten into you, man?” Frederic bent over, resting his hands on his knees, trying to catch his breath. “Did I insult your honor?” He joked as he stood back up rubbing his side.

Ezra wiped the sweat from his brow as he walked over to where he had a pitcher of water.

“You always insult my honor.” Ezra taunted before taking a healthy gulp of water.

Frederic dragged himself from where they sparred to a chair by the table. “Seriously, Ezra, is something amiss? You’ve been extra,” he waved his sword back and forth, “stabby today.”

Ezra furrowed his brow. “I’m not extra stabby.” He said defensively. “I just have a lot on my mind and I needed to work out some stress.”

Frederic leaned back in the chair and extended his legs with a groan. “Can’t you find a nice willing woman to take it out on? I fear I’m getting too old to be on the receiving end of this particular stress reliever.”

Ezra clucked his tongue before pursing his lips and averting his eyes.

Frederic caught the movement and sat up.

“I know that look. Is there a woman?” He teased. “Please God, tell me there’s a woman. Harriet would love to see me return in one piece tonight.”

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At the mention of his sister his mind cleared, until he remembered she was married to the friend sitting in front of him. Ezra groaned with the thought of his best friend and sister together in the biblical sense.

He raised a hand. "Please, do not talk to me of your relationship with my sister."

Frederic's smile widened. It was a well-known fact Frederic loved to tease Ezra with his very loving relationship with his wife.

"What? You tell me of your escapades with the opposite sex. What kind of friend are you if you will not allow me to offer my experiences?"

"The kind that is your brother-in-law and does not wish to think of his baby sister in that way." Ezra took another sip of his water. "Enough talking. Are you ready for another round?"

Ezra made his way back onto the floor. He turned to see that his friend had not moved from his spot in the chair. He raised his hands to the side. "Well? Are you coming?"

Frederic sat back in the chair and crossed his legs at the ankles. "Not until you tell me what has gotten you so worked up."

Ezra looked up to the ceiling in frustration. "Why does it matter?"

Frederic lifted a shoulder. "Because I bruise easily and my fragile skin can't take much more."

Ezra has seen this man walk out of brawls with two broken ribs and a sprained ankle only to go on a three hour hunt the next morning and bag the biggest kill. He was by no means “fragile.”

Ezra huffed a sigh at his oldest friend and put his hands on his hips. “Are you really not going to come back out here?”

Frederic cradled his side where Ezra’s last strike hit and frowned in pain.

“If I tell you what is on my mind can we get back to sparring?”

Frederic sat back up with interest.

So much for his aching side. Ezra thought with a scowl. With an exaggerated sigh Ezra rolled his eyes and tossed his sword down in defeat.

“Remember how I was late to the party the other night?” He asked as he pulled up a chair next to his friend.

Frederic replied with a blank stare.

“Oh, right. You’re an old married man who doesn’t know how to have some fun or go out any more.”

“Trust me, dear friend. I still know how to have a good time, just ask your sister.”  
Frederic licked his lips and winked to Ezra’s horror.

“What did I tell you about talking about my sister that way?” Ezra warned.

“Come on, man, you walked right into that one.” Frederic jested with a nudge to Ezra’s shoulder.

Ezra acquiesced. “You’re right, but regardless.” Ezra pushed out a breath. “Caddington was having one of his masquerade parties the other night.”

Frederic whined. “Oh, I used to love those parties. Always had fun there.” He raised his eyebrows up and down.

Ezra frowned. “Watch yourself. You’re married to my sister.”

Frederic laughed loudly. “There is no winning with you, is there? I’m not allowed to talk about being married to your sister, yet at the same time I have to be consciously aware of it at every moment.”

Ezra sniffed. “I don’t see the problem. Anyway, may I continue with my story?” He quipped.

Frederic leaned back and put his hands behind his head.

“As I was saying, I was on my way to the party and I ran into a young woman, one that should not have been wandering Water Street after midnight.”

Frederic smiled. “Sounds tempting.”

Ezra’s eyes flashed to Frederic. “I did not jump the poor woman. I have more sense than that”

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“What did you do with her? Or should I say, to her?”

Ezra grimaced at his friend’s off color comment. “I told her to return home at once.”

“My, how times have changed. Have you gone soft on me, brother?”

Ezra shook his head. “This girl did not belong amongst the night crawlers that frequent that street.”

Frederic pointed at Ezra. “You frequent that street.”

“Exactly.” Ezra deadpanned. “I told her to go home. She refused. She had quite a tongue on her.”

“Uh oh.” Frederic supplied.

Ezra’s head snapped to his friend’s. “What does that mean?”

Frederic shrugged. “Nothing. I just know you are always up for a challenge, especially if it comes in a witty little package.”

Beatrice was little, and curvy and, as far as Ezra could tell, everything he did look for in a dalliance. He pushed the thought of her soft body out of his mind.

“Stop interrupting me.” He snapped. “She wouldn’t leave, so I convinced her to.”

Frederic leaned his elbows onto his knees. “Oh, yeah.” He drawled. “How?” The way



he drew the word out like a child annoyed Ezra.

“Buy offering her a kiss.”

Frederic whooped in laughter. “You certainly do think highly of yourself, don’t you? How did you know she would leave after a kiss?”

Ezra rolled his lips and stuck one finger in the air. “This girl had inexperienced written all over her,” he raised a second finger, “she was clearly out of her element, her eyes were wide and scared, even though she tried to hide beneath a hood and false bravado.” He lifted a third finger and with his other hand gestured to himself. “And who wouldn’t want to kiss me?”

Frederic pointed to himself.

The men laughed and Ezra felt a lightness he hadn’t felt in days.

Ever since he met his daring little lady he hadn’t been able to concentrate. And when he can’t concentrate he gets anxious. When he gets anxious he gets, as Frederic puts it, stabby.

“Did it work?” Frederic asked.

Ezra tilted his head and smirked. “Of course it worked. But,” he leaned into his friend, “here’s where it gets interesting. As she was leaving she dropped a list of ‘to do’ items. On it was things like, kiss someone, which I accidentally helped with. But other things like drink and gamble, and repeat an opera scene.”

Frederic cocked his head to the side. “Opera scene? What does that mean?”

Ezra shrugged. “I didn’t get to ask her about that one.”

Frederic sat up. “Wait. You said she dropped the list as she left.”

Ezra shook his head.

“Are you telling me you ran into your midnight wanderer since then?”

“At Swanson’s ball yesterday.”

Frederic slapped his knee. “And?”

Ezra pondered that for a moment. And what? What could he say? That a chance meeting two nights ago, led him to a dance and a conversation yesterday that has consumed every ounce of his being since then?

“And I offered to help her check off the rest of the items on her list.”

That sobered Frederic immediately. “Really? Did you mention your own list?”

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Ezra's cheeks reddened, which he hoped he could still blame on the exertion from their match.

"I did not. It does not affect my assistance in helping her complete hers."

Frederic just stared at his friend. Ezra has had that particular stare thrown in his direction many times before. Frederic was calling his bluff and most likely adding a few choice words on the end.

"What? I am steadfast in maintaining my own list and I don't see this changing."

"I think you misunderstand me. I would love to see you throw that deuced list away."

Ezra stood and walked to the pitcher to more water into his glass. He hated talking about his own list. Instead of goals, his was one of personal limits and rules. It gave him structure, a clear mindset. If something fell outside the limitations he set forth, he didn't do it. It was easy as that.

Ezra ran through his list in his mind. He repeated it to himself before every social gathering. Although, it has been on constant repeat in his mind since two nights ago.

1. No ladies of the ton
2. Nothing indecent in public
3. Only dally once with a woman, no repeats

#### 4. No falling in love

“Other than drinking, gambling, and some mysterious opera scene, what else is on her list?” Frederic asked.

Ezra reached into his pocket and pulled out the tiny square of paper. He rubbed his thumb over her handwriting and felt a bolt of electricity run through his finger. He balled his other hand into a fist as he gave it to Frederic.

He snatched it from his hands causing Ezra to take a step forward, but he stopped himself from going further. He had a peculiar sense to take the piece of paper back and inspect it for any tears.

Frederic snorted. “You’re going to help her with these? What about her number six? It goes directly against your number four?”

Ezra took a sip of his water. “There’s nothing to worry there. She said she has no desire to fall in love with anyone. Perhaps she is destined for spinsterhood?”

Frederic looked up to him questioningly. “Is there something wrong with her?”

Ezra’s eyes flew to Frederic’s. “Of course not, you dolt!”

Frederic dropped his hands to his lap. Ezra couldn’t take his eyes off the piece of paper. Why did it bother him that it was no longer in his possession?

“Are you seriously considering helping her complete all of these?”

“Well, I already helped her with the first one and my mother always taught me that I should finish what I’ve started.” He winked.

Frederic shook his head in disbelief.

Ezra scoffed. "It'll be fun."

"Are you willing to break your rules for a little fun?" Frederic joined his friend at the table of drinks.

"As long as I don't break that last one I think I'll be ok. And it'll only be this one time. I think I could handle messing around with one lady of the ton if she's destined for spinster hood." A corner of Ezra's lip quirked up. "I rather like thinking I will be the only man a woman has been with. She can spend her whole life with only me as her experience. Kind of thrilling if you think about it."

Frederic stood, staring at the list in his hand.

"You've had your list for a while."

"I have."

Frederic pursed his lips. "I've never really asked you about it. We all have our rules when it comes to dealing with women, but yours always interested me more than others."

His friend was pulling on a thread Ezra did not want touched. He stayed silent hoping the conversation would surprise him and go another way.

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“I’ve always meant to ask you, did you create your list after...”

Ezra’s pulse was thumping in between his ears. “After what?”

Frederic sighed. “After what happened to your sister.”

He pulled the thread. Ezra’s back straightened. He hated talking about his sister being married to his best friend, but he despised talking about what happened to her before their marriage.

“This has nothing to do with Harriet.” Ezra said coolly.

Frederic handed Ezra Beatrice’s list. “You know she is very happy now. You took care of-”

“I said it has nothing to do with what happened to my sister.” Ezra bellowed. “Now, if you excuse me. I have some matters to attend to. I will see you later tonight for dinner.”

Ezra turned on his heel, picking up his discarded sword as he walked towards the door.

“I thought we were going to go another round?” Frederic’s question echoed off the walls of the empty room. Ezra was already gone.

## CHAPTER 6

“Must you go?” Candace asked as she worried her thumbnail. “Last time you were lucky and nothing happened, but there’s no guarantee you’ll be safe this time around. What if you meet someone else who doesn’t have your best interest at heart and takes advantage of you?” The last of her question came out in a hurried whisper.

Beatrice lifted the hood over her head. She took one more look in the mirror to make sure her hair was tucked under the hood. The mask she found amongst her sister Sarah’s old things hung heavy in her pocket. She was sure to get into the party this time.

“I’ll be fine. I’m more familiar with the street now, and no one bothered me until I bumped into that man. I’ll be more aware now.”

That cursed man. She hadn’t been able to stop thinking of him since the ball yesterday afternoon. Normally she didn’t mind someone occupying her thoughts for a bit, but she couldn’t decide if she wanted to smack him or ask him to kiss her again.

She grimaced at her reflection. She would smack him so hard the smug arrogance would leave his body. Perhaps then, and only then, she would ask for another kiss.

The thought of both smacking him and kissing him had her smiling.

“I’m still not sure about this and I’m regretting helping you. If your mother found out I would out of a job.” Candace paced behind her.

Beatrice took Candace’s hands in her own to steady her maid. “I promise you, regardless how tonight ends, if I’m caught, I will say I overheard a conversation at a ball, which is somewhat true. Men are always talking openly in front of women as if we don’t have ears and an ability to understand words.” The inequality women faced on a day-to-day basis was grating but Beatrice had no qualms in using it for her advantage.

“No. Do I look like I belong?” Beatrice took a turn in front of Candace.

Her maid lifted her shoulders. “You look like Lady Beatrice to me. I’m not sure how one should look to go to one of these parties. I’ve only heard about them through gossip.”

Beatrice chewed on her bottom lip. “Well, I have a mask now,” she patted her pocket. “Hopefully that’s enough to help me blend in. Apparently I looked too naive last time.”

Her body whirled at the memories of being held against him during their kiss and their dance. Thankful for the hood for covering her blush, she cleared her throat and faced Candace.

“Wish me luck.”

The streets were less crowded than the previous night. There were several society events that most likely pulled revelers to, making it harder to blend with those around her. She turned onto Water Street and fastened her mask, shielding the top half of her face from the people around her.

Without fear of being recognized due to her mask and hood she walked freely, with her head up. She assumed the affect would exude confidence and therefore help her blend in. She reached 110 Water Street and found herself in the exact spot where she first met Graham. Her body stopped as phantom touches raked over her body. Gooseflesh erupted down her arms, and her body felt electric. She gave into the sensation for a brief moment before she refocused on her goal.

She was close to checking off number three on her list, see the wild side of London. She turned to her right to see a house sitting further back from the rest of the row, which is probably why she didn’t see it the other night. With a deep breath she



walked forward, holding her head high, repeating the mantra, I belong here. I belong here. I belong here.

“You don’t belong here.” A deep voice startled her.

She looked up to see a monster of a man standing in front of a dimly lit doorway. “Excuse me?” She winced at the squeak in her voice.

“I said, you don’t belong here.” The man was built like a boulder, his stance was wider than the doorframe. “I know everyone who is allowed to into this establishment and I don’t know you.”

Beatrice thought quickly. “I’m new, just invited. It’s no fun with the same people over and over again. The host decided to inject some new blood into the scene.”

## Page 22

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Crossing her fingers under her cloak she had hoped her comment, which had come from the current mystery novel she was reading, would work.

The door man harrumphed. “Invitation?”

Buzzing sounded off in between her ears. “Excuse me?”

“If you’ve been invited you must have an invitation. All new guests are instructed to bring their invitations with them. You would know that if you had received your invitation.”

Beatrice rolled her lips.

Remain calm. This could be a trick. What if there isn’t instructions on an invitation? But what if it there was? What if there was no invitation at all? Did Graham mention an invitation at the ball?

The rock of a man laughed. “I was right. You don’t belong here. Be gone.”

Beatrice cleared her throat. “I forgot it. Surely, this isn’t the first time someone has forgotten their invitation. I’m new after all.” She plastered the biggest smile on her face, hoping to persuade the man to move.

It did not work. He continued to stare past her as if she no longer existed.

She huffed. “Fine. I’ll go all the way back to my home to retrieve it and I’ll be back.”

He shook his head. “Very well.”

She blinked. “Aaaall the way back,” she exaggerated her words for emphasis. “I won’t be back for another hour or so and I’ll miss most of the party.” Her words whined, and annoyed even her, but she hoped she could still convince him to let her in.

“How unfortunate for you.” He remained unmoved in his stance.

She groaned. “Fine. I’ll return with my invitation and then you’ll be sorry you didn’t let me in!”

The man looked at her pointedly. “I highly doubt that.”

She huffed as she turned to walk away but not before looking at the sides of the home to see if there were other points of entry. Her latest mystery novel had a chapter on the heroine climbing through a window. Unfortunately for her, the windows all had very pointy looking shrubbery in front of them.

My goodness, what goes on in there that it needs a door man the size of a cathedral and lethal shrubs in front of windows?

The security only made her want to go in more. Which meant she needed to do the one thing she did not want to do, take Graham up on his offer. Perhaps she could add in an amendment to smack him every time he annoyed her. The thought alone made the idea of going to him more amenable.

“What a lovely day for a stroll. I just love these cooler summer days, don’t you Beatrice?” Charlotte strolled with her arm entwined with her daughter’s while Candace and Charlotte’s maid, Elizabeth, followed behind them.

Beatrice gave a noncommittal response. She couldn't stop thinking about how she would get in contact with the Duke of Graham. She could easily ask her mother, but then she would have to give a reason why she needed it and she didn't want to open Pandora's box. She could ask Candace to find out the address, but her maid already felt too involved with her scandalous list she didn't want to burden her any further.

"Oh, look, it's the Duke of Graham!" Charlotte's voice was like a punch to the stomach.

Beatrice's eyes flew up to take in the tall duke leaning against a tree they were walking towards. He gave off the air of casual aloofness that bothered Beatrice for some reason, yet made Charlotte gravitate towards him all the more.

Charlotte paid no mind to the fact that she was dragging Beatrice in his direction. "Good morning, Your Grace. What brings you out on this gorgeous day?"

Beatrice groaned at her mother's overly friendly demeanor. If she only knew what kind of man he truly was, she wouldn't be parading Beatrice in front of him. She glanced at her mother from the corner of her eyes. Or would she? It was no secret her mother would go to any lengths to see her daughters married.

"Just enjoying the day which keeps getting more beautiful the more I experience it."

Charlotte's shrill laugh had couples turning in their direction. Beatrice closed her eyes and wished for death to take her.

"Oh, I've heard you are ever the charmer." Charlotte covered her face with her fluttering her fan. "Isn't he the charmer, Beatrice?"

Beatrice scowled. "Yes. So charming." She said with little emotion.

Undeterred Graham extended his arm. “May I escort you ladies on your walk?”

Beatrice tightened her arm around her mother’s, hoping her mother would pick up on her unease.

She did not.

“That would be lovely. Here. Why don’t you walk with Beatrice? I have some things I want to discuss with my maid.”

Charlotte untangled her arm from Beatrice and took a step backwards, looking at both of them expectantly.

Beatrice refused to move and the blasted man just stood there with a stupid smile on his face. He knew he had the upper hand here and Beatrice had no option but to take his offered arm.

She refused to acknowledge the thrill of excitement that rushed through her veins as her arm slipped through his.

“How are you faring this morning, Lady Beatrice” His tone was conversational.

Playing the part of polite society, Beatrice smiled and dipped her head. “I am well, Your Grace, thank you.”

“That is good to hear. I would have thought you would be in sour spirits this morning after what happened last night.”

Her eyes drifted up to his smirking face. “What do you mean? What happened last night?”

Graham kept his eyes on the road ahead of him. Casually acknowledging those who

passed them.

“It was the second time you did not cross off the third item on your list. Although, you did make it to the door this time.”

Beatrice’s body stiffened next to his. “How do you know about that?”

Graham smiled, smugly. “People talk, Lady Beatrice. However, I heard you came a bit more prepared this time with a mask. Perhaps next time you’ll have the illustrious invitation that is needed for new invitees.”

He finally brought his eyes down to meet hers and she quickly dropped her eyes to the ground. Embarrassment mixed with frustration fueled her blood. She made peace with asking him for help but her stubbornness did not want her to do it now. If she asked now he would assume victory over her and she couldn’t have that.

Not that this was a game to her, but something told her that if she gave into him now, she would have a harder time resisting him later.

“It’s a learning curve, Your Grace. You will see me at one of those parties, mark my words.” Her words were delivered through gritted teeth and a fake smile as they passed Lady Swanson and her daughter.

Graham tilted his head and gave a smile to the passing ladies. “Of that I have no doubt, mouse.”

Beatrice’s skin heated. Who would have thought the pet name “mouse” would cause her body to react? He called her that the night they met, before they knew each other as Graham and Beatrice. That night they were just the masked man and a woefully unprepared woman.

There was something deliciously scandalous about the mystery of it all. A warm sensation settled low in her stomach that made her knees wobble under her skirt.

Beatrice could feel his eyes on her. “You do seem more confident today. Perhaps one day you will feel like you fit in there. We shall see.”

Her eyes met his. “I will and we will.”

Graham’s eyes darkened. “We both know what’s on your list, so I know how inexperienced you are.”

Beatrice’s eyes widened before darting around to their surroundings. “Shh! Someone may hear you.”

Her words did nothing to deter him.

“But just how inexperienced are you?” He finished, paying no mind to her sudden distress.

She furrowed her brows. “How do you mean? I thought it was pretty clear in the description of the word ‘inexperienced.’ You saw my list. Obviously the existence of number four is proof that I’m inexperienced.”

Her insides were spinning. She couldn’t believe she was having this conversation a handful of steps away from her mother, out in public where anyone could overhear them.

Graham pulled her closer to his side as he pretended to point to a bird in a tree. To anyone else it would look like they were admiring a beautiful Cardinal in the tree. However, what he spoke ignited a spark deep within Beatrice.



“The fact that you don’t know there are many ways to enjoy the human body does prove how inexperienced you are. You don’t always need a partner.”

Graham’s eyes were set on the flittering bird, hopping from branch to branch, his stance as casual as you could get on mid-morning park.

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Beatrice eyes darted to Graham, who only shook his head. “Now, now, look back up into the tree, little mouse. We don’t want people to think we’re talking about anything uncouth.”

Beatrice did as she was told. Her eyes tried to focus on the bird even though she felt as if the ground had upended her.

“What do you mean?” Her whisper shook with curiosity.

He leaned in closer so his breath tickled her neck. She could smell the familiar scent of sweet smoke that had her mouth running dry. The cool breeze did nothing to calm her racing heart, and heating body.

“Tell me, Lady Beatrice, have you ever touched yourself?” His decadent voice had her eyes fluttering shut. “Eyes open, mouse.”

Beatrice’s eyes flew open at the command. She blinked a few times to clear her vision. Did he just say what she thought he said?

She licked her lips. “I’m not sure what you mean.” At least she didn’t think she knew. She’s heard a few married women gossiping about it, but she didn’t think it was something people actually did.

Graham turned his head so his lips grazed her ear. “The way you’re breathing tells me you do.”

Beatrice felt faint. This conversation could not be actually happening.

“Do me a favor, little mouse. Prove to me you’re ready for parties thrown on the ‘wild side of London.’”

Beatrice swallowed the lump that had formed in her throat. “And... and how do I do that?” She focused on taking several deep breaths to regulate her breathing lest she fall right here in front of her mother and the cardinal.

“Touch yourself tonight.”

His words stopped the birds from singing, the world from spinning, the breath from filling her lungs.

She bobbed within his grip and with a chuckle he held her up. “Do you think that is something you could do for me?” He purred in her ear.

Words failed her, she could only shake her head in little nods.

“Good.” He looked around before he added. “One more favor, think of me when you do. Ah. Your Grace, your daughter and I were just admiring the nest of cardinals up there. They say that cardinals are messengers from passed loved ones.”

Her mother was now standing beside her. Beatrice’s face flushed as she looked up to Graham in complete shock. How was it possible for him to say such vile things to her in the same breath he addressed her mother? What sorcery did he possess?

“What a lovely sentiment, Your Grace.” Her mother looked up into the tree. “Oh look, there are several of them.” She slid her arm around Beatrice’s shoulders. “It’s as if it’s your father looking down on us.”

Beatrice’s eyes widened at the thought of her father being privy to the conversation she just had. Graham rolled his lips to stop a laugh. “Well isn’t that a lovely thought,

Lady Beatrice?"

If she had any control over death it would take her now.

Graham dipped at the waist. "I must take my leave of you. I hope you both have a wonderful day and an enjoyable evening." He winked at Beatrice before turning and leaving.

"He seems like a nice man." Charlotte said after he left.

Beatrice's mind was still reeling from her conversation with him as her mother led her down the pathway and back to their home.

Her mother chattered on about birds and balls while Beatrice contemplated if she really needed to check off the items on her list. Perhaps she should look into going to a convent instead.

## CHAPTER 7

"You and the Duke of Graham seemed to be getting along well, Beatrice." Charlotte took the cup of tea Elizabeth offered her before giving Beatrice an all knowing smile.

Beatrice sat back in her chair. "Don't give me that look, Mama. I have not set my intentions on His Grace, nor have I changed my mind on my future."

Beatrice took a sip of her own tea, relishing in the calming effect tea had on her. After this morning's excursion she needed all the help in settling her nerves.

Charlotte laughed. "While I am not happy to hear you have not changed your mind, I am glad you are not going after Graham."

Beatrice cocked her head to the side. “Really? Then why did you all but push me towards him at the park? At the ball?”

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Charlotte waved her daughter off with a scoff. “I just wanted people to see you socializing. If your head isn’t in a book it’s hiding in the shadows. People need to see you out there if you are to rightfully claim your title as diamond of the season.”

Beatrice looked at her mother in amazement. Even after living with all of her mother’s dramatics and scheming ways for the past eighteen years, there were times when her mother’s ruthlessness still shocked her.

“I do not want the title of diamond of the season, Mama. And can we at last acknowledge how sad it is that Cecilia’s entire family is ill and needed respite? Or are titles and marrying me off the only thing of worth around here?”

Charlotte set her tea down and collected herself. “You know I sent correspondence wishing for their return and full recovery, but I’m not ashamed to admit I also added that they should not rush their recovery.” A small smile tilted Charlotte’s lips.

Her mother groaned at her daughter’s eye roll. “Really, Beatrice. You act as if I am the one that planned their demise. Don’t give me that look. I did no such thing and the fact you think I’m capable of doing something like that is insulting.”

Beatrice was not convinced but gave her mother a shrug. “All I’m saying is that the further we go into this season the more reasons I find that validate my decision to retire after this season.”

“Beatrice, all I’m asking is you give it a fair shot. You have already made up your mind and I’m afraid you might miss something that is right in front of you. Something that could make you happy if you give it a chance.”

Beatrice raised her eyebrow. "Like Graham."

Charlotte laughed and picked her tea back up. "Heavens no, he was satisfactory in getting you noticed at the park today and at the ball, but I don't think we need to use him anymore." Charlotte took a sip of her tea and signaled to Elizabeth to bring them the plate of biscuits.

Beatrice took a biscuit and broke off a small piece. "Why don't you like the Duke of Graham? You seemed to like him at Lady Swanson's ball. You didn't object to him dancing with me."

Charlotte brushed the crumbs from her lap. "He's not bad, per sé, he's just not that good, either." Charlotte offered her daughter a tight-lipped smile.

"Care to explain that, Mama?"

Charlotte brought her cup up to her mouth and took continuous sips. It took everything in Beatrice not to roll her eyes at her mother's avoidance of the subject. When her sisters lived at home it took a lot of Charlotte to annoy Beatrice. Now that it was only the two of them Beatrice was finding it harder to remain calm in the presence of her mother.

"What was that, dear?" Charlotte feigned forgetfulness.

Beatrice bit her lip before proceeding. "The Duke, Mama. Why don't you like him? Why is he not bad, but not good?"

"Why must it go further than that? Just take my word, my love. What about Lord Devlin's son. Wasn't he at the park, Elizabeth? I think I saw him." Charlotte looked to her maid who looked put on the spot.

Before Elizabeth could open her mouth Beatrice raised her hand. “Mama. I’m not a child anymore. If you intend to marry me off then I am old enough to know what makes a man bad or good.”

“Fine.” Charlotte huffed. “I told you he is a known rake. And while no real scandal has touched him, it doesn’t mean I want to see my youngest daughter attached to a man with certain... proclivities and tendencies.”

Beatrice’s ears perked up. “Proclivities and tendencies?”

Charlotte’s eyes drifted to the two maids who were huddled in the corner, watching with caution. Beatrice’s eyes followed.

“There’s been talk, love, about his behavior at certain parties.”

Beatrice returned her gaze to her mother’s. “Talk from whom?”

Beatrice looked back to Candace who was looking at the floor, then to Elizabeth. Why did Candace look like she was in trouble? Beatrice knew that Candace shared gossip with the other maids, it’s where Beatrice got most of her information. Why was Candace avoiding Beatrice’s eyes?

Elizabeth’s eyes were wide, staring at Charlotte in disbelief.

There was a tickle in Beatrice’s mind, a notion was forming and it brought a sense of dread down on her. Candace talked to Beatrice, but, Candace also talked to the other maids, including Elizabeth. If Candace was forthcoming with gossip to Beatrice, it’s only fair to assume Elizabeth was open with Charlotte.

A pit formed in Beatrice’s stomach. Did Candace tell Elizabeth about her midnight errands and therefore her mother knows?



Her eyes quickly returned to her mother's who was sitting back, stirring her tea with her spoon.

“Oh, Beatrice, I know you know more than you let on. Elizabeth told me that Candace told you about the night life of some of the peerage. Although, heaven knows why anyone would want to travel down to that area is beyond me. I'm just thankful that your father and I raised you and your sisters better than to be seen at one of those establishments.”

Beatrice bit her tongue. Did her mother know? She wanted desperately to look at Candace for confirmation on how much she told Elizabeth but she was afraid any movement would give her away.

She took a sip to wet her dried throat. “You don't have to worry about that, Mama. You know me, I'm naturally a curious person.”

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Charlotte leaned forward. “That’s exactly what I told Elizabeth.” She said with aplomb. Charlotte turned to the two maids. “Isn’t that exactly what I said, Elizabeth? Our Beatrice is always so curious, it’s from all of the reading she does.”

“Yes, Your Grace.” Her maid responded. Both Elizabeth and Candace looked sheepishly at Beatrice who pushed out a sigh of relief. It seems the topic of Beatrice’s interest in the midnight parties stopped there, with just her interest in them.

Charlotte sighed. “Anyway, I hear the Duke of Graham frequents that area often and some of those parties, well, I don’t want to shock your sensitivities, love, so we’ll just leave it at they are no place for a respectable young woman, or man, to be. So there.”

Beatrice shook her head. “Well, you won’t have to worry about me going there, Mama.” She failed to add that she can’t go without an invitation. She set her tea down and stood. “It’s been a very long day, I think I shall retire.”

She kissed her mother on her cheek and made her way up to her room with Candace following her.

Candace closed the door behind her and rushed to Beatrice’s side. “I’m sorry! Elizabeth’s the one who confirmed the information about the party, but you must believe me, I did not tell her you went, only that you had overheard a conversation and you were curious. I promise, I would not betray your trust like that.”

Beatrice held her maid’s hands in hers. “I believe you and thank you. I was worried there for a moment. My mother can be very intimidating and very cunning when it comes to getting information on her daughter’s, so I appreciate you keeping this

between us. I know your part in all of this weighs heavily on your conscience.”

Candace smiled and hugged Beatrice. “Thank you!”

Beatrice pulled away. “Would you mind helping me get ready for bed. It was quite the day and I want to put it behind me.”

While Candace helped Beatrice with her nighttime rituals she kept catching Candace’s look in the mirror.

“Something on your mind, Candace?”

At first Candace shrugged her off but after she helped Beatrice into bed she sat on the edge of the mattress.

“What were you two really talking about in the park? You seemed completely enraptured with the conversation and I didn’t know you had such an interest in birds.”

Beatrice feigned ignorance. “What can I say? Mama was right, the man is charming.” She smiled before rolling to her side, hoping to effectively shut down the conversation. She felt the bed lift as Candace stood and made her way to the door.

“Good night, Lady Beatrice.” Candace called as she closed the door.

Beatrice laid on her side, facing the wall, waiting for her maid’s steps to quiet. When she no longer heard them she flopped onto her back.

She ran her hands over her face. What a day! She rolled back onto her side, trying to find a comfortable position. She kicked her legs out, tucked them in, stuck one foot off the side, thought better of it and tucked it back underneath the duvet.

After what seemed like hours of tossing and turning she sat up.

“This is useless.” She pouted. Frustrated, she got out of bed and began to pace the room. She saw the corner of her new list sticking out of the book she hid it in. Seeing the list brought thoughts of the Duke rushing into her mind. Her body began to hum and tingle.

“Oh, that man.” She went back to pacing. “Who does he think he is deciding if I’m experienced or not.” Beatrice stopped in front of the mirror. Who was she kidding? She had virginal maid written all over her. Her only kiss was from Graham and the only men who have touched her in any way other than a familiar handshake were the men who danced with her and that was in a middle of a ballroom.

Her chest swelled with the memory of dancing with Duke. He had a way of making that feel scandalous even in a full room of people. She groaned. How was he able to make a regular waltz feel like an intimate dance in front of hundreds of people? How was he able to have a lasting affect her all this time?

Her skin began to itch and that low heat that had settled in her belly earlier in the day returned. She shifted her feet while she eyed the corner of paper. Her eyes drifted to the bed.

Do me a favor. Think of me when you do.

The duke’s seductive tone rang through her head causing her body to vibrate in delicious warmth. She shook her head. “No. This is ridiculous.”

She walked over to the bed when the friction of her shift along her skin shot a sensation of need through her. Beatrice stopped in her tracks, she’s never felt that before.

She made it back to her bed and laid down. She stared at the ceiling while her body cooled. Maybe if she just relaxed she could fall asleep and forget all about her conversation with the Duke. Unfortunately every time she shifted her body sprang awake, looking for something. She rested her folded hands on her lower abdomen. After a few moments of tapping her fingers against her stomach she pretended she had an itch on her inner thigh.

She huffed. She was being absurd. If she wanted to touch her body anywhere that was her prerogative, she didn't need to pretend there was someone there she had to justify her movements to.

She squeezed her eyes shut. She felt silly arguing with herself. She should just touch herself to see what it felt like. If anything, if she ran into that blasted Duke again she could tell him she did it as further proof she isn't as innocent as he perceived her to be.

Beatrice reached down and felt a wetness pool between her legs. Interesting. She brought it out from under the covers, it wasn't her monthly courses.

Now, Beatrice is well read and she has read some books that dealt with human sexuality, although it was mostly contraband from friend's parent's library's. Her one friend's father is a surgeon. The textbooks she found in his library kept her awake for weeks. Some touched on sexual intercourse between a man and a woman but it was from a purely scientific perspective. There was nothing scientific about how Beatrice was feeling right now.

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She moved her finger back down and it grazed over her sex, causing a yelp. She quickly looked to the door and waited for footsteps but none came.

She continued her ministrations, slowly at first. Her movements were stunted and awkward until she figured out what she liked. The warmth that had pooled in her stomach began to grow and spread throughout her entire body.

Ha! Just wait until I see that Duke again!

The Duke.

With his strong hands, broad chest, emerald green eyes, and a smile that could get even the holiest of women in trouble. Beatrice's hips began to move underneath her. She could feel his body pressed up against hers. His breath on her neck as he praised her and encouraged her to keep going. She felt her body pushing closer to a cliff. Her mind and body began to fight for control. Her body has never felt this way, it was as if something else was in control of her and her mind was fighting for decorum.

The Duke's eyes flashed in her mind and her body froze. Her stomach cramped from the sudden stop. She licked her lips and sat up, taking deep breaths to calm herself.

This wasn't working, she needed more. She needed to know more. She sprinted to her closet where she kept her cloak.

She needed the Duke.

## CHAPTER 8

Beatrice looked over her shoulder. It wasn't that she was scared to wander the streets at night, she had done it several times by now. However, she never snuck to a Duke's house and asked to see him.

She crossed her fingers as she knocked, hoping she had the right address. She cursed herself for not giving herself enough time to plot this adventure better. She should have waited until tomorrow night to do this so she could have taken her time when she snuck into her mother's study to go through her correspondence for an address.

But Beatrice was done waiting. Now she was standing in front of large, darkened door, hoping she read the address she found on a discarded envelope right. She dug in her pocket for the envelope and pulled it out just as the door opened.

"Who goes there?" A tired voice mumbled through the darkness.

"Um, it's Lady Beatrice Morsey." Beatrice shuffled her feet and tried to peer through the crack of the door. "I'm here to see Duke Graham... that is if he is not indisposed."

A ragged sigh floated through the sliver of an opening. "Unfortunately for me, he is never indisposed."

The door widened and Beatrice was met with a man most likely in his late seventies with bags under his eyes. He barely lifted his arm as he ushered her in.

"Come in then. I'll take you to him, but you're out of luck if you want anything. I won't wake up Mrs. Sanders."

Beatrice was too busy trying to calm down her racing heart to be offended by the butler's demeanor.

She waved him off. “That’s fine. I won’t be here long.”

The butler huffed. “They never are.”

“What was that?” She asked.

The butler shuffled past her, ignoring her question.

Beatrice held her cloak close to her as she followed the butler down the dimly lit hallway to what she assumed was Graham’s study.

He opened the door without a knock and held his arm out in front of him. On a normal day Beatrice would find the butler’s actions disrespectful and off-putting, but due to the nature of her visit she had other things to worry about.

She stepped into the study lit by a single lamp on the Duke’s desk and a dying fire in the fireplace. The low light cast shadows that danced around the room as the Duke sat his desk flipping through papers, mumbling to himself.

Beatrice turned to the butler but the door was already closed and the butler gone. She retuned her gaze to Graham and opened her mouth to say ‘hello’ but something stopped her.

Her eyes caught the movement of his arms as he turned a page in a ledger book. His forearm muscles, bare from his sleeves rolled up, flexed causing her stomach to flip.

When was the last time she saw a man’s forearm? Nervous laughter almost bubbled out of her but her curiosity tempered it. Her eyes tracked the veins and muscles as they moved and flexed against his taught skin as he lifted heavier tomes to skim through.



She never thought that a man's arm could be so fascinating, yet here she was salivating over one.

The Duke leaned back in his chair, his hands immediately coming up to rub up and down his face. As his body pushed further back into his chair his shirt pulled against his chest and abdomen showcasing a tight and muscular frame. A small squeak escaped her lips causing Graham to drop his hands.

His eyes zeroed in on hers.

“Lady Beatrice, to what do I owe the honor of your presence at,” he squinted at his time piece, “one in the morning?”

Beatrice licked her lips. This is what she came for, no point in delaying the inevitable. With a deep breath Beatrice took a timid step forward. “I’m here to accept your offer.” Once the words left her mouth she felt bare and exposed. Her hands fiddled with the belt at her hip. “That is, if it is still something you wish to offer.”

Graham’s eyes darkened as his lips slipped into an easy smile. “I make a lot of offers, mouse, you’ll have to remind me of which one you are referring to.”

Impatience and embarrassment flashed through her body. Of course he was going to make her say it. There was no confusion as to why she was here.

Stealing her spine she took another step towards the sitting Duke.

“I want your help completing the items on my list.”

Graham licked his lips, his fingers slid underneath a book to pull out a familiar square of paper.

My list.

Beatrice’s heart thudded at the sight of her list in his hands once more. There was something intimate about a man holding on to her deepest and darkest wishes. Even

more was that she was coming to said man to help her fulfill them.

“This list?” He purred.

Beatrice sighed. This man and his games. “Yes. That list.” She said pointedly.

Graham considered the list in his hands. “Before I concede to my offer, what made you change your mind?”

Her body tingled at the memories of her own wandering hands exploring her body enflamed her cheeks. She turned her head slightly as she dropped her eyes.

There was no fooling Graham. He gasped. “You are a daring creature, aren’t you?”

Graham stood and sauntered to where she stood, refusing to meet his eyes. He placed a single finger under her chin to pull her head up. Her eyes lifted to his. To her surprise she didn’t find ridicule or jest, but pure interest?

“Did you touch yourself, little mouse?” His voice was gruff and caused Beatrice to shutter in his grasp.

She nodded slightly.

Still holding her chin by his finger he took a step closer to her, their bodies almost touching. Beatrice’s body thrummed from the heat growing in her belly.

“And did you like it?” His words brushed against her lips causing that growing heat to ignite a fire within her, causing licks of flames to turn her body into molten lava.

Again, she nodded within his grasp. No words would come. She was completely entranced by this man and his words.

“One last final question, my little mouse, did you think of me?” His lips touched hers as his whispered words created shock waves that shook her to her very core.

With one slight nod from Beatrice Graham’s lips fully connected to hers. Her knees gave out from the intensity of his attack but his arms reached around her waist and pulled her to him.

He picked her up and pushed her up against the door to his study. Her mouth opened for him, welcoming in his exploring tongue. She moaned against his kisses as her hands trailed up his muscular arms, oh his delicious arms, and found purchase in his hair.

She gave a slight tug. His answering growl into her mouth had her squeezing her legs together. Her core was exploding with sensations that had her body moving against him in ways she never thought to before. Much like how her hips bucked against her own hand earlier in the night.

Graham pulled back, setting her down on the ground. He leaned his forehead against hers.

“My offer still stands, however, I have my own list that you must follow.”

Beatrice would have vowed to never read another book again if it meant she could kiss this man again. Instead of offering him anything, she once again shook her head.

She was starting to think she had forgotten how to talk around him.

“You must do everything I say, like you did tonight. Can you be a good girl and do that for me?”

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Beatrice's eyes rounded as she licked her lips. His words made her feel dizzy. She shook her head in agreement, unaware of what that could possibly mean. She just knew that he seemed pleased with her and that was all she wanted in this moment. Well, that and another kiss.

Her eyes drifted down to his lips, plump from their kiss. She would agree to much more than just her compliance if it meant he would kiss her again.

“Without question.” He added.

His clarification cleared some of the blissful fog that had infiltrated her mind.

“Without question?” Her unused voice squeaked.

It was Graham's turn to just stand there and nod his head. Every so slowly he lifted his head up and down. The stubbornness she inherited from her mother clawed from deep within, pushing her to fight against his command. She was not some pliant young woman. She had ideas and intentions and no man was going to stand in her way.

Her eyes dropped back to his wet lips and that stubborn little voice was squashed by desire.

She bit her lip and shook her head, secretly hoping that her compliance would award her another kiss.

Graham dipped his head. “Good girl.”

Gooseflesh erupted across her skin and once again her legs squeezed together hoping to relieve the growing tension that brewed between them.

“Uh-uh.” He shook his head. “I need you to say the words, Beatrice.”

This blasted man!

Beatrice whimpered. She began to feel overcome by sensations. Her clothes felt too tight, the air too thick, his presence, too overwhelming, his scent, too intoxicating.

She closed her eyes to calm her senses.

“Open your eyes, little mouse. I want to look in your eyes as you agree.”

Beatrice opened her eyes at his direction.

“I will do as you say without question.” She surprised herself with how stable her voice sounded considering her insides were shaking like leaves on a tree during a storm.

He raised an eyebrow.

Confused she tilted her head until his meaning dawned on her. She cleared her throat.

“I, uh, will do everything you say... like a good girl.”

Pleasure and desire flashed in Graham’s eyes.

He took her head in his hands, tilting it to take her mouth at a delicious angle. He pushed her back against the door once more. Her hands came up and held onto his bare arms as his tongue pushed into her mouth.

Feeling his muscles flex under her touch caused her hips to instinctually push against him. The world melted away around her as her body molded against his hard, lean one.

His mouth moved down her throat and left a trail of heat in its wake. Beatrice whimpered against his assault, her mind at war between wanting his kiss on her lips or for him to continue on his journey south. Her core was clenching, needing attention and the idea of him moving down her body had her raising up on her tiptoes to help him move faster.

She could feel a smile warm his lips as he placed a gentle kiss on her décolletage before fully standing. Her eyes opened up in confusion.

“What... why did you stop?”

Graham righted her cloak with a wolfish grin on his face.

“Think of that as us signing our contract.”

Beatrice stared up at him with longing. “But there is nothing stopping us from starting now.”

Graham let out a small chuckle. “You are ever the eager one, aren’t you?” He walked over to his desk and flipped open a book.

Beatrice remained leaning against the door, her fingertips touching her still tingling lips.

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Graham nodded at his book as he pointed to a page. “There are some things I need to get in order but I will send word when it’s the appropriate time to see to the rest of your list.”

Beatrice stood and fiddled with a button on her cloak. “That’s it? I just wait?”

Graham sat in his chair like he didn’t just upend her world with a kiss. Was his body throbbing like hers? Was his mind whirling with what could have been?

She considered him. He looked calm and collected. Beatrice didn’t know whether to be impressed or insulted. Her eyes drifted around his study. It was full of books and trinkets from various landmarks, proof of a man well-versed in life and experience.

If she was going to enter into this agreement with him she needed to step up to his level. If he was cool and collected after they sealed their deal with a kiss, then perhaps she should follow his lead.

She stood straighter and buttoned the rest of her cloak. “Very well. I will await your word. Until then... goodbye.”

Beatrice hesitated before she turned, hoping he would call her back. When he only looked on with a cunning smirk she dipped her head and turned. She clenched her core as hard as she could as she walked out, hoping to give off the air of confidence. Her knees were still shaking and her heart was racing but she was determined to prove she was up for the challenge of whatever he had in store for her.



Thunder clapped causing Beatrice to jump and spill her tea.

“Beatrice, dear, are you all right?” Charlotte’s words carried worry, but seeing how much she spilled on herself, her mother’s worry was most likely for Beatrice’s dress and not for her daughter’s emotional state.

Eleanor handed Beatrice a napkin. With a small nod of thanks to her sister, Beatrice began to blot the tea, hoping it didn’t cause too much damage. “I’m fine, Mama.” She all but sighed the words.

Truth was her nerves were frayed. It had been almost a week since she snuck out to Graham’s residence and she hadn’t received word from him yet. He told her to be patient but she couldn’t help to think he was reconsidering.

What if he never meant to follow through? What if he didn’t take me seriously and it was all for a bit of fun?

Beatrice grimaced as she sipped what was left of her tea.

“Are you sure you’re doing well, Beatrice?” Her old sister asked. Beatrice glanced at Eleanor. Unlike her mother, Eleanor most likely did care about her sister’s wellbeing.

Beatrice’s eyes tracked to the rain hitting the window. “I suppose it’s just the weather. Storms make me quite anxious.”

Sarah scrunched her nose. “They never used to. You would always say they were perfect for reading and since you prefer books to people, rainy days gave you an excuse to read.”

Beatrice huffed. “Well I guess I have changed my mind, haven’t I? If others can do it, why can’t I?”

Beatrice cringed.

“What has gotten into you, Beatrice?” Charlotte chastised.

She sat her tea cup down on the side table and stood. “I’m sorry, Sarah, I really am. I’m feeling very anxious for some reason.”

Beatrice stalked to the window. She prayed no one would ask any follow up questions.

“Why?” Sarah asked.

Beatrice wanted to bang her head against the window. Curse her for being born into a family of nosey women.

She lifted a shoulder.

“Ah. I know.” Charlotte said, victoriously.

The blood flowing through Beatrice’s veins froze. Did her mother know? But how? Did she see her sneak out? Did she have her followed?

With what she hoped was casual interest she turned to face her mother and sisters.

Eleanor laughed. “Well, do enlighten us, Mama. We’re all waiting with bated breath.”

“Yes, Mama. I would love to know why I’m anxious.” Beatrice tried her best to sound light and unaware but it came out rushed and curt.

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“Lady Joynor’s ball is coming up and it’s one of the last of the season. You had promised me that you would give it your all. I suspect you’re having a change of heart and may want to find love after all.” Charlotte looked quite pleased with herself.

Relief flooded her system.

Sarah laughed. “Mama. What makes you think Beatrice changed her mind?”

Beatrice turned back to the window and leaned her head against the window, the cool pane helped slow down her racing heart. The thought of her mother knowing about her pact with the Duke terrified her.

Charlotte tsked. “You two are never around any more, you don’t see what I see. Your sister has changed over the past week. She’s been fluttering around here with so much energy and life. Whether she knows it or not, something has changed within her and I think her mind is finally coming around to the idea of marriage.” Charlotte tapped her temple. “A mother knows these things.”

Sarah and Eleanor exchanged a look of disbelief before turning their gaze to an equally confused Beatrice.

She could admit that since meeting with the Duke, and with the possibility of her checking everything off her list, she had been more cheerful and excited.

To her mother’s defense, it’s not like Beatrice could be truthful about why she was acting more optimistic. Since making the pact with the Duke, Beatrice no longer fought with her mother about what to wear to a ball, or rolled her eyes at any society

gossip her mother brought to her.

The Duke gave her a way to fulfill her wildest dreams and in doing so, she felt removed from the restraints of society. Hearing about the comings and goings of the peerage was no longer duty-bound but entertaining.

She could see how her mother could confuse her relief for not having to be a part of society as finally accepting her place in said society.

However, the further she got away from that night, the more anxious she became. Beatrice returned her sister's looks with another shrug. Her mind was whirling with what-ifs and made up scenarios. The barrage of thoughts caused her head to throb.

Beatrice was saved by a knock on the parlor door. Daniels, their butler, opened the door with an envelope on a tray.

"Pardon the interruption, Your Graces, but this letter just arrived for Lady Beatrice."

Once again all three sets of eyes drifted to Beatrice who stood there unmoved.

"Don't look at me, I have no idea who is sending me a letter." She huffed as she trudged over to the butler.

She took the envelope and opened it only to feel the hairs on the back of her neck stand. She turned to see her mother leaning forward to try and see what she held in her hands.

"Do you mind?" Beatrice chided.

Sarah laughed. "Now Beatrice, your mother is just looking out for you."

Beatrice narrowed her eyes at her sister. “I liked you better before you became a mother.”

Eleanor snorted as she took a sip of her tea.

“Well,” Charlotte huffed. “Are you going to tell us who it’s from? Is it from a suitor?” She asked hopefully.

Beatrice rolled her eyes. “No, Mama. It’s from Jane. She wants to know what I’m wearing to the Joynor’s ball. And she added a line asking if there will be any good food at Sarah’s dinner party next week.”

Sarah’s laugh echoed throughout the parlor. “Your friend Jane loves my cook, doesn’t she? Whenever we have a party she is always hovering around the dessert table.”

Charlotte sniffed. “She shouldn’t be. She’s a lovely girl but sometimes...”

“Mama.” Eleanor’s voice warned. “I wouldn’t finish that sentence. Jane is a lovely girl and I hear her she has several interested suitors including a Duke’s son and Lord Dancary.”

Charlotte lifted a shoulder. “I don’t mean to talk ill of the girl, I’m just saying.”

Sarah sighed. “We all know what you’re saying, Mama.” She looked to Beatrice. “Tell her we’ll have all of her favorites because they just so happen to my favorites as well.” She said with a wink.

Beatrice folded the paper back into the envelope. “I think I’ll go write to her now.” She looked at her sisters. “Do either of you mind if I retreat to answer her letter?”

Eleanor nodded as Sarah added, “We’ll see you at our dinner party next week. I can’t wait to hear all about the Joynor ball.”

Beatrice gave each sister and her mother a kiss on their cheeks before retiring to her room.

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She shut the door behind her and walked to her desk, her hand cramping from how tightly she held the envelope.

With a glance over her shoulder to make sure the door was closed and locked she opened the envelope.

Dearest Mouse,

I hope this letter finds you well. Below you will find directions to a meeting place. Meet me there tonight exactly at midnight, not a minute after. You are to wear a nightgown and the mask you wore for your failed attempt at gaining access to a particular party.

I look forward to crossing an item off your list tonight.

G.

Beatrice could hear her heart beating between her ears. She read the note several times, running her fingertips over the words he wrote. Almost as if her finger could pick up more information about him and their rendezvous.

She glanced at her father's time piece on her desk. She had several hours before midnight, and thought of sitting around just waiting was too much for her to bear.

She rang for Candace.

"I need to bathe." The words rushed out.

Candace looked at her. “But it’s...”

“I spilled tea all over me, and I tripped in the garden earlier, I... can you draw me a bath? Is this the middle ages? I don’t need a reason to bathe, do I?”

Candace took a step inside the room and leaned forward. “Is everything all right, Lady Beatrice?”

Beatrice pushed out a breath. “Yes! Why is everyone asking me that today?”

Candace shrugged. “You seem a bit on edge is all.”

Beatrice’s face lit up. “You’re right! I’m on edge and a nice bath will help calm me.”

Candace raised an eyebrow before quickly glancing over her shoulder. “Does this have anything to do with your list?” She whispered.

Beatrice wrinkled her nose. “No. In fact, I think I’m going to take a break from that, give my mother what she wants until the end of the season.”

Candace breathed a sigh of relief. “That’s wonderful to hear, Lady Beatrice.” She brought her hands up. “Not that I think you were wrong in pursuing your own dreams, it’s just,” she laid a hand over her chest and let out another breath, “it was very stressful for me.” She laughed.

Beatrice rolled her lips. “I know, and I’m sorry. But, we don’t have to worry about for right now. Right now I could use a nice relaxing bath.”

Candace dipped her head. “I’ll see to it.”

After Candace closed the door Beatrice walked over to her dresser and pulled out a



nightgown.

She raised an eyebrow. While holding the nightgown she walked back to her desk where the letter laid in the open. She cringed. She was lucky Candace didn't come into the room, she could have seen this.

She picked up the note and reread it. It said nightgown.

Beatrice looked at the gown in her hands.

Where could we possibly be going that would require me to wear a nightgown?

She ruminated over that question for a moment before a more pressing one came to mind. What item would they be checking off?

Beatrice found herself once again scurrying down a side street in the same direction as her previous attempts to attend a midnight party. Only this time she turned down an alley several blocks before the main square. Luckily for her it wasn't far from her house and she knew the area quite well.

When she turned into the alley she saw Graham standing next to his carriage. She knew it was him immediately. He wore the same mask he was wearing the night she met him and he looked just as formidable yet enticing.

Her heart fluttered as she neared him.

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“Good evening,” he said with a bow. His eyes raked over her causing her hands to pull her cloak over her. Only she wasn’t wearing one.

The night was chilly, but his letter said nothing about a cloak and she didn’t want to disobey him on his first order.

Instead she folded her arms across her chest to stave off the chill in the air.

Graham clocked the movement and smiled. “No coat?”

She shuffled her feet. “You only listed the nightgown and the mask.”

“Good girl.” He purred.

His words heated her blood and she dropped her hands.

She took his offered hand as she stepped into the carriage.

Once the carriage took off towards their destination Beatrice finally took in the man sitting opposite of her.

He was dressed in his normal clothes, his cravat tucked neatly into his shirt and waist coat, with a lighter coat overtop. Other than the mask he wore he looked like he was going to any ordinary event thetonmay be holding.

She shivered. And she was in a nightgown.

“Where are we going?”

Graham tilted his head. “No questions.”

She scrunched her nose. “I thought that meant about what we were doing, not, where we would be going.”

He raised an eyebrow in reply. She knew it was a feeble excuse but the curiosity was too much for her.

“It’s just you’re fully dressed and I’m in a nightgown. As much as I wish to complete my list I do not wish to make a mockery of myself.”

She saw a shift in his eyes and crossed her fingers, hoping he would relay some piece of information to settle her nerves.

“Very well.” He acquiesced. “You’ve been wanting to attend one of the midnight parties on Water Street, have you not?”

Beatrice nodded.

Graham reached within his jacket and pulled out a thick piece of paper with gold embossed lettering on the front. “I have acquired you an invitation. Tonight we party with the revelers.”

She took the offered card stock and ran her fingers over top of the raised words.

“The Revelers are what the party hosts call themselves.” Graham offered. “It’s a group of people who get together to enjoy the... finer things in life without judgement or recourse.”

Beatrice's eyes lifted to his at his tone. "How do you mean?"

A corner of Graham's lips quirked up. "That, little mouse, you'll have to wait for. You'll understand when you get there."

Just then the carriage pulled up to a familiar house. It was the same one she was turned away from.

She shifted in her seat when Graham's hand came down on her thigh. Her eyes flew to his.

"Before we go, I have some rules for tonight." His tone was serious and unrelenting.

Beatrice was about to groan. He already laid down rules. If he was going to add a rule with every outing would his help even be worth it?

"I'm serious Beatrice, we are not leaving this carriage until you agree. It is for your own safety."

Beatrice's rebuttal dried on her tongue. "My safety?"

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Graham nodded. "You are not to touch anyone tonight. Do you understand?"

Confusion clouded Beatrice's mind. "Why would I touch-"

Graham raised his hand to silence her. "Your word, Beatrice."

She shook her head. "You have my word."

Graham stared at her. "If you disobey this order there will be repercussions, do you understand?"

Beatrice tried to swallow but her mouth had run dry. She surprised herself when she managed to say, "I understand."

Graham hesitated before nodding. He stepped out of the carriage and turned, offering her his hand.

With the invitation in one hand, she reached out and took his hand as she stepped out of the carriage and into the cool summer night air.

His grip tightened around her as he whispered in her ear. "No touching, Beatrice, or there will be consequences."

She nodded in understanding. It was on the tip of her tongue to ask what consequences there possibly could be but she thought better of it.

Graham walked her to the door that was being guarded by the same monster of a man

who had turned her away the last time.

Graham looked down at her. “Last chance.”

Beatrice looked at him then to the guard. Her eyes dropped to the invitation in her hand. Graham was giving her one last chance to back out, to turn around and go back to the safety of her mother’s home, to the sheltered safety of society.

She didn’t know what laid behind those doors but she knew it would most likely change her.

She looked back up to Graham. With a smile she handed the invitation the guard and met the brutish man’s eyes.

“I told you I’d be back with my invitation.”

## CHAPTER 10

Ezra’s hold tightened around Beatrice’s waist. There were more people here tonight than the past few weekends. He scowled under his mask. He knew there was a risk bringing her here, but he was hoping the end-of-season balls would have kept the majority of people away.

Ezra made eye contact with a few familiar people as he escorted Beatrice down a low lit hallway.

Her body was radiating electricity and nerves. His finger twitched slightly against her back and she jumped, her eyes flashing to his for reassurance.

He continued to guide her through the throngs of people, some milling around, some kissing, and some doing more than kissing.

Her eyes were bouncing around, trying to take in all the new sights around her. And new sights indeed. Ezra doubted Beatrice saw many people kissing in the provocative manner most were currently partaking in. Couples were draped over each other in almost every corner of the manor.

Ezra's hand slid to hers and stepped in front of her. He navigated her through a particularly crowded area where people's inhibitions were becoming more lax. Beatrice gasped and her footsteps stopped behind him. He turned to find her staring at two women kissing each other while sitting on a man's lap.

Ezra took a step back and leaned down to her. "No judgement here, Lady Mouse. You don't touch them, they won't touch you. Remember my rule. Now come along. There's more to see." Ezra took a step before turning back. "Unless you do not wish to continue?"

Beatrice's eyes snapped to his as she swallowed. Her eyes were still wide under her mask. Even with the anonymity of the mask, there was no hiding the fact she was innocent.

Her eyes cleared from shock as she shook her head slightly before gesturing to continue on. He took her around entwined legs, discarded clothing, and inviting smiles and stopped in front of a door. He knocked twice in rapid succession before the door opened.

Ezra stood to the side and motioned for Beatrice to walk in first. As much as he wanted to enter first, who knows how far into the demonstration they would be, he wanted Beatrice to walk in under her own volition.

With a cautious look to Ezra, Beatrice pulled her shoulders back and walked into the room with her head held high.

Ezra couldn't help but smile at her determination, and stubbornness. She will be a fun one.

Beatrice's confidence evaporated when she was met with a couple sitting on a couch facing the doorway. Several couples occupied chairs and lounge chairs placed in front of the couple on the couch, as if the couple on the couch were on a stage.



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Her steps halted as curious eyes turned to face her.

“Umm...” she brought her hand up as to wave and Ezra grabbed it and put it back at her side.

“No touching, and no talking.” His whispered into her ear, loving the shiver his words caused her.

She nodded once and allowed him to guide her to the couch directly in front of the couple. Beatrice looked at the other occupied chairs, all of them were off to the side or even behind the open couch. Her face said it all.

Why must we sit here?

Her features were painted with worry and confusion. Ezra said nothing but sat on the couch. With one look, Beatrice plopped down onto the couch with more emphasis than she probably intended. She dipped her head and squeezed her eyes shut.

There was an unfamiliar tug inside of Ezra. As much fun as he thought this would be, ruining an innocent, and even at her own behest, he found himself wanting to make it slightly easier for her.

Taking pity on her, he placed his arm around her shoulders and pulled her back into him as he leaned back onto the couch. Her body was stiff and rigid underneath his touch.

This won't do.

“Relax, Mouse. We’re just here to watch.” He nodded to the couple on the opposite couch as he spoke.

Beatrice dipped her chin. “Watch what?”

A low moan from the woman on the opposite couch halted Beatrice’s next question.

Beatrice lifted her gaze to see the woman, who was also dressed in only a nightgown leaning back onto the couch. Her one hand gripped at the cushion while her other one played with the ribbon at her neckline.

Beatrice’s breath caught and she leaned forward a little. Ezra watched as her eyes took in the scene before them. Her eyes displayed her emotions perfectly; curiosity first, then confusion, back to curiosity before understanding finally dawned on her.

Her breathing increased as her eyes traced over to the man sitting next to the woman. His lips were on her neck with open-mouthed kisses. His one arm laid across the back of the couch while his other one was underneath the woman’s nightgown.

Ezra bit his lip to stop from smiling when Beatrice’s expression turned from understanding to indecision.

Ezra leaned into Beatrice. “Enjoying the show, Mouse?”

Beatrice’s brows furrowed. “I don’t understand what we’re watching.”

Ezra cocked his head to the side, to which Beatrice rolled her eyes.

“I obviously know what we’re watching, but why?”

Ezra let the smile he was holding back free. “Some find it entertaining.” He nodded

to a man who was sitting off to the side with a drink in his lap, just watching. “Some find it arousing.” He gestured to a couple sitting on a chair to their right who were kissing and quickly undressing each other.

Beatrice gasped and dropped her eyes, shielding herself from both couples.

“This is highly inappropriate.” Beatrice’s words rushed out.

Ezra worried that for all her bravado, she really was an innocent girl. He had found that the most sheltered society girls say they want danger and adventure but when the opportunity actually presented itself they turn back to what they know.

He took in her huddled frame as disappointment settled within him. He had hoped she was one who truly wanted adventure.

A slight movement caught his eye. Beatrice had shifted in her seat and while her head was still down, her eyes kept flashing up to the scene in front of them.

A jolt of electricity shot through Ezra. She does want it, she just doesn’t know how badly she wants it.

Ezra relaxed against her and once again pulled her to him. With his arm around her shoulders he whispered into her ear.

“There is nothing to be ashamed of here. Why people come to watch, or participate, or do anything is not for us to decide. It’s only for us to become inspired.”

Beatrice brought her eyes up to his. “Inspired?”

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Her light brown eyes were nearly black from her pupils being dilated. She was aroused.

He gestured for her to watch. As she leaned back against him, taking in the scene before them Ezra continued to whisper in her ear.

“From your own midnight discovery you know there’s a special spot on a woman, that when touched just so causes ecstasy and enjoyment.”

Beatrice bit her bottom lip. Even in the dim light he could see the blush blossoming on her cheeks. She was no doubt remembering the night she came to him and what she had done just before.

She swallowed and licked her lips. “She’s enjoying it? Being touched so intimately in front of complete strangers?”

Keeping his lips close to her ear his eyes floated to the couple on the other couch. The man’s hand was moving faster, his own hips raising into the air. The woman’s eyes were squeezed shut with her mouth forming the perfect ‘o’ through her growing moans.

“Mmmm, indeed. See how her hips are pushing up into his hand? I highly doubt she remembers there are others in the room.”

Beatrice’s breathing was becoming erratic as she nodded her head slightly. She licked her lips once more and shifted again in her seat.

“Do you remember when you touched yourself the other night?” Ezra’s words were low and rough. He could feel his pants tighten as he watched Beatrice process his question.

She didn’t answer but shook her head in acknowledgement.

“Did you not enjoy it?”

She slowly blinked.

Her head bobbed again.

“Well, if you enjoyed it then, think of someone one else doing it for you. Just you and him, no worries of getting caught, all the freedom in the world to explore what your body likes, wants, desires.”

Beatrice’s body swayed to his words. Her eyes became heavy, as if she was under a trance, listening to his words and watching the couple in front of them.

Once again she shook her head to clear her thoughts. “Why is it hot in here all of a sudden?” Beatrice closed her eyes and took a few deep breaths. This was going better than Ezra could have imagined. She was very responsive to stimuli.

The woman moaned, throwing her head back against the couch. Beatrice sat up in earnest. Her leg began to bounce underneath her nightgown. She reached for Ezra’s hand but he took her hand and placed it on her own thigh.

“No touching tonight, remember?” He scolded lightly

Beatrice scowled. “I thought you meant other people. Plus, you also said no talking and we’ve been talking this whole time.” She squirmed on the couch, her fingers

fidgeting in her lap. Suddenly her movements stopped and her eyes glanced at him from their corners.

Ezra noticed the change and got the sneaking suspicion his little mouse was up to something.

Surely enough, she lifted her hand and started to lightly touch the neckline of her nightgown. Ezra watched as her fingertips traced the ribbon that was threaded in and out around her throat.

His mouth ran dry and he tried to swallow over the lump that had formed in his throat.

Not only was she a responsive little thing, she was a quick learner as well.

Ezra's hand that was draped around her shoulders caught her wandering hand. "I said no touching, Mouse."

A sly smile warmed her lips. "You said no touching other people. You said nothing about touching myself."

Images of a writhing Beatrice with heavy lidded eyes flashed in his mind sending his body into an inferno of want.

"You're walking a very fine line right now, Mouse." Ezra shifted, hoping to quell the hardening cock in his pants.

"Lucky for me I can walk in a straight line." Beatrice's words were breathy as she became lost in the movements of the couple in front of her. Her hand started massaging her own breast.

At the sight of her hand cupping one perfectly rounded breast Ezra growled in her ear. Beatrice's eyes fluttered shut as her own moan escaped her lips.

A movement off to Ezra's left caught his eye. The man who was sitting back enjoying the show was now leaning forward with his eyes squarely on Beatrice.

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Ezra's eyes narrowed on the man before nudging Beatrice. He knew the man, he posed no threat so Ezra was curious just how adventurous his little mouse was.

"I'd be careful who you allow to hear you. It seems you have attracted your own audience."

Beatrice's ministrations stopped and her eyes opened quickly as she looked around the room. When they landed on the man who was watching her she yelped.

"Unless you want an audience? Or perhaps a third?" He nipped her ear relishing in the gasp that fell from her lips.

"I only want you." She breathed.

It was the last thing he heard before his mind shut off and his body took over. Without thought he leapt off of the couch, pulling Beatrice up and over his shoulder. Some in polite society would definitely see this as caveman behavior, but lucky for him they were not currently in polite society.

Beatrice was still processing the fact that a strange man was watching her touch herself when her world was flipped upside down. Literally.

Air rushed out of her as her stomach landed on Graham's shoulder. She picked her head up just in time to see the woman lose herself to her orgasm and the lone man in the chair, who was watching her retreat, look on in confusion.

"Where are we going?" Beatrice yelled, trying to get Graham's attention. It was hard



to talk to someone when you were flung over their shoulder, your body bouncing up and down over a shoulder.

She saw nothing but passing feet and clumps of discarded clothing. She heard a door open and, next thing she experienced, was being flipped down onto another couch.

Beatrice brought her hand up to stop her spinning head. She opened her eyes to see they were alone in a darkly lit room. Her eyes snapped up to the man looming over her.

Graham's hair was disheveled, his cravat askew and his eyes were heavy with lust. At least, she assumed it to be. She could honestly say she'd never seen a man in lust, only read about them. But if this was what it meant when a man's eyes darkened with lust, she could understand how the heroine would always lose herself within them.

Graham's eyes fixated on her, making her afraid to move. He looked formidable standing over top of her. It was then she realized how small she was in comparison to him. He could do anything he wanted to her and she wouldn't be able to stop him.

Her thighs clenched. A small voice in the back of her mind told her she probably shouldn't be excited over that thought.

Without a word he fell to his knees in front of her. He nudged himself in-between her thighs and took her head in his hands. Without much else warning his lips crashed down on hers. His tongue didn't wait for permission but pushed through her lips.

She leaned in, running her hands through his hair. Her nails scraped his scalp eliciting a growl from Graham. Excitement tickled her skin as his arms pulled her closer to him. He crawled up onto the couch, forcing her to shift her body to lay back.

He hovered on top of her, with only their lips engaged in the kiss. He let his hips

fall and connect with hers. Her eyes widened at the pressure of his hardened length against her belly.

Shock, curiosity, and nerves fought for dominance of her thoughts. Luckily for her, desire won out. She ran her hands down his back, wanting to pull him closer. The man was a stealbeam, no matter how hard she pulled the rest of his body would not come down.

Connected through their kiss and their hips, she wanted desperately for the whole of him to be on her, to consume her.

He stopped the kiss and pulled away from her, nestling his knees between her legs so he could rest on his haunches.

“You want more, my little mouse?” Graham’s lips were swollen from their kiss, his hair was even more of a mess and she couldn’t remember a time she wanted something in such disarray.

She chewed on her bottom lip. “Yes, please. More. I need more.”

Beatrice raised her arms and much to her pleasure he allowed her to guide him back down to her mouth. Unfortunately, he still did not give her all of his weight.

His lips trailed down her neck. Her hips bucked with every suck and nibble. “You can lay on me, I don’t mind.” She whispered. “In fact, I want you do.”

Graham placed one more open-mouthed kiss on her neck before retreating back to his knees. Beatrice’s hands dropped from his body.

“I’m glad you want me to. It means your punishment will be that more effective.”

Beatrice propped herself up on her elbows. “Punishment? What punishment? For what?”

Graham stood and walked over to a mirror that was hanging on a wall. He smoothed over his hair and straightened his cravat.

“It’s a shame, really. I had big plans for you tonight.” He turned and winked at her.

Beatrice sat up on the sofa. She would stand up but she feared her legs would give out on her. Graham’s kiss seemed to have an effect on the stability of her legs.

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She took a breath to calm her racing heart. This was not where she thought the evening was going to go.

Realization was settling in. “What are you talking about, Graham?”

After Graham deemed himself put back together he walked back to Beatrice and extended his hand to help her stand. She almost refused but she heard a moan from the outside, reminding her she was in his world and she did not know her way out.

She slid her hand into his, trying ignore the rush of heat that skated up her arm and straight to her core.

“You disobeyed me.” He said simply.

Beatrice blinked in confusion. “What? When?”

Graham tilted his head. “I said no touching. You touched yourself.”

Anger and frustration bubbled in her blood. “You weren’t specific! It’s not my fault I outsmarted you.”

Graham’s laugh startled her. “You’re right. I need to remember you’re more intelligent than most women I encounter. However, it does not matter, I said no touching, you touched yourself. Your punishment is no reward.”

Beatrice scrunched her forehead. “My punishment is no reward? What does that mean? What’s the reward?”

Graham shrugged. “Me.”

Now it was Beatrice’s laugh that echoed throughout the room. “Think highly of ourselves, don’t we?”

Graham offered another shrug. “I know my worth, mouse. Do you?”

His words stopped her retort. “What does... of course, I... what do you-”

“Come now. It is late. And while we didn’t get to cross two items off your list we did get to cross the one about attending the “wildside of London.” Of course, if you’d like to return we can. Now that you’ve been here, you no longer need an actual invitation, just me on your arm.”

Once again a cocky wink crinkled his green eyes. She was still trying to decipher what he meant about knowing her worth. The whole reason why she didn’t want to marry was because she knew her worth. She wanted more than a married life could give her. She was worth more than that.

She eyed him as he took her hand and guided her back down the hallway toward the front door.

She decided to let his comment rest for now. She pictured her list in her head and smiled when she mentally checked off Number 3: See the Wild Side of London.

## CHAPTER 11

Lady Joynor swept along the side of the ballroom, side-eyeing anyone who would dare look bored at her ball. It was utmost importance that everyone not only enjoy themselves at her soirees but do so in such a manner that her ball would be the highlight of the season.

Beatrice could feel Lady Joynor's eyes on her as she fiddled with the lace that lined her neckline. She cringed when she saw her maid lay out this particular dress. The lace was itchy and the fabric was stiff but her mother swore it was her most flattering dress. So, here she was, scratching at herself with Lady Joynor staring daggers at her. After all, if you're scratching, you're not dancing.

"Oh, look Beatrice." Charlotte leaned into her daughter. "Lord Devlin's son is here again." She brought her fan up to hide her face. "We never did figure out his name, did we?"

Beatrice sighed and sank on her heels. "Nor do I care to, Mama."

Charlotte huffed while she fanned herself. "You promised me, my sweet."

Beatrice bristled under the reminder.

"Besides, what harm can it do? We're at a ball, a Joynor ball at that. If you don't dance until your feet hurt you haven't done enough." Charlotte whispered with a giggle. "Why don't you go wander over in his direction. Perhaps you'll catch his eye and he'll ask for a dance. After all you look positively stunning tonight and with Cecilia out of the picture you are the season's newest diamond." Charlotte said with a sly smile.

Beatrice wrinkled her nose. No one bestowed the title of the season's newest diamond on her but her mother. Yes, she's heard her name circulating around the marriage mart more than she cared to but it was nowhere near the fanfare Cecilia had at the beginning of the season.

"Very well, Mama. If anything, it'll get Lady Joynor to stalk someone else. I swear she's passed us four times and each time her sneer gets larger."

Charlotte smiled as she dipped her head and moved to the outer wall.

Beatrice walked toward a group of young men huddled in the corner. Luckily for her they were by an open door, where a nice breeze entered. It was becoming too hot in the ballroom and having the excuse of standing near an open doorway was a good way to strike up a conversation with Lord Devlin's son.

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Heavens. I don't even know this man's name.

Beatrice's eye wandered around the ballroom, hoping to see someone she could ask. Perhaps Jane was here, maybe she remembered his name.

As Beatrice's head swiveled from side to side looking for a familiar face her steps carried her into the middle of the ballroom.

Dancers circled her and long skirts swept at her feet.

"I keep finding you in the oddest of places."

Beatrice's heart fluttered.

She turned and looked up, straight into emerald green eyes, full of mischief and jest.

"Your Grace." She tilted her chin. "How lovely to see you here."

Graham looked around with a flippant smile. "In the middle of the dancefloor?"

Beatrice took in the couples still circling her, some of them looking at her in confusion.

"Oh my! I had no idea I wandered into the dance. I was looking for someone."

Beatrice felt her cheeks heat as embarrassment washed over her.



“You were looking for someone,” Graham said with a raised eyebrow.

“Uh, I, um... yes. A friend. Jane.” She felt it important to let him know it was a female friend and not a male friend. Even though she wanted the female friend to tell her the name of a male acquaintance but Graham didn’t need to know that. Was he an acquaintance if she didn’t remember his name?

“You often stare into space. Did you know that?” Graham’s voice interrupted her train of thought.

“Hmm?”

Graham smiled. “Never mind. Well, as I see it Lady Beatrice, you have two options. You can continue on your journey to seek your friend or you can stay here and dance this next dance with me.”

Beatrice guffawed. “With you?”

Graham straightened his back. “Yes, with me.” He looked around. “Who else is risking ridicule by standing in the middle of a ballroom while people dance around just to talk?”

Beatrice nibbled on her bottom lip. “I just mean... you want to dance with me?”

Graham took a step closer to her. “I don’t offer things I do not want.”

The world tilted on its axis and Beatrice found herself leaning towards him. His pull was undeniable.

“What say you?” He offered his hand.

Beatrice's eyes drifted down to his hand then back up to his eyes.

She nodded as her hand slipped into his. He pulled her closer just as the musicians began to play the next song.

"I'm glad you chose the dance. Lady Joynor was staring at us. I was almost certain she was going to come out here and make us dance whether you wanted to or not."

Beatrice blushed. "Well, then, I am glad I accepted your offer. That would have been quite the spectacle."

Graham's eyes darkened as a devilish grin appeared. "Yes, I would think we've had enough spectacle for the week, wouldn't you agree?"

Beatrice gasped as her eyes peered around the room. "Shh, someone may hear you."

Graham laughed. "Hear me say what? Spectacle?" His voice rose with the last word.

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Beatrice lowered her head and tried to look out of the corner of her eyes to see if anyone was looking. So far, no one was watching.

“It’s not like I’m talking about any specific spectacle in particular. Now, if I were to say the word ‘party,’ or ‘mask,’” Graham paused for a moment. “Or I suppose even ‘couch,’ now those words may bring some unwanted interest our way.”

With each word Beatrice’s head sunk lower and lower. If she could she roll into a ball and roll right out of the room she would. She looked up to see Lady Joynor watching with her with interest.

Beatrice straightened up under her watchful eye and offered a small smile in the woman’s direction. Being on Lady Joynor’s bad side did no one any favors.

“Tell me, little mouse, are you ashamed of your actions the other night?” Graham’s question was softer as he leaned into her.

Beatrice bit her bottom lip and shook her head. “No. But just because I’m not doesn’t mean I want others to know what activities I engage in.”

Graham considered her response as he turned her around the outside of the dance floor then back into the middle.

“Well, because of your actions, it’s not like you were engaged in anything too scandalous.” He lifted a shoulder. “If you would have behaved, well, then I guess you would have something to hide from eavesdroppers.”

Beatrice's body heated at the memory. Her thighs clenched as phantom touches caressed her thighs and stomach. She blocked out the swaying of skirts and the song of the violins so she could remember the feel of his lips felt on her throat. She shuddered within his grasp.

"To think what might have been." His words tickled her ear.

She looked up to find humor in his eyes and grimaced.

"I still think it was complete rubbish. You said no touching other people, not that I couldn't touch myself. You made up a rule as we went. That is cheating." She pouted.

Graham lifted her chin with one finger. "It is either my way, or no way, Lady Beatrice. You knew that going in. Do you wish to renege on our deal?"

Beatrice quickly shook her head. "No... I just wish you laid out all of the rules ahead of time in a clear and concise manner."

Graham hummed. "I'll take that under advisement."

The parting notes of the song ended and Beatrice found herself wanting to continue. Even though they were arguing, she'd rather argue with him than dance with anyone else.

As couples began to leave the dance floor she secretly prayed that the musicians would start again quickly so they could just continue.

While still in his arms, he looked down to her. His eyes searched hers leaving her breathless.

"It is rather warm in here. Would you like a drink, Lady Beatrice?" His voice was

rough and sent goosebumps down her arms.

She took his offered arm as he escorted her towards the refreshments. He walked her past the group of young men she was originally walking towards and past her friend Jane with other young women. She noticed a few looks their way but for the most part her attention was directed to the man at her side.

He moved with grace and agility, yet with a sense of power and authority that only came from experience and privilege.

After pouring them each a drink he gestured to the open door. They stood just inside, well in view of others so not to start any untoward rumors.

Graham looked around quickly. "I've been meaning to ask you a question about your list."

At the mention of her list Beatrice's body stilled. She, too, looked around but thankfully found that most had deserted the refreshment table for the next dance.

She nodded her head. "Go on."

Nerves raced up her spine. She couldn't deny the knowledge of knowing he had possession of her list felt too intimate and significant.

Graham leisurely leaned against the door jamb. "The opera scene."

Giggles bubbled out of Beatrice. "What of it?"

The Duke raised his hands in question. "What is it? Where is it from? How am I supposed to help you recreate that scene if I have never heard of it?"

Beatrice took a breathe as the cool summer breeze wafted past her. In her stiff dress, she welcomed the kiss of the cool summer's air on her skin. Which was perfect because just thinking of 'the opera scene' was enough to shoot white hot heat through her veins.

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Her skin began to heat despite the breeze.

“It’s from a book.” She took a sip of her punch, hoping to cool herself from the inside.

Graham chuckled. “A book, you say?” He cocked his head to the side. “I read a lot of books, Lady Beatrice. I’m not sure which book you are referencing.”

Beatrice wished for her mother’s fan to hide her face. “It was one of my sister’s, Sarah’s, books. She loves reading stories of love, especially forbidden romance.”

Graham’s eyes darkened. “Forbidden romance?”

Beatrice rolled her lips as she shuffled her feet. For some reason, her body felt foreign to her whenever his gaze focused so intently onto her. Under his microscope she felt exposed and she wasn’t quite sure how she felt about that.

She lifted a shoulder. “Those are her favorites.” Her words came out as a hushed breath.

Graham straightened and swirled the punch in his cup.

“Tell me, are they your favorites, Mouse?”

Beatrice swallowed.

She slowly shook her head from side to side.

“No?” He questioned.

“I like mysteries, adventure.”

Graham nodded absently. “Is that why I always find you in the most precarious places, scurrying around?”

Beatrice could hear the pandering in his voice but was too lost in his eyes to care.

Without allowing her to answer he continued. “So, if they’re not your favorite kind of story, why is a scene from them so stuck in your mind that you wish to recreate it?”

If Beatrice had her wits about her she would have replied that recreating a murder scene would be disastrous for all involved, but her mind played a very different scenario.

All she could see was the words of the opera scene playing out in front of her. A woman and a man alone in an opera box with wandering hands, and long, passionate kisses. Beatrice’s eyes fluttered close as she became lost to the scene.

Graham hummed in interest. “Your face is flushed. What are you imagining, little mouse?”

His pet name for her brought her back to reality.

“The book is ‘To Love a Traitor’ I suggest you read it. It is... enthralling.” Movement from her side caught her eye. “I have to go, my mother is motioning for me.”

Graham tilted his head. “Noted. Farewell, Mouse. I’m sure we’ll be seeing each other soon.”



Graham's parting words caused Beatrice to misstep. She couldn't control her body's reactions to him and something told her that would become a problem the more they see each other.

"Was that the Duke of Graham you were speaking with?" Charlotte said as her fan waved in front of her face.

"It was." Beatrice tugged at the lace around her neck.

"You danced with him as well." Charlotte added.

Beatrice shook her head. "Yes."

Charlotte ran a curious eye over her daughter. "Is there... should I..." Charlotte scrunched her nose. "No. There's nothing there, right?"

Beatrice laughed. "Heavens, no. I ran into him while I was looking for Jane, hoping she'd remind me of Lord Devlin's son's name. I figured since I ran into him on the dance floor that I should accept his offer to dance."

Charlotte gasped. "He asked you to dance?"

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Beatrice looked pointedly at her mother. “Well I wasn’t going to ask him.”

Charlotte bristled. “It’s just that he’s not known to be so giving of his time. I’m surprised by his actions, not yours.”

Beatrice didn’t know how to respond to her mother so she stood hoping the awkwardness of them silently staring at each other would drive her mother to change the topic.

“Shall we go? You’d think for a woman who wants everyone to rave about her parties she would invest in some more windows or doors. It is an inferno in here.”

Beatrice smiled. Her mother was an easy read.

“I would love to go. My feet hurt.”

Charlotte swatted at her daughter in excitement. “Oh, we should go find Lady Joynor and tell her. She’ll just love that!”

Beatrice took her mother’s arm. “Wonderful. While we’re add it, we’ll tell her that she should also invest in some more windows or doors. I’m sure she’d appreciate that as well.” Beatrice added with a wink to her mother.

Ezra downed his second whisky of the night. He bit back a groan as the burn coated his throat. He’d been on edge ever since he left Joynor’s ball. He was hoping a stop at the club and some drinks would help soothe him.

“Ah, you’re here.” Frederic clapped him on the back.

So much for relaxation.

“The missus let you out tonight?” Ezra commented as he signaled for another drink.

Frederic sat down next to Ezra with a mock laugh. “Ha. Ha. Very funny. I’ll have you know she lets me do whatever I want... as long as I ask her first.”

Ezra smiled as the barkeep filled his tumbler and brought Frederic his own. He may still think of Harriet as his little sister in need of protection, but ever since that bastard of a Duke ruined her, she had grown into a strong and capable young woman. Ezra knew exactly who was the head of Frederic’s household and it wasn’t the man sitting next to him.

“I head Joynor had a ball tonight and that you were in attendance.” Frederic motioned to Ezra with his tumbler.

Ezra grimaced. “People talk too much.”

Frederic laughed. “And I thank my lucky stars for that. I wouldn’t know anything if they didn’t.”

Ezra swirled his drink. “Is there a point to this conversation? Or did you just want to prove that Harriet lets you out of the house every once in a while?”

Frederic took a healthy sip of his whisky, his mouth pulling back at the burn.

“Both.” Frederic said as he coughed.

Ezra reached out to pat his friend on the back. “You’ve gone soft on me, brother. You

hardly come out any more.”

Frederic smiled. “When you have a woman like Harriet at home, there’s no need to leave.” His wink had Ezra cringing.

“I’m going home.” Ezra pushed away from the table.

Frederic barked out a laugh. “I’m sorry! I’m sorry! I swear, no more talk of your sister as my loving and willing wi-”

Ezra stood while Frederic pulled him back down. “That was the last one. I swear.”

Ezra considered his friend before fully relaxing back into his chair.

“So why are you really here?”

“I was in town doing some business and I heard about the ball and, to my surprise, I heard your appearance made quite the stir.”

Ezra furrowed his brows. “How so? All I did was dance with Lady Beatrice.”

Frederic’s eyes widened as a bright smile lit his face. “So you admit it!”

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Ezra cocked his head to the side, utterly confused as to what his friend was going on about. “Of course I admit it. Why wouldn’t I? I was there, she was there, we ran into each other on the dance floor and I asked her to dance since we were both out there.”

Frederic held up his hand. “Hold on a moment. You were in the middle of the dance floor?”

Ezra sighed, this conversation was becoming exhausting. “Yes.”

“And you don’t see how people would consider that strange?”

Ezra continued to look on in confusion.

“You,” Frederic drew out. “You. On the dance floor. What? You were just wondering around and found yourself in the middle of a dance floor? Does that sound like something you would normally do?”

Ezra once again swirled the liquid in his tumbler. “Just because I haven’t done it in the past doesn’t mean it’s odd behavior. I was walking, trying to avoid people and I found myself in the middle of the dance floor. What was odd was that there was empty space on the dance floor to walk. If anything someone should talk to Lady Joynor, she’s losing her grip on exciting balls.”

Frederic blinked at his friend. “Do you hear yourself?”

Ezra shrugged, tired of this conversation.

“And Lady Beatrice just happened to be there at the same time?”

Ezra nodded. “I didn’t drag her out there if that’s what you’re insinuating.”

Frederic sat back and considered his friend. He rubbed his face then leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees.

“I’m willing to concede that your dance was happenstance, but what about afterwards? People told me you were spotted speaking with her in a darkened doorway.”

Ezra groaned. “This is why I hate the peerage and society events. Vultures. All of them. Each out to make something out of nothing.”

Frederic raised an eyebrow. “Again, you’re not denying it.”

Ezra pushed out a breath. “Yes! I was talking to her, heaven forbid! And it was not a darkened doorway, it was just beside the refreshment table where anyone could have heard our casual conversation about books.”

Frederic sat up with a bewildered look. “Books? Now who’s going soft? You’re semi-alone with a woman and you talk books with her?”

Ezra finished his drink. “I’m done for the night, Frederic. Give my best to Harriet.”

Ezra turned to leave when his friend grabbed him by the arm. “Just be careful, yeah? People are starting to talk and you, of all people, know where talking can lead.”

Ezra’s body recoiled at Frederic’s insinuation that his arrangement with Beatrice would lead anywhere near her ruination.

He shrugged Frederic's hand off. "I know what I'm doing, Frederic. You worry about yours, I'll worry about mine."

Ezra left the club not realizing that, intentionally or not, he had called Beatrice his and it didn't feel wrong.

## CHAPTER 12

Beatrice stood off to the side with her mother watching Sarah and her husband, the Duke of Stoleton, welcome their guests as everyone entered their home.

"Come," Charlotte whispered in Beatrice's ear. "Let's make our way to the parlor. I think Eleanor is in there already."

Beatrice followed her mother into her sister's parlor. There was a drink cart set up and the furniture was moved from its original setting to allow for more people. Somehow the shift allowed for more seating, yet more room to move around.

Charlotte walked them to the cart and poured Beatrice some punch. "I wonder who all is coming. Sarah told me but in my old age I must've forgotten."

Beatrice raised an eyebrow. Her mother was far from her maiden days but she was far from old.

"I know Jane will be here with her parents but that's all I know." Beatrice took a small sip of her punch as her sister Sarah walked into the parlor with a peculiar look on her face.

"Sarah?" Charlotte questioned. "Are you all right? Is everything all right with the children?"

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Sarah waved her mother off. “Yes, everything’s fine with them.” She turned and looked at Beatrice and she winced.

“Beatrice. The Duke of Graham is here.”

Beatrice looked between her mother and her sister. “Should this concern me?”

Sarah and Charlotte exchanged looks.

Charlotte’s whole body heaved with her sigh. “I told you, Beatrice.”

Ignoring her mother’s dramatics Beatrice looked back to Sarah. “What is she talking about? Why does it matter that the Duke of Graham is here? Didn’t you know who you were inviting to your own dinner party?”

Sarah rolled her eyes. “Well, yes. I know who I invited, but I didn’t know who Charles invited.”

Beatrice still didn’t know how Graham being here should concern her.

“But he’s investing in a venture with Charles so Charles invited him.”

Beatrice took a sip of her punch, nonplussed.

“Beatrice! Are you daft? Have you not been hearing what people are saying?” Sarah exclaimed.



Beatrice's heart slowed. "People? What are people saying?"

Sarah looked at her mother for help but the woman was too busy fanning herself with a napkin.

Her sister took a deep breath. "It's nothing too serious... as of yet. But people are starting to note that you and the Duke of Graham spend a lot of time together."

Beatrice took a breath of relief. No one was talking about their midnight rendezvous at the masked party, only about them dancing. That she could handle.

"Sarah." She said pointedly. "First of all, we danced and talked at two balls. Oh no! Quick write the banns." She added an eye roll for emphasis. "And secondly, he's a Duke, should you have me shun him and not accept his invitation to dance?"

Sarah's eyes bulged. "That's just it, Beatrice. He doesn't usually enter into conversations willingly and he has done so with you." She stuck another finger up in the air. "And two, he never dances and he's danced twice with you!"

Beatrice tried the trick of standing in awkward silence with her sister, hoping Sarah was like her mother and would change the subject to something less scandalous. It didn't work.

"Are you going to say anything?" Sarah cried.

Beatrice shrugged. "What would you have me say? If it were anyone else it wouldn't register with anyone but because he's a Duke you are all up in arms."

Sarah looked at Charlotte sheepishly. "I'm not all up in arms. I just wanted you to know people are talking and where's there talk, there's rumors. And where's there's rumors, there's ruins--"

“Don’t say the word!” Charlotte gasped.

Beatrice grimaced. “Oh, Mama. It’s not like by saying the word makes it happen.”

Charlotte’s gaze flew to Beatrice. “Why risk it? All Sarah is saying is to be careful. I told you while the Duke is well respected and reputable, he is seen in some not-so-reputable places and is known to have questionable tastes. You are not granted such allowances. Please be mindful of your reputation.”

Beatrice tightened her grip on her glass she was afraid she’d break it. She was tired of the double standards that allowed men to do as they please with women, but the same women had no such freedom.

It was another reason why the life of a spinster was so appealing to her. The idea she would only have herself to answer to was invigorating.

If she could only complete her list she would feel better about the next phase of her life.

As if the devil heard his cue, Graham walked into the parlor.

It was as if all the air was sucked out of the room and she was standing in a vacuum. There was no one but him, no where else to look but to where he was, no other sound, but the sound of his voice.

“Lady Beatrice.” Graham’s voice spoke to her.

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With a breath of new life, Beatrice's eyes flittered up his broad chest, past his perfectly tied cravat, hesitating briefly on his full lips, before finally landing on his deep green eyes.

Her body swayed under his attention.

"Your Grace." She dipped her head.

"Your Grace, how lovely it is to see you again." Charlotte stepped forward, offering her hand.

Without missing a beat, Graham took her hand and placed a chaste kiss upon it. "Your Grace, the honor is all mine." His smile was charming, his speech impeccable, his body language perfect. Beatrice was in awe of his ability to be the dashing Duke when he needed to. Although, she preferred his more devilish side.

Heat rushed to her cheeks at the turn of her thoughts.

She cleared her throat and placed a wide smile on her face, hoping she didn't seem as awkward as she suddenly felt.

"Did you enjoy Lady Joynor's ball?" Charlotte asked. "I hope my daughter didn't occupy too much of your time." She quipped with a quick look to her youngest daughter.

Beatrice took a breath to steady her breathing. She crossed her fingers behind her back, hoping her mother wouldn't say anything to embarrass her.

Her mother rose an eye brow in the Duke's direction.

Who was she kidding? Of course her mother would embarrass her.

Beatrice looked helplessly to Sarah.

With a sigh Sarah stepped forward. "I'm sure she didn't, Mama. You know Beatrice would much rather be alone with her books than at a ball. She most likely retreated to a corner to read one of the books she smuggled in. Isn't that right, Beatrice?"

At the mention of books Beatrice's mind switched from proper etiquette in a parlor setting to the opera scene in 'To Love a Traitor.' Her heart began to beat faster and nervous laughter bubbled out of her.

"Beatrice! What has come over you?" Charlotte questioned.

Beatrice took a few gulps of air to quell the nervous laughter. "I'm sorry," she coughed and placed a hand over her chest. "I don't know. Um... please forgive me I need some more punch." She stepped to the side to hopefully slip past the Duke but he raised his arm to stop her.

"Actually, Your Grace, after our dance we ended up having a lovely conversation about books." Graham shifted his body to further impede Beatrice's escape. She had no choice but to turn back to the conversation but not before giving a quick sneer in the Duke's direction.

Beatrice could feel the color drain from her face when she saw the look of amusement on Sarah's face and the look of concern on her mother's. Surely this wasn't happening.

Sarah tilted her head in interest. "Oh? What books did you discuss?"

Beatrice looked at the window. She wondered if it was double paned. Maybe with enough force she could break through it if she threw herself hard enough.

“She actually mentioned you in our discussion.” Graham noted.

Sarah’s eyes widened and lit with glee. “Did she now? I find that most curious since the types of books I favor differ heavily from the ones she does.”

Graham looked to Beatrice with a sly grin. She pushed out a breath and accepted her fate. She was not going to leave this conversation alive, or at least without a stern look from her mother. A stern look from her mother would turn into a long lecture, which would lead to hysterics, and more arguing. Who’s to say which was worse this point? Death or another argument about her future with her mother?

Beatrice glanced to the window again. If only if it were slightly opened...

“She did mention that you two read vastly different books, but there was one of yours in particular that she did fancy.” Graham furrowed his brows in concentration. “What was it again, Lady Beatrice. I can’t remember.”

Beatrice ground her molars. He was toying with her and he knew she had no recourse that wouldn’t lead to embarrassment.

“I honestly don’t remember, Your Grace. I spoke with several gentleman at Lady Joynor’s ball, I can’t be expected to remember every detail of every conversation.” She said smugly.

There. That should quieten him for a moment. Her victory felt short lived when she heard a slight intake of air come from her mother.

“Beatrice.” She chided. “Your Grace, please forgive my daughter for her brash

tongue.”

Beatrice dropped her shoulders. Her mother could be so perplexing. One minute she is scolding her for giving the Duke too much attention, the next she is berating her for putting him in his place.

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“No need to apologize, Your Grace.” Graham smiled with ease. “I’d rather have a woman be honest with me than to placate me with unfounded niceties.”

Sarah waved her hand to clear the air. “We appreciate your candor, Your Grace.” She looked over her shoulder towards her butler who was standing in the doorway. “If you’ll excuse me, I think dinner is about to be served. I want to check on a few things before we eat.”

Sarah kissed her mother on the cheek before giving a nod to Graham and a cheeky wink to Beatrice.

“Oh, Eleanor is back.” Charlotte exclaimed. “Beatrice, we must go say hello to her before we sit down.” Charlotte turned to Graham. “If you will pardon us, Your Grace. We should say hello to my oldest before dinner.”

Graham dipped his head and stepped off to the side to allow them to pass.

Beatrice breathed a sigh of relief that their interaction was over. She didn’t know how much more she could take speaking with the Duke with her mother and sister in attendance.

As she swept by Graham he lifted his hand to grab hers, stopping her at his side.

“Had I known you had a brash tongue I would’ve have put it to good use the other night.”

It took her a few moments for her brain to catch up with her body. She stood there for

a moment until she realized that he had dropped her hand and she was still standing there. Her eyes re-focused on the room around her. Curious eyes followed by whispering mouths watched as she tilted her chin in the air and joined her mother and sister by the door.

It took a small miracle for Beatrice to get through dinner. Luckily, the Duke was seated further down the table from her, but unfortunately, he was on the opposite side which allowed her eyes to drift to his.

Every time she stole a glance, his eyes were already on her.

One unfortunate time, she was bringing her water glass up to her lips when she looked at him. The intensity of his stare startled her and caused her to spill some of the water on herself. One very unfortunate time, she was cutting a particularly stubborn vegetable and his laugh caught her so off guard and her knife missed the potato causing it to fly off her plate and land in Lord Shelding's lap.

Her nerves were frayed, and her head was pounding. Between the potato incident and her nervous stomach, she didn't eat much at dinner. Now that dinner was over and the guests retreated to the parlor for after dinner drinks, her stomach regretted not eating.

Sarah's parlor led to a veranda with her lush gardens surrounding it. Seeing no one on the veranda Beatrice stepped into the cool night, knowing that at least the night's breeze would help settle her nerves.

"I just had an enlightening conversation with a friend of yours."

Beatrice's stomach flipped. Unfortunately for her, she knew it was because of the man who had stepped onto the veranda and not the lack of food.

She swallowed as she turned. Graham stood in the waning light, the shadows of the



coming night showcasing his chiseled face and lean, yet muscular, body.

“Oh?” Her voice squeaked.

“Lady Jane? I had no idea the human palate could register so many different tastes.”

Beatrice relaxed slightly at the mention of her friend. “Yes, Jane is a connoisseur of sorts. Her family travels a lot and her favorite part is trying new foods and dissecting the different tastes. She says that throughout all of her travels, Sarah’s cook has the best food. It’s quite a compliment in her eyes.”

Graham nodded in agreement. “Are you well-travelled, Lady Beatrice?”

She shook her head. “No. Perhaps that is why I read so much. I do my traveling through the pages of a book.”

Beatrice caught herself. She was still on edge from their earlier conversation about books, bringing it up again may have just put her back in spotlight. Her eyes flittered around the empty veranda. Who was she fooling? It was only the two of them out here, there was no escaping his gaze.

A bubble of laughter came from the parlor. A reminder that just inside were people who would be very interested in knowing that it was just the two of them out here. If the wrong person saw them it would most likely mean ruin for herself.

Eleanor stepped through the door with Sarah close behind her. Her sisters nodded in their direction before moving to the other side of the veranda. It looked like Sarah was showing Eleanor her newest addition to her garden but Beatrice knew their true intentions. They were keeping an eye on them. And while she doubted she wanted them to overhear anything her and the Duke would discuss, she appreciated them keeping her reputation in mind.

Even if her reputation was the furthest from her own mind.

Her eyes floated back to the Duke before dropping under his gaze.

“Yes. It seems our earlier conversation concerning books was interrupted.” Graham noted.

Beatrice nodded as she shuffled her feet. Her body began to hum, something she was becoming quite accustomed to when in his presence.

Her fingers started to fidget while she took slow breaths to regulate her breathing.

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“T’was a pity. I had a question for you about your book recommendation.”

Curious, Beatrice lifted her eyes to his. “Oh?”

Graham nodded and looked over towards her sisters. “Perhaps we should call Her Grace to offer her opinion, since it is from one of her favorite books.”

He lifted his hand as if to motion to her. Without thinking Beatrice raised her hand and pulled his down. “No!”

If her sisters heard her loud whisper they didn’t respond.

“Just ask your question.” She pleaded.

Graham licked his lips and her body heated.

“I read the book in question.”

Beatrice narrowed her eyes. “I thought you forgot the name of the book.”

Graham rolled his lips before a wide, innocent smile broke free as he shrugged.

“While the book itself was interesting, I paid close attention to the opera scene and I must ask, is that really what you want to do?”

A blush bloomed across Beatrice’s cheeks as the warm heat that started moments ago blossomed into an inferno within her veins. The cool breeze did nothing to cool the

radiating heat from her body.

Her mouth dried as she once again recalled the scene in her mind. The idea of the Duke kissing her, touching her, massaging her in the way her book described had her knees threatening to give out.

She didn't trust her voice so she simply nodded.

Graham nodded once. "Very well. Next item we'll cross off will be the opera scene."

He bowed his head as he turned to walk back into the parlor.

Beatrice turned to face the garden. She closed her eyes and took deep breaths as she tried desperately to calm her raging nerves and hormones.

"Beatrice?"

She yelped at her sister's call

Beatrice turned to see Sarah and Eleanor watching her carefully.

"What were you two talking about that has you so unnerved?" Eleanor asked.

Sarah flashed a wicked grin. "Continuing your conversation about my books?"

An eye brow of Eleanor's quirked up in question. "Your books? You read romance..." Eleanor's eyes widened as they flew to her youngest sister. "Beatrice! Were you talking about romance novels with the Duke of Graham?"

Beatrice winced. There was no use in lying to her sisters. Not only were they able to tell immediately if she were lying, she valued their friendship and advice more than

her propriety.

“At Lady Joynor’s ball we got into a discussion about books and yes, I mentioned a few of Sarah’s books that piqued my interest even though I am not a fan of the genre myself.”

Beatrice chose her words carefully. While she didn’t want to lie to her sister’s, she didn’t want them finding out about her list and the Duke’s involvement with completing it.

Eleanor worried her bottom lip. “I know Mama and Sarah spoke with you regarding Graham, but I must add my concern. While he is highly respectable amongst the peerage, I caution you when spending time with him. People are beginning to talk, Beatrice, and I’m not sure it is wise to attach yourself to him that manner.”

Beatrice cocked her head to the side and played innocent. “And what manner is that, dear sister?” She blinked her eyes quickly to further emphasize her mock naiveté.

“Don’t play coy with me, Beatrice. Mama may think you’re still naive, but we all know you know more than someone of your status should know.” Eleanor’s motherly tone came out and once again, Beatrice recalled a time when her oldest sister sounded like a sister and not a mother.

“I already have a mother, Eleanor, and you and I both know our mother is enough. I don’t need another one.”

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Sarah laughed before Eleanor's eyes cut to her quelling her laughter.

"I know you don't, but right now you're not thinking. You think your conversations with the Duke are just that, conversations. But in the eyes of thetonyou are acting as if he is courting you."

Eleanor stopped and took a step forward. "Is he?"

Beatrice wrinkled her nose. "No! How many times, to how many people," she said with a look towards Sarah, "do I need to say that just because I danced with the man twice and had a few conversations with him it does not mean that I plan on marrying him? In fact, the more I talk with the man, the more my stance on marrying has not changed."

Beatrice's sisters both let out a sigh of relief, an action that irritated Beatrice for a reason she couldn't name.

"Well that's something at least." Eleanore smiled. "Come, let's go back to the parlor before Jane eats all the sweets."

"Eleanor, don't make me lecture you about commenting on my friend's eating habits. You're really turning into Mama." Beatrice jested.

Eleanor gasped in mock horror. "You take that back!"

Beatrice walked back into the parlor, giggling with her sisters. And while she was enjoying their carefree exchange she couldn't stop wondering why the notion of her

sisters being relieved she wasn't after the Duke bothered her.

## CHAPTER 13

Charlotte took a deep breath, releasing it with a sigh. "I just love coming to the opera. Don't you, Beatrice?"

Beatrice looked around nervously. This was the first time she'd been to the opera since her sister's dinner party the other night. She hadn't heard from the Duke since then, surely he would have sent word confirming if something were to happen tonight.

A woman's laughter startled her as her mother led her through the throngs of people milling in the lobby. An attendant ushered them into their box where Beatrice sat stiffly next to her mother.

"Beatrice? What has come over you? You are acting very peculiar tonight." Charlotte's expressions did not match her concern. She waved and smiled to friends and dignitaries in nearby boxes. "Please tell me you're not coming down with something. I have it on good authority that your dance card will be full at the next ball."

Charlotte flicked her wrist at Lord Devlin's box. Beatrice's eyes landed on a very nervous looking man who sat just as stiffly next to his father. She rolled her lips. He looked dull and boring, like most of the suitors that her mother had lined up for her.

Just then a curtain moved a few boxes down from her's, pulling her attention. The Duke of Graham entered his box and sat in the back row, middle seat.

Odd he isn't sitting in the front seats.

As he settled into this chair he casually turned his head and looked directly at Beatrice. She watched as his head tilted as he took her in, a small, knowing smile graced his lips.

Beatrice shifted in her seat. Under his watchful eye, her heart began to race. Suddenly she couldn't sit still. No matter which way she rested her feet, or placed her hands, nothing felt comfortable.

"Beatrice," Charlotte whispered. "Stop fidgeting. The show is about to start. I don't want you pulling focus."

Beatrice kept her eyes on Graham. It was now or never.

"I'm sorry, Mama. I'm suddenly very warm. I think I'm going to slip out into the lobby for some fresh air."

Charlotte's eyes darted between the stage and her daughter. "What? Now? But the show is starting!"

Beatrice shook off her worry. "Would you rather I pass out here in the box or go to the lobby to ensure I'm here for the second act?"

Charlotte grimaced. "Fine. But if you're not back for the second act you can rethink the series of books I said you could buy."

Beatrice stopped short. "I promise, Mama. I'll be back. It just awfully hot in here and I don't want to embarrass you. Trust me, you put my books on the line. I will return."

Her mother gave her a doubtful look but waved her on.

The house lights began to dim as Beatrice walked into the dimly lit hallway. She



looked both ways, up and down the hallway, before she made her way towards the Duke's box. Usually there were attendants standing outside the boxes in case someone needed something but, thankfully, the hallway was clear.

She stood at the door to the box and took several calming breaths. The written words of her favorite scene flooded her mind. She had thought about acting that scene out more times than she could count but standing here, on the precipice of it actually coming true was overwhelming.

Murmurs sounded from further down the hall, someone was coming.

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Without a second thought she stepped through the door, pulling it shut. She pulled the curtain that covered the door in place. Asher eyes adjusted to the darkened box, she noted the Duke didn't fully turn to meet her, only turned his head slightly to the empty seat next to him.

Her heart was pounding in her ears as she cautiously stepped towards the empty chair. Her knees were wobbly and she was afraid they'd give out before she even made it the three measly steps that were needed.

Her body was a tight ball of nerves as she lowered herself into the chair. She thought for sure he would be able to hear her heart beating within her chest.

"Ah, Lady Mouse, funny finding you here."

Beatrice swallowed over the lump forming in her dry throat.

"You invited me, did you not?"

Graham chuckled lowly, its sound winding around her like a warm blanket.

"I did say our next meeting would be at the opera. I was curious if you would take the initiative or if I needed to formally invite you."

Beatrice sat still, her eyes unfocused on the actors on the stage. They were bright blobs of moving colors to her. While her eyes were trained on them, her mind was directed to the man next to her. Every breath he exhaled, every shift in his body felt as if it was being projected right into her mind, causing her to be on high alert.

“I must say, I am quite impressed you came to find me and not the other way around.”

Beatrice pushed out a breath. If only he knew that just by looking at her he had called to her. The more time she spent with him the more she doubted she had any control of her body.

It was both terrifying and exhilarating. She had always been a big proponent of women’s rights but always fighting to be seen was exhausting. To be in the sights of someone who was looking for you was intoxicating.

Beatrice made a mental note to remember why she was doing this. He was simply a means to an end. She wanted, no, needed her list to be completed so she felt ready to face the world as an experienced, and single, woman.

She turned to face him. “Why are you sitting in the back row?”

Graham rose his eyebrow sardonically. “My, my, my. I take you to one voyeuristic party and all of a sudden you’re ready to steal the spotlight from the actors.”

Beatrice shook her head as she rolled her eyes. “I have no intention of stealing anyone’s spotlight.”

Graham lifted his arm and laid it across the back of her chair. She felt the heat of his body as it opened to her. She wanted desperately to lean into his side but she was unsure of what she should do.

The scene from the book, so vivid in her mind a few moments ago, was completely lost to her now. She couldn’t remember what the woman did, if she instigated the scene or if the man did.

Was the Duke expecting her to play the woman's part as portrayed in the book? She couldn't remember how it went.

"I can practically hear you thinking." Graham murmured in her ear.

As she tried to formulate a response, her mind received a sensation alert from her shoulder. Beatrice turned her head slightly to her left to see the Duke's finger drawing lazy circles on her skin.

Goosebumps erupted and she shivered.

"Cold?"

Beatrice shook her head 'no.' She felt like a complete dolt. Perhaps she was not ready for this. Disappointment and embarrassment mixed within her. She felt this way at the midnight party as well. How many more times must she feel like this to realize that perhaps her mother was right?

Beatrice felt the Duke shift beside her. When she turned, she found his eyes watching her.

"I think I agree with your mother."

Beatrice's eyes widened, horrified.

"You think too much, it must be from all the reading you do." Graham's words came out with a smirk.

She opened her mouth to reply but it was captured by his. Shock at the quick contact quickly dissolved into want.

Beatrice pressed her body into his as her hands came to his chest. Graham pulled her tighter, his one hand rested at the back of her neck, while his other one grabbed her outer thigh.

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His lower touch felt as if it scorched her dress, she wouldn't doubt if his hand print was now seared into her skin.

She moaned into his mouth as his hand began to massage her thigh. Her eyes opened and looked around, worried someone would have heard her.

“Why do you think we're sitting in the last row?” He murmured. “Once the lights go down you could sit here naked and no one would be the wiser.”

Not only would the dark hide a naked body, it hid her blush. The thought of a naked Graham danced in her thoughts causing her core to ignite.

She clenched her thighs together to quell the building tension within her. Graham's eyes dropped to his hand for a moment before returning to hers.

“Is kissing all you want?” He questioned. His eyes were searching hers for something, but she wasn't sure for what.

She chewed on her bottom lip for a moment. “Well, yes... I mean, that was the opera scene in the book. So, yes, this is what I want.”

Beatrice swallowed the fear that since they technically did kiss in an opera box that Graham was going to end their experience. She willed herself not to be upset, he did help her check off the item. However, no matter how hard she tried she couldn't help but feel disappointed that this may be all she'd get.

Graham's eyes drifted the stage and the captivated audience. When he looked back to

her she was surprised to see a bit a mischief in them.

“I think I can do you one better.” He drawled.

Beatrice cocked her head to the side. “How do you mean?”

“Would you consider what we are doing sufficient enough to cross off item two from your list?”

Beatrice didn't know if her smile was from the fact he had memorized her list or from the finger that was playing with the curl that framed her face. She felt completely enveloped in this man and she never felt more seen.

She nodded. “I do.”

“Good. Now that we've checked that off, let me show you how I would have written that scene.”

Beatrice giggled. “I had no idea you were interested in writing.” She said coyly.

“I wasn't until now.” Graham said as he knelt down in front of her.

Beatrice looked up into the audience. “What are you doing?” Her frantic whisper caused some stirs from other boxes, but thankfully no one looked to see where the sound came from.

Graham smiled as he slowly pushed up her skirt. Beatrice's eyes rounded as her hands flew to cover his and try to push them back down. “Your Grace, what are you-”

The Duke rose up on his knees and silenced her with a kiss. Beatrice momentarily forgot her hesitation and met his tongue with hers.

After a few moments Graham pulled away. “Did you enjoy that kiss?”

Beatrice’s eyes fluttered opened, her body felt as if it was floating in warm water, relaxed and at ease. “Mmhmm. Very much so.”

Graham nodded in appreciation. “Did you know there are other ways to kiss?”

Beatrice’s brows furrowed. “How do you mean?”

The Duke’s hands once again started their journey of pushing Beatrice’s skirt up her legs.

“Why don’t you sit back, relax, and I’ll show you. In fact,” he gestured over his shoulder. “Why don’t you pay attention to the opera. I’m sure someone will ask me about it, I need to know what to tell them.”

Before Beatrice could respond, Graham dipped his head under her skirts and placed his mouth over her sex. She gasped loudly. Her body froze with her hands covering her mouth. She squeezed her thighs against the Duke’s head, hoping to stop his movement..

This time her sound didn’t go unnoticed. However, thankfully, due to the darkened theater, the curious eyes couldn’t locate where it came from.

She relaxed into the chair, which caused Graham to continue his ministrations. She tried sitting up to push him off but he grabbed her thighs to keep her from squirming away. Beatrice grabbed at his head through her skirts to stop him when he flicked her clit causing electricity to shoot through her veins.

Her body melted into the chair as her blood turned into hot liquid, igniting tiny fires throughout her body.



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His mouth rhythmically moved against her causing her hips to follow the melody he set. It was their own private dance. The heat grew within her as her hips pushed against his mouth for more friction.

He teased her with kisses before stealing her breath with tiny flicks and sucks that had her curling her toes in her shoes to stop from moaning.

She covered her mouth her hand to further aid in keeping herself quiet. Her mind quickly realized that if he kept going at his current rate she would lose the battle to keep herself quiet.

Her eyes tried to distract her mind by focusing on the actors. The music was building, a woman was singing something about lost love, or lost privilege, or something lost. Beatrice shook her head. No. She needed to concentrate. Perhaps if she focused on the performance she could stop her body from erupting.

Beatrice narrowed her eyes on the woman. She was singing about love and death. A beautiful aria that rang through the rafters. Between the woman's voice and Graham's tongue Beatrice was lost to a cacophony of sensations.

Her movements became more frantic as Graham's tongue moved against her. It was as if he was also lost to the music and using it to guide his touch.

Heat bloomed across Beatrice's body. Her hips gyrated against Graham and as one hand covered her own mouth, her other hand landed on Graham's head, aiding him to angle his head in just a way that had her biting her hand.

She couldn't keep quiet. How could she? Her body was being thrown into the stratosphere by this man being aided by the opera. Tension was building from deep within her, pushing against every fiber of her being.

His tongue raced along with the music, Beatrice felt herself climbing higher and higher. The woman's voice hit the culminating high note just as Graham flicked her clit that sent Beatrice over the edge.

Her scream was drowned out by the applause from the crowd.

Beatrice's vision blurred as she slumped back against the chair. Graham sat back on his haunches, readjusting her skirt. She watched as he, ever so nonchalantly, sat back in his chair, as if he didn't just kiss her in the most intimate of places in a theater that held over two thousand people.

"You should hurry. The house lights will be on soon and I doubt I'll be able to hide you. Unless I was correct earlier in thinking you want an audience."

His comment woke her from her haze.

She looked to the stage to see the curtain starting to close from the wings. Beatrice looked to Graham who nodded to the back curtain and door. "Go."

Her body wanted to stay but the thought of her mother and the whole opera house catching her in the Duke's box unchaperoned was too much of a motivator to leave.

She hurried out of the box, down the hallway and raced down the steps to the lobby.

When she got to the bottom she found a bench to sit on. Just as she sat down she heard the doors open and the lobby was filled with people within minutes.

“Beatrice!” Charlotte’s voice carried over the din of people. “You look just as flushed as before. Perhaps we should go?” Charlotte brought a hand up to her daughter’s forehead. “You feel a bit warm as well. Let me find an attendant to call for the carriage..”

Beatrice couldn’t have been more relieved. She didn’t think she would be able to form words after what she just experienced. She was craving some time to herself to process what she just lived through.

“Ah, Your Grace, how nice it is to see you and Lady Beatrice tonight.”

Beatrice’s legs gave out at the sound of his voice, causing her mother to reach for her in alarm. “Beatrice! Are you all right? Please sit!” Charlotte’s voice rang out, causing other to look on in curiosity.

“Here, let me help.” Graham’s hand touched Beatrice’s arms causing her body to ignite once more. Her eyes widened as she looked up to find his displaying concern with a hint of humor.

“Your Grace,” Charlotte dipped her head. “Thank you for your help. As you can see we won’t be staying. It seems Beatrice is unwell.”

Beatrice inwardly cringed. If there was one thing she learned about Graham during her time with him was that he never shied away from a conversation that could embarrass her.

“Oh that’s unfortunate.”

Beatrice couldn’t help but notice the attention they were drawing. “I’m fine. Really. But we should get going, Mama.” She glanced quickly at Graham as she forced her legs to hold her as she stood. “Thank you, Your Grace, for your help.”

Graham's eyes lit with a devilish grin.

"You know, now that I look at her, she does seem flush. It was as if she were just running."

Beatrice narrowed her eyes toward the Duke. "I wasn't running, Your Grace." She lifted a shoulder. "I was simply just sitting here."

Graham's smile widened and she groaned. "Just sitting you say? How odd that just sitting could make your body react as if it were just running a race. I agree with your mother, you should go home and be taken to bed at once." He purred.

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Beatrice's stomach dropped as her legs clenched underneath her skirt. The cursed man knew how to get a reaction out of her.

Charlotte nodded in agreement. "He's right. You should go straight to bed."

Graham nodded solemnly. "It's exactly what I would do with her."

Beatrice and Charlotte both looked at Graham. Charlotte with confusion, Beatrice with derision.

"I mean, if she were in my charge and she appeared to be ill" Graham offered simply. "I would put her to bed to make sure she gets the adequate rest. I think I would even take her books away." He leaned into Charlotte. "Don't want her getting too excited."

Charlotte nodded. "Yes. I think you're right. She does get too excited when she reads too much." Charlotte looked to Beatrice. "No reading tonight, love. Straight to bed."

Graham smiled victoriously. "I hear most of what young women read is rubbish. Giving them unfortunate ideas that have no ground in reality. I've often found living life and experiencing all it has to offer is much more beneficial."

Charlotte agreed as she waved to an attendant.

Beatrice rolled her lips. If she could she would smack that smarmy smile off his face. With Charlotte's focus on the attendant Graham winked at Beatrice. For as much as she wanted this conversation to be over she had to acknowledge his ability to think quickly on his feet with his words was interesting.

Intelligence was always something she considered when deciding if someone was worth her time or not.

And while he irritated her to no end, she was finding more reasons to want to be in his company than not. If she wasn't careful she might accidentally develop true feelings for him and where would that leave her future?

"Your Grace," an attendant interrupted. "Your carriage is ready."

Charlotte thanked the attendant before returning her attention to the Duke, "Thank you for your help. Your Grace. I hope you enjoy the rest of the show."

Graham's eyes landed on Beatrice as he frowned. "Doubtful. The first act was phenomenal, I'm not sure the second act could possibly top it."

Beatrice's didn't think her eyes could get any bigger as she pulled her mother. "Come, Mama. I need to get home."

Graham dipped his head. "Rest up, Lady Beatrice."

Beatrice couldn't help but take his parting words as a threat, and a delicious one at that.

## CHAPTER 14

Beatrice sat back and looked at her list.

1. Kiss a stranger

2. Recreate the "opera scene"

3. See the Wild Side of London

4. Be intimate.

5. Gamble/drink

6. Fall in love

A thrill of excitement rushed through her. If someone would have told her just a few months ago she would be so close to finishing her list she would have laughed. But here, in just a few short weeks, she had already officially crossed off three items.

Her eyes hovered on the sixth item as she chewed her bottom lip. She was steadfast in her belief that the life of a spinster was calling her, but damn that man for confusing her.

She rested her elbows on her desk and she rubbed her temples. She couldn't deny how exhilarating it was to be in the Duke's company while she discovered the more stimulating side of life, but she couldn't possibly consider married life. Could she?

She closed her eyes. Her earliest memory of the marriage mart was watching in disgust as young women were paraded in front of the men in the hopes that one would ask her to dance. Her young mind likened it to pigs being led to slaughter. Which, consequently, was the first time her mother questioned what books she was reading.

From then on it was a constant struggle between the life her mother wanted for her and the life she envisioned for herself. But could there be a part of her mother's wish that was acceptable? Would it be terrible if she found someone who would not only allow her to experience all that life has to offer, but would want her to do so with freedom? Or, better yet, who would want to experience them with her?

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She grumbled as her head fell to the desk. Was she pushing against what society wanted for her because she always had? Or did she truly still want a life of being alone?

Her heart sank. Last night shook her world in more than one way. Her body still throbbed when she recalled his kisses, his touch, but she had erected a wall that demanded she only allow her body to react, not her heart.

So why did thinking of completing her list, something that should be bringing her joy, bring her a touch of sadness?

A knock jolted her upright.

“Lady Beatrice? Your sister Eleanor is here. She’s with your mother in the parlor. They’re asking for you.” Candace’s voice drifted through the door.

Beatrice briefly thought it was curious her maid didn’t open the door to let her know but the thought dropped just as quickly as it came. “Please tell them I’ll be right there.”

She pushed away from the desk and gave herself a glance in the mirror to make sure she was presentable.

Beatrice entered the parlor and immediately knew why her maid spoke to her through the door. Beatrice had been a part of polite society long enough to know when scandal hung heavy in the air.



Candace stood in the corner with her mother's maid, Elizabeth, both of which dropped their gazes as soon as Beatrice looked at them. Her eyes fell on her mother who was sitting on the sofa, worrying a handkerchief in her hands, her gaze staring off into nothing. Odd, and dramatic, but so was her mother, so she couldn't gather much information from her.

It wasn't until her eyes landed on Eleanor that Beatrice knew something was amiss.

"Eleanor. I didn't realize you were coming today." She tried to keep her tone light and casual, hoping their peculiar behavior was all in her mind.

Naturally, she immediately thought someone saw her in the Duke's box last night. But, the Duke was right, once the house lights go out it near impossible to see the last row of box seats from another box. Unfortunately, the knowledge didn't do much to quell the growing knot in her stomach.

Eleanor looked to her mother before forcing a fake smile on her face as she stepped towards Beatrice and embraced her.

"I was in town doing some shopping and had some time before I needed to get back to the children so I decided to stop in to see how everyone was doing."

"I'm glad you did. How are the children? We didn't get to talk much at the dinner party." Beatrice started.

"Oh, can we stop with the niceties?" Charlotte wailed.

Eleanor rolled her eyes and dropped her shoulders. She mouthed apologies to Beatrice as Charlotte's hysterics continued.

"We warned you, Beatrice! We told you to mind your business when it came to that

Duke and look, just look!”

It wasn't a handkerchief in her mother's hands, but a gossip sheet. Beatrice's heart dropped to her toes. With a shaky hand she reached out and took the paper her mother was holding out to her.

The words blurred in front of her as she scanned for her name, or the Duke's. She squinted, clearing her vision. Her eyes raced over the page several times.

“Forgive me, I think I'm missing something. I don't see anything of note concerning me or the Duke.” Beatrice looked to Eleanor.

Her sister stepped forward and pointed to a small line towards the bottom of the page. Beatrice read the lines out loud.

And it seems having the newly bestowed honor of Diamond of the Season has enabled Lady Beatrice to reenter the marriage mart with her eyes set on the formidable Duke of Graham. They have been seen dancing and conversing at several events.

Beatrice flipped the page over and back to the front. “Is this it? On an entire page of gossip, there are two lines, at the bottom, that insinuate something that I already told you wasn't true and you think there's a scandal brewing? Mama.” Beatrice admonished. “This is a bit dramatic, even for you.”

Charlotte balled her hands into tight fists. “People are talking, Beatrice!” Her mother's eyes shot to the two maids in the corner who continued to find the floor particularly interesting.

Beatrice felt her blood begin to boil. She hated gossip, and while she was thankful the maids in her family's employ were faithful and didn't let information out, they had no

problem taking part in other's gossip. To Beatrice, taking any part in the circulation of gossip was deplorable.

“And what are people saying?” Beatrice asked the maids.

Charlotte began to speak when Beatrice held her hand up. “No, Mama. I'd like to hear it from the source, please.”

Candace's cheeks flamed red but it was Elizabeth that stepped forward. “Lady Beatrice, you know your family has our loyalty and it is because of that loyalty that I came to your mother with what I heard.”

Beatrice's resolve softened. “We are forever grateful for your loyalty, Elizabeth. Please, tell me what was said.”

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Elizabeth glanced at Candace who shrugged slightly, while still keeping her eyes down.

Her mother's maid took a deep breath. "Well, it's like the gossip sheet said, people are talking about how two people who previously wanted nothing to do with society events are now not only showing up with interest, but engaging with only each other."

Beatrice started, "I engage with other people," but Eleanor interrupted.

"There's more, Beatrice."

Beatrice swallowed. The only other "more" involving the Duke had to do with her list.

Oh no.

Have they been caught? Beatrice sat on the sofa next to her mother. Her mind racing with ways she can explain her actions to her mother without sending the woman to an early grave.

"Go on, Elizabeth." Eleanor encouraged.

Elizabeth looked to Charlotte who was staring out into the distance, chewing her bottom lip.

"Someone who looked like you was seen going into the Duke's opera box last night."

Beatrice's eyes widened in horror while a whimper escaped Charlotte's lips. Charlotte wiped a stray tear from her eyes as Beatrice's world came crashing down around her.

Her mother's greatest fear was coming true, Beatrice was ruined. And while spinsterhood was now her only option, she did not want to achieve her dream this way. Not at this cost to her family.

"However," Elizabeth continued. "The Duke was seen talking with a woman after the opera who also looked like you. The widow Connors, so most likely it was her. But with people speculating that there was something developing between you and him, some think it was you. However, from what we heard," Elizabeth gestured to Candace, "a majority of people think it was the widow and you are considered an injured party since they have resumed you took an interest in him. Most agree it was the widow since her and the Duke have known each other since they were children."

Beatrice sat in stunned silence. Her emotions ran the gamut of dread, to horror, confusion, hurt and relief.

The widow Connors? She knew of the woman, but not much. Was the Duke seeing her? Was it a problem if he was? She had no claim to him, no right to him. He was a Duke. He could do whatever he pleased.

So why did hurt overwhelm the feeling of relief that most assumed it was the widow sneaking in and out of his box? She should feel elated that their ruse of acquaintances was still viable. Yet, a strange buzzing sounded in her head while her chest felt as if it were caving in.

"Finally, she gets it." Charlotte proclaimed.

"Beatrice?" Eleanor's frame came in front of her, even though Beatrice's eyes

couldn't focus on her features. She was lost to her emotions, processing the information that was just given to her.

"Beatrice? This is good news." Eleanor said gently, as she sat next to Beatrice, taking her hand. "Most think it was the widow, and Mama mentioned that even the Duke himself said he saw you unwell and that's why you weren't in the box with Mama last night. People will believe his word. But this is why you must be careful." She implored. "A simple line in a gossip sheet may seem like nothing, but it can be so much more when pieced together with other sources."

Beatrice slowly shook her head. "I understand." She forced the words out. She was beginning to feel nauseous.

"Candace?" Eleanor stood. "Will you see Beatrice back to her room? I think she needs some time to herself. Don't you agree, Mama?"

Charlotte was holding the gossip sheet in her hand, her eyes now dry. "At least we have confirmation that Beatrice is the newly crowned Diamond of the Season!" She crooned.

"Mama." Eleanor chastised. "Not now."

Charlotte shrugged off her eldest. "I must write to Sarah!"

Eleanor returned her focus to Beatrice taking her head in her hands. "Go rest. And remember, we only want what's best for you." Her eyes flickered to their mother. "Even her, in her own way. If you were really in trouble she would be the first person to come to your defense, she just gets a little carried away."

Beatrice trusted Eleanor's words but her heart and mind were no longer on her mother's silly obsession with marrying her off. Instead her heart was wrapped up in

the perceived relationship of the Duke and widow.

“I know, Eleanor. I think you’re right. I just need to process this situation. It seems I’m a bit more like Mama than I care to admit. I must have gotten carried away and had not realized the spectacle I was taking part in.”

Beatrice knew she said the right words, but felt nothing. She said what she needed to say in order to escape the closing walls of the parlor. She wanted the refuge of her bedroom, away from the gossip sheets, curious eyes, whispering maids, and dramatic mothers.

Beatrice sat near her window watching the rain fall. She spent the majority of her day in her room. Her mind wavered between hating the man, deciding the widow can have him, to utter despair on how she will continue on her intended journey without his help.

She berated herself for caring who the Duke was seen with and once again affirmed her relationship with the Duke must remain as a partner in crime, of sorts, not a partner in life.

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Candace knocked on the door as she opened it. “I hope I’m not intruding, Lady Beatrice, but a package arrived for you.”

“A package?” Beatrice never received packages. “Thank you, Candace, just put it on my desk. I’ll get to it.”

Candace did as she was told and left the room, shutting the door behind her. Beatrice stared at the box. She had a sneaking suspicion she knew who it was from and she was convincing herself she was not interested.

She stood and walked to her closet, pretending she needed something from it, as if there was some unseen authority who was watching her moves, judging them. She opened her closet then closed it and walked to her bed, passing her desk and the package. Beatrice sat on her bed, staring at the package.

“Oh for goodness sake, just open it. Even if it’s from him you don’t need to do what it says. You can return it and do what you want. Isn’t that the point of your whole list?”

She rolled her eyes. Great. She was talking to herself in the third person. She stood with a huff and trudged over to her desk.

The writing on it was nondescript, with no return address. She rolled her lips as she held the box in her hands.

With a groan she removed the twine and opened the lid. Inside was a very plain looking frock, something a woman in a lowerclass would wear. A note fell to the



ground as she pulled the dress from the box.

My dearest mouse,

I hope you'll do me the honor of meeting tomorrow

night at the usual time at our usual meeting place.

I am looking forward to crossing off number five.

G

Beatrice held the note in her hands along with the dress. She shouldn't go. She was almost caught last night, it was becoming too risky. And, if there was something between the Duke and the widow she shouldn't get in the way, especially since she didn't want anything more from him.

Or did she?

No. A spinster's life was for her. Which was why she should go, so she could finish her list, which was why this whole situation with the Duke started in the first place. She could probably find someone else to help her with the last two, but that would be timely and she already had a willing participant.

Beatrice looked towards the window again. She had told herself that her relationship with the Duke was a means to an end. She should be glad she was told of the widow, even if there is nothing between the two of them it proved to her that her lines were becoming blurred.

She looked back down to the dress with a nod. She would continue with the Duke, but with a much stronger mental wall to protect her livelihood. She had to, her future

depended on it.

## CHAPTER 15

Ezra watched as his little mouse scurried under the street lamps. Her shoulders were hunched, and her head down, trying to blend into the background while people stepped out of carriages and into buildings.

He couldn't help but smile as she rushed in between buildings, hiding her face under hooded cloak.

There was a small, annoying part of him that worried she wouldn't show up tonight. He knew the town lived for gossip so he made sure word got out about his inviting Melinda into his box. Even though no one was in the hallway when Beatrice left, he knew how feral people were for a scandal and he refused to cause one.

Plus, it was nice to have an old friend to watch the second act with and she was a similar build as Beatrice. A quick glance could fool anyone.

"Your Grace," Beatrice's flush face looked up to him. "It is good to see you again."

Ezra quirked an eye brow feeling her statement was oddly cold.

His eyes raked over her. She held her cloak tightly against her slight frame, much like the first night they met. Back when she didn't trust him.

A lead weight began to form in his gut. He pushed the uncomfortable feeling aside. Her stance notwithstanding her eyes seemed dull. The excited glow that radiated from her entire being when she was on the verge of getting what she wanted wasn't there.

"The honor is all mine, mouse." He said with a dip of his chin.

She wrinkled her nose. “I rather you not use that nickname tonight.”

Ezra clucked his tongue. Something was off with her. He nearly nodded in acknowledgement and extended his hand to help her into the carriage.

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The same part of him that was worried she wouldn't show was clawing at his mouth to ask if she was all right.

Beatrice settled into the carriage. She laid her hands in her lap, fiddling with the frayed ribbon on her dress. Her eyes flittered everywhere but to him.

He adjusted in his seat. Not having her interest was raking his insides.

"No questions about where we're going? What we're doing?"

Beatrice looked up, her bottom lip caught between her lips.

"Hmm? Oh. No." She offered a tightlipped smile. "I know the rules. No questions, no talking."

Ezra waved her off. "It'll be hard to gamble if you don't talk."

Finally, some life flashed in her eyes. "Are we really going to gamble?"

Ezra chuckled softly as the carriage jolted and swayed on the bumpy road.

"Of course. I said so in my letter and I am quite loyal to my word."

Beatrice didn't respond, just simply nodded and looked outside. Her eyes squinted against the darkening road.

"In that case, where are we going? It seems we're heading outside the city limits."

Ezra let his eyes drink her in while her attention was elsewhere.

“We are indeed outside the city, far enough that no one will know who you are, nor care. Anything that happens here will be well kept.”

Beatrice turned to look at Ezra. “You sound as though you speak from experience.”

This time there was no stopping the wide smile that graced his face. “I know this place very well and have been coming here since I was inherited the duchy. They know me very well.”

Beatrice frowned. “Out here? You’ve been coming all this way for several years??”

Ezra nodded. Memories of long nights full of laughter and freedom infiltrated his mind. Whenever he needed a break from the responsibilities of Duke, he made his way to this small village far enough from prying eyes, but not far enough it took long to get to.

The carriage lurched to a stop.

Ezra got out of the carriage and offered his hand.

Tingles of electricity danced along his hand as she slipped hers into his. He tried shutting down the part of his mind, and body, that reacted to her, but he failed.

Her brown eyes looked up to him, and he saw a bit of fun and excitement return to them. He almost shifted his weight when they drifted past him to the establishment behind him.

“Is this it?”

Ezra turned to take in the old wooden door that had been kicked in too many times and now hung slightly off kilter because of it.

“It is. Trust me, mouse, er, sorry.” He offered when he remembered she didn’t want to be acknowledged by his pet name for her.

He rolled his lips.

Her sigh of relief struck him oddly. Was he feeling sadness? Over what? The fact she didn’t want him to call her a nickname? Preposterous.

Beatrice walked past him as he held the awkward door open for her.

Inside was stepping into a different world. While the outside world was dark and quiet, inside was bright and loud.

Raucous laughter echoed in the rafters, while clinking of mugs and plates could be heard over the din. Couples danced to the music of small band sitting in the corner, their tune lively and upbeat.

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Beatrice's eyes widened in delight leaving Ezra feeling quite proud of himself.

He came to stand next to her. He leaned down to whisper in ear as he took her hand in his.

"I know you'd prefer if I don't call you 'mouse.' How about for this evening I call you by a different name?"

Beatrice blinked, her excitement was practically radiating from her skin. She turned to him with bright, anxious eyes. "Depends. What would you call me?"

"Wife."

If he wasn't holding her hand Beatrice would've dropped dead from shock right then and there. She couldn't possibly have guessed what he would call her, but it certainly wasn't that.

"Wife?" She squeaked.

Ezra's eyes danced around the room, searching for something. Her eyes were still on him, trying to convince herself what she just heard she actually, in fact, just heard.

She opened her mouth to repeat the word when Graham pulled her to an empty table by the bar. He sat in a chair and motioned for her to sit in the chair beside him.

Beatrice's eye bounced around the room. There was so much to take in she didn't know where to look first. When she turned back to Graham his closeness startled her.

He was leaning towards her that their noses practically touched when she looked at him.

“Listen to me. I didn’t lie to you when I said that I’ve been coming here for years. When I inherited the duchy there was a lot of...” Graham shook his head, “let’s just say I needed a place where people didn’t know who I was. A friend of mine brought me here and this has been my secret to this day.”

Beatrice listened intently. One would have assumed it would be hard for her to hear the whispers of a man but nothing could tear her gaze from his lips as he spoke to her.

At the mention of a ‘friend’ her heart squeezed and she tried to hide her grimace. What did she know? Just because she just heard that the Duke and an old ‘female’ friend reconnected, did not mean the friend in question is the same person. He could be talking about an old friend.

Her womanly intuition told her otherwise.

She reminded herself that no matter what these people knew of him, Graham was a Duke and could take whomever he pleased.

Why couldn’t it have been me?

Beatrice shook the wayward thought from her mind. She returned her focus on the man in front of her.

“They think I’m a solicitor. And you, my dear, are going to be introduced as my wife.”

Beatrice swallowed hard. She felt her cheeks turn red with heat.



“I.. I’m not sure I can do that.” Her eyes fell to her lap.

Graham lifted her chin with one finger. “My rules, remember? What I say goes. And I say tonight, you’re my wife.” With each word he leaned in closer until his mouth was whispering against hers.

“What say you?” His words brushed against her lips.

Beatrice’s body reacted before her mind. She closed the minute distance between them.

When she pulled away she found his eyes still on her.

“We’ve sealed our deal with a kiss, I thought it would be appropriate to continue the tradition.” She said with a sly smile.

Graham sat back in his chair. “I think we’ll get along just fine tonight.”

Just then a rotund older man came staggering up to the table. “Thomas? Thomas Linden, is that you, boy?”

Beatrice noted his name change and reminded herself they didn’t know who he truly was.

The old man sputtered and coughed. His face red before he chugged more ale from his mug.

“Charlie, my boy, it’s good to see you.” Graham stood up, hitting the man on the back to help him breathe.

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“Ha! I haven’t been a boy for some time now.” The man pulled out a handkerchief to wipe the sweat from his brow. His eyes landed on Beatrice.

“Oh ho! And who is this lovely flower? Eh?”

The man reached out and took Beatrice’s hand. She flinched, expecting the man’s hand to rough and abrasive. Much to her surprise his hand was soft and gentle.

She dipped her head demurely. “You’re too kind, sir.”

Beatrice looked up to find Graham looking odd.

“Are you all right?” Beatrice stood.

The man looked to Graham and laughed. He reached out and pulled Beatrice to his side, laying his arm around her shoulder. “He’s just worried the longer you stay around here you’ll realize you’ve hitched your horse to the wrong carriage.”

The man looked to Beatrice and winked.

She couldn’t help but smile. For as drunk as this man was, he wasn’t unseemly or uncouth, she was surprised she felt rather comfortable around him.

Graham’s eyes cleared of whatever thought transfixed him and he smiled while reaching out to grab Beatrice’s hand, guiding her back to his side.

“While I admit you are a worthy opponent, I fear you are at a loss. See, this beautiful

flower, is my wife.”

Graham’s words made her heart skip. Heat rose within her, causing her feet to shift under her dress. The swishing of her skirt allowed for some air flow, cooling her off a bit.

The man barked out a laugh so loud heads turned in their direction. For as round as he was, he clambered up onto a chair quite deftly and whistled.

“Oy! Listen up! It seems our favorite solicitor Thomas Linden here has taken himself a bride!”

Cheers and hollers rang out as two men standing next to Thomas ruffled his hair and patted him on the back.

Beatrice stood in awe. Never in her wildest dreams would she think she would witness a time when the formidable Duke of Graham would be so carefree and relaxed around others.

His hair was mussed, he was wearing a plain shirt, with an open vest and unremarkable trousers. Yet he seemed more comfortable here than any time she had seen him gussied up for the ton.

The man on the chair raised his mug, which shockingly still had some ale in it. “Let’s all raise a toast to Thomas and his beautiful bride...” Charlie looked down to Beatrice.

“What’s your name, love?”

Beatrice looked at Graham who only shrugged, offering her a chance to make her own persona. Beatrice hesitated before she blurted out “Colette.”

“Ah. Colette.” Charlie raised his mug again. “To Thomas and Colette!”

The crowd cheered and clinked their mugs as they well wishers threw words of encouragement their way.

Thomas shook hands and exchanged pleasantries with the men who were next to him.

“Your drinks are on us, mate!” The one man exclaimed as he and his friend made their way to the bar.

Beatrice sat down and covered her mouth with her hands. She felt so giddy.

“Colette?” Graham leaned in.

She lifted a shoulder. “It just came to me.”

A side of his mouth lifted in a devilish grin. “It feels... exotic for you.”

Beatrice giggled. “I know.”

It felt so freeing to be out amongst a class of people who didn’t care where your dress came from, or who you wanted to marry, or who you were seen talking to. She sat back in her chair and took a deep breath. Then, unfortunately, had a coughing fit.

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Graham took the drinks from the friendly man who offered them.

“You all right, Mrs. Linden?” The man asked.

At hearing the married title Beatrice started coughing again.

Beatrice covered her mouth as her coughs continued.

Graham pushed over a mug of ale. “Here, drink this.”

Beatrice picked up the mug, her wrist wavering under the weight of the glass. She brought the cool glass up to her lips and took in a small sip. She went to lower it when the mug was brought back up to her mouth.

Graham placed his hand on the bottom of the mug and tilted it up, causing more liquid to run down her throat.

“There’s a good girl.” He cooed. “Nice and steady.”

He pulled the mug away after she had a few swallows. She swiped her tongue across her bottom lip. Beatrice watched as Graham’s eyes followed the movement. Being under his scrutiny used to make her uneasy, now she was finding comfort in it. It felt as if she was being watched over, that it wasn’t just her, alone in the world.

“I should have warned you that taking a deep breath in an establishment like this not recommended. Swarthmore does his best to keep it suitable, but between the piss, ale, and smoke, this isn’t the most refreshing air to breathe.”

Beatrice cleared her throat. “Swarthmore?”

Graham looked towards the back of the pub. “The owner’s family name,” he said returning his gaze to Beatrice. “Now that you’ve had something to drink, it’s time to cross of gambling.” Graham said with a wink.

Beatrice looked around the pub. She saw people drinking and dancing but she didn’t see any tables of chance or cards being played.

“Where? Here?”

Graham shook his head as he stood and extended his hand. “Come, Colette. Let’s go see how lucky we are.”

A thrill ran through Beatrice’s body as her hand slid into his. She giggled as he pulled her through dancing couples who continued to shout well wishes to the supposedly newly married couple.

When they reached the door at the back of the pub Graham gave her a cheeky wink before rapping his knuckles on the door three times.

“Do you have a secret knock everywhere you go?” Beatrice laughed.

The door opened before Graham could answer and Beatrice stared at the woman in the doorway as her heart dropped.

## CHAPTER 16

“Ah, Thomas! I thought I heard your name being shouted. It’s good to see you.”

The Widow Collins embraced Graham giving his cheek a friendly kiss. Her dark eyes

drifted to Beatrice who was trying desperately to remind herself that her arrangement with the Duke did not mean she owned him.

Still, why did he bring her here if the widow was here? Humiliation crowded her senses as she felt the woman's eyes wash over her.

"Melinda." Graham started by taking Beatrice's hand. "My new bride and I have come to extend our gratitude." Graham said easily as he pulled Beatrice close to him.

Beatrice looked between the two of them, confusion clouding her vision.

A warm smile slid across the widow's face. "Anything for an old friend, Thomas." She gave an obvious wink when she said his name.

Melinda stepped aside and ushered the couple in. "No need to thank me, but I'll take your money any day."

Beatrice looked back up to Graham who was pulling her into the darkened room. Beatrice squinted in the low light. There were several tables set up, one with a spinning wheel, and others with various card games happening.

Nerves collided with her already agitated state. She turned to Graham, pulling on his shirt, forcing him to lean into her. "I don't understand what is going on." Her words were rushed and bordering on hysterics.

Graham pulled her to the side of the door, away from the tables. With a quick glance to make sure everyone was preoccupied with the games, he placed his hands on her shoulders, looking directly into her eyes.

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“Remember who we are tonight, mouse. I am a solicitor by the name of Thomas Linden and you are my beautiful wife, Colette, who I want to show off.”

Beatrice couldn't ignore the jolt of electricity that zipped through her at the word 'wife.'

“But what about the wi-”

Graham raised his hands to cut her off.

“No worries, tonight, little mouse.” Graham thought a moment before his eyes lit up with mischief. “How about tonight, we step into one of your books. You're the heroine. What would Colette, the book heroine, do?”

Beatrice chewed her bottom lip. She desperately wanted to know the truth about his relationship with the widow. He didn't seem surprised when she opened the door. Why would he bring her here and call her 'wife' knowing the widow would be here?

Perhaps they aren't together.

She eyed Graham who was waiting with a casual look on his face.

“You really are comfortable here, aren't you?”

Graham smiled and nodded. “I am. But you're avoiding my question. Stop thinking. And start asking yourself what would Colette do?”



The various plot lines she had devoured for years barreled into her thoughts. Stories of young women finding adventure in stolen stagecoaches, others who were detectives trying to solve a murder, she even read one where the young woman was captured by pirates and had to escape. Each one of those women shirked the rules society placed on them and did what they needed to do.

Beatrice looked around the room then back to Graham. “Colette would throw caution to the wind and let her new husband show her a good time.”

Graham’s eyes heated. “Well, we’ll visit number five from your list another night.” His voice dropped low and rumbled in her ear. “For right now, let’s concentrate on having some more drinks and doing a little gambling.”

His flirtatious comment had butterflies swirling around her stomach. Who knows, maybe checking off number four on her list would lead to checking off number five.

Melinda’s laugh danced amongst the murmurs and clinks of glasses. Beatrice shook her head. Right. It was foolish of her to assume Graham would be willing to complete that item, especially if he is involved with the widow.

She rolled her lips. She really needed to find a way to bring it up.

She took his hand and let him lead her to a table of chance. Graham started explaining the rules of this particular game but her mind kept going back to Melinda. If they were involved, what kind of relationship did they have that she would be all right with Graham not only bringing Beatrice here tonight, but calling her his ‘wife’?

“Sounds easy, right?” Graham’s shoulder nudged hers.

She furrowed her brows. “I don’t know much about gambling, but I hear games of chance are never in the favor of the gambler.”

Graham shrugged as his eyes landed on Melinda who was currently sitting in a man's lap. Her arm was slung around his shoulder as they both looked at the cards in his one hand.

“Usually I hate losing money. But tonight, we owe our host for saving us from some unsavory gossip.”

Beatrice glanced over to the widow, who was now whispering something into the man's ear that had his face turning red.

Graham gestured for a barmaid to bring them two mugs. Beatrice waited for the young woman to leave before whispering. “I'm not sure I'm following.”

He took a healthy pull of ale before answering. “The other night, at the opera.”

Beatrice just sat waiting for the connection to hit.

Graham sighed. “I'm sure you heard the gossip.”

Her lips suddenly went dry. This was it. This was when he'd tell her that he was with the widow and this was just something to keep him busy or some other nonsense.

She slowly shook her head, praying she looked nonchalant and unaffected.

“Well, I didn't want people thinking it was you, and it was our dumb luck that you and Melinda are similarly built. She was the perfect ruse, don't you think?”

Beatrice looked back to the widow then returned her look to Graham. “Are you saying there's nothing between the two of you?”

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Graham sputtered on his drink. “Heavens, no!” He started laughing as he wiped away spilt ale from his shirt.

“That would be like courting my sister.” He said with a shudder.

She knew his words shouldn’t mean anything. With the widow or not, she promised herself she would not lose herself to wild daydreams of her and the Duke being together. Still she had to bite her lip from letting her smile grow too wide.

“Melinda is an old family friend, she introduced this establishment to me and Frederic. Another friend of mine,” he added at her questioning look. “Freddy had a bit of a crush on the old gal when we were younger, but it didn’t work out. Her family owns this bar.” He looked up. “Well, her father did. It’s hers now.”

Beatrice looked back to Melinda who was laughing, her head thrown back in glee. “So she keeps your secrets.”

Graham threw back some ale. “And I keep hers.”

Beatrice looked at him quizzically.

He waved her off. “Another time. Let’s get started shall we?”

After several rounds of poker, it didn’t take long for Beatrice to realize she had a very good poker face. Unfortunately, for her, her supposed husband knew each one of her tells.

“I can’t believe you called my bluff!” She giggled as she drank the last of her ale. She couldn’t remember how many glasses she had, although, she didn’t care. Her head felt fuzzy and it felt like she was walking on air with every step.

She loved it.

“Much like your books, mouse, I can read you just as easily.” His words were slightly slurred, which Beatrice found endearing.

She couldn’t help but sit and stare at the man in front of her. Gone was the perfectly poised and dignified man that turned his nose up at any social event that made him interact with others. Her bleary eyes looked around the room. He talked to anyone and everyone about anything and everything. There wasn’t a person Graham didn’t talk to at some point in the evening. Some were short conversations, others were long-winded of shared experiences that had Beatrice laughing until her sides hurt.

Her eyes returned to him as he finished his ale. His hair was even more mussed now, he lost his vest an hour ago and his sleeves were rolled up to show off his sculpted forearms. Beatrice’s entire body heated. He looked delicious.

Her hands itched to reach into the luscious dark locks and tug on them like she did when they last kissed. She licked her lips at the thought.

“I’ve gotten used to you staring and drifting off into space, but your eyes are starting to blink so slow I fear one time they won’t reopen and you’ll pass out on me.”

Beatrice blinked a few times, trying to steady her vision.

“I must be lost to my cups because I have no idea what you mean.” She giggled so much she snorted. She covered her mouth in surprise.

Her reaction only made Graham laugh harder. The sound of his laughter clicked something inside of her.

“Come on, Colette. I think it’s time to go.” He snaked one hand around her back while his other slipped underneath her legs. From her sitting position he hoisted her up and carried her towards the door.

“Go take care of your bride, Mr. Linden!” Beatrice heard Melinda’s call. She wanted to smile at her, or wave, but her head felt heavy. Her head felt comfortable resting against Graham’s chest and she had no desire to lift it.

She felt the room change from the darker back room the lighter main room. She opened one eye to see a vastly different scene than the one they walked into hours ago. Only a few people remained and they were either quietly talking to a friend or slumped over on a table snoring.

“Good to see you, again, Tommy boy. Have fun with the missus, eh? Don’t stay away too long next time.” The old man she first met when they arrived called out to them.

Beatrice could feel Graham nod his head as he pushed through the broken front door. Cool air washed over her body causing her to burrow further into his warm body.

Her world tilted when Graham placed her down on the ground and leaned her up against a wall. Once he made sure she was steady he stepped away.

She had a moment of instability as gravity tried to pull her down.

“Give me a moment, I’m going to call for our carriage.”

Beatrice tried to shake her head but it only dropped. She didn’t have the strength to pull it back up. The realization made her want to laugh, but in her drunken state she

could only manage a small lilt to her lips. Her face and fingertips felt numb but other than that she felt relaxed and at ease.

It was a glorious feeling.

A shadow came across her feet and a familiar hand lifted her chin.

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“Are you all right, Beatrice?”

Her eyes drooped to a close and she could feel a goofy grin spread across her face.

“Don’t you mean Colette?”

She heard him chuckle. “I’ll call you whatever you want, just tell me you’re all right.”

Call me yours.

The thought sobered Beatrice. She promised herself she wouldn’t think like that anymore. She looked up to Graham and cringed. How is it even possible that the dueced man look even more enticing after a night of drinking, while standing in a dank and dark street?

“What is it?” Graham asked as he pushed hair from her face. She wore it down, to match the style of dress.

“I didn’t like thinking you were with the widow.” The words slipped out before Beatrice’s mind had a chance to stop them.

Graham’s hand hovered by her face before he pushed more hair back. Heavens, she must look atrocious.

His face softened as his held her face in his hands. “You beautiful creature.”

His next words were lost to Beatrice’s mouth. She didn’t want to talk, she wanted to

kiss. She didn't want to think about her list, or her future, or what any of this meant. She just wanted him, now.

Graham pushed her against the wall and plundered her mouth with his tongue. His hands left her face and reached around to cup her bottom. She gasped when he pulled her hips into his.

"Graham." She pleaded against his mouth. "Please. Please, I need you, please, I need more." Her plea came out in rushed whispers. She pulled at his shirt, at his hair. She needed him, all of him. She couldn't move her hands fast enough.

Graham pulled her into the alley, one step away from the corner they were just on. He took her mouth once more, biting and nibbling on her lips, eliciting moans from Beatrice. He reached down and started to gather her skirt when the door to the pub opened and a few men stumbled out.

Both froze, their breaths mingling as they watched with bated breath as the men passed the opening to the alley, not realizing Graham and Beatrice were there.

As soon as their footsteps disappeared Beatrice reached back up but Graham caught her hands.

His eyes were heavy with lust and something else.

"This isn't the way, Beatrice. Not for you."

Beatrice smiled and pulled on his shirt. "Good thing, I'm not Beatrice, I'm Colette. This is definitely something Colette would do."

Graham stepped back to stop her from pawing him. "No."



His word was a demand and snapped Beatrice out the haze she was in. Embarrassment washed over her. “I see.” Those were the only two words she could manage.

Graham huffed out a sigh and placed his hands on his hips. “Do not mistake my stopping as any sort of indication that I am not interested. But I refuse to do anything more salacious in the alley behind Swarthmore’s.”

Beatrice felt some relief but suddenly understood what had just transpired between them and found herself at a loss for words. She was so close to throwing away her propriety in an alley behind a pub. She was all for losing her innocence, but the Duke was right. Not like this.

Her cheeks heated with form the embarrassment. Thankfully, the carriage pulled up ending their conversation. She had a brief moment of worry that their ride home would be awkward but that was the last thought before she fell asleep.

## CHAPTER 17

Ezra’s eyes adjusted to the low light of the club. He scanned the room, looking for a quiet place to rest and enjoy his drink without being disturbed.

“Oh ho! Look who graces us with his appearance?”

Ezra turned his body to immediately step back out into the bright afternoon when a hand reached out and grabbed him by the shoulder.

“Going so soon, brother?”

Frederic’s voice boomed in his ear. There would be no rest for him this afternoon.

“Frederic,” Ezra sighed. “I’m really in no mood for your personality.”

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Frederic grasped his chest in protest. “You wound me, brother. There is nothing here that cannot tame your senses. What has caused such melancholy in a joyful man?”

Ezra gritted his teeth. No one on God’s green earth would ever describe him as a ‘joyful man,’ not even those at Swarthmore’s who knew him as somewhat jovial.

He reached up and rubbed his eyes. “Honestly, Frederic, I question why we are friends sometimes.”

Frederic’s laugh annoyed him. “Well, it’s your misfortune if we are not friends, since I am married to your sister. Friend are not, I’m afraid I’m not going anywhere.”

Ezra groaned as he allowed Frederic to push him towards a corner that had two chairs on opposite sides of a chess set.

“I’m in no mood to play games, Frederic. I have enough game playing in my own life, I don’t need to do it for enjoyment.” Gods be damned if wasn’t whining. Ezra scowled, his whole life is becoming unrecognizable.

Frederic’s eyes focused on his friend. “Playing games, are we? Does this auspicious mood have anything to do with a certain Lady whose name begins with a ‘B’?” Frederic teased before pointing a finger in the air. “Oh wait, or does her name start with the letter ‘C’? I also hear congratulations are in order. You do wound me, though. You’re married and you didn’t invite your dearest and oldest friend, nor your sister.” Frederic tsked. “We expected more from the great solicitor.”

Ezra rolled his lips. “You spoke with Melinda?” His voice held no weight or emotion.

Frederic waved over an attendant who had two tumblers of whisky on his tray. “Aye, I did. She said you two were quiet the pair last night. Drinking and gambling, have a gay old time, did we?”

To Frederic’s defense, Ezra could tell his friend tried to hide his mirth but he was positively buzzing with it.

“Go on. Say what you’re going to say.” Ezra threw back some of the amber liquid and dropped his head into his hands.

Frederic laughed and ruffled his friend’s hair. Ezra swatted the hand away.

“How little you think of me that I would pick a man so obviously low that I would burden him with the knowledge that I was right.”

Ezra merely picked up his head and gave his friend a pointed look.

“And you’d be absolutely right to think that low of me, because I would love to burden you with such knowledge!” Frederic barked out a laugh, annoying Ezra to his core.

He drank more of the whisky, wanting the alcohol to dull of his senses. Particularly his hearing. Ezra sat back in his chair, resting his tumbler on his thigh.

“Well, then, let’s have it.” He conceded.

Frederic sat up and cleared his throat. “Give me a moment. It’s not every day you allow me the honor of being right.”

Ezra glanced to the door. There were other clubs he could go to.

“You’ve fallen for her.” Frederic’s words lost all jest and felt like a slap across Ezra’s face.

Ezra’s eyes snapped to his brother-in-law’s. “Excuse me?”

Frederic’s eyes searched Ezra. “Look at you. I have never seen you like this. You are positively lost to this woman.”

Ezra grimaced. “I am not.” He murmured.

Frederic tilted his head, considering his friend. “According to Melinda you have. She may not have known you as long as I have, but you must agree that she is an excellent judge of character.”

“And a gossipmonger if there ever was one.” Ezra grumbled into his tumbler, swallowing the last bit before signaling for another.

Frederic nodded. “True, thetondefinitely missed out on her expertise. Regardless, she said she saw you in a way she’s never seen you before. You were...” Frederic waved his hands in front of him, as if he was conjuring the words before him. “Nice. Cordial.”

“I take offense to that. I may be a bit standoffish here,” his head gestured to the club, “in polite society,” he said with a sneer. “But there those people know who I really am. I am never not cordial to them.”

Frederic slammed his hand on the table between them, startling some of the fellow gentleman at nearby tables. After nodding in apology, Frederic brought his attention back to Ezra. “Exactly.” His voice just above a whisper. “You took her to Swarthmore’s, a place you consider your refuge. You’ve never taken any one there, your own sister has never been there.”

“Well, that’s on you, brother. You can take your wife there.” Ezra interjected.

“Like you took yours?” Frederic challenged with a raise of an eyebrow.

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Era's eyes darkened and narrowed in on his friend. "Careful, brother. Or we will revisit our old ways and take this outside."

Frederic smirked. "The years may have continued, but I assure you, I could still kick your ass." His eyes moved to the door. "Would you like to test that theory?"

Ezra snarled. "No." He rested his head on the back of the chair, and closed his eyes. How did he let this situation get away from him so quickly?

"Just answer me this, have you developed feelings for her?" Frederic raised his hand to stop Ezra's immediate response. "No, I want you to really think about it. Put your pride aside and what you 'think' is right, and tell me honestly, do you seriously care for this woman?"

Ezra bit the inside of his cheek. He owed his friend an honest response. As his mind replayed their exchanges, their dances, their conversations, his hands remembered the way her body felt in his. His tongue recalled the sweetness of her kisses, and the taste of her body.

Ezra licked his lips as he sat up, suddenly uncomfortable in the oversized chair. He looked toward the attendant.

Where is my bloody drink?

"Ezra, you can only stall for so long."

Ezra rolled his eyes. "I'm not stalling. I'm processing." As soon as the words left his

mouth his mind flashed bright brown eyes, full of intrigue and mischief, with a bit of stubbornness in them. She said those exact words to him the night after the last ball, when she found him on the veranda. The night he offered to help her complete the items on her list. Every item, but the last one.

To fall in love.

Unease settled within Ezra.

“While I will concede I have developed some sort of feelings for the woman, they fall within the realm of friendship. Our arrangement has become nothing more than one friend helping another.” He sniffed as he grabbed the new tumbler of whisky off the attendant’s tray with a sneer.

“Why did you offer your assistance in the first place?” Frederic’s question prodded.

Ezra lifted a shoulder. “I was bored? I was available? I don’t know, Frederic. Because I wanted to. Do I need more of a reason than that?”

Frederic shook his head. “No, I guess not. What of your list?”

Ezra looked up to his friend after a healthy pull of whisky. “What of it?”

“One of your golden rules in no repeats. You’ve not only been seen repeatedly with this woman but you took her to Melinda’s place.” Frederic leaned in and lowered his voice. “And speaking of Melinda, am I correct to assume it was not Melinda sneaking out of your box the other night?”

Ezra’s back snapped up as he put his tumbler on the table, his eyes searching the room to make sure no one heard.



“Keep your voice down, you want to be the cause of a ruination?” Ezra’s heart was beating uncontrollably in his chest. He made sure Beatrice was protected in every aspect of their outings. From her clothing, to how and when they were to arrive, he had coordinated everything so her reputation would survive her list.

Frederic hunched his shoulders in apology. “You are playing a dangerous game, Ezra.”

Ezra swallowed. He hated to admit his friend was right, but he was. He can say she is just an acquaintance all he wants, he knew, deep down, there is only one way for this to end and that is with her heart being broken.

Whether it’s due to feelings or from ruination is yet to be determined. Either way, it cannot and will not end happily for Beatrice.

“Why you refuse to admit the reasoning behind your own list is in because of what happened to your sister is a discussion I’m tired of having-”

“Thank God for that.” Murmured Ezra.

Frederic ignored the interruption. “Because I’ve already decided it is and you admitting it does nothing. The fact is, you have that list for a reason and it’s to protect whomever you’re with. If you are to stay true to yourself, and her, you should end whatever it is going on between the two of you.”

Ezra mashed his teeth together. There was nothing serious between them, was there? He could admit he admonished his list in order to help her complete hers. But there were no real feelings there. At least not for him.

Sure, his body hums when she was near, and his hands itched to touch hers. He also noticed himself smiling more around her, which was highly annoying.

Ezra's eyes met Frederic's when the realization dawned on him.

“Ah. There it is. I love watching you come to the same conclusion as me. It takes you longer, but you always get there.”

Ezra disregarded the comment and sat up. “Hold on, Frederic, I'm not conceding to anything of the sort. I remain steadfast that my feelings remain platonic.”

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The word felt like dust on his tongue, but he pushed on.

“However, I will admit that this has gone on for too long.”

Frederic considered Ezra’s words. “Only if you are still steadfast in not wanting to marry.”

“I can’t marry her.”

Ezra did not appreciate how his gut seemed to drop at his admission.

Frederic snorted. “And remind me again why you can’t. From what Melinda said it seemed like she would be willing to change her stance on spinsterhood for you.”

Ezra steeled his thoughts. His mind pushed to allow him to fantasize what a life with Beatrice would look like. Alas, he knew he could not offer the life she deserved. He was not soft, he was not one to think of others first. One would only have to look at his sister’s situation before Frederic to see how he could fail.

He could not, and would not, let that happen to Beatrice.

“Ezra?” Frederic’s voice penetrated Ezra’s thoughts.

“Beatrice is not your sister. And even if she reminds you of her, your sister is fine and well taken care of. If you want her, take her and end this madness. For both of you.”

End this madness.

This is madness.

Ezra finished his tumbler and slammed it on the table. “You’re right, Frederic.” He stood and straightened his jacket. “See? I can admit when you’re right.”

Frederic stood and followed his friend through the club. He stopped Ezra just as he was about to open the door. “So you’re going to marry her?”

Frederic sounded hopeful. Ezra smiled and clapped his hand on his friend’s shoulder.

“No. I’m going to end the madness.”

Ezra left Frederic standing in the darkened club. With every step that carried him further away from the conversation his feet became heavier. He knew he was doing the right thing, for Beatrice’s sake, but it didn’t lighten his step in the slightest.

## CHAPTER 18

“Ah, Your Grace! I’m so glad you could join us this afternoon. My dear Edwin said you wouldn’t be caught dead at garden party.” Lady Ellsworth flitted her fan in front of her face to hide her cheeky grin.

Ezra pushed out a breath. Her dearest Edwin was normally right. But he had gotten word that Stoleton would be here today and he had business to finish up with the man. It was of no consequence to him that the Duke’s sister-in-law was a certain lady with whom he decided to stop seeing. Although, he had yet to tell her that.

“It’s my honor and pleasure to be here today, Lady Ellsworth. Please give my condolences to your husband for being wrong.”

Ezra jolted when the woman’s obnoxiously high-pitched laugh rang out and she

swatted him with her fan. “Oh, how funny! I shall do that. Don’t think I won’t!”

He nodded his head and cast his eyes out over the garden for any sign of Stoleton so he could excuse himself from this dreaded small talk. Unfortunately for his escape, he could feel the woman’s eyes still on him.

“Its, um, a lovely day for the party.” He ground out. He absolutely loathed small talk.

Overly flamboyant hosts aside, it was a nice day out. Not too hot to be sweltering under the hot summer sun, yet it wasn’t too cold to chase everyone inside. He assumed the topic would occupy his host while allowing him to further scan for Stoleton.

Lady Ellsworth preened like she had any say in the outcome of the day. “It truly is, isn’t it? Say,” she took a step closer. “I heard you have your sights set on theton’s newest diamond. Is that true?”

The direct change in conversation caused him to rock back on his heels. The heavy weight of scandal loomed over him causing him to crack his neck. “I don’t know what you heard, Lady Ellsworth, but I have no intention of courting or marrying anyone.”

Ezra caught movement towards the floral arch that welcomed the guests. Stoleton and his wife stood next to Beatrice and her mother.

“Oh, I didn’t mean to offend, Your Gr-”

“I suggest you stick to your garden parties, Lady Ellsworth, and leave the gossiping to the professionals like your husband.” Ezra ignored the gasp that came from the old wench as he walked down the steps and towards the arch.

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His body propelled him forward as if on order from some higher power. Ezra convinced himself it was out of necessity to speak with Stoleton. However, there was a little voice that considered it had more to do to the young woman standing next to Stoleton's wife than any business he, himself, deemed important.

"Stoleton, good to see you." Ezra extended his hand inwardly cringing. It was rare for him to seek out conversation, stranger still that he offered his hand first.

His reputation preceded him based off the wide-eyed look Stoleton gave him as he shook his hand, almost in disbelief.

"Graham. Likewise. You know my wife, Sarah and her mother, and sister?" Stoleton gestured to each woman as he mentioned them.

Ezra quickly nodded at Sarah and Charlotte, and even though he knew he shouldn't, he let his eyes linger on Beatrice a beat longer than appropriate.

Her brown hair was swept up and pinned, accentuating her long, slender neck. Ezra swallowed the lump that formed in his throat.

Beatrice's eyes dipped before returning to look up at him. "Good to see, Your Grace."

Ezra didn't realize that they were still staring at each other when he heard a gentle cough from her mother.

"Your Grace, I hear you are to do business with our dearest Charles." Charlotte's

words had a sense of warning in them. Ezra pulled his eyes away from Beatrice to find Charlotte staring at him with her eye brow raised.

Ezra cleared his throat. "Yes. I actually came over here to see if we could iron out some of the last details"

Stoleton exchanged a look with his wife before his face broke out in a wide grin. He stepped forward and clapped his hand on Ezra's back. "Come now, this is a party. There will be plenty of time for business. Eat, drink, be merry!" Stoleton laughed as he took his wife's hand and lead her towards the refreshment table and away from Ezra.

Charlotte cast a doubtful look over Ezra before following her daughter and son-in-law.

Ezra stood watching them walk away. When he turned to Beatrice he found her owlsh eyes staring up at him in earnest.

Ezra pursed his lips. "It is good to see you, Lady Beatrice."

A small smile danced across her lips. "Thank you, Your Grace. I hope you are faring well. I know the ominous Duke of Graham is not one for parties, let alone of the garden variety."

Ezra lifted a corner of his mouth, conceding a smirk.

Do it now, man. Do it now, then leave. Tell her it should end for her sake and be done with it.

"Would you like to walk with me to the refreshment table? Lady Ellsworth's cook is friends with Sarah's so you know the food and drinks will be good." She said with a

wink.

Ezra stepped to the side and offered his hand.

What are you doing?

“It would be my honor. But, we should be careful. Lady Ellsworth has heard word of me courting you.” He whispered as they walked.

Beatrice looked up to him before eyeing those around them. “Does that mean you wish to stop? I know you strongly dislike gossip and the problems that inevitably rise from it.”

Ezra stewed over her words. This was his chance. He opened his mouth to tell her it was over. Instead he found his mouth had other plans.

“No worries. I set her straight. Although, I guess I could pull a page from one of your sister’s scandalous books and flirt with someone else in front of her.”

Beatrice gasp was followed by some giggles. “You wouldn’t do me the dishonor of promenading with me one moment and flirting with another the next? That feels highly inappropriate and unfitting of a Duke.” She said artfully.

Graham couldn’t help himself, he smiled wolfishly as he leaned down to whisper directly into her ear. “I assure you, little mouse, a Duke has no such restraints on his actions.”

Beatrice’s steps stuttered under her dress causing Ezra to fill with pride. He loved how easy it was to get a reaction from her.

The thought gave him pause.



Beatrice looked up to him. “Everything well, Your Grace?”

Ezra looked down at her, then back to the arch where he met her. What was he doing? He was supposed to be telling her their arrangement was over, but here he was promenading around a garden with her on his arm. He needed to leave.

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He quickly scanned the area. Some couples had taken an interest in their walk, with some women hiding their faces behind their fans, while their eyes washed over Ezra and Beatrice.

His heart began to race as he noted every pair of eyes that set upon them.

“I need to go, Lady Beatrice.”

Beatrice cocked her head to the side in confusion. “What? I don’t understand. Did something happen?”

“Yes. I mean, no.” Blasted, he needed to get out of this damned garden. “Everything is fine. I just realized I had a meeting that I needed to get to. Please excuse me.”

He untangled her arm from his, ignoring the tingly sensation that raced up his hand as he moved her arm.

“My apologies, Lady Beatrice. I’ll reach out soon.”

He winced when he said the words. Looking around he hoped others were far enough way not to hear and assume something more between them.

Ezra nearly tripped over himself trying to get away from her. When he got to his carriage he leaned up against the coach, catching his breath.

What was it about this woman? The minute she stepped within his space he completely lost his mind. He needed his wits about him.

But more importantly, he needed to figure out a way to end things between them without losing sight of what's important. He promised himself, and his sister, he would never be the cause of such scandal in a family.

Even if he was capable of loving her, he couldn't give her the life she deserved. It was those words he repeated to himself on the carriage ride home from the garden party. The words replayed in his mind over dinner and while he tossed and turned during the night.

Those same words became his daily mantra. The more he said them, the more he hoped they'd become believable.

Beatrice's hands hovered over the piano keys. Her eyes stared at the fingers, her mind completely blank of the tune she was just playing.

"Beatrice?" Her mother called to her. "Is everything all right, dear? You just stopped playing all of a sudden."

Beatrice blinked her eyes a few times as her mind caught up with reality. She looked up to find her mother peering at her over her tea cup.

"I'm fine, Mama." She lied. "My mind just wandered for a moment."

"If I may say so, you've been increasingly forgetful these last few days. Ever since Lady Ellsworth's garden party last week." Charlotte set down her tea and came to sit next to Beatrice on the bench. Charlotte absently plucked a few keys with her finger. "You almost seem to be preoccupied with something... or someone?"

Charlotte's hopeful eyes glanced towards her daughter.

Beatrice's heart squeezed.

Her mother wasn't wrong. She had been thinking of someone, but that someone seemingly no longer wanted anything to do with her with no explanation.

Ever since he left the garden party Beatrice's mind kept replaying their last interaction in hopes to discover what caused his abrupt change of demeanor.

She was ashamed to admit she had seen his eagerness to speak with Charles as a ploy just to see her, but apparently she was wrong. Which did nothing for her self-esteem. Their conversation was light and flirtatious during their walk towards the refreshments, nothing that would cause such a quick retreat.

In fact, she barely said anything to him. He couldn't possibly have taken offense to her jest about allowances awarded to a Duke? They've had far more abrasive, and intimate, conversations than that.

"I see the wheels in your head turning." Charlotte's shoulder nudged Beatrice's.

Beatrice's groan was accompanied by an eye roll. "I hate how well you know me."

"Ah! So it is a man!" Charlotte's voice sang.

Beatrice's hands plunked down hard on the keys. "Ugh. Why must everything be a scandal with you?"

She shimmied out from the bench and walked to the window, her arms folded across her chest. A defensive posture to be sure, but Beatrice did it merely to hold herself together. She felt more vulnerable and exposed the longer she went without word from Graham.

Charlotte turned to face her daughter. "Bite your tongue, I'm not looking for a scandal. I just want to see you happy-"

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Beatrice raised her hand in her mother's direction. "Please do not pretend the only way to be happy is to be married to a man. I know you loved your time with Papa and you miss him dearly, but look at you," she now gestured to her mother. "You are not married and you are happy, aren't you?"

Charlotte sighed. "I am. But I'm happy because of you and your sisters, my grandchildren. The life you want will leave you all alone."

For the first time since Beatrice and Charlotte began these discussions Beatrice could see the heavy distress this conversation caused her mother.

Charlotte's shoulders slumped while she looked at Beatrice with great concern.

"I am no fool, Beatrice, and neither are you. Out of all of my children I know you can hold your own. And if given the chance, you would be able to go on and do great things on your own."

Beatrice met her mother's eyes. For the first time she saw optimism and support within them. She had hoped it meant her mother was finally coming around to her side.

"Unfortunately for you, Beatrice, you will not be given the chance willingly." Charlotte's words hung between them.

Beatrice curled her hands into tight fists. Cursed this society. Cursed this blasted society and its dependence on the male's ego. She could do anything a man could do and most likely better. Heavens, there were things she could do that a man could not.

Between the two sexes, there was no doubt in Beatrice's mind who was the weaker sex, and it was not the women.

She once saw Charles get a splinter of wood lodged in his finger and you would have sworn someone had cut his hand off.

Beatrice squeezed her eyes shut to stop the tears gathering in her eyes. She felt her mother's embrace and sighed into it.

Despite their differences, she knew her mother wanted what was best for her, even if it meant giving up the one thing she always sought for herself.

"I'm so sorry, Beatrice. For you, I wish I could change the world." Charlotte's soft whisper did little to comfort Beatrice, but she appreciated it just the same.

Beatrice only nodded.

"I know, Mama." She sniffled.

Charlotte lifted Beatrice's head in her hands. "Now, not that I want to cause you discomfort, but..." Charlotte hesitated. "Was there someone you were thinking about?"

Beatrice chewed on her bottom lip. She wanted nothing more than to be able to have an honest conversation about this with someone.

She was woefully unequipped when it came to handling matters of the heart. Still, there was no way she could tell her mother of the past few weeks without sending her into apoplectic fits.

Beatrice decided to tread very carefully. "There was someone."

Charlotte gasped as she muttered, "I knew it!"

"But we were just friends." Her gaze boor into her mother's. "I haven't seen him or heard from him since." Hearing her own voice say those words out loud to another person left her bereft. Her hands shook and her lips quivered. Perhaps this wasn't the best idea.

Charlotte frowned. "Oh, my baby!" She enveloped Beatrice in a tight hug before pulling her to the sofa. "Sit. Tell me all about it."

Beatrice rolled her lips. "Well, I'm not telling you who it is."

Charlotte tried to interject but Beatrice raised her hand. "You get this news on my terms or not at all."

Charlotte scowled but acquiesced. "Very well."

"We've spoken to each other several times over the past few weeks and it's been pleasant each time. We last spoke at Lady Ellsworth garden party. We were just beginning our conversation and he all but ran from me. I don't understand what I did."

Charlotte's eyes narrowed. And just like her mother could see when her thoughts were working overtime, so could Beatrice with her.

"Mama. I'm not telling you who it is, and you can stop trying to remember every social event we've gone to in the few months or so to try to discover who it is. And remember, I'm not concernedover losing a potential suitor we were merely becoming fast friends."

Lies

“I just enjoyed his company and want to know what, if anything, I did to upset him.  
As I would with any friend”

Lying by omission..



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Charlotte pushed out a breath and pouted. “Oh fine. Well, if something changed at the garden party, what were you talking about with him?”

Beatrice shrugged. “That’s just it. We barely spoke past the cordial greeting. Then he said he forgot about a meeting and left. It was as if a bee stung him and he ran off.”

“Perhaps one did.” Charlotte said with a chuckle.

“Mama. You’re not helping.”

“It’s hard to help if I don’t know of whom I am talking about.” Charlotte pursed her lips.

Beatrice remained quiet and looked at her mother.

“Fine.” Charlotte sighed. “If you have had spoken to this gentlemen several times in the past, why don’t you write to him? Perhaps there was something that he needed to attend to and he has just forgotten about you.”

Beatrice blinked at her mother. “Thank you, Mama. I feel so much better now.” Beatrice went to stand while her mother pulled her back down.

“Now, Beatrice, you know that’s not what I meant. You are a fascinating young woman and a treasure to anyone who meets you. But life has a way of getting in the way of things. Write to him.” Charlotte grabbed her hand and gave it a little shake. “Refresh his memory of what he’s missing out on.” She winked at her daughter.

Write him a letter.

Why didn't she think of that? Of course! He had written her when he wanted to see her, why couldn't she do the same?

It felt as if a weight had been lifted off her shoulders. "You're right, Mama. I think I shall do that." She leaned over and embraced her mother. "Thank you."

She saw the glimmer of hope in her mother's eyes. "Mama. I'm just concerned I upset a friend. You would be worrying yourself over a similar situation as well."

Charlotte opened her mouth but thankfully closed it. "I believe you."

Beatrice had a sneaking suspicion that Charlotte did not in fact believe her, but she had other things to consider.

She ran to her room and pulled out her paper. She tapped her quill pen on her desk. She wanted to speak plainly, he liked it most when she was brutally honest with him, but considering she felt she wronged him in some way she didn't want to come off too abrasive.

With a deep breath she settled with a balance of honesty and curiosity. She sealed the letter and handed it to Anne to see that it was delivered. She made Anne swear on her mother's life that she would not tell Charlotte who the letter was being sent to.

Now that the letter was off being delivered there was nothing left for her to do but wait. Unfortunately for her, she had to wait longer than she cared to.

## CHAPTER 19

Beatrice slammed her book shut. It's been four days since Anne smuggled her letter

out of the house and delivered it to Graham's house. When she didn't receive a response the day after she told herself he may have needed time to come up with a cheeky response.

When no letter arrived the following day, she convinced herself that he was busy doing important Duke things, like riding, or counting, or doing whatever it was Duke's did.

The third day came and went and her mother declared her unfit for social events. To her mother's defense Beatrice admitted to throwing the muffin at her mother when she asked Beatrice to pass to the basket of muffins to her.

Yesterday was one of the longest days of her life. She started the day declaring she absolutely done with the Duke and she was glad he didn't respond. By lunch she was in tears in her room. The afternoon brought the calm before the storm and she enjoyed a nice walk around her mother's gardens.

That was until she tripped on a stick and declared war against nature and vowed to seek revenge against the tree that lost its branch. She stomped back to her house and went straight up to her room to pace the room long into the night.

Beatrice looked at her reflection. Her head fell into her hands. This was pointless. No matter what she did she couldn't focus on anything. If she kept losing her temper with everyone her mother may send her to an asylum, and rightfully so.

She looked back up and met her eyes in the mirror. She saw hurt and embarrassment but she something else. The small glimmer of the defiance and rebellion sparking from deep within and Beatrice knew exactly what she needed to do.

Beatrice's fist pounded on Graham's door. She took a step back, collecting her thoughts. She knew exactly what she was going to say him, she repeated it to herself

on her fast paced walk over here. All she needed know was for someone to open the door.

She knocked again. No answer.

Beatrice leaned over the railing and tried to peer through the sidelight window next to the door. The entryway has dark and empty from what she could see.

“Drat.”

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Stubbornness had her wanting to knock again, even kick the door, if need be. But the etiquette that was ingrained in her, or perhaps it was just her fatigue, had her stepping away from the stoop.

She heard a giggle squeal from the back of the house. Beatrice picked up her skirts and tiptoed to the side of the house where she saw a valet and maid flirting. The back door opened causing the couple to laugh. The young woman was pulling at the man's arm while he stood and talked to whomever was in the doorway.

There was a little voice in her head daring her to follow them. Beatrice had flashes of the party Graham took her to and how watching that couple that night made her feel. Butterflies began to swarm in her stomach.

"Leave the door unlocked, Sam.. We'll try not to be too long." The valet called out with a wink.

Leave the door unlocked?

Beatrice held her breath as the couple scurried away into the darkness. She watched them as until disappeared down the darkened alley. When they were out of sight she quietly made her way to the door. She looked around and found no one so she turned the knob, praying for a quiet hinges.

To her great luck, the door opened quietly. She peaked through the door to find the hallway empty. She slid her body through and held her breath as she closed the door behind her.

She gingerly stepped down the hallway, past a darkened kitchen and a pantry. She found the steps and made her way to the first floor. There were no lights except from one doorway a few doors down.

Graham's study.

A wicked smile curved her lips. This was better than her original plan, that would have had her being introduced. Now, she can sneak up on him and surprise him.

Heavens, her heart was beating so quickly she could hear it in her ears. If her steps didn't give her away, her pounding heart would.

She stood in front of the study door debating on whether or not burst in and shock him, or just casually open the door, step in and see if and when he notices her.

A creak sounded behind her. Her head snapped around to find no one.

Must be the house settling.

Beatrice took in a deep, cleansing breath. If she stayed out in the hallway any longer she'd lose her nerve, and she'd come too far to turn back now.

Without knocking, she opened the door and walked in.

"I thought I told you to go to bed, old man. No need to stay up tonight." Graham's rough voice came from the sitting chair next his fireplace. His shirt was unbuttoned at the top where his cravat laid open. His sleeves were rolled up showing off those delectable forearms and he had a tumbler of what looked like whisky on the side table next to him.

Beatrice's eyes lit up when she saw the cover of the book he was reading. It was one

of her favorite mystery novels.

“Did you get to the part where they have a carriage race through the streets of London yet?”

There were no words that could describe how quickly the air changed. Without moving, or looking at her, not even acknowledging her, Beatrice felt the world shift and she was now in his sights.

She swallowed hard, trying to keep her wits about her. She caught him unaware, she needed to stay on top of her emotions if she was going to accomplish what she came here to do.

For a moment more he didn't move, but Beatrice could see his eyes began to lift towards her. Inch by inch he rose his eyes, then his head, and met her gaze.

Her body reacted to those emerald eyes and her feet begged to take a step towards him. She remained still. She currently had the upper-hand and she didn't want to give it up so quickly.

“Lady Beatrice,” his voice hummed, sending shivers down her body. If only she could hear him say her name every day for the rest of her life.

Focus, Beatrice! We're not here for love!

“To what to do I owe the pleasure of seeing you tonight?” His voice was calm but she could see him shift in his chair.

A small smile broke free. She had bested the ominous Duke of Graham. She wanted to sit in this feeling a little while longer, but she had an item to cross off her list.

“My list. It seems you are reneging on your end of the deal.”

Graham slowly closed his book, set it on the table next to him and picked up his tumbler of whisky, swirling the liquid in the glass.

“How so?”



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Beatrice looked on as he took a long pull from the glass, watching his throat swallow the amber liquid.

Her already ragged heart rate jumped. She took another breath to steady herself. She had surprised him yet he looked so calm and nonchalant.

How does he do that?

“We did not finish the list. You said you would help me accomplish all of my items. Disregarding the last item, which was removed from the list before you and I discussed our terms, you still owe me number five.” She straightened her back.

This was good for her. If she was to become a spinster she would need to know how to conduct business by herself. Hopefully, this was the last time she would be offering to do this kind of business, but still, she felt confident in her stance thus far.

She squared her shoulders as Graham picked up the book again to page through it. His long fingers plucked a small piece of paper from within the pages.

He used her list as a bookmark.

“Number five, you say?” His eyes wandered over the well-used paper. It used to feel jarring when she saw him hold a piece of her dreams within his hands. Now she wished she was that blasted piece of paper.

His eyes trailed from the paper up to her. Suspense hung in the air between them. She knew he was playing with her. Much like a cat would to a mouse.

Little mouse.

The pet name purred in her mind causing her eyes to flutter shut with the memory of deep kisses and rough hands.

“Cat got your tongue, mouse?”

His voice broke her reverie. She cleared her throat.

“Are you officially declining to see to your end of our deal, Your Grace?”

Graham considered her.

“And if I am?”

Beatrice forced herself to shrug even though a pit began to form in her belly.

“Then I guess I need to find another willing partner.” She looked to the window that faced the street. “Perhaps I can go back to Swarthmore’s. Those two young fellas who first congratulated us in the tavern were pleasant looking enough.”

Graham’s eyes narrowed. “You’re playing with fire, little mouse.” He growled.

Beatrice licked her suddenly dry lips. “You leave me no choice. I wrote to you, you didn’t respond, so I came here to see for myself.”

Graham remained sitting, his eyes focused on hers. She tried pulling her gaze away but she was lost to those dark green pools.

She shook her head to break the trance and cleared her throat.

“Nevertheless, you did not respond so I am here so we can officially dissolve our arrangement with no hard feelings.”

Beatrice pulled her hand behind her back and crossed her fingers. She said a silent prayer that he wouldn't call her bluff.

Graham nodded his head as he slowly stood up.

Like a panther stalking his prey he walked ever so slowly towards her. Her heart rate picked up with every step he took. She found herself taking a step back as he neared her. There was a small voice that was getting louder telling her to run. That him not responding should have been enough for her to know he was done.

Still, she dug to find the rebellious woman who started her on this journey. She reminded herself of all the balls she had to attend, the itchy dresses, the gossip, the stares, the archaic way in which women were used for securing the blood line for men.

It was that last thought that had her straightening her back once more. She was not afraid of this man.

She looked up and met his eyes that were nearly black. All right, she was a little scared, but even that rebellious woman in her quivered when their eyes met.

“You were not supposed to come here, mouse.”

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Beatrice smelled whisky and leather, the aroma wrapped itself around her and pulled her into him.

“Yet here I am.” Her own voice sounded husky and foreign to her own ears. She liked the way she sounded.

“You do not know what you’re asking for.” He took the slightest step forward, their toes touched.

“I’m asking for a Duke to follow through on his word. What is a Duke worth if not his word?”

A small devilish smile formed on Graham’s lips. “You are a cheeky little thing, aren’t you?”

Beatrice tilted her head as she kept his gaze. Her tongue darted out to wet her lips. She watched as his eyes dropped to track the movement.

She leaned into him.

“What are you going to do about it?”

The Duke’s eyes flashed right before his lips crashed down on hers. Her hands instinctively went to his hair. Graham’s hands reached around and cupped her bottom, pulling her up his body.

Throwing caution to the wind, she wrapped her legs around him. He groan of

approval rumbled into her mouth, sending shockwaves through her body.

Graham carried her to the sofa and sat. He reclined back in the sofa causing the top half of her to lean onto his lean chest. Her legs settled on either side of his lap as they continued the kiss. She shifted to loosen some of her skirt that was caught underneath him. She felt the growing length beneath her she gasped.

At her reaction Graham pushed up against her causing Beatrice to moan into his mouth. His brought one hand up to guide her head to the perfect angle as his tongue warred with hers.

She could never control her hands when she was with him. She never felt like she had enough of him. Her mind whirled at the opportunity that was literally sitting underneath her.

Graham pulled her head away and looked up to her. His eyes were wide, his lips were swollen and his hair was tousled. Her throat and lips suddenly went dry. It should be illegal to look that good.

“What is it?” Her words were whispers between them.

Graham sat up with her still on his lap. He brushed a hand over her cheeks, his eyes searching hers. But for what?

He held her head ever so softly, titling it. He brought her head down to his for a tender kiss.

Beatrice jolted within his grasp. She pushed her tongue into his mouth, wanting the fight, the emotion, the push and pull she had grown accustomed to.

He pulled his head back and slowly shook his head 'no.'

Her eyebrows furrowed as he brought her back for another tender kiss. Her emotions were spinning out of control. She had expected rough, she had expected danger. She did not expect intimacy.

This time it was Beatrice that pulled away. She studied his eyes, trying to dissect the man in front of her. Graham was confident, arrogant, opinionated, and formidable. But the man before her was soft, kind, passionate. He was the man from the tavern.

Her heart thudded against her chest. She did not give the Duke enough credit. There were more layers to him than he allowed anyone to see. Anyone except her.

A tear formed in her eye. He raised a long finger and brought it to the corner of her eye to catch it before it fell.

Her breath caught in her throat as she leaned against him and kissed him. He brought his hands around her back and pulled her closer. His hips pushed up against her, this time it was his own delicious moan that filled the air.

Instinct had her slowly moving her hips back and forth. His grasp tightened around her. Pride bloomed within her. With every variation she made, he countered and together they created a movement that grew from subtle movements back to the frantic motions that begged for something more.

Graham's lips were on her throat as she threw her head back in bliss. When she brought her head back down her eyes landed on the book he was reading and she had a thought.

She brought up her hands to his head to stop his kisses. She peered into Graham's eyes, past his different layers, and saw a glimpse of what this man could be to her.

Overcome with emotion she laid a soft kiss on his lips. His eyebrows quirked up as

she pulled her skirt out from underneath her, allowing her to shift backwards on his lap.

She leaned forward and placed several kisses on his neck. Graham's eyes closed as he rested his head on the back of the sofa. A slight smile appeared on his lips. Those luscious lips. She kissed them one more time before kissing down his neck and onto his collarbone.

Graham hissed and raised his hips against her. Liquid heat began to pool in her core and it fueled her movements. She didn't let the notion she had no clue as to what she was about to do stop her. She was just basing her movements off of what he did to her that night in the opera box and threw her luck to chance that that was something that could be reciprocated.

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She pushed further back, letting her legs slip off the sofa. She lowered herself to a kneeling position in front of him when his eyes flew open.

He jerked up with his hands on his belt.

“What are you doing?” His eyes widened as his breath caught in his throat.

Seeing the surprise cross his face, emboldened Beatrice’s ministrations. He was always one step ahead of her that to be able to give him pause made her feel victorious.

“Repaying the favor, Your Grace. I can say I will never be able to witness another Opera without the memories of your mouth of me.”

Graham slowly closed his eyes as he laid his back to rest of the sofa. Beatrice’s fingers lightly swept along the waist of his pants causing goosebumps to erupt across his lean stomach. He shifted under her touch, his muscling quivering underneath her touch.

Beatrice licked her lips as she moved her fingertips just underneath his waistband.

Graham’s eyes flew open and his hand slammed down onto hers.

“Stop. You mustn’t do this.”

Beatrice looked up to him with a raised brow. “But I want to. You did it for me, I want to do the same for you.”



Graham's pliable body had gone rigid underneath her fingers. She searched his eyes as her heart dropped. "Oh God. Is this something that women do not perform?" Embarrassment didn't just wash over her, it crashed into her, it annihilated her, it broke her. She scurried to her feet, her hands covering her face.

"I am so sorry. We were kissing and I saw the book, which reminded me of the opera scene, which reminded me of where you... um, kissed me and I thought perhaps I could do the same for you."

Beatrice separated two of her fingers allowing her eye to peak through. Graham stood motionless, his face of mixture of confusion and something else Beatrice couldn't quite put her finger on. Regardless, she had a feeling she wouldn't like it if she could name it.

"No."

Beatrice groaned into her hands and backed up.

She felt Graham's hands land roughly on her shoulders. "No. I mean, yes, that is something that is done. No, you are not doing it."

It took a moment for Graham's words to sink in.

"Did I offend you?" Her voice cracked.

Graham lowered his knees to look in her eyes. "You did not offend me."

She found some comfort in his words and lowered her hands. She pushed out a breath when she something he said caught up with her.

"Wait. If it's something that is done, why can't I do it? You did it for me."

Graham dropped his hands from her shoulders, before rubbing his face with them. Frustration colored his features.

“What I did was different. You don’t need to do that.” He sighed. He suddenly sounded exhausted, which annoyed Beatrice to no end. She hated being treated like an unruly child.

“Last I checked I wasn’t if I should. I understand that in my inexperience I may have fumbled a bit, but you have to admit I am a fast learner, you said so yourself.”

Graham fought a smile which relaxed some of the tension throbbing within Beatrice.

She took a step closer, testing her limits. “I was always an eager student.” She ran a finger up his chest.

His hand grabbed her finger and removed it.

“No.”

She narrowed her eyes. “I don’t understand. Do you not like that?”

Graham barked out a laugh. “No. I enjoy it very much. But…” his words drifted off.

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“Not from me.” She finished for him.

His eyes softened and he reached out. Beatrice threw off his advance and took a step back.

She bit her inner cheek to stop tears from falling. She had given this man too much of herself to grant him the honor of seeing her broken by his words.

She squeezed her eyes shut and groaned. “And to think I thought there was more to you than the show you put on for other people.”

Graham dropped his eyes.

Good. He should feel ashamed.

“You are what they say. Mean. Unruly. Dangerous. A caution to women.”

Graham lifted his head and stood taller. She watched as he stood motionless, only his throat moved with his swallow.

She shook her head once. “Consider yourself let go from our arrangement.”

Beatrice thought he took a step forward but she had already turned quickly to run from the room. Without thinking, her body carried her down the back hallway steps and out the door she came through. She had no idea if anyone was there, if anyone saw her. She no longer cared.

If she was caught then she would cement her future as a spinster. She could survive the pain a scandal caused. She swiped at the tears that fell as she ran all the way home. She was doubtful anything could top the pain she was feeling right now.

## CHAPTER 20

“Ah, Beatrice, I’ve been looking for you.”

Beatrice turned at the sound of her mother’s voice coming through the garden arch. It had been deemed that Beatrice was spending too much time inside, sulking, so her mother prescribed her a morning outside in the garden.

“I’m where you left me.” Beatrice’s voice was emotionless. She was too tired to give her mother the usual sass that was needed in surviving a conversation with her.

“I see my treatment did nothing to cures what ails you.” Charlotte lifted an eyebrow at her daughter.

Beatrice sighed and transfixed her gaze on the ground before her. She didn’t blink, not a single thought entered her mind, she was just lost in the haze of melancholy.

“Well, if this beautiful morning didn’t help, perhaps the news I have will.”

Beatrice felt her mother sit next to her, she shifted her body to face Beatrice.

“From your mood these past few days I take the letter written to your, um... friend, was not received well.”

And there it was. The only thing that was able to break through her defensive emotional wall.

Heartbreak.

Beatrice squeezed her eyes shut as she tilted her head away from her mother. She was tired of the tears that accompanied her thoughts whenever she thought of that night, of him.

She tried giving into the feelings and completely losing herself in sobs. She tried ignoring the pain that radiated from her very being, and tried distracting herself with books, music, food. No matter what she did the embarrassment and heartache from that night didn't dissipate.

"Oh, darling, I hate to see you suffer like this." Charlotte reached down and patted Beatrice's thigh before grabbing her hands. "Which is why I went and did something you probably won't like. However, please know, I did it with your wellbeing as my only motivator."

Beatrice was too tired to fight. Even turning her head to face her mother took too much effort. Charlotte brought their clasped hands up to her chest. "Look at me, sweetheart."

Beatrice sighed and dragged her eyes to her mother's.

"What did you do?" Her voice creaked from misuse.

Charlotte hesitated for a moment. "I think I may have found your match."

Beatrice swallowed. What did it matter? What did any of this matter? She knew what her future held.

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“Mother. It’s not worth it. If I learned anything from these past few weeks is that not only will I do just fine on my own but I really do prefer it.”

Charlotte grimaced. “Oh. Come now. I don’t believe that. You and I get along.”

Beatrice quirked an eyebrow causing Charlotte to chuckle.

“Most of the time. And you have friends, Jane, and...” she waved her hand. “Oh, I don’t know all your friends but you have them and enjoy them. And they enjoy you, too.” She leaned closer. “And why wouldn’t they, you’re lovely. Intelligent. Interesting. And I hear you have the most wonderful of mothers.” She added with a wink.

Beatrice rolled her lips. She actually did feel slightly better with her mother there. And she was grateful she had shared what was going on, even if it was full of half-truths and omissions. It still made these past few days a bit easier to navigate.

“She is pretty wonderful.” She said with the slightest hints of a smile.

Charlotte beamed a radiant smile back.

“Good. So you’re not upset with me asking this particular suitor over for tea this afternoon?”

Beatrice groaned as she pulled her hands away from her mother so she could cover her face. “Oh, Mama. Why now?” She was not in the mood to talk to any man, let alone meet a new one.

“I’m sorry, Beatrice. I was introduced to him at the start of the season. If I’m being honest, he didn’t strike me as anything other than a polite young man, nothing out of the ordinary. But I’ve seen him at a few of the balls and he’s always around people, dancing, laughing and having fun. I’ve had several conversation with him since then and he’s into many of the same things you are, including books and travel. When I ran into him today something clicked and I thought you must meet him.”

Beatrice shook her head. “Fine, but not today.” She pleaded.

Charlotte licked her lips and took a moment. “Beatrice. When I said he was always surrounded by people I meant it, he was the center of attention. But these last few balls I’ve noticed he has been dancing with Lady Catharine, who is nice, however, I don’t see a good match there.”

Beatrice looked at her mother pointedly. “Do you honestly not see a match between him and Lady Catharine? Or are you inserting your nose where it doesn’t belong?”

Charlotte bristled. “I know matches, my dear, and there is not one there.”

Beatrice continued to stare at her mother, doubting her.

“All right fine, they’re a pretty good match, but I think you will be better.” She added, quickly.

“Mama. If he’s interested in Lady Catharine, let him be interested in Lady Catharine.”

Charlotte wrinkled her nose. “You truly are naive when it comes to matters of the heart.”

Beatrice’s body seized up. Unknowingly her mother’s words penetrated her thickest

wall of defense and hit her directly in the soul. Her biggest fear going into spinsterhood was becoming one and still being innocent and naive.

If she only knew the heartache her wishes would cause her she might not have set herself on this journey.

She reached up and rubbed the ache in her chest.

“If he was interested in only Lady Catharine, he wouldn’t have accepted our invitation.” Charlotte said triumphantly. “Come now, what do you say? Spend an afternoon with him. Drink some tea.” She looked up to the sky. “It’s a nice day, not too warm to be outside for a nice walk around the gardens.”

Charlotte’s bottom lip protruded like a child’s. “Please, Beatrice. For me?”

Beatrice sighed and rolled her eyes, refusing to smile. Her mother and her dramatics. “Fine. I will meet with... what is his name.”

“An Earl named Amos Duncary.” Charlotte responded.

“Oh. I remember him. You tried to get me to dance with him at one of the balls.” Beatrice’s mind had been fuzzy these last few days, but she faintly remembered hearing his name before.

Charlotte’s eyes rounded. “So you remember him! That is an excellent sign!”

Beatrice shook her head. “Mama, I said I remember his name, not the man. I know nothing of him.”

Charlotte stood up, extending her hand to Beatrice. “Well, now you have the perfect opportunity to meet him. Come, let’s get you ready. You’ve been lounging around the



house for days. It's time to start something new."

Beatrice took her mother's hand to stand and together, they walked back to the house.

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Start something new.

Perhaps her mother was right. It was time to start something new. Beatrice felt a modicum of weight fall from her shoulders. Having a purpose gave her some relief from the pain she had been carrying.

Her new plan was to meet Amos Duncary and decide if he could help her with her final item, or if he would just be something to hold her mother off her back until the season was officially over.

Only one way to find out.

“He’s here! He’s here!” Charlotte came bursting through the parlor door and quickly sat in the chair opposite of Beatrice. She positioned herself in a way that made it look as if she were there all along and not standing by the front window watching for his carriage.

Beatrice took a deep breath as closed her book and set it on the table next to her.

The door opened and their butler entered with a tall man behind him.

“Lord Amos Duncary, Your Grace.”

At the sound of his name the man stepped forward and into the room.

Beatrice smiled gently at the nervous, wide-eyed Earl standing before her.

“My Lord,” he walked to Charlotte who raised her hand. “He is so good to see you, again.”

Beatrice rolled her lips when her mother dipped her head coyly. If going into the theatre was a reputable career for a woman her mother would have been famous.

The Earl turned his body and faced Beatrice.

She sat straighter under his gaze. Beatrice licked her lips in concentration. She was desperately trying to fend off the inevitable.

She refused to compare Amos to... him. But she was failing. Her very first thought upon seeing the Earl was he had blue eyes, not green. His hair dark blonde, not brown. And his built was tall and lanky, instead of tall with lean muscles.

Beatrice shook the comparison off and raised her hand. “Lord Duncary, how nice it is to finally meet you.”

Amos dipped at the waist. “Yes, my apologies for that. I’ve been meaning to introduce myself for awhile now but I have heard rumblings that you may have...”

Beatrice threw her hand up. “I know the rumors. And they couldn’t be further from the truth.”

Charlotte jolted at Beatrice’s outburst and exchanged a look with Amos. She released a nervous giggle. “Yes, yes, that is all just society gossip for the sake of gossip. She is the new diamond, after all. Disgruntled mamas are going to want to cut her chances.”

Beatrice furrowed her brow. She never really understood the meddling marriage mamas that inserted themselves into every match for the sake of seeming important.

She looked to her mother who was now looking at her with raised eyebrows as her head motioned to Amos.

Beatrice slowly blinked and looked back to Amos. "Sorry for my sudden outburst. As you can tell I am quite tired of hearing that particular rumor."

Amos frowned, holding his hands to his heart. "I can imagine. My apologies. I did not mean to upset you."

Beatrice bit her bottom lip. She felt her defensive wall shaking loose. The emotional ups and downs from just this morning to now were exhausting her. Suddenly it felt as if someone placed a boulder on her shoulders.

This was a bad idea.

Charlotte clapped her hands together. "I know. Why don't we move this outside. It's a bit stuffy in here, don't you think?"

Beatrice looked to her mother who gave her a small smile. Beatrice reciprocated. Her mother knew she needed a moment to collect herself.

"That is a lovely idea, Your Grace. That is, if you're up for it, Lady Beatrice?" He looked down to Beatrice with concern in his eyes.

Beatrice waved him off. "Yes, I'm fine, Lord Duncary, thank you. I think a walk outside would be lovely,"

Amos lowered his hand to help her up. She slipped her hand into his and... felt nothing. No electricity, no tingling sensation, no trills of emotion, just hand on hand. Nothing else.

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When she passed her mother, Charlotte mimicked taking a deep breath. Beatrice nodded and did just that. Amos looked down to her and gave her a gentle smile.

She led him through the back door and down the veranda steps, her mother following a few steps behind them.

They walked a few moments in compatible silence when Amos turned his head towards her. "I can't help but feel I came at an inopportune time."

Beatrice gave a tight lipped smile. "The timing is not your fault."

Amos chuckled to himself. "Your mother is quite persistent."

She laughed. "Amongst other things."

Amos laughed, again. She found his laugh light and breezy. She had to admit it lightened her step.

"Yes. I can tell. She held my cravat hostage when we bumped into each other this morning."

Beatrice looked up to him with widened eyes. "She did what?"

"I was coming out of the tailors, and she was coming out of the modiste. We exchanged pleasantries. I told her I was looking for more cravats, she asked to see the one I purchased and before I knew it she was holding saying I must come over for afternoon tea."

Beatrice looked on horrified. “I am so sorry. I should say something to her...”

She slowed her steps to turn to her mother but Amos pulled her forward. “No, it’s fine. I admired her negotiation skills. She would have made a great solicitor. Or actress.”

Beatrice let out a laugh that startled even herself. When was the last time she laughed?

She covered her mouth. “I’m sorry. I always say my mother missed her stage calling. Her dramatics rival the most prestigious of players.”

Amos widened his smile as they continued to walk amongst the daisies and roses.

Even though she didn’t feel any instant romantic feelings with the man, she did feel comfortable with him. It was easy to laugh with him, and she found herself talking about things as easily with him as Sarah or Eleanor.

Or Graham.

The walls that were being rebuilt during her walk came tumbling down with that single thought.

Her shoulders dropped and her world lost all color.

Surprisingly, Amos noticed the change. “Everything well, Lady Beatrice? Should we stop? Perhaps return to the house.” He looked behind them to Charlotte who was pretending to be smelling a flower.

Beatrice shook her head. Why did that blasted man have to pop up in her head at the most random of times? “I’m fine, Lord Duncary, just...” She lifted a shoulder. She

didn't know how to finish that sentence without breaking into tears.

Amos considered her for a moment, shook his head once, and pulled her along to continue their walk. He covered her hand that rested on his arm with his hand.

"I'm going to be honest with you, Lady Beatrice. I am a very good judge of character, it's become the character trait I am most proud of. And I can tell you are a worthy woman, respectable, honest, kind, understanding. So, I'm going to lay it all out for you. But first I'm going to ask you a question, and I hope you'll prove me right and answer honestly."

His words were spoken softly but with intent. Beatrice swallowed over the lump that formed in her throat.

"Are you attached to someone else?" He asked simply.

The lump in her throat dropped to her stomach. She immediately opened her mouth to deny him, but that would be lying. What could it hurt to admit to him that her heart belonged to someone else.

But did it?

Was this heartache and pain she was feeling a result of love?

"The fact that you're hesitating is telling me you do."

Shocked, Beatrice rose her eyes to his.

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She expected to find defeat, or perhaps frustration but instead she found triumph and acceptance.

“It’s fine. In fact, it doesn’t bother me in the least.”

Beatrice looked at him for a moment. “Oh. Is this because of Lady Catharine? Are you here only because of my mother?”

Amos quirked his head to the side. “Lady Catharine?”

Beatrice shook her head. “Yes. Mama said you have been seen with Lady Catharine a lot and that perhaps you would match with her.”

Amos shook his head slowly. “Gossip affects us all, I’m afraid.”

Beatrice offered a weak smile. While she enjoyed his company she had enough of this day and longed for her room and the quiet.

“You didn’t answer my question.” He continued.

“I did not.”

“Why not?” He asked with a tilt to his head.

“Because I don’t want to lie to you. I feel that we could be great friends and I don’t want to start off on the wrong foot.” Beatrice bit her lip and dropped her eyes to the ground as they continued to walk.



“I appreciate your honesty.” He said with an easy smile. “So let me reciprocate. Both of us know your mother’s intentions of asking me here. And while I would be honored otherwise to throw my hat into the ring, so to speak, I must be honest with you.”

Beatrice tilted her head to meet Amos’s eyes.

“If we were to wed it wouldn’t be a conventional marriage.”

She furrowed her eyebrows. “How do you mean?”

Amos’s head wavered back and forth. “I won’t be able to offer you romantic love both in feelings and in, uh, the physical sense.”

Beatrice considered his words. “My parents relationship started without romantic feelings. According to Mama, those feelings didn’t fully develop until after their wedding.”

Amos offered her his easy smile again as he rubbed her hand. “I fear that would be impossible. You’re not quite my type.”

Beatrice’s footsteps stuttered. “I’m not a hideous monster.” She wasn’t too proud to admit she felt slighted at his comment

Amos reacted with a laugh. “No, no, no, you misunderstand me. Trust me, you are a very beautiful woman, one of which I get along with, which is a positive. I think we’d get along smashingly as married partners. However, when I say you are not my type, I mean you are not my type. My eyes lie elsewhere.” He drew out his last word hoping Beatrice would catch his meaning.

She stared at him in confusion before his meaning dawned on her. She wasn’t his

type because his type was not female.

Beatrice recalled several same sex couple engaging in sensual situations at the party Graham took her to.

“I see.” It was all Beatrice could think to offer.

“However, in its place I could offer you protection and friendship. You would have the freedom and funds to live how you wished. We would need to be careful for the sake of society, but all in all, you could technically be a married spinster.”

Beatrice’s mind whirled with the possibilities. Having the protection of the Earl’s name was not something to turn down without thought. This changed how she viewed this entire interaction.

“May I take some time to think on it?” She questioned.

Amos’s smile widened. “Absolutely, Lady Beatrice. Your mother knows where to find me.”

Beatrice giggled. “I’ll try to keep her away from your tailor.”

Amos dipped his head. “I would appreciate that greatly.”

CHAPTER 21

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Beatrice slid her arm through Amos's. This was it, the final ball of the season. There were some smaller events happening later in the week, but she finally made it the last official ball of the season.

Beatrice looked up to Amos who was sporting a confident grin as he walked her to the middle of the ballroom.

"Careful, Lady Beatrice," Amos whispered. "Your mother might get the wrong impression about your intentions following this season if she sees you smiling that big."

Beatrice bumped his shoulder as she giggled. It was true, she was smiling and she had to admit she was having a grand time with Amos. He was intelligent, funny, and loved mystery novels almost as much as she did.

The music began just as Amos placed his hand on her waist. It was no wonder her mother always saw him dancing, he started their movement with such grace and elegance.

"Have you given any thought to our last conversation?" Amos asked breezily as he twirled her around to the outside of the circle. The ease in which he did so was astonishing. She had never danced with such a skilled dancer before. Most of the men clopped around, she was lucky to leave a ball with only pained toes.

He isn't the only good dancer I've danced with.

With the thought the movement around her slowed as the air around her changed. It

felt charged, somehow, as if the whole room began to hum with electricity. The hairs on her neck rose as she felt eyes descend on her. Eyes she thought she'd never see again.

Beatrice tried to shake off the sensation and focus on the man moving her back towards the inside circle. She didn't even know if he was there.

“Um, yes, I did. Well, I mean, briefly. There is a lot to consider when you have planned your life to be one way and now there is tempting offer.” She said with a smile.

Amos considered her words. “I understand. I am in no rush, but I know you have a deadline with your mother.”

Beatrice cocked her head. “How do you know about that?”

Amos lifted a shoulder.

She narrowed her eyes at him. “What did my mother bribe you with this time?”

Amos threw his head back and laughed. “She is a brazen thing, isn't she? No. No bribery, or hostage situation, she just mentioned if I could try a bit harder to convince you to take my offer she would appreciate it.”

Beatrice turned towards where she last saw her mother. She was still there, speaking with a friend and throwing happy glances their way.

“Does she know... about you?” Beatrice whispered.

Amos lightly shook his head and dropped his voice. “I only tell those I need to.”

Beatrice looked back up to him. “But you barely knew me when you told me.”

Amos shrugged again. “I told you I am a good judge of character. Was I right to trust you?”

Beatrice shook her head quickly. “Yes.”

Amos gestured to her mother. “Am I wrong not to trust her?”

Beatrice followed his line of sight and saw her mother and another woman flitting their fans in front of their faces, the tell-tale-sign of spreading gossip.

Beatrice grimaced. “I love my mother dearly. But, no, you were not wrong not to trust her.”

Amos gave a small smile. “But I trust you.”

Beatrice looked back up to him and felt some relief. Her grief has subsided in some manner, she no longer spent more time crying than not and she owed that to Amos. He bought her favorite chocolates, gifted her with a new book, and had been pleasant company throughout all of this.

“I am humbled by your trust, my Lord.”

Amos smiled as the music reached its final notes. “I think you can call me Amos if you’d like.”

Beatrice’s smile warmed. “That would be lovely... Amos.”

Amos brought her hand up to his mouth and placed a chaste kiss on her wrist.

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It would have been a nice gesture had Graham not been standing behind Amos. As Amos lowered to kiss her hand, Beatrice's eyes landed on Graham.

Her world tilted and she lost her breath.

His green eyes had gone dark as they narrowed in on her. His posture was that of an animal ready to pounce. Pure rage pumped off of him in waves.

Amos righted himself and must have saw the distress on her face.

"Beatrice? Is everything all right?"

She couldn't speak, she continued to stare through Amos, directly in the Duke's direction.

"Come, let's get you some punch. It's hot in here. Perhaps you just need a break."

She tried to lick her dry her lips, but it did no good, her mouth was just as dry. Beatrice let Amos take her to the refreshment table and gratefully accepted the cup of punch.

She drank it until it was all gone.

"My. You must have been thirsty." Amos said, looking her over, making sure she was stable. "What happened? You just went white."

Beatrice opened her mouth when a shadow darkened the spot next to her.

“Lady Beatrice.” Graham stated.

Beatrice looked up to him. Her heart was beating so quickly, she couldn’t hear over the thumping in her chest.

“Your Grace, it is nice to see you.”

Graham barely acknowledged Amos.

“I hear your business with Stoleton is going well.” Amos offered his hand which was ignored by the Duke.

Beatrice and Graham stood in silence as they stared at each other. Amos’s eyes bounced between the two of them.

“Why do I feel like I’m interrupting a conversation?” Amos asked eyeing both of them suspiciously.

“What was that?” Graham asked.

Amos lifted his hands. “Nothing, Your Grace.” He took Beatrice by the elbow. “Would you like to get some air, Beatrice?”

Graham bristled at the common use of her name without her title.

“Actually, I was coming over here to ask if Lady Beatrice would like a dance.”

Beatrice’s eyes widened. “You were?”

Graham rocked back on his heels. “Yes.” He finally looked at Amos. “Do you mind Duncary?”

He didn't wait for a response but grabbed Beatrice by the arm and led her to the dance floor.

Beatrice's head began to swim. She looked back to Amos who stood there with a peculiar look on his face. She mouthed the words "I'm sorry," to which he waved her off and rose his glass to her. He toasted her with a smile as Graham turned to her in the middle of the ballroom.

Beatrice swallowed as her eyes drifted up his body. Could this be real? Is she really doing this?

Her heart and mind were at war. Her heart missed being in his presence, while her mind was still reeling from the way he kicked her out of his house.

Her mind won.

Anger overtook the hurt as her eyebrows furrowed in frustration.



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“Who do you think you are coming in here and demanding a dance with me?”

Graham quirked an eye brow. “I did no such thing. I simply said I was going to ask you to dance, in fact, I don’t think I even asked.” His eyes went to Amos who was still standing there, comfortably watching them. “I asked Duncary, but I didn’t ask you.”

Beatrice scowled. “Exactly. You didn’t ask me, you pulled me out here like some barbarian.”

Graham smiled wickedly. “A barbarian would throw you over his shoulder.” He thought for a moment. “Which I guess we could try later, if you’d like.”

Beatrice stumbled at his suggestion. “How dare you”

Graham shrugged. “What? Just because our arrangement is over doesn’t mean-”

Beatrice shook her head as tears swelled in her eyes. “Do not finish that sentence.”

Graham studied her expression carefully. He was blissfully silent for a few moments while Beatrice’s mind wavered between finishing this dance with dignity or just running from the dancefloor. No. That wouldn’t do. It would cause a scene and put her relationship with the Duke back into question with the gossipmongers.

“You’re thinking.” Graham stated plainly.

Beatrice scowled. She forgot how well he could read her.

“Why did you want to dance with me? You’ve already made it perfectly clear what you think of me. I am of no consequence to you.”

Graham’s eye brows rose. “Ah. See that’s where you are wrong. You are of great consequence, little mouse. Which was why I reacted the way I did. But I was right, you are not for me.”

Beatrice had heard those words from him before, yet they hurt just as much as the first time. She opened her mouth to question why insisted on dancing with her when his words stopped her short.

“But you are not for Duncary either.”

Beatrice’s eyes flew to Graham’s, whose have hardened since the beginning of their dance.

“What do you mean?” Did Graham know about Amos’s proclivities? She didn’t know if she was going to take his offer, but she didn’t want to see harm come to him either way.

“You are too strong to be tied down. You are too beautiful to sit on someone’s shelf. You will not be happy with him.”

Beatrice lifted her chin. “That is none of your concern.” She sniffed.

Graham’s jaw ticked. “My concern or not I know you, mouse. I know you don’t want this, him.” His head motioned to where Amos was standing, now talking with friends.

Beatrice’s body warmed when he used his pet name for her. She tried cooling her body by recalling the utter humiliation and embarrassment this man had caused her. However, every time her mind replayed her sleepless nights full of tears, her body

remembered how his touch felt, how passionate his kisses were.

This time the war between her heart and mind didn't have a clear victor.

Graham lowered his head to whisper in her ear. "You once agreed to do everything I asked of you. I'm asking you not to do this." His voice was low, his warm breath sent tingles down her spine.

Her body and heart yearned to lean into him, while her mind finally pushed through with their very last conversation.

"I don't understand. Do you not like that?"

"No. I enjoy it very much. But..."

"Not from me."

Beatrice cowered within his hold. She felt the floor give out from underneath her as her mind replayed that scene over and over again. It was something she wished she could edit from the story of his life, but she feared she was doomed to relive it over and over again.

"You gave up that privilege the night you dismissed me from your home." She swallowed back the tears as she stepped back from him.

"Thank you for the dance, Your Grace." She dipped her head and walked back towards Amos.

Amos watched as Beatrice walked away from him and directly to Duncary. His body leaned, ready to stalk over to them and demand they not go any further with this charade.

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He held his hands behind his back, hoping to stop himself from doing anything stupid to the man. It took all of his strength not to lay hands the blasted Duncary when he asked for a dance with Beatrice.

Seeing them together was too much for him to handle. He thought enough time had passed that he would be able to be around her without consequence.

He was wrong. If anything, it only made it worse. As he stood there, watching her whisper something in Duncary's ear Graham's body tightened with tension. She left Duncary's side and went out on the veranda. His eyes drifted back to Duncary who was looking at him with a smirk on his face before turning to talk to a friend.

Graham's eyes flew back to the veranda's door.

She's out there by herself.

Without another thought Graham found himself walking through the veranda door. He stopped short when he found the veranda empty.

He walked to the outer wall and peered out over the sprawled out gardens.

There!

Beatrice was walking on a path that led to a fountain. Graham trailed her and waited until she sat on the bench and took a deep breath.

"I thought you knew better than to wonder by yourself at night." He said as he

stepped up to the bench she was sitting on.

Beatrice rolled her eyes as she groaned. “For someone who wants nothing to do with me, you are certainly going out of your way to seek me out.” She grumbled.

Feisty. He liked her this way.

“The ending to our arrangement did not go as either of us planned.” He started.

Beatrice looked up with a pointed look.

“But that does not mean that I do not care for you.” He sat down next to her on the bench.

She immediately jumped up. “No. I cannot do this. Not now. Not with you.”

Graham was surprised by her outburst. “I can’t sit with you?”

She pulled her arms over her chest, closing herself to Graham. He felt a sharp pain in his chest at her reaction. She looked so fragile standing in the moonlight.

I did this to her. See? You can’t stop hurting people.

Graham rolled his lips. He was not used to having conflicting feelings. He rested his elbows on his knees and hung his head. This was why he had his own list of do’s and don’t’s with one of them being no repeated dalliances with the same woman.

Attachment, from either side, was not something he handled well. Except, it was usually the woman who became attached. This time, he had a sneaking suspicion that he was just as guilty.

That did not sit well with him.

“I’m sorry, Beatrice. I wish things were different.” He offered.

Beatrice cut his useless words off with a laugh.

“Just stop.” She pleaded. “Enough with this game of acting like you are doing me a favor. You said your peace weeks ago, I have moved on. Isn’t that what you wanted?”

Graham rubbed his hands on his face. “Yes. No.” He sat up. “I don’t know any more.”

Beatrice dropped her hands to her side. Utter defeat and exhaustion colored her expression.

“Are you saying you didn’t want me to move on?” Her eyebrows rose in question. “What? Am I supposed to be like a little puppy and pine for you with no reciprocation?”

Graham looked to her. “You pined for me?”

He couldn’t help it. Knowing that he wasn’t the only one in turmoil these past weeks soothed a little part of his soul.

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Beatrice shook her head in disbelief. “Unbelievable. That’s what you’re focusing on? Not on how you acted? There is a give-and-take amongst friends, amongst those we care about. There was no ‘give’ with you, only ‘take’ and I can’t give any more.”

She brought her hands up to her face to wipe the tears that began to flow freely. Seeing her cry changed something within Graham. He jumped up from the bench and went to her, cradling her head in his hands.

“This is why we can’t be together. Look at what I do to you.” He whispered as he wiped a tear away with his knuckle.

Beatrice looked up to him as she pushed him away. “Stop. You’re a man. If you are sorry about it, fix it. You can stop it if you want to.” Her voice was harsh and her words direct.

Graham ran his hands through his hair. “Do you think I like knowing that I hurt you?”

Beatrice shook her head defiantly. “I think you do!”

Graham took a step away, turned back and opened his mouth, only to close it again. This woman had gotten under his skin like no one else. And she wasn’t afraid to tell put him in his place, which something he was not used to.

He usually found it refreshing when she exercised her strength. Tonight he found it frustrating.

“As if it’s a switch?” He chided. “It’s because I care about you that I hurt you, don’t you see that?”

Beatrice stood dumbfounded. “That was the dumbest thing I’ve ever heard.”

Graham ran his hands through his hair again and growled. “Must you be so insufferable?” He dropped his head back and bellowed into the night sky.

He turned to Beatrice when silence answered him instead of her. She stood, looking at him with a knowing look on her face. He knew her well enough to know that she felt powerful in that moment. And she was right to feel that way.

Graham was not one to show emotion and he just exposed himself to her. He rarely lost his cool and when he did it never was because of a woman.

He stood with his hands on his hips, looking back at her.

The two were in a standoff, both waiting for the other to make a move.

She took in a deep breath and released it. “What do you want from me, Your Grace?” Her voice had become tired and strained. “You tell me to go, I go.” She looked resolved, exhausted, but steadfast. She looked more in control of her emotions than he felt right now.

What was happening to him? Nothing reached him emotionally, he carefully created his persona to be impenetrable for this exact reason.

He said nothing. There was nothing he could say. His actions confused him just as much as they confused her.

She scoffed as she wiped the last tear from her face. With a shake of her head she



picked up her skirts. She got just past him when Graham's arm reacted without thinking.

He reached out, grabbed her and pulled her in. His mouth crashed hers. Much to his surprise she didn't fight back. Her hands immediately found purchase in his hair. He welcomed her nails as she scraped against his scalp sending jolts of electricity down his spine.

Heaven help him, but he missed this. He missed her. His tongue clashed with hers causing Beatrice to moan against him. His hold tightened against her.

Damn if she didn't feel perfect against him.

His hands went back to her face to tilt her head to deepen the kiss. His fingers brushed against her cheeks where he felt the dampness from her fallen tears.

Reality came crashing down on him. He hurt her. He would always hurt her. She has too much to offer this world to let his issues bring her down. She deserved someone who would champion her, someone who could meet her strengths and use them to push her even further. He would only drag her down with his own insecurities.

He pulled away suddenly, causing Beatrice to stumble forward.

"I was wrong." His words felt like gravel on his tongue.

The hope in her eyes numbed his senses.

"You were?" Her question squeaked, much like a mouse. He smiled slightly at the connection.

"You should marry Duncary. He will be an excellent match for you."

Beatrice shook her head in confusion. “N-n-no.” Her hands tightened on his lapels.

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He removed them as gently as he could. “As if we needed any more proof that I am not the man for you this night should have quelled that need.”

He watched as the realization settled within her. He dropped his gaze, he couldn't bear to see her hurt any more.

Beatrice looked back to the veranda then back to him. She pointed to the ball. “If I go back in there, that's it. This,” her finger wagged between them, “whatever this is between us is over.”

Graham nodded as he cleared his throat. “As it should be.” He nodded towards the ballroom. “Go on. I'm sure Duncary is wondering where you are.”

Beatrice took another breath and turned. Her steps started slow but quickened in time. He watched with his heart in his throat as she began to run back towards the ballroom.

He was right. He did this for her. She'll see that in time, she had to. Their situation got away from both of them. Hell, Frederic was right. But, now it's done. She'll marry Duncary, and he'll go on with his life.

So why was he still staring at the door to the ball room wanting to go back in and carry her out over his shoulder?

## CHAPTER 22

“Is everything suitable to your needs, Lady Beatrice?”

Amos's question brought Beatrice's attention back from her wondering. She looked down at the tea cup in her hand. It took every ounce of strength she had to get out of the house this morning and accept the invitation for tea.

If it weren't for her mother and Candace constantly pushing her to get out she would still be stuck in her room, wallowing in self pity.

"Oh yes, Lord Duncary, everything is most pleasant." She forced out. "Thank you for inviting my mother and I over for tea." Her eyes drifted to the charming parlor. "You have a lovely home."

A soft smile graced Amos's lips as he took in his parlor. "Thank you. I spend a lot of time traveling and I like to bring a little piece of the world with me when I return. It also helps calm me when I start to get that itch to travel again. If timing isn't right, I can come in here and the memories of past travels soothe me."

Charlotte sighed contently. "That is a wonderful sentiment, isn't it Beatrice?" Her weighty question forced Beatrice to look her way. Her mother's eyes were pleading with hers to engage in the conversation.

Beatrice nodded silently as her eyes fell to a small bowl with gold lines threaded throughout it.

"It is." Her head nodded to the bowl. "That is a beautiful bowl. Where is it from?"

Amos's eyes lit up. "You have a good eye, Lady Beatrice. That is one of my favorites." He stood and walked over to the bowl. He picked it up and handed it to her, ever so carefully.

"I got it from my travels to Japan. It is a remarkable tradition of Kintsugi, the art of using gold to fix broken things. The belief behind the practice is that nothing is truly

broken and sometimes, in fixing it, the object can actually become more valuable and unique.”

Beatrice traced the lines of gold that ran across the porcelain. The ancient practice was right. While it was a beautiful bowl to begin with, the connecting lines of gold added depth and meaning to an otherwise normal looking bowl.

She lifted her eyes to Amos. “That is beautiful.”

Amos lowered his eyes and cleared his throat as he took the bowl back from Beatrice. “Would you like to talk a walk, Lady Beatrice? It’s a pleasant day and I would love to show you the gardens. They don’t rival your mother’s or sisters, as it’s just me here, but I find solace in them when I am down.”

Beatrice rolled her lips. “You are very astute, Lord Dunary. I apologize, I seem to carry an air of melancholy wherever I go these days.”

Charlotte bristled and groaned to herself. “Beatrice.” She muttered.

Amos waved her mother’s worry off. “No need to apologize, Lady Beatrice. We all have those days. Fresh air can help. If you don’t mind I would love to test that theory with you.”

He extended his hand in such a gentle manner Beatrice couldn’t help but take the offered hand.

“How kind of you to understand, Lord Duncary. I would love to take a walk.”

“Amos.” He supplied.

Beatrice looked up quizzically. “Hmm?”

“Amos. I would be honored if you called me by my given name.”

Beatrice smiled. “Amos.”

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She slipped her hand through his offered arm and allowed him to escort her outside to his garden.

It wasn't as big as Sarah's or as luscious as her mother's but it was a quaint patch of land that gave the air of tranquility in the middle of a bustling city.

"I hope you don't find me too forward but is there anything I can do, other than getting you outside in fresh air, that may help boost your spirits?"

Beatrice furrowed her brows. "I really am sorry I am not fit for socializing lately. You have been most kind and patient with me. My mother was ready to disown me if I didn't accept your invitation."

Amos chuckled. "We've already established how well motivated your mother is. If I was a betting man I would put my money on her."

Beatrice laughed. "I wouldn't blame you."

They walked in compatible silence for a few steps.

"Amos," Beatrice voice was hesitant. "May I ask you something? It may be too personal, but I'm curious."

Amos lifted a shoulder. "For you, I am an open book. Ask away."

Beatrice took a breath as she looked over the hydrangea bushes that lined this part walkway. "Have you ever been in love?"

Amos was quiet for a moment. Beatrice was afraid to look at him for fear of offending him. She opened her mouth to dismiss her question when Amos sighed.

“I have been.” He said then leaned down to whisper in her ear. “I don’t recommend it.”

Beatrice laughed at his comment, relief flooding through her. “Why not?”

Amos considered her words. “Love is everything that is good and everything that is bad. When it’s good it’s the best feeling in the world, nothing can top it. It energizes you, fuels you, gives you a purpose to wake up.”

His eyes met hers before dropping to the ground in front of them. “And when it’s bad, it feels as if the ground has been ripped out from underneath you. Everything hurts. The sun hurts your eyes, your clothes feel funny, air coming into your lungs can even feel like razor blades.”

Beatrice scrunched her nose. “Are you sure you just didn’t get a bad head cold?” She laughed, hoping to ease any pain she just caused.

Amos laugh held no mirth. He lifted his eyes to focus on a distant spot on the horizon only he could see. “I would take a bad cold over love any day. I have survived many colds, I don’t think I could survive another love.”

Beatrice’s heart broke for her friend. While she was glad that there was no pressure to be anything more with him, she hated to see such heavy sorrow within his eyes.

“Now, may I ask you a question?”

Beatrice huffed a sigh. “I suppose, an eye for an eye and all that.” A corner of her lip quirked up into a small smile.



Beatrice held her breath hoping it wouldn't be a follow up to her question. What if he asked if she had ever been in love? What if he asks with whom?

“If I propose, would you accept?”

Beatrice pushed out the breath she was holding. “That was not what I thought you were going to ask.”

Amos chuckled as his eyes washed over her. “I don't feel you're ready to admit what you're feeling.”

Beatrice's brows furrowed. “How do you mean?”

Amos shrugged. “It's just I've been where you are. You're hurting and you don't know why. But I do.”

Beatrice chewed on her bottom lip. “Care to enlighten me? Perhaps I can move past whatever it is that I'm feeling.”

Amos smiled lightly. “If only it were that easy. I fear I cannot be the gold that glues you back together. But I can help you pick up the pieces. When you're ready I think you'll be able to bond yourself back better than ever.”

She rose an eyebrow. “Do you always speak so cryptically? I may have to reconsider my answer.”

Amos's eyes widened in glee. “Ah. So you have thought of what your answer would be if I were to ask.”

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Beatrice nudged her shoulder with his as they continued to walk. “I have thought about it but I have not settled on my answer yet.”

Amos lifted his free hand to his heart. “Oh, how I love that little word, ‘yet.’”

Beatrice couldn’t help but laugh. Their friendship was easy, they had a natural connection that didn’t take work to uphold. She could see herself having a life with Amos. It wouldn’t be what she thought her life would be like, of course, but she would have a companion and the safety and security of his name.

Marrying him would give her the ability to live her life as a spinster, but with more freedoms than a woman who was shelved by the ton.

“Well, just remember, it is a lady’s prerogative to change her mind.” She said with a flutter of her eyelashes.

Amos laughed at her coquettish smile. “I promise you, Lady Beatrice, our life together would be filled with adventures and laughter. What more could you ask for?”

Beatrice smiled up at Amos while her heart sank at his sentiment.

What more could she ask for?

There was only one thing she could think of, and only one man who she would want it from.

Beatrice sat at her dresser brushing her hair. She had already finished the book she just started that morning, she wrote to both of her sisters and reorganized her closet. She put the brush down and looked at her father's time piece.

One in the morning.

She pushed away from the dresser and walked the length of her room. She could start another book but it would be useless. Her mind could no longer focus on anything other than her talk with Amos.

What more could she ask for?

If she would have gotten this offer from Amos two months ago she might have balked at the idea of marrying someone, but once she'd come to know him she'd see that his offer was too good to turn down.

So, why was she hesitating now?

Beatrice stopped and looked at herself in the mirror. She brought her hand up to cheeks. Dark circles had settled underneath her eyes and her complexion looked pale. She ran her fingers down her cheeks, onto her neck and settled at the neckline of her shift.

Goosebumps erupted across her body at her movement and dark eyes flashed in her mind.

"Ugh. That man." She stomped. "This is all because of him. I wish I never met him!"

Regardless of her words her body began to hum with the memory of his touch. Beatrice didn't know whether to be turned on or annoyed.

She settled with annoyed.

She threw herself onto her bed and covered her head with a pillow.

I wish I never ran into him that night. I wish I never dropped my list.

Beatrice sat up.

My list.

She still wanted to finish her list. She assumed her and Amos would consummate the marriage, but she was still adamant of exploring that part of womanhood before she became tied down to one man. And considering that man had his eye elsewhere, Beatrice wanted to know what it was like to lie with a man who was just as interested as she was.

Beatrice hopped off of her bed and threw open her closet doors. Her hands landed on her black cloak she'd wear when sneaking out.

She stuck her hand in the pocket and felt the heavy card stock that was tucked away in it. The invitation that Graham had procured for her. He had said that as long as he was with her they'd let her in. But perhaps they'd let her in with just the invitation?

She turned it over in her hand. "Hopefully there's not an expiration date on this thing."

She shoved it back in the pocket and swung the cloak over her shoulders. With one quick look in the mirror she saw the color return to her face.

Her eyes beamed brightly back at her as a rush of energy coursed through her veins. Finally, after days of moping she felt like herself again. The rebellious and brave

heroine was ready to finally go on her last conquest.

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Beatrice opened her door and looked down the barren hallway. A cunning smile formed as she tip-toed down the quiet hallway, with only the nightly shadows accompanying her on her adventure.

She slipped out the back door and down to the main road. She didn't need to think of the route, her body knew the way. It wasn't long before she found herself standing in front of the door to the midnight party that Graham brought her to.

The same mammoth of a man was standing outside the door. "Ah, mistress, I see you have returned."

She pulled out the invitation but he waved her off.

"No need, mistress." He stepped to the side and opened the door. "You've been accepted into this house before. You are a Reveler now."

Anticipation and excitement rose within Beatrice. She honestly thought her feet were going to leave the ground as she skittered past the doorman with a squeal and a nod of 'thanks.'

Her steps skidded to a halt when the reality of the occasion came crashing down on her.

Heads turned at her abrupt arrival. Curious looks, coy whispers, and someone even licked his lips when he looked at her.

Beatrice swallowed hard as her mind and body fought over whether this was a

mistake or not.

Beatrice dipped her head and made her way to a makeshift bar just off to the right of the door.

“Looking for love, mistress?” A woman behind the bar asked.

Beatrice looked up from underneath her hood to find kind, yet curious, eyes looking back at her.

Beatrice lowered her hood and shook her head.

“I don’t want love. I just want to feel something.”

The woman’s lips widened. “Good. We can’t help with the first one, but I’m sure someone can help you with the latter.”

## CHAPTER 23

“What are you doing here?” Ezra’s eyes darkened as they focused in on his brother-in-law standing in the doorway.

Frederic raised his hands to his sides. “Not what you think I assure you. Your sister knows I’m here.”

The thought of his sister being at one of the Reveler’s midnight parties turned his blood cold. “Is she here?”

Frederic’s laugh bounced off the walls in the small room. “Heavens, no, what are you? Mad?”

Ezra rubbed his face. It was too late in the night to deal with Frederic. “Then why are you here?”

“I’ve been trying to track down Slatington. He owes me money and the bugger keeps forgetting to bring it to our meetings so I figured he’d be well stocked here.” Frederic leaned against the door jamb in a nonchalant way that had Ezra grinding his back molars.

“I heard there was a game going on in one of the back rooms tonight and that he’d be in attendance. Imagine my surprise to find you in one of these back rooms. Waiting for someone?”

Frederic’s raised his eye brow added to the cheekiness of his grin. Ezra rolled his eyes and groaned.

“I was. Now, if you’d leave me be you probably scared her off.”

Frederic looked around the empty room. “Aw, your usual girls wouldn’t be so picky. Most were up for the challenge, eh?” Frederic laughed. “You could always do it by yourself but-”

“Will you just leave?” Ezra bellowed.

Something about Frederic reminding him of his old ways grated him the wrong way. He didn’t like remembering those lost nights of random women with no ties, no emotion. He used to crave only that, but now, something had changed.

He refocused his rage onto his brother-in-law.

“You barged in here and disrupt my night. If you must know, I wanted to make sure this room was empty before I brought someone in here. Unlike you I find it rude to



just walk through closed doors.” He said with a sniff.

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Frederic chuckled. “Funny you should talk propriety in a place like this.”

Ezra’s head began to throb, a known reaction caused by spending too much time with Frederic. “Honestly, Frederic, I don’t have time for this or you. Now, be gone so I can unwind.”

Frederic remained unmoved. “Something troubling you, Ezra? Or, should I say, someone?”

Ezra huffed. “You know what? You have this room. I’ll find another.”

Ezra nearly knocked Frederic over as he barreled out of the room and down towards the main room. He needed another drink.

He came here tonight hoping to find someone who would help erase the memory of Beatrice from his mind.

Everywhere he went he thought he saw her, smelled her, heard her. She was in the crowds at the opera, she was smelling the flowers in the park. He found no refuge at night, her melodic laugh haunted his dreams and caused him to suddenly awake drenched in sweat and lust.

He passed several women who extended their hands, trying to pull his focus from his path to the bar.

“Ah, kind sir, wouldn’t you like to join us in here?” A voluptuous blonde pulled at his arm while her friend stepped in front of him.

“Two for one, kind sir.” She said with a wink behind her mask.

Ezra stopped and looked at the women. Both beautiful with bodies he would normally find enticing but he felt no attraction.

He frowned. “Not tonight, ladies. I appreciate the invitation. Perhaps another time.”

The lie tasted like sand on his tongue. There wouldn’t be another time. Perhaps, like Frederic, he has outgrown these parties. Only, Frederic outgrew them due to his marriage. Ezra wasn’t married, had no intention of doing so, so then why did this no longer whet his appetite?

He side stepped the two women as his heart thudded against his chest and he ignored it. A small part of him had suspicions as to why he had a change of heart, but he refused to acknowledge it. Much for his sanity than anything. He was too far set in his ways to let anything, or anyone for that matter, change his perspective.

He made his way down the hallway and stepped into the main room. The lights were dim and couples had paired off on various chairs and sofas. There was a small group in the one corner laughing and clinking their drinks together, sloshing their drinks onto themselves and the floor.

Ezra avoided that group as he made his way towards the bar tucked in the front corner. Has it always been this loud and raucous here?

That’s when he heard it. Her. More precisely, her laugh. The sound stopped him dead in his tracks. Surely he was hearing things. His eyes quickly skimmed the room and landed on the corner group that had several women giggling. One of them must have a similar laugh to hers.

His feet began to move when he heard her laugh ring out again. His pulse picked up

and a sixth sense was telling him he wasn't imagining it.

He looked back to the group in the corner, the sound wasn't coming from them. It was coming from the front of the house. Ezra stepped over lounging bodies, and snuggling pairs and made his way to the front of the house.

Ezra stood staring at the bar. A lone figure sat on a stool in front of the bar. He knew that cloak.

It was large, black, and unremarkable in any way other yet he knew, without a shadow of a doubt, whose body it was covering. His fingers itched to reach out and grab it, to hold a piece of it, her.

He tightened his hands into fists as the realization dawned on him that if that cloak is hers, that meant that she was here, alone, without him. Even worse, what if she wasn't here alone? What if she was here with someone?

The thought fueled his steps as he charged up to the bar.

"Looking for love, mistress?"

Ezra heard the woman's question as the cloaked figure lowered the hood. Long brown locks cascaded down the seated woman's back. Ezra's mouth ran dry as his footsteps once again halted. Flashes of their time together at Swarthmore's played in his head. His stomach squeezed at the memory of feeling so carefree and at ease with her that night.

He missed what her answer was so he stepped closer. He wanted to reach out and grab her, demand to know why she was here. But a part of him thought she was a mirage. He had envisioned her so many places over the past week he couldn't be positive it was truly here even within feet of her person.

“Good. We can’t help with the first one, but I’m sure someone can help you with the latter.”

Beatrice laughed and the sound settled over him like a warm blanket. He was within reaching distance. All he had to do was extend his arm and he could touch her but something was holding him back.

“Looks like we may have a volunteer. Lucky girl.” The bar maid cooed as she motioned her head to Beatrice’s right.

“I don’t think the mistress will be here long enough for anyone else to volunteer.” A man stepped up on the other side of Beatrice pulling her focus.

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Ezra stood dumbfounded as he watched as another man reached out and caressed her cheek.

Did she sigh into his hand?

“You’re too kind, sir. But I think I will just sit here and acclimate myself to the surroundings a bit more before I join in any fun.”

Ezra was torn between being proud of his mouse being able to ward off unwanted advances, and wanting to reach across her and toss the louse out of the house.

“Come now, puppet. The night is young and so are we. Why wait when the fun can start now?”

The man leaned over here causing Beatrice to lean away from him. “If you would like to have a fun night I suggest you back up or you won’t have much to participate with.”

Ezra quirked an eye brow. His eyes looked over the scene in front of him and it was then he noticed Beatrice was holding something long and sliver against the man’s groin.

The man’s face drained of color as he stepped back with his hands raised. “No need for a problem, mistress. I was only suggesting...”

“So was I.” Beatrice said with a bright smile.

The man dipped his head and retreated back to the group in the corner. He knew he didn't like those people.

He returned his focus to the two women at the bar who were now sharing a laugh. Beatrice turned in her stool and hopped off. She raised her head and within seconds their eyes connected.

"Your Grace!" Her voice squeaked.

"Mouse."

Beatrice's eyes flew open. "What are you doing here?"

Graham cocked his head to the side. "I could be asking you the same question, but I think we both know the answer to that."

Beatrice's cheeks heated but she refused to drop her eyes. She was a grown woman, on the verge of being married, she had every right to claim something for her own before she took her vows. Men did it all the time, why couldn't women?

"We do. So, if you'll excuse me, I'll be on my way and you can be on yours."

Beatrice refused to acknowledge the thought of him being here with another woman hurt her, especially since she was here to be with another man.

Another fact she refused to acknowledge was the small part of her was hoping he would be here to intercept her night and finally give her what she wanted from him.

However, instead a night of passionate lovemaking with him they were currently in a heated staring contest, with both of them refusing to be the first to flinch.

“You’re not going anywhere, Mouse.” He snarled.

Beatrice clucked her tongue. “You’re no longer in charge of me.”

Graham licked his lips as he cracked his neck. “Is that a challenge?”

Beatrice’s whole body came alive in response. Colors became more vivid, sounds were more acute. Her body temperature rose and her clothes began to itch.

“And if it is?” She quirked an eyebrow.

Her world was turned upside down as he hoisted her over her shoulder and carried her out of the house.

He placed her down when his carriage pulled up.

“You know, you need to stop carrying me around like that here. People are going to think I don’t know how to walk.”

Graham ignored her as he pulled her into the carriage and hit the roof signaling his drive to go.

“So is this it then? You carry me out here like a cave man and say nothing?”



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She reached her hand out of the carriage and slapped on the hood. To both of their surprise the carriage stopped.

She smirked as she reached for the door. Graham's hand shot out and stopped her. His other hand hit the roof and he barked out, "Go!"

Once again the carriage began its journey, bumping along the back roads of the city.

Graham sat still, his outstretched hand still holding hers, his eyes never dropping contact.

Beatrice licked her dry lips. Tension was pulsing off of him in waves. She hated not knowing where she stood with him.

She thought he was done with her but right now his eyes were telling a different story.

"You should not have been there. What were you thinking?" He ground out.

His voice was low and menacing but he finally released her hand. She cradled her hand against her chest, rubbing where he held it. It didn't hurt, but the loss of his touch was unbearable.

"I was thinking I had one last item to check off my list."

Graham laughed dryly. "That blasted list."

“It means something to me.”

“Your ruination?” His eyes were cold and black.

Beatrice laughed as she shrugged her shoulders. “Ruination means nothing to a spinster.”

“You could have been hurt. You are no where near ready to handle a party like that on your own.”

“I thought I handled myself just fine.” She pulled out the letter opener she held against the man. “I started carrying this with me after the first night we met. I figured if nothing else I should carry some sort of protection with me.”

Graham rubbed his temples as he leaned his head back against the seat. “You think a letter opener would stop a man from getting what he wants?”

“Well, if he was someone like you I think just offering something he wants would cause him to run for the hills.” She chided.

Graham looked on in stunned silence that had Beatrice smiling. “You can say you don’t want me, that’s fine if you want to lie to yourself. You once told me you know how to kiss without it meaning anything to you. I was naive enough to believe it.”

Her eyes drifted over him. His body was stiff and on edge, energy simmered along his skin, he was like a cornered animal waiting for the right time to pounce.

“But you can’t tell me you felt nothing during our last kiss. If you didn’t, I wouldn’t be sitting here.”

“That’s preposterous.” He snapped.

“Then tell me, Your Grace, why am I sitting here? In your carriage?” She peeked outside at the passing scenery. “Presumably going to your house?”

Beatrice watched as Graham’s cravat bobbed with his swallow.

She sighed. “It doesn’t matter. I think you should know that I have agreed to marry Amos.”

Beatrice had hoped for a slight shift in his demeanor, anything that would signal his opinion on the subject one way or another but the man remained motionless.

“I have no grand fantasies about what my life will be like with him, but I do know he can offer me the safety and security of a married woman with the freedoms of a spinster.” She lifted a shoulder. “It is an offer I cannot refuse. However...”

He shifted in his seat.

She noted the movement and continued. “However, I have not given up on my list. I want to enter into my marriage knowing what it’s like to be with a man. And not just a man who is with me because we’re married. I want...”

Without warning Beatrice’s voice caught in her throat. “I want to know,” she stopped to swallow and regain her composure. “I want to know what it’s like to be with someone who wants me.”

Tears gathered in her eyes. This was her last chance to not only finish her blasted list, but to give herself something that truly mattered to her. The choice to give herself to someone of her choosing, with no rules, no made up society roles, just her and her wishes.

“Please, Your Grace.”

“Ezra.” His voice cracked under the weight of the word. “If we’re going to do this, you’re calling me by my God-given name.”

“Please, Ezra.”

### CHAPTER 24

The carriage jolted to a halt and Ezra pulled her from her seat. Her feet barely touched the ground as he rushed her into the house. When they reached the bottom of the stairs he picked her up and took the steps two at a time.

Beatrice’s heart was racing as she tried to wrap her head around the last twenty minutes of her life. She was determined to end her maidenhood tonight, she just didn’t expect to be in Ezra’s arms when it happened.

Ezra kicked the door closed behind him and placed her down in front of him.

They both stood, caught in each other’s gaze. Afraid to move, Beatrice held her breath. Was this real? Is she really in his bedchamber about to give herself fully to him?

Anticipation and nerves coursed through her veins as her eyes searched his. His eyes were nearly black as he loomed over her, his chest rising and falling rapidly.

Ever so slowly he raised his hand and ran a finger along her jaw down to her neck,

ending at the neckline of her dress. Goosebumps erupted across her skin as electricity ran from his touch to every fiber of her being.

A slow wolfish grin widened his lips at her reaction to his touch.

“Always so responsive, Mouse.” His words slid across her skin like velvet causing her exhale the breath she was holding.

Her eyes fluttered shut as she instinctively tilted her head back, opening herself up for his kiss.

She felt him shift as his breath tickled her neck when he whispered, “I will take you but only for tonight. Do you understand?” He pulled the bow where her cloak was tied and let it fall around her feet.

Her body was thrumming with expectation and need she could barely control her motions. Her head bobbed in acknowledgement as she whimpered against him. Only his one hand was on her but she felt his touch all over her body.

“I need words, Mouse.” He commanded.

“Yes, yes, yes. Only tonight. I can have you for only tonight.” She opened her eyes. “For God’s sake, Ezra, give me tonight.” Her eyes pleaded as her hands climbed up his chest and grabbed hold of his vest. “Now, Ezra. If I only have you for tonight I don’t want to wait any longer..”

Her words ignited something within Ezra. His hands wrapped around her waist and he pulled her in for a crushing kiss.

His tongue pushed through her lips and captured hers in a war for dominance. Both wanted more than they were willing to give. As Ezra pulled at her dress, Beatrice

yanked at his cravat. After too much fumbling from both of them Ezra picked up Beatrice and carried her to the bed, tossing her on the oversized mattress.

He stood over her, chest heaving, eyes dark, body humming with barely controlled emotion. Beatrice laid with her dress half off, exposing her one breast, her hair wild around her, yet, within his gaze, she felt like the most beautiful prize.

Within his dark eyes she saw amazement and wonder. She bit her bottom lip to stop it from quivering. Not out of fear, or chill, but out of anticipation.

Ezra was a large man and she knew he was known for certain proclivities in the bedroom. He could do anything he wanted to her and she could do nothing to stop it.

Her eyes locked in onto his.

Not that she would want to.

She watched as Ezra reached up and deftly removed his cravat, vest and shirt. Standing before her with just his pants on, Beatrice's eyes washed over his lean, yet muscular, frame in front of her. Her fingers stretched, wanting to reach out. She licked her lips, wanting to know what those hard muscles felt like under her touch.

Her eyes widened when his fingers opened his pants and shucked them off with his boots.

Standing in his glory she drank him in. Suddenly her own state of undress wasn't enough. Sensing her displeasure with her clothing he leaned over and tugged her dress off over her head.

Ezra's eyes lit as they took her naked body. Beatrice's body came alive under his perusal. She found empowerment and strength in being watched with such reverence,

yet she desperately wanted him to stop looking at her and start kissing her.

“Eager for me, Little Mouse?” His devilish grin had her blushing, which considering her current state was a bit amusing.

“And if I am?” Her voice but a whisper.

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“It’s exactly how I want you. How I always want you.” With each word he moved closer to her. “I want you eager for me to touch you,” he said as he placed one knee on the bed. “Take you,” his other knee landed in between her legs. “Control you,” he said as he placed his hands on either side of her head to lean over her.

“Are you eager for me?” He asked again.

Beatrice shook her head quickly. “So much it hurts.”

His lips crashed down hers. Her body arched up into his with a moan. Her arms reached up and found purchase in his hair, pulling him down onto her. His lips left hers and trailed down her neck.

“I want all of you, Ezra. If I only have you for tonight I want it all. Don’t hold back.”

Ezra’s lips stopped on her neck and he looked up to her.

“Be careful what you wish for, Mouse. I’m barely holding on so as it is.”

She raised an eyebrow. “Are you saying you’re not up for the task?”

Ezra leaned down and nipped at her breast causing Beatrice to squeal.

“I told you before, Mistress Mouse, I always do what I say, say what I mean, and follow through on my word. You will not leave here in one piece.” He leaned down and nipped at her other breast.



“I will break you apart,” he bit her side causing her to jump. “I will take you to your breaking point over and over again.” He moved to her other side and left a small bite there. “Piece by piece. I will have my fill of you.” He travelled to her stomach, leaving small bite marks in his wake. “And only then I will shatter you.” His lips landed on her center causing her to whimper against his lips. “And you will beg me to do it again. You will not leave this room whole.”

Beatrice’s body was on fire. Between his scandalous words and the way he moved over her body she felt as if she was going to break apart then and there.

His lips sucked and nibbled on her most sensitive of parts as she writhed underneath him.

“Is that what you want, Mouse?” His words were hot against her.

“Yes, yes, please, Ezra.” She pleaded as her hips began to move underneath him.

“Do you want to fall apart underneath me, Mouse?” His tongue swirled around her catapulting her to her precipice.

“Please, Ezra. I can’t... I need...”

“What do you need, hmm? Is it this?” Ezra slipped a finger inside of her and hit her center. Beatrice’s eyes flew open as she gasped. He began to pump his finger in and out of her as he sucked and nibbled.

Beatrice’s blood rushed to her head. She was no longer in control of her body. She dug her heels into the bed as she lifted her hips against his mouth. With a final flick he sent her careening over the edge. Her moans echoed off the walls as she fought to catch her breath.

When she opened her eyes Ezra was leaning over her, looking down into her eyes.

“You are beautiful when you break apart.” His voice was tender and full of awe.

Beatrice smiled. “Then do it again.”

Ezra smirked. “I told you you’d ask for it again.”

He winked as he began to kiss the sensitive spot on her neck causing her to wiggle under his kiss. He settled in between her legs and with his kisses on her neck as a distraction he pushed into her.

Beatrice let out a cry as she adjusted to his length.

“Breathe, Beatrice.” His words were muffled in between his kisses.

On his command she took a deep inhale and pushed it out, feeling her body loosen around him.

“That’s my girl.”

She preened under his praise.

“Are you ready?” He whispered.

“Ready for... oh!”

He began to move his hips, gently at first. Their rhythm was soft and exploratory. Her hands roamed over the hard plains of his back as his tender kisses trailed over her cheeks, neck and breasts.

Soon his movements became more erratic. His hips pushed into her harder and faster. He lifted his head and rested it on her forehead. Ezra’s eyes were set and focused on hers.

“Tell me you’re mine. For tonight, you’re mine. Say it.” He demanded.

“I’m yours, Ezra. I’m yours.” Beatrice said in between her moans and gasps.

At her words he squeezed his eyes shut and moved his hips even harder against her.

Fire burned throughout her body, burning whatever was left of the girl that entered this room. Her body met his rhythm, challenging him to go over the edge with her. She wanted him to be as lost to the moment as she was.

Beatrice snaked a hand into his hair as the other one held onto his shoulder. She pulled at his hair. He let out a moan when she wrapped her legs around his waist and squeezed.

“Ezra,” she cried out. “I’m yours!”

Ezra growled as his body bunched over top of her. Together they reached their peaks.

Each calling out in ecstasy as they hurdled over the edge of euphoria.

She let her legs fall to the side, her soul still trying to find a way back her body. Her eyes fell closed as her breathing started to even itself out. Ezra rolled off of her and gathered her under his arm.

She cuddled against him as he pulled a blanket over them.

An overwhelming sense of emotion washed over Beatrice. She bit her lip to stop it from quivering. How embarrassing that she would respond to such a beautiful and life altering moment with tears!

“Are you well?” He mumbled.

Alarmed Beatrice looked up to him, swatting at her tears. “I don’t know why I’m crying.”

He pulled her back down to rest her head on his chest. “It’s not the worst reaction I’ve had, not the best, either.” He joked.

She laughed into his chest. “Can I ask you a question?”

Ezra nodded.

“Is it always like that?”

Ezra raised an eyebrow. “Like what?”

Beatrice sat up, not caring that she was no longer covered by the blanket. She waved her hands in front of her hoping to catch the correct wording. For someone who reads as much as her, one would think she would have a better handle on her vocabulary.

“Like this,” she waved her hand between them. “So... explosive, all consuming. Euphoric.”

A wide smile danced across his face. “Well, I must say, that is one way to make up for crying. Euphoric, huh?”

Beatrice pushed at his chest. “Stop. You know what I mean. Is it?”

Ezra placed his hands behind his head, accentuating those arm muscles she loved to drool over.

“As much as I would love to take credit for the euphoria alone, I must be honest with you...”

She leaned in waiting for him to continue.

He simply shook his head. “It’s not.”

The words hung heavy between them. She felt like that admission should mean something more. Did it?

“Well, then.” She sighed. “I guess I should be happy I got to experience it then.”

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Ezra solemnly nodded. He sat up and rubbed his jaw. The scar on his hand caught her attention.

She reached out and took his hand in hers, running her finger along the crescent shaped scar. "I saw this the first night we met. It's how I knew it was you at the ball."

Beatrice looked up to him and saw his eyes were fixated on their entwined hands.

He swallowed as his hand flexed in hers.

"I got that protecting my sister." His voice was low and rough.

"Your sister?" Beatrice pulled their hands up to her chest. "What happened?"

Ezra's eyes, still on their hands, softened as he shrugged.

"Nothing I couldn't handle. A lying bastard of a Duke ruined her reputation and I wouldn't stand for it."

Beatrice's breath caught. "Oh my, is she all right?" She racked her brain trying to remember if she knew he had a sister. Her mind was mush from the events of the last few hours, let alone the last few months.

"She's fine." He laughed. "Well, she's now married to my best friend so I'm not sure if you call that fine, but fine enough, I suppose."

Beatrice smiled. "Was it always just you and her?"

Ezra nodded. “My mother didn’t handle my father’s death well so when we lost her Harriet and I were already used to depending on each other. Other than my sister, I have known Frederic and Melinda since I was a boy and they keep me grounded.”

Beatrice’s body tensed at his mention of the widow Collins.

“They were with me that night.” Ezra said absently as he nodded to his hand in hers. “Melinda’s father still owned the tavern and he knew the comings and goings of a lot of people. He heard Damen had a few debts to pay and was trying to find games to cash in on. Frederic and I met him outside of one. He got a few good shots in and I didn’t see the knife. He managed to get my hand and my side.” He said as he shifted showing a slight, sliver line along his side.

Beatrice gasped as she scooted closer to him to inspect the long forgotten scar. “Did it hurt?” She asked as her finger traced the jagged line. She bit her lip to stop from smiling when he shivered under her light touch.

“It tickles.” He mumbled. “And, yes, it hurt at the time. Melinda met us with supplies and got us stitched up, though. Being raised in a tavern she learned first aid at a young age.” He smirked.

Beatrice looked up to him. “What a life you’ve led.” She said in wonderment.

Ezra considered her words. “I did. It hasn’t been easy, but it’s mine. I accept what is given to me.”

Beatrice licked her lips. Nerves and anxiety began to bubble within. She had this need to push the conversation into a direction neither of them wanted it go. She knew tonight was a one time deal, she knew that going in and yet, she couldn’t help herself. This felt like something more.

“Ezra?” She hesitated. Her mind fought her against her heart. This night was perfect, she didn’t want to ruin it. But she couldn’t let this relationship go.

“What is it?” His voice sounded hopeful. Or maybe she just wished it did.

She swallowed the lump that formed in her throat and pushed the words out of a dry mouth. “Why can’t we be more?”

Ezra sighed, leaning his body against his headboard. He closed his eyes. She sat and watched him for a moment. When she realized he wasn’t going to say anything she continued.

“You said yourself that tonight is not like how it usually is. I took that to mean that you’ve never felt that way before.”

His eyes opened at her comment and connected with hers. She waited for his denial, but it never came.

She pushed on. “If it can be like that, why not have that?”

Ezra’s shoulders dropped. “I told you before I can’t be what you need.”

Beatrice sat up with a huff. “I am in charge of what I need. What if I say you are exactly what I need?”

Ezra took her outburst in stride. He remained relaxed against the headboard. “Then I would say you are showing your innocence. The world is a cold and cruel place and you need someone to look out for you, to protect you. I think my history with my sister is proof enough that I am not that man.”

“You’re denying the possibility of something great because of a mistake you made



when you were young?”

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Ezra's jaw ticked. "I knew Damon was no good and I did nothing to stop their courting."

Beatrice snickered. "If she is any girl I know, if she was committed to this Damon than nothing an older brother could say would stop her. Does she blame you for your misgivings?"

Ezra rolled his eyes and shook his head.

"So you blame yourself and have decided that you should live out your life as a miserable old curmudgeon? Ezra. I thought you had more sense than that." She chided.

Ezra sighed as he swung his legs over the bed. He stood and began to gather his clothing. He picked up her ruined dress and put it on his desk. He opened his closet door and pulled out a shirt and pants.

"They'll be a little big, but they'll cover you until we can get you home to your own things."

Beatrice swatted the clothing away. "We're not doing this, Ezra. We're not doing where you dismiss me because you don't want to talk. Answer me. If your sister has moved on and is happy, why can't you be?"

Ezra looked down to his hand and traced the scar. "You fulfilled your list. You stopped at nothing to complete it and I aided, willingly. Why can't you now offer me the same respect?"

Beatrice sat in silence, fighting back the tears she swore she'd never shed for him again.

"I keep my word. I think I've proven that to you. I've kept my word to you, and now it's time I return to the word I promised myself. We said this was for tonight. Tonight is done. Please, Beatrice. Leave this, leave me, be."

Beatrice's heart shattered.

Heat rose in her cheeks and the room swayed in front of her.

"If things could be... if I could be diff-" he cut himself off and ran his hands through his hair. "You deserve more, Beatrice. It's because I care for you that I want more for you. I'm not good enough. Trust my word. It's all I have."

Beatrice looked up to him, standing half dressed in the moonlight. He looked defeated, but resolved. There was no use in fighting him. He was just as stubborn as she was and, he was right.

She knew going in it was only for tonight and tonight was over. Beatrice shook her head and swallowed the lump that popped back up in her throat.

"You're right. I deserve more." Her words were hollow as she put the oversized shirt and pants on.

Ezra placed her cloak around her shoulders and led her down the steps and to his carriage. After giving the driver directions he helped her into the carriage.

"Be well, Beatrice."

He offered no other words of solace or support. Just, "be well."

She shook her head and sat back in the seat. As the carriage pulled away she realized he was right about one other antidote. He shattered her in ways she'll never be able to piece back together. She undoubtedly left a part of herself there, she would never be whole again.

## CHAPTER 25

The next morning Beatrice wrote to Amos inviting him for tea. That evening Beatrice accepted Amos's proposal and she immediately started planning the wedding. Each day Charlotte and her sisters oohed and ahed over table settings, floral arrangements, ribbons and lace.

Beatrice tried her best to fully commit to the event in hopes of soothing her aching heart. Every time her heart squeezed at the memory of Ezra's touch she reminded herself she asked for that night, she must handle the consequences.

After all, she had read countless books of heart aches and each one of them resolved themselves in due time. Of course, most of them ended with the hero returning to the pining woman, but there were a few where the love was lost.

She would have to write her own future. In the light of day Beatrice felt that resolve strong and undeniable. She focused on her wedding plans and enjoyed her time with Amos, thankfully, he had a way of making her feel like it would all work out.

It was her nights when gut-wrenching pain would overtake her body and throw her into the fires of self-doubt and fear. Her body longed for Ezra's touch and her heart called for his. Every morning she woke drenched in sweat only to wash it off and forget about it for the day.

Unfortunately for her, the days only lasted so long and the nights came quickly. She started counting down the days to the wedding, not out of excitement but out of hope

that once she was married her nights wouldn't be so lonely.

She had no misconceptions about how her marriage to Amos would be, but she hoped that at least having someone else with her would help her survive the dark hours.

“What do you think about this for your dress, Beatrice? The light blue will draw out your eyes. Are you sleeping well, love? You have dark smudges under your eyes?” Her mother's rapid fire questions pulled her from her fog.

“I'm sure she's just overly anxious and nervous, Mama.” Sarah chimed in.

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Beatrice blinked back into reality and saw both her sisters and her mother looking at her with concern.

“Sarah’s right, Mama. This feels all so sudden and it can be overwhelming at times. I’m finding sleep is alluding me with all the chaos surrounding my upcoming nuptials.”

Charlotte sat and blinked at her daughter. “Well that sounded well rehearsed. What is going on?”

Beatrice sighed. Her mother was right. If she wasn’t crying she was coming up with responses to questions she knew she’d be asked but wouldn’t have the fortitude to answer.

Yes, that dress is lovely. No, I don’t like lilies. Sarah’s cook will have the perfect menu for the dinner.

She had responses for any question so her mind and heart could focus on the herculean task of moving on from her relationship with Ezra.

Beatrice shrugged.

“Mama, why don’t you and Sarah go check on Mrs. Waters. She said she had prepared some desserts for us to try. Let’s see if she’s done, I can help Beatrice try on these dresses you had sent over. We’ll get this out of the way and join you downstairs to try some of those desserts.”

Charlotte eyed Beatrice but agreed to Eleanor's plan. "All right. You're lucky I adore Mrs. Water's cooking like the rest of you. Let me know what fits and what doesn't. I can send for more options if we need."

Charlotte gave Beatrice one more look over before she kissed her on her cheek and left with Sarah.

Eleanor closed the door behind them and turned to face Beatrice.

"I'm not going to ask, it's none of my business, but if your plan is to look as if you are being tortured and forced down the aisle it's working." Eleanor said with a smirk.

Beatrice flopped face down onto the bed. Her body sunk into the mattress as she sighed.

"Is Amos that bad?" Eleanor asked as she sat next to her.

Beatrice shook her head and turned her face to respond. "No. He's actually quite wonderful. But he's more of a friend than husband material."

Eleanor pursed her lips. "Beatrice. I'm going to ask you a delicate question and you don't need to respond if you don't want to, or if you think you'll be betraying Amos, but I have heard some things, and noticed others, in regards to your betrothed."

Beatrice huffed out a laugh. "I should tell him there are more people than he thinks that know of his secret."

Eleanor cocked her head. "What do you mean by that?"

Beatrice sat up. "If you're hinting at what I think you're hinting at, which is, my soon-to-be-husband's interests in regards to the opposite sex, you'd be right. I have

no misunderstandings about what my marriage to Amos will be like. We will be confidants and partners, nothing else. And I am fine with that. Elated actually.”

Eleanor’s eyes took in Beatrice’s sullen cheeks and pale coloring.

“Yes. I see the joy just radiating off of you.” She said pointedly.

Beatrice scrunched her face. “I am. I may not seem it, but this is actually the best outcome for me. Amos will offer me the safety and security with his title and name and the freedom of a spinster, something I always wanted. Why would I be upset?”

Eleanor remained unconvinced. “Exactly. Why would you be upset?”

Beatrice shrugged.

“So why are you upset?” Eleanor pushed.

“I’m not upset.” Beatrice lashed out as she sat up and crossed her arms.

Eleanor failed at hiding her smile. “Clearly.”

Beatrice dropped her face into her hands. “I’m a little upset.”

“Well, that’s progress, I suppose.” Eleanor reached out and brought her sister in for a hug.

“I’m not sure what is going on, I have my suspicions, but I trust you know your heart better than me.”



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“Sometimes knowledge doesn’t help.” Beatrice muttered as she recalled Ezra’s story of his sister and the promise he made to himself.

Eleanor laughed lightly. “No, not always, you’re right.” She pulled away and took her sister’s face in her hands. “Is there anything I can do to help you?”

Beatrice shook her head. “No. But thank you. I just need some time, I think.”

Eleanor nodded. “Then time you shall have. Let’s try on this dress so we can check one thing off your list.”

At the mention of a list Beatrice’s heart squeezed. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. She could do this. She had to. This was her future, a future she was willingly going into. It may not look like the future she envisioned but if these past few weeks have taught her anything it was she couldn’t live her life based off a to-do list.

Life was far too complicated to be regulated down to a simple check list. It had twists and turns, hope and heartache. She always considered herself to be carefree, but she had come to the realization that while she rebelled against the societal cage that put women in, she had created her cage of her own. She didn’t keep her mind open to all the possibilities that laid in front of her.

No more.

If she were an author she would be outlining a new chapter, one that allowed room for the surprises that life loved to interject. She was more prepared for this next phase

in her life. She will be more fluid, open, engaging. She will make something of herself, even if it meant being in a loveless marriage.

Ezra sat, swirling the tumbler of whiskey in his hand. He held the same glass for the past twenty minutes. He wasn't thirsty, didn't feel like drinking it, yet he couldn't put it down. So he continued to swirl the liquid.

He didn't want to do much since Beatrice left his house last week. He tried throwing himself into work but he just created more problems with his surly attitude and short temper. His household staff now avoided him and have taken to leaving his meals outside of his study. They let him know his food is there by knocking on the door and quickly scurrying away.

Ezra leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes. He had hoped by coming to the club and being around others might assuage some of his tensions but sitting in the darkened room surrounded by quiet murmurs only made the voices in his head that much louder.

He was resolute in his decision not to enter into a relationship with Beatrice. He could admit to himself that he had come to develop feelings for her, but those feelings only made it that more important that he stay away from her.

"Well aren't you a pleasant sight to see this beautiful summer evening."

Ezra groaned at Frederic's voice.

"Must you bother me? Can't you see I'm relaxing?"

"Your hand is gripping that tumbler so tightly it may break in your hand and your brow is pinched. I am no doctor but I can absolutely say you, brother, are far from relaxed."

Ezra grimaced as he opened his eyes to Frederic settling into the chair opposite of him.

“I need to check in with Harriet. I feel you are out too much and leaving her unattended.” Ezra scowled.

Fredric just chuckled. “Don’t you worry about your sister, Your Grace. My wife is taken care of. In fact, it was her who sent me out this evening.”

“Sick of your nonsense, no doubt. I’m going to take a page out of her book. Be gone.”

Ezra waved his hand and closed his eyes again.

“No can do, old friend. Your sister sent me on a mission and if you know your sister you know she won’t let me return until I have accomplished my goal.”

Ezra sighed. His sister’s stubborn streak could out last anyone. If she gave Frederic something to do she would not expect him back until it was completed to her satisfaction.

“And what mission did my fair sister send you on?” Ezra’s voice held no interest. He was hoping the sooner he gave into this nonsensical conversation the sooner Frederic would leave him to his own misery.

“You.” Frederic replied simply.

Ezra opened one eye. “Me?”

Frederic nodded. “You.”

Ezra closed his eye. “I don’t know what that means. You saw me. Is that enough?”

Frederic’s laugh annoyed Ezra. He just wanted peace, why couldn’t Harriet wait a few days before sending Frederic after him?

“Oh, how I wish. You’d think seeing your ugly mug would be enough but, alas, your sister has far more sinister motives.”

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Ezra rubbed the bridge of his nose. He was never in the mood for Frederic's antics, but when his sister got a bee in her bonnet she was unbearable.

"Fine." He ground out. "What does she want from me?"

"To be happy."

Ezra's stomach flopped. His eyes opened and landed on his friend who was sitting with a blasted smug look on his face.

"Excuse me?"

Frederic cocked his head to the side. "Are you daft, Your Grace? What don't you understand?"

Ezra sat up. "Just go, Frederic. Tell my sister you saw me and that I'm fine. I'm happy. Whatever she wants. Just leave me be."

Frederic shook his head. "Sorry, you know I can't go back to your sister with that."

Ezra rolled his eyes and groaned. "What does it matter what you tell her? Just go."

"Ezra. Why are you putting yourself through this?"

Ezra rolled his lips and finally took a swig of his whisky. The burn coated his throat and settled in an uneasy stomach that was currently rolling with tension.

“I’m not doing anything.” He said through gritted teeth.

“You are punishing yourself for something that is not your fault. We’ve had this conversation too many times and your sister and I let it go because there was no one else at stake. You were only hurting yourself.”

Ezra huffed. “And what do you think has changed now? Why double down on this conversation now?”

“You know why.” Frederic leaned in and rested his elbows on his knees.

Ezra snickered. “Enlighten me.”

“You’re not only hurting yourself, you’re hurting her.”

Ezra’s breath caught in his throat. His mind started to race along with his heart rate. He’s not hurting her. He can’t be. His whole reasoning as to why he can’t be with her was to protect her from harm, from being hurt.

“She’ll get over it.” He ran his tongue over his teeth. He knew the words fell short, he didn’t know for sure she would recover, he could only hope. Amos was a good man, he made sure of it, he looked into him. She will be happy with him. She deserved someone like Amos.

“Who are you to say she will?” Frederic countered.

“Because I know.”

“You thought you knew about Damon.”

Ezra’s blood began to boil. “Low blow, brother.” His voice held the threat of

retaliation. “Besides, weren’t you just saying that wasn’t my fault?”

Frederic nodded. “I was.” He cast his eyes out over the rest of the club while he gathered himself. “Look, all we’re saying is you might be the Duke and therefore are in the know of a lot of things, but when it comes to the matters of the heart you have to admit you are woefully inexperienced.”

Ezra smirked as he took another healthy sip of his whisky. “I know my way around a woman.”

“Sex is a different animal than love, Ezra. You may know sex, but you don’t know love.”

Ezra flinched, Frederic’s words poked at an already gaping hole where his heart should be. He dropped his gaze to his now empty tumbler.

“Ah, that’s where you’re wrong, brother. I did know love.” He said quietly.

Frederic sat up. “Did know?”

Ezra slowly nodded. “I let her go. For her own good.”

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Frederic laughed before standing and pacing back and forth between the two chairs. “You’re unbelievable, you know that? You always think you’re the only one who can fix things.”

Ezra looked up to his friend. “What do you mean?”

Frederic stopped his pacing and looked down at Ezra. “Your sister? Beatrice? You think your solution is the only viable solution.”

Ezra stood toe-to-toe with Frederic. “If I remember correctly you were with me every step of the way when it came to avenging Harriet.”

“And Beatrice?” Frederic asked.

“What of her?” Ezra spat.

“What does she say about the ending of your relationship?”

Ezra bit his tongue. He could still see her heart breaking as she sat on his bed listening to him give all his reasons why he can’t be with her.

“She understands my position.” He voice was low and gravelly.

Frederic put his hands on his hips. “Did she? Or was she too hurt to counter? Because I’ve been in fights with you, you can be exhausting.”

Ezra rolled his lips and rubbed his temples. “I’d ruin her.”



There.

He said it.

“She’s already ruined.”

Ezra’s hands dropped from his face and tightened into fists at his sides. “What did you say?”

Frederic looked around at the other gentlemen who were too busy in their own world to pay any mind to them. “I know you, Ezra. I know you better than you think. There is no way you didn’t lay claim to that woman. And it’s not only because she was willing, anyone who saw you two together knew there was a deeper connection there than either of you let on. She opened something within you, Ezra. Why close it back off?”

“Because...” Why couldn’t he think of an answer? He always had an answer. “Because!”

Frederic laughed to himself. “Because is not a reason, Ezra. Why?”

Ezra ran his hands through his hair. “I’ll make her miserable. It’s what I do.”

“Was she happy when you parted ways?”

Beatrice’s blood shot eyes, pinched in the corners to stop the flow of tears flashed in his mind’s eye. She looked broken and desperate. She looked miserable.

“No.” He admitted.

“Was she happy before you told her you couldn’t be with her?”

Damn Frederic and his questions.

Ezra took a breath. “Very.”

“Seems like by trying to keep her from being ruined and miserable you made her... ruined and miserable. Well done, old chap.” Frederic clapped Ezra on the back.

Ezra narrowed his eyes on Frederic. “And what do you suggest I do? She’s supposed to marry Amos tomorrow. It’s done.”

The two men stood in silence for a moment. Ezra could see an excited Beatrice walking down the aisle, only the man standing at the end wasn’t him. It was Amos. He heart thudded at the realization of what he gave up.

He sat back down in his chair and signaled for another whisky.

Frederic extended his hand to his friend. “Since when do we let things go without a fight?”

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Ezra looked at his friend's hand then up to his eyes. "It's over, Frederic. I need to let her be."

"Will you be happy with that outcome?"

Ezra rolled his lips.

"May I remind you who sent me here in the first place and her mission she wanted completed?" Frederic nudged Ezra's shoulder with his hand. "Haven't you ever wondered what your life would be like with someone like Beatrice by your side? Someone who challenges you, cares for you, loves you?"

Ezra ran his hands through his hair again. "I never allowed myself to think like that."

Frederic pursed his lips. "What will make you happy, brother?"

Ezra took the offered hand and stood up.

"Beatrice."

## CHAPTER 26

"You'd think after all of her hemming and hawing Mama would be here with bells on but instead she is stalking around the vestibule like a caged animal." Sarah said as she brushed the wrinkles out of Beatrice's dress.

Beatrice looked over to the vestibule where her mother was pacing back and forth,

wringing her hands as she muttered to herself. Beatrice grimaced. Her mother did look distraught.

“Leave her be. There’s a lot to process.” Eleanor added before kissing Beatrice’s cheek. “She has spent the last twenty years of her life worrying over the fate of her three wayward daughters and now her youngest is getting married. I’m sure she’s feeling a lot of emotions today.” She cupped her sister’s cheek. “We all are.”

Beatrice smiled at her two sisters. “I’m so thankful you are both here today. I’m not sure I could do this without you.”

Her mother yelped from the small entryway. All three women turned to see her mother disciplining one of her grandchildren.

Eleanor and Sarah exchanged a look. “Whose child do you think is in trouble?”

Just then Sarah’s youngest came toddling into the room licking his jam-covered hand. Charlotte followed with a small purplish handprint on the front of her dress.

The three sisters tried their best to hide their laughter but failed.

“Devon! What did you do to Grandmama?” Sarah had a long way to go to get that motherly discipline in her voice but she tried. Her son’s blue eyes and cherub cheeks made it difficult for anyone to punish him.

Although, it looked like Charlotte was willing to try. “I swear Sarah, I told you to make sure he didn’t have any sweets with him. Now look at what he did!” Charlotte walked over to a vase of flowers and dunked a handkerchief in to wet it. She began to blot the stain as Sarah hurried her child out of the waiting room.

Once Sarah got into the vestibule she let out a loud groan. “Um, Eleanor? Could you

help me? It seems my child decided the vestibule needed some color.”

Eleanor and Beatrice laughed before Eleanor kissed her younger sister’s cheek again. “I’ll see you out there. You look beautiful.”

Beatrice watched her sister leave before turning to her mother who was attacking her dress with the wet handkerchief.

“Here, let me help you, Mama.” Beatrice said as she took the cloth.

“Oh, it’s no use, Beatrice. The dress is ruined. Although, I don’t know why I bother. We don’t have the best luck the first time around.” Her mother said as she rubbed her brow.

Beatrice straightened. “What do you mean?”

Charlotte sighed and looked into the vestibule before returning her gaze to Beatrice.

“Mama? What is it?”

Beatrice’s heart began to race. Did her mother find out about her list? About Ezra? She pursed her lips as her mind started to come up with excuses, reasons, anything that could help ease whatever storm was about to hit.

“It happened with Eleanor and Sarah, it might as well happen with you.” Charlotte sat down into the chair in the corner in a wave of lace and chiffon.

Beatrice titled her head. “You lost me, Mama.”

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Charlotte rested her head on the back of the chair. “We can’t do anything right the first time around. Both of your sisters walked down the aisle twice. Twice, Beatrice! I’m surprised people even showed up to this wedding and just didn’t wait for the next one.”

Beatrice heaved a sigh of relief before breaking into a fit of giggles.

“Mama. There will only be one wedding for me. And considering I didn’t want any at all, I say one is enough.”

Charlotte looked unconvinced. “Both of your sisters thought the same thing. Both of them walked down the aisle to men they barely knew or didn’t want, only for the man they did want to come barreling into the church and whisk them away while I’m left to explain to the congregation.” She looked up to Beatrice with wide eyes. “I can’t do that again!”

Beatrice swallowed. She never gave much thought to how her sisters ended up with their husbands but her mother was right. They both denied themselves of the truth and at the last minute fate stepped in and they married the man they were meant to be with.

Her lip began to tremble. “There is no other man for me, Mama.” She moved to the table where the vases of flowers stood. She needed to keep herself busy or unwanted thoughts would ruin what little hold she had on her emotions.

“That’s what I thought with your sisters.” Charlotte added.

Beatrice took a deep breath to steady herself. Her eyes drifted to the window and out to the beautiful summer morning. It looked so peaceful outside. Far different than the turmoil that was crashing around within her.

Soon, Beatrice. Get through this and your peace will come. You will be outside in the free air soon.

She watched as carriages pulled up and guests exited to make their way inside the small chapel. Lines of people in their best dresses and suits greeted each other and commented on the celebration.

People were completely oblivious to her heartache and the fallacy that was to become her marriage. She felt as if she were in the wings preparing for her biggest performance yet. She had played the curious younger sister, the coy debutante, the rebellious young woman, and now, the dutiful wife.

Her eyes landed on a lone carriage off to the side. The hired hackney looked out of place next to the prestigious and well kept carriages of the ton.

Beatrice cursed her heart for wanting it to be Ezra.

I am not my sisters. He is not going to come in at the last minute and save me.

“I wonder who that belongs to?”

Her mother’s voice made her jump. Charlotte was now standing directly behind Beatrice looking out into the courtyard.

Beatrice shrugged. “I have no idea. You took over the invitations. The Queen herself could show up and I would be none the wiser.”

Charlotte laughed. “Oh, could you imagine? That would be a sight. Still, I doubt the Queen would be traveling in a hired hackney.”

Just then the door to the hackney opened and a gentleman stepped out. He was about Ezra’s size and Beatrice’s heart stuttered.

Her chest began to rise and fall with her quickened breaths.

Could it be?

The man turned and extended his hand to help a woman out of the carriage. She was a petite young woman with a bright, beaming smile on her face.

The couple turned and Beatrice’s hopes were once again dashed. The man was broader than Ezra with lighter hair. He escorted the woman past the window and into the chapel.

Beatrice cleared her throat. “Who were they?”

Charlotte was back to blotting her dress with a freshly wet handkerchief. “Hmm? Oh, sorry, my love, was trying to salvage this dress before I go out there and everyone sees.”

“I was just asking who that couple was. I didn’t recognize them.”

Charlotte waved her off. “I promise you, I only invited people we know. I learned my lesson with Sarah’s first wedding. Inviting the wholeton,” she scoffed. “Only to have them see her left at the alter. What a horrible experience.”

Charlotte walked over to the door and peeked her head into the vestibule that lead to the nave. From there she could see directly to the front of the church and the alter.



Beatrice smiled softly at her mother. “He still there?”

Charlotte turned and clapped her hands. “He is! We may be able to do this in one shot after all!”

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Beatrice sighed and rolled her eyes. “Mama. I swear to you, I made no plans with any other man. Amos and I will be married today. I saw to it.”

Her words caught in her throat. It was not for lack of trying but she needed to respect Ezra’s wishes. He had his reasons she couldn’t deny or overlook. He respected her wishes and her list. It was only fair she gave him the same allowances.

“Well, then. I think everyone is here. Shall we get started?” Charlotte took Beatrice’s hands.

Beatrice took a deep breath and pushed it out. “What is it that you always say? Trust the process?”

Charlotte smiled, leaned in and enveloped her daughter in a tight hug. “Always, my love. I’m so happy that you have found a way to have the life you want. I’m sorry if I tried pushing you in a direction you didn’t want. I just always had you and your sister’s best interests at heart.”

Beatrice could only offer a tight lipped smile. The enormity and finality of the day was beginning to take its toll on her constitution. She wanted to see this day through, but she also just wanted to be tucked away in her tiny corner room and lose herself in her books.

In stories that had happy endings, where the hero came for the girl, or where the girl at least received a desirable outcome, satisfactory to her wishes.

But her life wasn’t a story and, when all said and done, the ending to this chapter was

satisfactory for her.

She squeezed her mother's hands. "I'm ready, Mama."

Charlotte pinched her daughter's cheek. "I love you, Beatrice."

"I love you, Mama."

Beatrice watched as her mother flittered out of the room and down the aisle to the front row.

Beatrice caught her reflection in the mirror. She didn't recognize herself. Her hair was perfectly coiffed, her dress was a bit too stiff for her liking, but this day was more for her mother than herself. When Charlotte gushed over the dress, Beatrice accepted it. The same as she accepted the flowers on each of the pews, the dinner menu, although she was looking forward to the desserts.

Her mother not only took care of the invitations, but every aspect of the day, which was fine for Beatrice. It gave her the time for her heart to heal somewhat, and wrap her mind around the changes that were happening around her.

With one timid foot in front of the other Beatrice made her way through the vestibule and stood looking down the aisle.

Heads turned to face her. Beatrice wasn't too proud to admit their pleasant reaction to her appearance was a soothing balm to her aching heart. If she was going to enter into this facade of a marriage, at least she looked good. Her sister Sarah would be proud to hear such thoughts.

Beatrice couldn't help but look over her shoulder to the opened chapel door. She could see the back end of the hired hackney that sat in the courtyard. Her heart

lurched at the wayward thought that Ezra was connected to it.

She sighed and shook her head. Once again, her mother's voice rang throughout her head. You read too much, Beatrice.

Beatrice fixated her eyes on the man at the end of the aisle. He wasn't Ezra, but he was a good man. Someone who understood her and would give her a life of laughter and companionship. Some didn't even get that. She should feel lucky, she could have ended up with someone garish and undeserving.

She began her walk down the aisle, smiling at familiar and not so familiar faces. She tried looking for the mystery couple but she made it to the end of the aisle before she could locate them.

Amos smiled and extended his hand. She slipped her hand into his and felt the chapter close. This was it. She was going to be a married woman.

“Stop!”

The bellow came from the back of the church.

Women gasped, men stood, and she was pretty sure her mother threw her handkerchief up in surrender.

Amos and Beatrice turned, squinting at the light shining from behind the man who was now charging down the aisle.

Ezra.

“You can't marry him. I won't allow it.” Ezra's voice echoed off the rafters.

Beatrice's heart was beating so fast she brought her hand up to her chest in the off chance it beat right out of her body.

"Ezra. What are you doing?" Her whisper barely reached him.

"You can't marry him." Ezra demanded.

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Beatrice looked to Amos who was silently standing off to the side. His hands clasped in front of him, intrigue and curiosity displayed on his face.

She tilted her head. Not the response one would expect from a man who was about to be left at the altar.

Left at the altar. Good God, what was she saying? Was this really happening?

“Ezra, you said-”

“I don’t care what I said. I was wrong. I was wrong about all of it.” Ezra stepped up to Beatrice and grabbed her hands and kissed them. His movements were frantic and frenzied as he laid kisses on the backs of her hands, on her palms.

“I tried to live without you. I tried convincing myself this was the way, but I was wrong.” He cast his eyes out into the pews to connect with someone in the congregation. “Frederic made me see that.”

Beatrice followed his eyes and they landed on the mystery couple. The man was Frederic, which meant, the woman next to him was Ezra’s sister, Harriet. The couple both stood with bright smiles on their faces.

Ezra took her head in his hands to bring her focus back to him. “Please, Beatrice. Give me another chance. Let me have you, I need more than that one night. I need all of your nights.”

His lips crashed down on hers to a cascade of gasps and murmurs from the

congregation.

Ezra's kiss forced her to rock back on her heels. Instinct took over and Beatrice reached up and held onto his shoulders to stable herself. Ezra deepened the kiss as her hands reached up and she ran her fingers through his hair.

A not so subtle cough sounded from her right.

"You know I'm really tired of having my daughter's weddings interrupted by a third party."

Charlotte stood next to her daughter with her eye brow raised. "I thought you said there would be no mystery man during your ceremony?"

Beatrice blushed as she looked up to Ezra. "He is no mystery man, Mama, just someone I thought was done with me."

Ezra shook his head. "Never. I'll never be done with you. I love you."

Beatrice's heart soared at his admission. She smiled as his lips captured hers again.

Charlotte took another step closer to the couple and looked directly at Ezra. "Forgive me for questioning you, Your Grace, but in case you have forgotten we are in the middle of a wedding ceremony and the woman you just pledged your love to is supposed to be marrying another man."

Ezra turned to Amos who was still standing silently by, watching the situation unfold.

"You can't marry her."

Amos dipped his chin. "I see that."

Beatrice looked out into the congregation of curious and surprised faces taking in the drama in front of them.

She shook her head to gather her thoughts. “This is insane. Ezra, can we do this? Is this really happening?”

Ezra pulled her to him. “This is happening, Mouse. You and me, no more lists, no more ‘should haves’ or ‘should nots,’ we’re doing this. Together we’ll write our own story, we’ll be our own heroes. We’ll have adventures, we’ll travel, we’ll have an entire floor of books, if that’s what you want.”

Beatrice couldn’t believe her eyes or ears. Finally someone had stood up and chose her for her. Someone who wanted to champion her, someone who would not only let her experience all life had to offer but wanted to experience it with her.

Her eyes drifted to Amos. He would have given that to her but Ezra could give her one thing Amos couldn’t. Deep, passionate, and never-ending love.

She looked into Ezra’s eyes and saw her future. For once in her life she was no longer apprehensive or nervous about what the future held.

Beatrice wrapped her arms around him and kissed him again.

“That’s what I want. I want all of that.”

Ezra’s face widened into a bright smile. “Then you shall have it all.”

“I love you, Ezra.” Her words brushed against his lips.



“I love you, Mouse.”

### EPILOGUE

“What an absolutely beautiful day!” Charlotte whisked into the room with flair and joy.

“Well you’re in much better spirits than my last wedding.” Beatrice laughed as her mother hugged her.

“Of course I am. If experience has taught me anything is that my girls need more than one walk down the aisle to make it stick.” She stopped and looked Beatrice in the eyes. “This is the last time, correct? There are no other men?”

Beatrice laughed out loud. “No, Mama. I promise you, there are no other men.”

“Mmm-hmm, I heard that before. From all of my girls, actually.” She eyed her other two daughters who were giggling in the corner.

“I swear, it’s a wonder I’m still here. My poor heart can’t take much more.”

Beatrice rolled her eyes. “Mama, you’re not going anywhere, you’ll outlive us all.”

Eleanor laughed as she joined Beatrice and her mother. “Beatrice is right, Mama. No matter what stress you pretend we’ve caused you, it falls short of your dramatics every time.” She softened her words with a kiss on her mother’s cheek.

“Oh, you girls.” Charlotte giggled. “What will I do now? All my little chicks left the roost.”

Sarah stood and took Beatrice and Eleanor’s hands. It was the last time she would be standing with them as only their younger sister. After today, she would join them in the ranks of happily married women.

Beatrice looked to each of her sisters and her mother with gratitude and respect. “Thank you, all, again, for everything. I didn’t plan on any of this happening and you all welcomed the change with patience and support. This wedding wouldn’t have happened without your help these past few weeks.”

Her sisters and mother all murmured words of encouragement and love.

“Much to Mama’s dismay, Sarah and I know what it’s like to have to plan a second wedding.” Eleanor offered.

Sarah winked at Eleanor. “Us Morsey girls like to keep everyone guessing.”

Charlotte furrowed her brow. “Yes, well, next time one of you wants to keep others on their toes let me in on it. I’ve had to throw two weddings for each of my daughters. I’m surprised we have any money in the coffers!” Charlotte said as she waved her fan in front of her face.

“Oh, hush, Mama. Charles said we were perfectly capable of holding such events. Trust me, he would tell me otherwise.” Sarah said with a giggle.

Beatrice looked out the window. It was a warm fall day and the sun was high in the sky. “I think it’s time. Most everyone is here, correct?”

Eleanor stuck her head out into the vestibule and looked into the nave. “Looks like it.

And, more importantly, His Grace is at the alter, looking quite eager if I might add.”

Beatrice blushed at the thought of Ezra standing there waiting for her. Her heart skipped a beat and she had a sudden urge to ignore ritual and run to him this instant.

“Come now, we’ll go to our seats and leave you to have a moment to yourself.” Eleanor gathered Sarah and Charlotte and ushered them out.

As Beatrice turned she caught her reflection in the window. How funny it was that just a few weeks ago she saw her reflection in the same window and didn’t recognize herself.

Now, standing there, about to marry a man who loved her, she was positively radiating. She couldn’t contain her smile, it was a constant in the weeks leading up to this day. She swished her dress back and forth and relished in the light material that moved with her.

Nothing was stiff or for show. Beatrice had a say in every detail of this wedding, she wanted it to be a reflection of her and Ezra.

The flowers were quaint and the chapel was full of friends and family. She kept the dinner menu the same because, well, Sarah’s cook is the best after all. Why mess with a good thing?

With one final look she stepped into the vestibule and directly into Amos.

“Amos! I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to walk into you.” Beatrice took a step back and noticed a small woman standing next to him.

Amos lifted his one hand to make sure Beatrice was stable. He held a small box in his other hand. “No, please don’t apologize. It is all my fault. We are running late and I

barged in here, not paying attention to my surroundings. I am so sorry.”

Beatrice waved off his apology. The three of them continued to stand, awkwardly as it dawned on them that not more than threeweeks ago, it was Amos Beatrice was walking down the aisle towards.

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“I must say, I am surprised you came, but ever so grateful. I haven’t properly apologized for the way things ended between us.”

Amos looked over towards the woman who was standing next to him. She gave him a slight nod of encouragement.

“Again, there is no need to apologize, Beatrice. In all honesty, I can say I am quite happy for you. I know what it’s like to not be with the one who holds your heart. I wouldn’t wish that on my worst enemy and you are a dear friend of mine. I would hate to know that I had tethered you to a life of just companionship when you could have had so much more.”

Tears welled in the corners of Beatrice’s eyes. “What a beautiful thing to say, Amos. Thank you.”

Amos looked down to the box in his hand. “I’m actually glad I am able to see you. I wanted to give this to you as a wedding present of sorts.”

Beatrice quirked an eye brow at the box he was holding out to her.

“Amos, really, you didn’t need to do this.”

Amos looked to the woman who smiled at him. “I feel you would appreciate it. Please, we want you to have it”

Beatrice couldn’t contain her smile as she pulled out the small bowl she admired from his parlor. Tears gathered in her eyes.

“Oh, Amos! It’s your bowl from your travels to Japan. Are you sure?”

Amos brought out a handkerchief and offered it to Beatrice. “I insist. It’s a reminder that we are all broken in some ways, but it’s the people that hold us together that makes life more beautiful.”

She reached out and embraced him. “You are too kind. I do hope we can continue our friendship. It has become to mean so much to me.”

Amos stepped out of the embrace. “I feel the same way. I would love nothing more than to continue our friendship.”

Beatrice smiled, then looked to the woman expectantly.

“Oh!” Amos exclaimed. “Where are my manners? Lady Beatrice? This is Lady Catharine. My fiancé.”

Beatrice’s eyes widened at the woman’s title. “Fiancé? How wonderful!”

Lady Catherine dipped her head. “Thank you. We are very happy.”

Beatrice suddenly remembered. “Wait. My mother said the two of you were seen together before she interjected. I hope I wasn’t the cause of delay for your engagement?” Her eyes searched Amos’s. “If I knew you had other arrangements I would have insisted nothing would have been agreed upon.”

Lady Catherine shook her head. “You mustn’t worry about that, Lady Beatrice.” She looked up to Amos who now gave her a supportive nod.

“You know of Amos’s interests. Well, we have an understanding as well. I am in a similar predicament as Amos.” Lady Catherine lifted her eye brow in hopes of

pushing her meaning.

Beatrice understood immediately and smiled. “I see. I’m glad you found each other. I’m sure you will be great companions. And, if Amos likes you, then I have no doubt we will become fast friends as well.”

Lady Catherine smiled. “I would like that as well, Your Grace.”

Amos laughed. “Well, she would need to make it down the aisle for her to be ‘Your Grace’ and for that to happen we need to take our seats so she can do just that.”

Beatrice smiled and accepted hugs from both Amos and Lady Catherine.

“Be well, Amos, and thank you, again.” She whispered as she hugged Amos.

“Be well, Your Grace.” Amos said before he gave her a chaste kiss on her cheek and joined Lady Catherine to find a seat.

Beatrice took a deep breath and looked down the aisle. How different it all felt walking towards her dream. Her steps were light and resolute. Her heart was steady and sure.

Ezra stood at the alter, his eyes focused on her every movement. She felt a pull towards him. If it wasn’t for the shuffling of feet in the pews, and the shifting of people in their seats trying to get a good view of the ceremony, she would have forgotten everyone else was there.

In her mind, it was only her and Ezra. It was all she needed.

When she reached the alter he extended his hand and like a magnet, Beatrice’s hand flew into his.

He rubbed his thumb on the back of her hand as he leaned down.

“Eager for me, Mouse?”

His words wrapped around her and caused her body to flash with white heat. He said those words to her the night they spent together. The night that changed it all for her, and apparently, him. She should remember to mark that date and celebrate it every year.

It was because of that night they both learned what they were willing to live with, and what they couldn't live without. Or more importantly, who they couldn't live without.

“I am very eager, Your Grace.” She whispered. “I kind of wish no one else was here so I could show you just how eager I am.”

Ezra's eyes darkened. “Careful, Mouse. We are in a house of God. We don't want anyone fainting because the bride is eager to start her wedding night.”

Beatrice dipped her head to hide her giggle.

As the vicar began to speak Beatrice couldn't help but steal glances at her soon-to-be husband. He stood, towering over her, his lean and muscular frame filled his suit perfectly. Her eyes drifted to his arms and she licked her lips at the memory of them holding her.

The vicar said something that had the congregation responding in kind. Beatrice's cheeks heated at missing the response.



“You’re not paying attention, Mouse.” Ezra murmured as the vicar began speaking again. Ignoring the fact that neither one of his participants were paying attention.

“Sorry, my mind is elsewhere.” She offered.

Ezra looked down just as she looked up to him.

“I know.” He said with a wolfish grin that had her insides igniting.

Beatrice took a deep breath to try to steady her racing heart. Were her sister’s ceremonies this long? Did it suddenly get hot in here for everyone or just her?

She shuffled her feet.

“Patience, Little Mouse. It’s almost over.” Ezra whispered.

Beatrice licked her dry lips again. Her patience was running out. She needed out of this church, out of this dress, and into Ezra’s arms.

“Beatrice?”

The vicar’s throat cleared. “Lady Beatrice wilt thou have this man to thy wedded husband, to live together after God’s ordinance in the holy estate of Matrimony?”

Beatrice swallowed. “I will.”

Her voice rang out clear throughout the chapel. She had never been more sure in her life.

She looked up to find Ezra looking down at her with love and pride in his eyes and she felt the final piece fall back into place.

She was whole again.

Beatrice looked up at Ezra hoping for a kiss but the vicar began to talk again. Her eyes flew to the parish priest in confusion.

“How long are these ceremonies?” She muttered.

Ezra did his best to hide his laughter but it echoed throughout the church. “Haven’t you been to several of these before from just your sisters?”

Beatrice grimaced. “I brought books to read and if you have forgotten, you interrupted my last one.” She said cheekily.

“Now, now, little Mouse. If you don’t behave, I may have to punish you later for that tongue.”

Now years of etiquette lessons and rules of propriety taught her that she should have been appalled at his comment. Instead, her blood heated and her eyes became hooded.

“Is that so?” She challenged.

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Ezra dipped his chin ever so slightly. “Absolutely. I may not be a man of much faith, but I know when and how to behave. I expect you to do the same.”

His lips were turned up slightly as he laid down his challenge. A challenge Beatrice couldn't ignore.

Finally the vicar gave the go ahead for the kiss. Ezra turned to Beatrice and took her hands.

She looked up into his eyes, so reverent and kind. He lowered his head to capture her mouth in a chaste, perfectly suitable kiss for a religious ceremony.

But Beatrice had other plans. She ripped her hands from his and threw them into his hair. She pulled him down with such force he lost his footing.

Her lips captured his in an all consuming kiss.

Gasps and murmurs erupted around them and Beatrice didn't care. Let the whole congregation know how much she loved this man.

She was proud of her accomplishment as she pulled away.

“You're going to pay for that.” Ezra laughed as he turned her to face the congregation. Most were sitting shocked in their seats, while a select few, mostly her family, along with Frederic, Harriet, and Amos with Lady Catherine, looked on with smiles while they clapped their hands.

“Lucky for me I can afford whatever punishment you deem necessary.” She said with a wink.

Ezra’s pupils dilated at her response. She pulled on his hand to bring him back from whatever fantasy just popped into his head and they began their walk to the back of the church.

For the first time in her life Beatrice was looking forward to what her future held. She knew her story with Ezra was just beginning and she was determined to make it one for the ages.

The End?