



The Earl's Scarred Bride

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Category: Erotic, Adult, Historical

Description: "Be prepared, wife. I'll make you beg for my touch before our three months end..."

Desperate to save her sister from a forced marriage, Eliza helps her run away. Only, the rakish Earl of Stonefield is owed a bride... and he demands to have her instead...

Being left at the altar should have made Cecil furious. Yet he can't think of anything but his new bride, the scarred Lady Eliza. And that he has three months to thoroughly corrupt her...

But when his wife declares she won't give him an heir, Cecil can't back down from the challenge. So he vows to seduce her until he has her on her knees... begging for pleasure.

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

Total Pages (Source): 68

CHAPTER ONE

"Harriet, do stay where I can see you," Elizabeth Cooper chided gently, adjusting her sister's domino mask. "Lady Morrison's masquerade balls are notorious for impropriety, and I won't have you caught up in any scandal."

"Elizabeth, you worry entirely too much." Harriet's eyes sparkled behind her elaborate butterfly mask, the gold filigree catching the light from the dozens of candles illuminating Lady Morrison's ballroom. "Besides, isn't the whole point of a masquerade to be a bit mysterious?"

"The point is to be mysterious while maintaining proper decorum." Elizabeth touched her own mask self-consciously, ensuring it still covered not only her eyes but the upper portion of her birthmark as well. The black silk creation was far more modest than her sister's, but it served its purpose admirably. For once, she could move through society without drawing the usual pitying glances or barely concealed grimaces.

"You sound exactly like one of the matchmaking mamas," Harriet teased, but she looped her arm through Elizabeth's as they made their way deeper into the crowded ballroom. "Though I suppose you've spent enough time among them to pick up their ways."

Elizabeth smiled despite herself. "Someone had to ensure you were properly introduced to society after your debut. And since Father showed about as much interest in the task as he did in mine..."

She let the words trail off, but Harriet squeezed her arm in understanding. Their father Luke Cooper, the Baron of Trowbridge, had made his feelings about Elizabeth's prospects quite clear over the years. What use was there in spending good money on a proper season for a daughter whose appearance would inevitably drive away any potential suitors?

"Look," Harriet whispered excitedly, drawing Elizabeth from her dark thoughts. "There's Lord Ashworth. I'd know that proud strut anywhere, even behind that ridiculous lion mask."

"And how, pray tell, are you so familiar with his lordship's...strut?" Elizabeth arched an eyebrow, though the effect was somewhat lost behind her mask.

Harriet's cheeks flushed becomingly. "One does observe things during the season, dear sister. Speaking of which..." She nodded toward a cluster of elegantly dressed matrons near the refreshment table. "Your usual compatriots await."

Elizabeth recognized Lady Weatherby's distinctive laugh among the group. The woman had taken Elizabeth under her wing shortly after Harriet's debut, perhaps out of pity, perhaps out of genuine kindness. Either way, she'd introduced Elizabeth to the other chaperones and match-making mamas of the ton, giving her a place to belong during the endless balls and soirees where she would otherwise have been relegated to the shadows.

"My dear Miss Cooper!" Lady Weatherby's voice carried over the music as Elizabeth approached. "We were just discussing the most intriguing piece of gossip. Do join us."

Elizabeth slipped into the circle of women, accepting a glass of lemonade from a passing footman. "I trust this particular piece of gossip is more substantial than last week's speculation about Lady Pembroke's mysterious illness?"

"Which turned out to be nothing more than a stubborn head cold," Lady Rutledge added with a disappointed sigh. "But this, my dear, this is something altogether more exciting."

"The Earl of Stonefield has returned to London," Lady Weatherby announced, her eyes gleaming behind her peacock-feathered mask. "And he's made it known that he's seeking a bride."

"Stonefield?" Elizabeth frowned slightly. "The rake who reportedly broke three engagements last season?"

"Four," Lady Ashworth corrected, fanning herself vigorously. "Though one can hardly blame the man. He's wealthy enough to be particular in his choice."

Lady Weatherby nodded sagely. "And handsome enough to break hearts without trying. My Isabel nearly swooned when he danced with her at Lady Rockingham's ball."

"And proceeded to dance with three other young ladies that very evening," Elizabeth pointed out. "Hardly the behavior of a man seriously seeking marriage."

"Ah, but that was before," Lady Rutledge leaned in conspiratorially. "Word has it he's finally ready to settle down. Something about needing an heir now that he's inherited the full extent of his father's estate."

Elizabeth's retort was cut short by a sudden flutter of excitement rippling through the ballroom. The music faltered for a moment as heads turned toward the entrance, where a tall figure had just appeared.

"Who is he?" Lady Weatherby whispered, clutching Elizabeth's arm. "Looks quite mysterious."

Elizabeth studied the newcomer with growing unease.

His black wolf mask covered the upper half of his face, but there was no disguising his commanding presence. He stood well over six feet tall, his broad shoulders and athletic build evident even beneath his perfectly tailored evening clothes. Unlike the other gentlemen who affected fashionable languor, he moved with the fluid grace of a predator—each step deliberate and controlled.

His evening attire, while impeccable, eschewed the more flamboyant trends popular among the ton. The black coat was cut to emphasize his powerful frame, the white linen of his cravat pristine against the olive tone of his throat. Dark hair, just a touch too long to be entirely fashionable, curled slightly at his nape in a way that made Elizabeth's fingers inexplicably itch to touch it.

Though the mask obscured much of his face, she could make out the strong line of his jaw, currently set in what appeared to be habitual arrogance. His mouth was well-formed, the lower lip fuller than the upper, curved into a slight smile that held more warning than warmth.

When he turned his head to survey the room, she caught a glimpse of eyes that seemed to absorb light rather than reflect it—deep blue like the ocean during a storm.

He was exactly the type of man who could make a woman forget her better judgment.

She forced herself to look away, disturbed by how her pulse had quickened merely from observing him. "Leave that stranger and just think," Lady Ashworth sighed dreamily, "one of our young ladies could be the next Countess of Stonefield. Your Harriet, perhaps, Miss Cooper? She's certainly beautiful enough to catch his eye."

"My sister will marry for love, not title or fortune," Elizabeth replied firmly, though her heart was still racing traitorously. "Besides, I've heard enough about the earl's

reputation to know he's not the sort of man I'd wish to see Harriet matched with."

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"Oh, my dear," Lady Weatherby patted her hand indulgently. "The worst rakes often make the best husbands. Once they've sown their wild oats, they appreciate the value of a good marriage all the more."

Elizabeth was about to respond when she realized she'd lost sight of Harriet among the whirling dancers. Excusing herself from the group, she moved to the edge of the ballroom, scanning the crowd for her sister's distinctive butterfly mask.

"Looking for someone in particular?" a deep voice inquired from behind her, making her breath catch in her throat.

Elizabeth turned, finding herself face to face with an elaborately crafted wolf's mask. He was the same stranger she'd seen a few moments before.

Something about his proximity made her skin tingle with awareness. "My sister," she replied, proud that her voice remained steady. "Though I don't believe we've been properly introduced, sir."

"Ah, but isn't that the beauty of a masquerade?" His voice dropped lower as he leaned closer, his breath warm against her ear. "The freedom to speak without the burden of names and titles."

"I find names and titles serve a rather useful purpose in preventing unwanted liberties," she managed, though her body betrayed her with a slight shiver.

"And yet you haven't moved away," he observed, a dangerous smile playing at his lips. "Tell me, do you always keep such a tight rein on propriety, even when your

instincts suggest otherwise?"

Elizabeth felt her cheeks warm beneath her mask. "My instincts, sir, are perfectly aligned with propriety."

"Are they?" He tilted his head slightly, studying her with an intensity that made her pulse quicken. "Then why do your hands tremble when I step closer?" As if to prove his point, he moved forward, forcing her to tilt her head back to maintain eye contact through their masks.

"Perhaps they tremble with indignation at your presumption," she countered, though they both knew it for the lie it was.

His low chuckle sent another shiver down her spine. "Your butterfly, by the way, was seen heading toward the maze. Though she wasn't alone."

Before Elizabeth could respond, he stepped back with a mocking bow. "Do be careful in the dark, my lady. One never knows what sorts of...creatures one might encounter."

He disappeared into the crowd, leaving Elizabeth unsettled by both his words and her body's traitorous response to his presence. The night air carried the sweet scent of Lady Morrison's prized roses as Elizabeth stepped onto the terrace. Her eyes scanned the shadows, counting three couples taking advantage of the relative privacy—all properly chaperoned, she noted with relief—but none wearing her sister's distinctive mask.

"Harriet?" she called softly, not wanting to draw attention from the ballroom behind her. No response came save for the muffled giggles of a young lady whose companion was presumably whispering something terribly amusing in her ear.

Elizabeth's fingers worried at her fan, a nervous habit she thought she'd broken years

ago. The terrace wasn't particularly large, but several paths led down into the gardens below. Surely Harriet wouldn't have ventured further without informing her? Her sister could be impulsive, yes, but she wasn't reckless.

Through the maze pathways, she caught fragments of hushed conversation and gentle laughter. Following the sounds, she turned a corner and froze. There, on a stone bench bathed in moonlight, sat Harriet, her golden butterfly mask gleaming. A gentleman in a raven's mask sat entirely too close, his head bent toward hers in intimate conversation.

"I shouldn't," Elizabeth heard her sister whisper, her voice trembling with what sounded like suppressed excitement. "It isn't proper, meeting like this."

"Since when has propriety ever led to happiness?" the masked man responded, his tone gentle but persuasive. "Sometimes we must be bold to grasp what we truly want."

Elizabeth had heard enough. She stepped forward from the shadows. "Harriet Cooper, what do you think you're doing?"

Her sister jumped up from the bench with a small cry of surprise. The gentleman in the raven mask rose more slowly, maintaining his composure even as Harriet clutched at his arm.

"Elizabeth! I...I was just..."

"Getting yourself compromised in a dark garden?" Elizabeth advanced on them, her fear manifesting as anger. "Have you taken leave of your senses?"

"Miss Cooper," the masked man began smoothly, but Elizabeth cut him off.

"Whatever explanation you're about to offer, sir, I suggest you keep it to yourself and depart immediately." Her voice shook with barely contained anger. "Unless you'd prefer I summon Lord Morrison's footmen?"

The stranger in the raven mask bowed slightly. "Until we meet again, my lady," he murmured to Harriet, pressing a kiss to her gloved hand before melting into the shadows of the garden.

"Harriet, what were you thinking?" Elizabeth demanded as soon as he was gone. "Do you have any idea what could have happened if?—"

"Nothing happened," Harriet interrupted, lifting her chin defiantly despite the slight tremor in her voice. "We were just talking."

"Talking leads to compromising situations far too easily at masquerades," Elizabeth replied sharply. "Come, we need to return to the ballroom. The unmasking is in less than fifteen minutes."

As they made their way back through the maze, Elizabeth couldn't help but notice how unusually quiet her sister had become. Harriet, who normally chattered endlessly about everything and nothing, kept her gaze fixed firmly on the ground ahead.

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The distant clock began to strike the quarter-hour, and Elizabeth felt her heart race. Less than fifteen minutes until the masks came off, and somehow she knew their evening was about to become far more complicated than a simple game of hide and seek in a garden maze.

The ballroom seemed impossibly bright after the darkness of the garden, the crystals in the chandeliers casting rainbow fragments across masked faces that now seemed more ominous than mysterious to Elizabeth.

The first chime of midnight rang out across the ballroom. All around them, masks began to fall away, faces emerging like butterflies from chrysalises. Elizabeth's fingers trembled slightly against her silk mask as she lifted it away.

Her gaze was drawn inexorably to the far side of the room where the gentleman in the wolf's mask stood. As he removed his mask, Elizabeth found herself staring into eyes as dark and dangerous as a storm at sea. His features were aristocratic, handsome enough to justify all the gossip she'd heard, but it was the calculating intelligence in his gaze that made her breath catch.

The Earl of Stonefield. Of course. She should have known from his commanding presence alone.

His eyes swept the room deliberately until they found hers, and Elizabeth felt a jolt of awareness course through her body at the intensity of his stare. His lips curved into that same knowing smile she'd seen behind the wolf's mask, and she forced herself to look away.

"Harriet," she whispered, turning to her sister. "We should?—"

But Harriet's face had gone pale behind her butterfly mask, her eyes fixed on something—or someone—across the room. Before Elizabeth could ask what was wrong, her sister had grabbed her arm.

"We need to leave," Harriet said urgently. "Please, Elizabeth. I'm feeling rather faint."

Elizabeth wanted to question her sister's sudden desire to depart, but Harriet's fingers dug into her arm with surprising strength. Whatever had spooked her, it seemed best to make their excuses and return home.

"Of course," she agreed, though she couldn't resist one final glance at the earl.

He was still watching them, his expression unreadable save for that dangerous smile.

Their carriage rolled to a stop before their townhouse, and Elizabeth was surprised to see lights still burning in her father's study. The Baron of Trowbridge rarely waited up for his daughters' return from social engagements.

"Ladies." Marty, their butler, greeted them at the door with unusual solemnity. "Your father requests your immediate presence in his study."

Elizabeth's sense of unease deepened. "At this hour?"

"He was most insistent, miss."

They found their father standing by the fireplace, a glass of brandy in his hand. He turned as they entered, and Elizabeth was struck by the strange mix of triumph and tension in his bearing.

"Ah, good. You've finally returned." He took a long sip from his glass. "I trust the masquerade was entertaining?"

"Yes, Father," Harriet answered automatically, though her voice trembled slightly.

"Excellent. Then you'll be pleased to know I've arranged a most advantageous match for you." His eyes glittered in the firelight. "The Earl of Stonefield has done us the great honor of requesting your hand in marriage."

Elizabeth turned to her sister, expecting to see shock matching her own, only to find Harriet looking away, tears gleaming in her eyes.

"Harriet?" she whispered. "Did you know about this?"

But before her sister could answer, their father's voice rang out with terrible finality: "The Earl of Stonefield will have a bride in a week's time. That is all either of you need to know."

"This is madness," Elizabeth protested, her mind still reeling from the connection between the commanding figure at the ball and this sudden announcement. "Surely Harriet should have some say in?—"

"Say?" Their father's laugh was harsh. "What say does a daughter need when her father has arranged such an advantageous match? The Earl of Stonefield is one of the wealthiest peers in England. His connections alone?—"

"His connections?" Elizabeth's voice rose despite her best efforts to remain calm. "What of his reputation? The broken engagements, the scandals?—"

"Enough!" The baron slammed his glass down on the mantle. "The match is made, the contracts drawn. Harriet will be a countess, and our family's position will be

secured. That is the end of this discussion."

Elizabeth watched helplessly as her sister seemed to shrink into herself, those earlier tears now flowing freely down her cheeks. She wanted to argue further, to fight this sudden pronouncement that felt more like a sentence than a celebration, but years of experience had taught her the futility of challenging their father when his mind was set.

"May we be excused?" she asked instead, her arm going protectively around Harriet's shoulders.

The baron waved them away dismissively, already reaching for the brandy decanter again.

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As they climbed the stairs to their chambers, Elizabeth could feel her sister trembling beneath her arm. She waited until they were safely behind the closed door of Harriet's room before speaking.

"Harriet, what's really going on? That man in the maze?—"

"Please," Harriet whispered, sinking onto her bed. "Not tonight, Elizabeth. I can't...I just can't."

Elizabeth knelt before her sister, taking her cold hands in her own. "A week isn't much time, but perhaps if we speak to the earl, explain that your heart?—"

"The Earl of Stonefield isn't known for changing his mind once it's set," Harriet interrupted, her voice hollow. "You heard the gossip yourself. Four broken engagements, yet he's still one of the most sought-after matches in London. What chance do I have of refusing him?"

Elizabeth felt her heart constrict at her sister's defeated tone. She thought of the earl's predatory grace, the calculating intelligence behind his smile, the way he'd watched them from across the ballroom. Something about this entire arrangement felt wrong, but she couldn't quite grasp what.

"Get some rest," she said finally, pressing a kiss to Harriet's forehead.

CHAPTER TWO

Dawn had barely touched the London sky when Elizabeth heard the telltale creak of

floorboards outside her chamber. Her heart tightened as she rose from her vanity, where she'd been staring unseeing at her reflection for the past hour. The soft knock that followed confirmed her fears.

"Come in, Harriet," she called softly, smoothing her hands over her morning dress.

Her sister slipped inside, still in her nightgown with a shawl wrapped tightly around her shoulders. In the grey morning light, Harriet's usual vibrant beauty seemed diminished, her face pale and drawn. Elizabeth's chest constricted at the sight of unshed tears in her sister's eyes.

"I can't do it, Elizabeth," Harriet whispered, her voice cracking. "I cannot marry him."

Elizabeth crossed the room swiftly, gathering her trembling sister into her arms. "What is troubling you so? You've barely said two words since Father announced the match."

"I..." Harriet pulled back, wringing her hands. "There's something I must tell you, but you'll think me terribly foolish."

"Never," Elizabeth assured her, leading Harriet to sit beside her on the bed. "Tell me what burdens your heart so."

Harriet's fingers twisted in her shawl. "I'm in love with another."

The words hung in the air between them as Elizabeth processed their implications. "What do you mean? Who?—"

"His name is James Crawford," Harriet rushed out, as if afraid she'd lose her courage. "He's the nephew of Viscount Pembroke. We met at Lady Morrison's ball three months ago, and he's everything I've ever dreamed of, Elizabeth. Kind and gentle

and—" Her voice caught on a sob.

"The masquerade," Elizabeth breathed, understanding dawning. "The man in the raven mask. That was him, wasn't it?"

Harriet nodded miserably. "He'll inherit his uncle's title eventually, but for now, he has no fortune of his own. When he heard Father would never agree, he..." Fresh tears spilled down her cheeks. "He suggested we run away to Gretna Green."

"Harriet!" Elizabeth gasped, gripping her sister's hands. "You cannot be serious. An elopement would ruin you completely."

"What choice do I have?" Harriet pulled away to pace the room, her movements frantic. "Father would never allow me to marry James, even if we waited. The earl is one of the wealthiest peers in England—that's all Father cares about."

Elizabeth watched her sister's agitated movements, her mind racing. The enormity of what Harriet was considering sent chills down her spine. "When were you planning to leave?"

"Tonight," Harriet whispered, stopping by the window. "James has arranged everything. A carriage will be waiting behind the baker's shop on Bond Street."

"Tonight?" Elizabeth stood, her heart pounding. "But the wedding?—"

"Will never take place," Harriet finished, turning to face her with desperate determination. "I know it's scandalous, but I cannot bear the thought of marrying the earl. You've heard the rumors about him, Elizabeth. Four broken engagements in one season! And the way he looks at people, like they're pieces on a chessboard..."

Elizabeth moved to grasp her sister's shoulders. "Listen to me carefully. Running

away to Gretna Green is not the answer. The scandal would destroy any chance of a respectable future."

"But—"

"There's another way," Elizabeth said, an idea forming even as she spoke. "Aunt Margaret has been begging us to visit her estate in Derbyshire. Go to her instead."

Harriet's eyes widened. "What?"

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"Think about it," Elizabeth pressed. "The countryside is far enough from London and Father's reach. You can stay there while I handle things here. If James truly loves you, he can wait until circumstances are more favorable."

"But Father will be furious," Harriet protested weakly, though Elizabeth could see her considering the alternative. "And the earl—what about his reaction?"

"Let me worry about that," Elizabeth said firmly, though her stomach churned at the thought of Cecil Gillet's infamous temper. "At least this way, you'll be safe with family instead of ruined by scandal."

Harriet bit her lip, hesitating. "But what if..." She looked at Elizabeth with sudden fear. "What if Father makes you marry him instead?"

Elizabeth forced a laugh, though the suggestion sent an unexpected flutter through her chest. "Don't be ridiculous. The earl would never accept a scarred spinster when he could have his pick of any beauty in London."

"You undervalue yourself," Harriet said softly, reaching up to touch Elizabeth's scar. "This doesn't define you, Elizabeth."

"Stop it. This isn't about me," Elizabeth cut her off gently, stepping back. "We need to focus on getting you safely away. There's not much time before the household wakes."

She moved to her writing desk, pulling out paper and ink. "I'll write to Aunt Margaret immediately. We can have Thomas drive you to the morning coach?—"

"Thomas?" Harriet's voice quavered. "But he's Father's groom. Surely he'll tell?—"

"Thomas has a soft spot for you since you nursed his daughter through the fever last winter," Elizabeth reminded her, already writing swiftly. "Besides, he owes me a favor."

The scratch of her quill filled the silence as Harriet wrestled with the decision. Finally, her sister spoke in a small voice: "You truly think this is better than going with James?"

Elizabeth paused in her writing, choosing her words carefully. "I think that if James truly loves you, he'll still be there when the time is right. Running away to Gretna Green speaks of desperation, not devotion."

"But what if—" Harriet's words were cut off by the distant sound of movement in the house. The servants would be starting their morning duties.

"We haven't much time," Elizabeth said, quickly folding and sealing her letter. "Pack only what you absolutely need. Nothing that will be immediately missed."

As Harriet hurried to her chamber, Elizabeth pressed her forehead against the cool glass of her window. Outside, the first rays of sunlight were beginning to paint the London sky in shades of pink and gold. In a few hours, those same rays would illuminate an empty church, a furious earl, and an absent bride.

Please God, she prayed silently, let me be doing the right thing.

The morning sun streamed through St. George's stained glass windows, casting rainbow shadows across the assembled guests.

Elizabeth sat rigid in the family pew, acutely aware of the mounting tension as

minutes stretched into quarters of hours with no sign of the bride.

Her father shifted restlessly beside her, his face growing redder with each passing moment. The whispers had started about ten minutes ago—first just a gentle murmur, but now growing into a steady undercurrent of speculation that even the vicar's pointed coughs couldn't quite suppress.

But it was the earl himself who drew Elizabeth's unwilling attention.

Cecil Gillet stood at the altar, his broad shoulders straight and proud in his perfectly tailored black coat. Though his expression remained carefully neutral, there was something in the set of his jaw that spoke of barely contained fury.

He's even more handsome than I thought, Elizabeth thought traitorously, then immediately chastised herself for the observation. This was hardly the time to notice how his dark blue eyes seemed to absorb light rather than reflect it, or how his fingers, elegant but strong, tapped an ominous rhythm against his thigh.

A movement at the church entrance caught her attention. Harrison, Cecil's butler, approached his master with swift, purposeful steps. The earl bent his head to receive whatever message was delivered, and Elizabeth's heart nearly stopped as those penetrating eyes suddenly fixed on her father.

"My lord," Baron Cooper rose hastily, mopping his brow with a handkerchief. "I'm certain there's a perfectly reasonable explanation?—"

"Is there?" Cecil's voice cut through the church like a blade, silencing all whispers. "Then perhaps you'd care to share it with your assembled guests? Some of whom, I might add, have waited nearly an hour for this ceremony to begin."

Elizabeth watched her father flinch at the earl's tone. She had never seen the baron so

discomposed—not even when she'd accidentally spilled wine on the Turkish carpet last Christmas.

"I'll send someone to check on her immediately," Luke stammered, but Cecil's cold laugh stopped him.

"Don't bother." The earl's eyes swept the church, lingering for a moment on Elizabeth in a way that made her skin prickle. "I believe we all know your younger daughter won't be joining us today."

Elizabeth's fingers twisted in her lap as whispers erupted through the church once more. Cecil's words had confirmed what many had likely suspected—the bride had fled. She could feel curious glances darting her way, no doubt wondering if she'd had a hand in her sister's disappearance.

"My lord," her father tried again, his voice strained. "If you'll allow me to send searchers?—"

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"Sending men to hunt down an unwilling bride?" Cecil's mouth curved into a smile that held no warmth. "How...medieval of you, baron."

The earl descended the altar steps with predatory grace, each footfall echoing in the now-silent church. Elizabeth found herself holding her breath as he approached, unable to look away from the dangerous gleam in his eyes.

"Tell me, my lord baron," Cecil continued, his voice deceptively soft, "did you truly think I wouldn't notice the signs? The hasty wedding preparations, the lack of proper settlements drawn up, the way your daughter could barely look at me?"

Luke Cooper paled visibly. "I assure you?—"

"Your assurances," Cecil cut in, "are worth about as much as your daughter's presence at the altar." His gaze flickered briefly to Elizabeth again, making her heart stutter. "Though perhaps not all your daughters share the same...reluctance."

Elizabeth's spine stiffened at his implication, even as her father sputtered indignantly beside her.

The earl's attention was fully on her now, those stormy blue eyes studying her with an intensity that made her want to shrink into the shadows—or perhaps step forward into the light. She wasn't entirely sure which impulse was more dangerous.

A bell tolled somewhere in the distance, marking another quarter-hour of this increasingly uncomfortable spectacle. Cecil's smile widened fractionally at the sound, as if it had reminded him of something amusing.

"Well," he drawled, his voice carrying clearly through the hushed church, "it seems we find ourselves at an interesting impasse."

"My lord," Elizabeth found her voice, though it emerged softer than she'd intended. "Perhaps we should continue this discussion somewhere more... private?"

Cecil's eyebrow arched elegantly. "And deny our guests the entertainment they so clearly crave?" He gestured to the assembled crowd, who didn't even pretend not to be hanging on every word. "Besides, I believe what I have to say concerns everyone present."

Elizabeth's heart thundered against her ribs as he moved closer, close enough that she could catch the faint scent of sandalwood that clung to his immaculate coat. Even through her mounting anxiety, she couldn't help but notice how his presence seemed to fill the space around them, making the large church feel suddenly, impossibly intimate.

"Do enlighten us, then," she managed, lifting her chin despite her racing pulse.

Something flickered in Cecil's eyes—appreciation? Amusement? But his voice remained coldly pleasant as he addressed the congregation while keeping his gaze fixed on Elizabeth.

"Ladies and gentlemen, it appears Miss Harriet Cooper has made her feelings about this match quite clear through her absence." A ripple of murmurs swept through the church. "However, I find myself in a rather unique position."

He turned slightly to pin Luke with a look that made the baron shrink back. "You see, certain arrangements were made. Certain...promises given. And I do not leave promises unfulfilled."

Elizabeth watched her father's face drain of what little color remained. There was something in the exchange she wasn't understanding—some underlying current of threat or obligation that made her father look positively ill.

"The Earl of Stonefield does not walk away from the altar without a bride," Cecil announced, his voice ringing with authority. His smile turned predatory as his attention returned to Elizabeth. "Fortunately, the baron has another daughter."

The silence that followed was absolute.

Elizabeth felt the world tilt sideways.

Surely she had misheard.

Surely he couldn't mean?—

"You can't be serious," she breathed, aware of hundreds of eyes fixed upon them.

"Oh, but I am." Cecil's smile held a dangerous edge. "In fact, I've never been more serious in my life." He glanced at the ornate clock above the church entrance. "I'll make this very simple. If a bride—any bride—is not standing before that altar in the next five minutes, there will be...consequences."

The last word fell like a stone into the silence. Elizabeth saw her father flinch violently beside her.

"My lord," Luke started, his voice trembling. "Surely we can come to some other arrangement?—"

"Can we?" Cecil's tone dropped several degrees in temperature. "Tell me, baron, what else do you have to offer? Your good name?" His laugh was sharp enough to cut. "Or

perhaps we should discuss certain financial matters? Here, before all your peers?"

Elizabeth watched the interplay between them with growing unease. There was something here she wasn't understanding—some hidden current of power and obligation that made her father look increasingly desperate.

Her heart stuttered, then began racing so violently she feared it might burst from her chest.

A rustle of fabric drew her attention as several ladies in nearby pews leaned forward, eager not to miss a word of what was quickly becoming the scandal of the season. Elizabeth could practically see tomorrow's gossip spreading through London's drawing rooms.

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"Four minutes now," Cecil announced pleasantly, though his eyes remained hard as steel. "Tick tock, baron. What shall it be? Your reputation?" His gaze slid meaningfully to Elizabeth. "Or your eldest daughter?"

"This is madness," Elizabeth found herself saying, though her voice sounded distant to her own ears. "You cannot seriously intend?—"

"Can I not?" Cecil's attention fixed on her fully now, his gaze so intense she had to fight the urge to step back. "Tell me, Miss Cooper, what makes you think you understand my intentions at all?"

Something in his tone sent a shiver down her spine. This was not the charming rake she'd observed at the masquerade. This man was dangerous—a predator waiting to strike.

"Three minutes," he continued softly. "Though I suppose we could skip the waiting entirely if you'd care to make the decision yourself, Miss Cooper."

Elizabeth felt trapped in his gaze, like a bird before a snake. "I?—"

"Elizabeth." Her father's urgent whisper cut through her confusion. "A word. Now."

She allowed Luke to pull her slightly aside, though she could feel Cecil's eyes following their every movement.

"Listen to me carefully," Luke hissed, his face ashen. "You must do this. You must marry him."

"What?" Elizabeth stared at her father in disbelief. "Have you gone mad? He's barely met me, he can't possibly?—"

"He can and he will," Luke cut in, his fingers digging into her arm. "You don't understand. The earl...he holds certain papers. Certain promises I made. If he were to call in those debts?—"

"Debts?" Elizabeth's eyes widened. "What debts? What have you done?"

"Two minutes," Cecil's voice rang out, making them both jump.

"Father?" Elizabeth pressed, her voice barely above a whisper. "What aren't you telling me?"

Luke's eyes darted frantically between her and the earl. "There's no time to explain. Just know that if you don't do this, we'll be ruined. Not just socially—completely ruined. We'll lose everything."

Elizabeth felt the blood drain from her face as understanding dawned. Her father had gambled away their future, and now the earl held their fate in his elegant, ruthless hands.

"One minute," Cecil announced, sounding almost bored. But when Elizabeth glanced his way, she caught a flash of something else in his expression—a keen intelligence that suggested he was playing a game whose rules only he fully understood.

"He can't truly want this," she protested weakly. "A scarred spinster instead of?—"

"What I want," Cecil interrupted, having apparently heard her whispered words, "is irrelevant. What matters is what I will have." His eyes locked with hers. "Thirty seconds, Miss Cooper. Make your choice."

The church seemed to hold its collective breath. Elizabeth could hear her heart pounding in her ears as she looked between her father's desperate face and Cecil's calculated calm.

"Time's up," Cecil said softly. "Well, baron? Shall I make public exactly how much you?—"

"I'll do it." The words escaped Elizabeth's lips before she could stop them.

Cecil's predatory smile returned. "I beg your pardon?"

Elizabeth lifted her chin, gathering what remained of her dignity. "I said, I'll do it. I'll marry you."

CHAPTER THREE

Everything that followed happened in a blur. Elizabeth felt as though she was watching herself from above as her father led her down the aisle. The few guests present—mostly her father's acquaintances who had come to see Harriet wed—whispered behind their fans, no doubt reveling in the scandal of the scarred sister replacing the beautiful bride.

Cecil stood at the altar, his broad shoulders straight and proud in his perfectly tailored coat. He didn't turn to look at her as she approached, and Elizabeth was grateful for small mercies. She wasn't sure she could maintain her composure if she had to meet those piercing blue eyes.

"Dearly beloved..." The vicar's voice seemed to come from far away.

Elizabeth's fingers trembled as Cecil took her hand. His touch was warm, almost gentle, but she could feel the strength in his grip. A warning, perhaps, or a promise.

"I, Cecil..." His voice was clear and commanding as he repeated his vows, never once hesitating.

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When it was her turn, Elizabeth's voice wavered only slightly. "I, Elizabeth..."

This isn't real, she told herself. This cannot be real. Yet the weight of the ring sliding onto her finger was undeniable.

"You may kiss the bride."

For the first time since the ceremony began, Cecil turned to face her fully. His eyes traveled from her scar to her lips, and Elizabeth felt heat rise to her cheeks despite her best efforts to remain impassive. He leaned down, and she braced herself for the contact.

But instead of kissing her lips, he pressed a chaste kiss to her cheek, his breath hot against her ear as he whispered, "Well played, my dear."

The words sent an involuntary shiver down her spine. Before she could respond, he had already pulled away, turning to accept congratulations from the assembled guests.

Elizabeth stood frozen, her new husband's words echoing in her mind. What game was he playing? And more importantly, what were the rules?

The carriage ride to Cecil's estate passed in complete silence. Elizabeth kept her gaze fixed on the passing landscape, though she could feel her husband's eyes on her more than once. The sprawling grounds of Stonefield Manor came into view just as the afternoon sun began its descent, bathing everything in golden light.

"Welcome home, my lady," Cecil said, his deep voice breaking the silence as he helped her down from the carriage.

Elizabeth's breath caught at her first proper view of the manor. It was magnificent—three stories of pale stone with tall windows that caught the sunlight like diamonds. Yet there was something almost forbidding about its grandeur.

A line of servants waited to greet them, arranged precisely by rank. The butler, a dignified man with graying hair, stepped forward first.

"My lord, welcome back." He bowed deeply. "And may I present the staff to her ladyship?"

"Proceed, Harrison," Cecil replied, his hand coming to rest at the small of Elizabeth's back. The touch, even through layers of fabric, sent warmth spreading through her body.

"Her ladyship, the Countess of Stonefield," Harrison announced formally, and Elizabeth noticed several of the servants exchange quick glances at the sight of her scar.

The introductions continued, but Elizabeth barely registered the names and faces. Her mind was still reeling from the events of the day, from the title she now bore, from the warmth of Cecil's hand still pressed against her back.

"That will be all," Cecil dismissed the staff once the introductions were complete. "Leave us."

The servants dispersed with practiced efficiency, leaving Elizabeth alone with her new husband in the grand entrance hall. The moment the last footstep faded, Cecil's demeanor changed. The proper aristocrat disappeared, replaced by something darker,

more dangerous.

"Now then," he said, circling her slowly, "shall we discuss the terms of our arrangement?"

Elizabeth turned to face him, refusing to be intimidated despite the way his presence seemed to fill the entire hall. "Terms, my lord? I wasn't aware marriage vows had negotiable terms."

A wolfish smile played at the corners of his mouth. "Come now, we both know this is hardly a conventional marriage." His eyes traveled deliberately down her form. "Though I must admit, you make a far more...interesting bride than your sister would have been."

"If you're trying to shock me, my lord?—"

"Cecil," he interrupted, moving closer. "If we're to share a bed, you might as well use my name."

Heat flooded Elizabeth's cheeks. "And who says we'll be sharing a bed?"

He laughed then, a rich sound that seemed to reverberate through her very bones. "That's precisely what we need to discuss." He gestured toward a nearby door. "Shall we?"

Elizabeth preceded him into what appeared to be his study, a masculine room dominated by a massive mahogany desk. The door closed behind them with a decisive click.

"Let me be clear," Cecil said, his voice taking on a harder edge. "I require one thing from this marriage: an heir. Nothing more."

Elizabeth's heart hammered against her ribs. "And after?"

"Three months." He prowled closer, and Elizabeth forced herself not to step back. "I'll stay for three months to ensure the deed is done. After that, you'll be free to live as you please. The estate will be yours to manage, with a generous allowance."

"How...practical of you," Elizabeth managed, hating the slight tremor in her voice.

"I'm nothing if not practical, my dear." His lips curved into that dangerous smile again. "Though I should warn you—I have no intention of maintaining my...other arrangements while we're married."

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"How noble of you," Elizabeth said dryly, gathering her courage. "Though I hardly expected fidelity from London's most notorious rake."

His eyes darkened at her words. "You speak quite boldly for someone who's spent her life hiding behind her sister's skirts."

The barb struck home, but Elizabeth lifted her chin defiantly. "And you speak quite confidently for someone who couldn't even keep his intended bride from fleeing."

In two long strides, Cecil closed the distance between them. "Careful, my dear wife," he murmured, his breath fanning against her cheek. "You might find that provoking me has...unexpected consequences."

"Is that a threat, my lord?" Elizabeth asked, proud that her voice remained steady despite their proximity.

"Cecil," he reminded her, one hand coming up to trace the line of her scar with surprising gentleness. "And no, not a threat. A promise."

Elizabeth's breath caught in her throat at his touch. No one had ever dared to touch her scar before, let alone with such...curiosity.

"I have conditions of my own," she managed to say, stepping back to clear her head. "If you expect me to fulfill my...duties."

His laugh was low and dangerous cutting her mid sentence. "My darling wife, do you know about wifely duties?"

"I know exactly what my duties are," she retorted, though her pulse quickened at the heat in his gaze.

"Do you?" He moved closer again, backing her against the desk. "Plus And I've voluntarily pledged my fidelity to you . Are you prepared for what that means?"

He leaned closer still, his breath fanning against her ear. The heat of his body seemed to envelope her, and Elizabeth gripped the desk harder. A wolf indeed, she thought, and she was trapped in his lair.

Elizabeth's hands gripped the edge of the desk behind her, but she refused to look away from his intense gaze. "I'm not some innocent miss who faints at the mention of marital duties, my lord."

"Aren't you?" His voice dropped lower as he leaned in, placing his hands on the desk on either side of her, effectively caging her in. "Tell me, Elizabeth, have you ever felt desire? Real, consuming desire that makes you ache in places you've never even dared to think about?"

A flush crept up her neck, but she held her ground. "You seem very certain of your own appeal."

"I am." The corner of his mouth lifted in that devastating half-smile. "And I think you feel it too. Your pulse is racing." His eyes dropped to her throat, where her heartbeat betrayed her. "Your breathing has quickened."

His hand came to rest beside hers on the desk, his little finger just brushing against hers. Such a small point of contact, yet it sent sparks racing up her arm.

"That's merely irritation," she lied.

"Is it?" He bent his head, his lips barely brushing her ear. "Then perhaps you need a demonstration of what real desire feels like."

The heat of his breath against her skin sent shivers down her spine. "I didn't agree to be one of your conquests."

"No," he agreed, pulling back just enough to meet her eyes. "You agreed to be my wife. And while I may be a rake, I take my vows seriously. For the next three months, you'll be the only woman in my bed—or against my desk, if you prefer."

The bold words made her gasp, which only seemed to amuse him further.

"You are absolutely insufferable," Elizabeth breathed, trying to ignore how her body responded to his proximity.

Cecil's eyes darkened with amusement. "And you, my dear, are far more passionate than you pretend to be. I wonder what other surprises you're hiding beneath that proper exterior."

"You'll never find out," she declared, though her voice lacked conviction.

He stepped back suddenly, leaving her feeling oddly bereft of his warmth. "Oh, I will. You see, desire isn't something you can control, Elizabeth." He walked to a cabinet and poured himself a glass of brandy. "It's a force of nature, like a storm at sea. You can try to resist, but eventually..."

"You seem very sure of yourself."

"I am." He took a slow sip, his eyes never leaving hers. "Within a month, you'll be begging for my touch. Within two, you'll be crying out my name in the dark. And by the time our three months are up..." He paused, letting the tension build. "Well, we'll

see if you're so eager for me to leave then."

His fingers traced an invisible line down her neck, following the path of her scar, making her shiver despite herself. When she couldn't quite suppress a small gasp, his eyes darkened with satisfaction.

Elizabeth straightened her spine, gathering what remained of her dignity. "You overestimate your charms, my lord. I've spent years resisting the advances of men?—"

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"Boys," he corrected sharply. "You've been resisting boys. I assure you, I am something else entirely." He set down his glass and moved toward her again, his movements predatory. "But don't worry, my dear wife. I won't touch you until you beg for it."

"Then you'll be waiting a very long time."

His smile was pure sin. "We'll see. In the meantime..." He leaned in close, his lips nearly brushing hers. "You might want to learn how to please yourself. The nights can get very...long."

With that parting shot, he turned and strode from the room.

She pressed a hand to her racing heart.

What kind of devil had she married?

And more troubling still, why did part of her long to discover exactly what pleasures that devil could teach her?

CHAPTER FOUR

Elizabeth hadn't slept more than a few hours.

The morning sun streamed through the windows of Stonefield Manor as she made her way down the servant's corridor, intending to speak with the housekeeper about the week's menus. She paused when she heard hushed voices around the corner.

"—scarred like that, and her own sister running away from the marriage too." The words, spoken in a maid's sharp whisper, made Elizabeth's fingers clench in her skirts.

"Seen her yourself then?" another voice asked eagerly.

"Clear as day, that mark running down her neck. No wonder she wasn't married before—and now taking her sister's place at the altar! Makes you wonder what the earl was thinking, accepting such a?—"

"Hush!" A third voice cut in. "That's no way to speak of the new countess."

"Well it's true, isn't it? First time in history Stonefield Manor's mistress is a?—"

Elizabeth stepped around the corner, her head held high. The three maids scattered like startled birds, dropping into hasty curtsies before fleeing. Only Sarah, the youngest maid dared meet her eyes for a moment—a glance full of mortification and apology.

Heat burned in Elizabeth's cheeks, but she forced her spine straighter. Let them whisper. Let them stare. She would prove her worth through actions, not appearances. This house needed a proper mistress, and she would be damned if she let a few gossiping servants undermine her authority.

By the time Mrs. Winters, the housekeeper, found her in the morning room, Elizabeth had already drafted three pages of necessary improvements in her mind.

"My lady?" Mrs. Winters entered with a steaming cup of tea. Her eyes swept over Elizabeth's face, noting but tactfully ignoring the high color in her cheeks. "I thought you might appreciate this before breakfast."

"Thank you." Elizabeth accepted the cup, grateful for both the tea and the elderly woman's dignified professionalism. Unlike the other servants, Mrs. Winters possessed that particular brand of stoicism that marked a truly professional housekeeper.

"Shall I have breakfast served in the morning room, my lady?"

"Yes, please." Elizabeth hesitated. "Will his lordship be joining me?"

Something flickered across Mrs. Winters' face. "His lordship...prefers to take his meals in his study, my lady. He's kept to that habit since—" She stopped abruptly. "For quite some time now."

Of course he did. Elizabeth suppressed a flare of irritation. Even in this, he would maintain his distance, treating their marriage as nothing more than the business arrangement he'd declared it to be.

"I see." She kept her voice neutral. "Then perhaps you could show me through the house after breakfast? I should like to familiarize myself with my new home."

The morning room proved to be a pleasant space, with large windows overlooking the estate's manicured gardens. But Elizabeth found herself picking at her food, her appetite diminished by the conspicuous emptiness of the chair across from her.

"My lady?" Mrs. Winters appeared in the doorway. "Shall we begin the tour?"

Elizabeth welcomed the distraction. As they moved through the house, she found herself impressed by its elegant efficiency. Every room spoke of wealth without ostentation, taste without excess. It was, she realized, rather like its master in that regard—beautiful but controlled, refined yet somehow dangerous.

"The kitchen gardens need attention," Mrs. Winters was saying as they walked. "And the east wing hasn't been properly aired in months. Cook has been asking for new copper pots, and the drawing room curtains..."

"The kitchen gardens should be our first priority," Elizabeth interrupted smoothly. "Fresh herbs and vegetables will reduce our reliance on the market. As for the east wing, we'll need to check the windows for drafts before winter arrives. The copper pots can wait until next quarter, but have the curtains cleaned and repaired rather than replaced—it's more economical."

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Mrs. Winters' eyebrows rose slightly. "You have experience with household management, my lady?"

"I've been managing my father's estate since my mother passed." Elizabeth touched her scar unconsciously. "Someone had to."

The housekeeper's expression softened with something that might have been approval. "Then perhaps you'd like to see the account books after?—"

A flicker of color through an open doorway caught Elizabeth's attention. She paused, drawn to what appeared to be a small gallery filled with paintings.

"Mrs. Winters, what room is this?"

"Oh, that's—" Mrs. Winters began, but Elizabeth had already stepped inside.

The room took her breath away. Paintings covered nearly every inch of wall space, their gilt frames catching the morning light. They weren't the usual stern ancestral portraits she'd expected in a noble house. These were intimate scenes—gardens in full bloom, children playing by a stream, a woman's hand holding a paintbrush. The style was delicate yet assured, each brushstroke placed with evident care and love.

"Who painted these?" Elizabeth moved closer to examine one depicting a young boy with familiar dark blue eyes, sword-fighting with a tree branch. Something about the child's impish grin reminded her of?—

"What are you doing in this room?"

Cecil's voice, cold and sharp as winter frost, made her spin around. He stood in the doorway, his broad shoulders blocking the exit, his expression thunderous. Mrs. Winters had vanished, Elizabeth noticed, apparently possessing the good sense to flee at the first sign of her master's displeasure.

"I wasn't aware any rooms were forbidden to the mistress of the house," Elizabeth replied, lifting her chin. Though her heart raced at his sudden appearance, she refused to be cowed. "Unless these paintings hold some special significance? Perhaps they belonged to a former...companion?"

The muscle in Cecil's jaw ticked. "You overstep, madam."

"Do I? I merely wish to understand what areas of my new home I'm permitted to enter. After all, we wouldn't want me stumbling upon any...delicate memories."

"You presume too much about things you don't understand."

"Then enlighten me, my lord." The words emerged more breathless than she'd intended. "What am I to make of a husband who demands marriage one day, then retreats to his study the next, speaking only to issue commands about forbidden rooms?"

Something shifted in Cecil's expression—a flicker of something almost like pain before his features hardened again. "You agreed to our arrangement. Three months, an heir, then freedom. My private matters are not your concern."

"Everything in this house is my concern now." Elizabeth gestured to the paintings. "Including these. If I'm to manage this estate?—"

"You'll manage what I tell you to manage." His voice dropped lower, sending an involuntary shiver down her spine. "And you'll stay out of this room."

Their gazes locked in silent battle. Elizabeth felt her pulse quicken at his proximity, hating how her body betrayed her with its response to his presence.

"Is that how you intend to spend our three months?" Elizabeth challenged, emboldened by his reaction. "Issuing commands and expecting blind obedience?"

A dangerous smile curved Cecil's lips. "I can think of far more...entertaining ways to spend our time."

His eyes dropped to her mouth, and Elizabeth's breath caught. She took a step back, bumping into one of the paintings. Cecil's hand shot out to steady both her and the frame, effectively trapping her between his arm and the wall.

"Careful, wife," he murmured, his breath fanning against her cheek. "These paintings are irreplaceable."

"Like their artist?" The words slipped out before she could stop them.

Something dark flickered in Cecil's eyes. His free hand came up to trace the line of her scar, the touch so light it might have been imagined. "You're playing a dangerous game, Elizabeth."

"I wasn't aware we were playing at all." But her voice trembled as his fingers lingered on her neck.

"Aren't we?" His thumb brushed her pulse point. "You're here, in a forbidden room, provoking me with accusations about former lovers. One might think you're trying to make me jealous."

Elizabeth's face flushed with indignation. "Don't flatter yourself, my lord. I'm merely trying to understand what kind of marriage I've been forced into."

"Forced?" Cecil's eyes darkened. "As I recall, you came to me quite willingly at the altar. Or was that another sacrifice for your dear sister?"

The reminder stung. Elizabeth attempted to duck under his arm, but Cecil moved faster, placing both hands on the wall beside her head.

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"Running away again?" His voice held a dangerous edge. "Like sister, like sister, it seems."

"At least Harriet had the courage to follow her heart," Elizabeth shot back. "Unlike some who hide behind locked doors and forbidden rooms, too afraid to?—"

"You seem very interested in my past affairs."

"Not at all," Elizabeth said, proud that her voice remained steady despite his approach. "I simply find it curious that a man so eager to secure an heir would keep a shrine to his previous?—"

"Enough." He stopped mere inches from her, close enough that she could feel the heat radiating from his body. His eyes dropped to her neck, following the line of her scar where it disappeared beneath her bodice. "Has anyone ever told you how fascinating you are when you're angry?"

Elizabeth's breath hitched. "I'm not angry, I'm?—"

"No?" His fingers traced the air just above her collarbone, not quite touching but close enough to make her skin tingle. "Your breathing says otherwise. I know what desire looks like, Elizabeth. The quickening breath, the flush in your cheeks...No matter how you try to hide it, I can always tell." He indicated the spot on her neck where her heartbeat betrayed her. "Like a trapped bird."

"Perhaps because you're blocking my escape," she managed, though her voice emerged huskier than intended.

"Am I?" His lips curved into that dangerous smile she was beginning to know too well. "You could easily step around me. Yet you remain." He leaned closer, his breath warm against her ear. "Why is that, I wonder?"

Elizabeth fought to control her breathing, acutely aware of how her body was responding to his proximity. "You presume too much, my lord."

"I don't presume. I am certain." His hand came to rest on the wall beside her head, caging her in. "Tell me, Elizabeth, do all your arguments end with you pressed against walls, or am I special?"

"You're insufferable," she whispered, hating how her body swayed toward his unconsciously.

"And you're trembling." His other hand came up to touch a loose curl by her cheek. "Is it fear that makes you shake so...or something else entirely? "How about we find that out tonight? I will see you at my study, ten o'clock. Don't be late, wife. "

CHAPTER FIVE

The Gentleman's Club

The rich aroma of aged brandy and Cuban cigars filled the private room at White's, where Cecil found himself seeking refuge from the mounting tension at home. He lounged in one of the deep leather chairs, watching the amber liquid in his glass catch the lamplight as his mind wandered traitorously to Elizabeth.

God, but she was beautiful—not in the conventional way of society's pampered debutantes, but in a way that haunted him. Her eyes were a striking emerald green, large and expressive, framed by thick dark lashes that cast shadows on her high cheekbones when she looked down at her ledgers. Her lips, full and naturally pink,

had a tendency to quirk up at one corner when she was trying not to smile at his provocations. And her hair—a rich mahogany that caught red highlights in the sunlight—was always trying to escape its pins in wayward curls that made his fingers itch to free them completely.

Then there was her scar—the very feature society deemed a flaw but which he found inexplicably alluring. It traced a delicate path from just below her left ear down the elegant column of her throat, disappearing beneath her neckline in a way that made him desperate to discover its end.

Her figure was fuller than fashion dictated, with curves that his hands ached to trace. He'd caught himself staring at the swell of her breasts above her neckline, imagining how they would feel filling his palms. The way her waist nipped in, emphasized by her well-fitted gowns, led to generous hips that swayed ever so slightly when she walked—a subtle movement that had him gritting his teeth with want.

He wondered if her breasts would be as full and responsive as they looked, if her nipples would pucker tight when he...

"I must say, Stonefield," the Duke of Greyhall remarked from his position by the fireplace, "you seem rather preoccupied for a newly married man." Percival Hardy, Cecil's closest friend since boyhood and now his brother-in-law through his marriage to Madeleine, wore a knowing smile that held a hint of amusement. "Your new bride proving more challenging than anticipated?"

Cecil's jaw tightened. "Challenging is hardly the word I'd use. The woman is absolutely infuriating."

"Which woman?" The frigid question came from Laurence Gillet, Duke of Westrow, as he entered the room. Cecil's cousin had only recently returned from his self-imposed exile in Scotland, and his imposing presence—made all the more severe by

years of isolation—drew the immediate attention of the few other gentlemen present. Though they shared blood, there was nothing warm in his voice as he asked, "The bride you intended to marry, or the one you actually did?"

"The latter," Cecil muttered, taking another sip of his brandy. "Miss Elizabeth Cooper—now the Countess of Stonefield—has proved to be far more...infuriating than anticipated."

"Challenging?" Percival's eyebrows rose. "Do tell."

"She questions everything. Challenges my authority in my own home. And has an utterly maddening habit of appearing exactly where she shouldn't be." Cecil ran a hand through his hair, a gesture that betrayed his frustration. "Just yesterday, I found her in a room I specifically told her was forbidden."

"Perhaps she's simply curious about her new home," Percival suggested diplomatically.

"Curiosity has no place in a marriage of convenience," Laurence stated flatly, accepting a glass from the hovering servant. His perpetual frown deepened as he settled into a chair. "Though I still fail to understand why you required such an arrangement in the first place."

Cecil shot his cousin a warning look. "The reasons are my own."

"And I suppose those reasons have to do with why you didn't want your sisters present at the ceremony?" Laurence pressed, his cold eyes studying Cecil's reaction. "Percival here went to considerable trouble to keep them away."

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"For which I remain grateful," Cecil nodded to his friend. "The less speculation about the...unusual circumstances of my marriage, the better."

"Unusual?" Percival chuckled. "Is that what we're calling it when one sister runs away and you marry the other instead?"

The glass in Cecil's hand creaked dangerously. "I would appreciate it if we could discuss something else."

"Come now," Percival leaned forward, his expression turning serious. "We've known each other since we were boys. Something about this marriage troubles you beyond mere irritation with your wife's spirit."

Cecil stared into the depths of his glass, weighing his words carefully. "She's...different from what I expected. When I first arranged the match with her sister, I thought everything would proceed according to plan. A suitable bride, an heir, a simple transaction. But Elizabeth..."

"Has proven to be more than a simple transaction?" Laurence supplied, his usually stern features showing a flicker of interest.

"She treats the staff with respect, yet maintains proper authority. She's already identified improvements needed in the estate's management that my steward overlooked. And when shespeaks..." Cecil trailed off, remembering their heated exchange in his study. "She has a way of making me want to provoke her, just to see the fire in her eyes."

Percival's knowing smile widened. "Ah, so that's it. You find yourself attracted to your own wife. How inconvenient for a man who claimed he wanted a marriage in name only."

"It's not attraction," Cecil protested, perhaps too quickly. "It's...vexation. The woman drives me mad." He paused, swirling the brandy in his glass. "When I told her I intended to be faithful during our arrangement, she acted as if she hadn't expected such behavior from me. As if I were incapable of honoring my marriage vows."

"And yet that offends you?" Laurence raised an eyebrow, his tone skeptical. "You've never been one to break marriage vows, notorious reputation aside."

"Of course I wouldn't," Cecil snapped, then caught himself. "But her assumption that I would..." He trailed off, jaw tightening. "She looks at me as if I'm no better than a common scoundrel."

"My friend," Percival laughed softly, "I believe you're in more trouble than you realize. The infamous Earl of Stonefield, bothered by his wife's opinion of his character? Perhaps you should be more concerned with why her good opinion matters so much to you."

"She challenged me," Cecil admitted, recalling the defiant tilt of Elizabeth's chin, the way her pulse had jumped beneath his fingers when he'd touched her scar. "Said she wouldn't believe I could maintain such fidelity. So naturally..."

"You couldn't resist proving her wrong," Laurence finished, shaking his head. "Your pride will be your downfall, cousin."

"Pride has nothing to do with it," Cecil retorted, though something in his expression suggested otherwise. "I simply want to prove that her assumptions about my character are mistaken."

"What are you planning, then?" Percival's tone was knowing. At Cecil's sharp look, he shrugged. "You've never been one to back down from a challenge, my friend."

A dangerous smile played at Cecil's lips. "She thinks she knows what kind of man I am. Thinks she can anticipate my every move because of my reputation." His voice dropped lower. "She'll learn the folly of provoking a rake. I will punish her."

"Nothing involving the Earl of Stonefield remains predictable for long," Laurence observed dryly. "Particularly when it involves such an...unconventional marriage. The gossips are having quite a feast with this one."

"Let them gossip," Cecil said, but his grip on his glass tightened. "It changes nothing."

"Doesn't it?" Percival pressed. "You arranged a marriage with one sister, ended up with another, and now find yourself making unprecedented vows of fidelity to a woman you claim merely irritates you. One might think?—"

"One might think very carefully before finishing that sentence," Cecil warned, his voice dropping dangerously.

Percival held up his hands in mock surrender, but his eyes danced with amusement. "I merely observe that for a man who planned a simple transaction, you seem remarkably invested in proving something to your new countess."

"The only thing I'm invested in is maintaining my sanity for the next three months," Cecil muttered. "Do you know what she did yesterday? Rearranged my entire study because she claimed it was 'inefficient.' The woman has no concept of boundaries."

"And yet you allowed it?" Laurence's question cut straight to the heart of the matter.

Cecil's silence spoke volumes.

"I'm beginning to think," Percival said carefully, "that your wife isn't the only one who finds themselves challenged by this arrangement."

Cecil stood abruptly, pacing to the window. Outside, London's fashionable streets bustled with evening traffic, but he saw none of it. Instead, he kept seeing Elizabeth's face when she'd discovered a more efficient way to organize his correspondence—that flash of triumph in her green eyes, the slight curve of her lips that made him want to...

"She's not what I expected," he admitted finally, his voice low. "When I made the original arrangement with Baron Trowbridge, I thought to secure a biddable bride. Someone who would fulfill her duties without...complications."

"And instead you got a woman who matches you wit for wit," Percival observed. "How terribly inconvenient."

"It's more than that." Cecil turned back to his friends, frustration evident in every line of his body. "She sees too much. Questions too much. The other night, when I found her in that forbidden room..."

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"Ah yes, the mysterious room that's caused such speculation among the staff," Laurence interjected. "Another boundary she's crossed?"

"She didn't just cross it—she's completely mistaken it for something else. And when I confronted her..." Cecil broke off, remembering how she'd stood her ground, chin lifted, eyes flashing. "She demanded to know why it was forbidden in the first place."

"And what did you tell her?" Percival asked softly.

"Nothing of consequence." Cecil ran a hand through his hair, a gesture that betrayed his frustration. "But the woman has a way of...getting under my skin. Every time she challenges me, every defiant tilt of her chin..." He stopped, aware he'd revealed too much of his growing obsession. With deliberate casualness, he added, "It's irrelevant. In three months, this will all be finished."

"Will it?" Laurence's cold voice carried an unusual note of skepticism. "Because from where I sit, cousin, it seems you're already in deeper than you intended."

Cecil shot his cousin a dangerous look. "What exactly are you implying?"

"Merely that for a man planning to leave in three months, you seem extraordinarily concerned with your wife's every move." Laurence took a slow sip of his brandy. "When was the last time you visited your usual...entertainments?"

"I made a vow of fidelity," Cecil said stiffly.

"I seem to recall at least three broken engagements where similar vows were made."

Laurence countered.

"That was different," Cecil snapped, though he couldn't quite explain why. The thought of betraying Elizabeth's trust made something in his chest constrict painfully.

"Different because this time you actually care what she thinks of you?" Percival suggested mildly.

Cecil's silence was damning.

"You know," Percival continued, swirling his brandy thoughtfully, "my Madeleine was quite impressed when she heard about your marriage. Said it showed remarkable growth in character, choosing a wife for her intelligence rather than her beauty."

"I didn't choose her," Cecil protested. "She was merely...convenient."

"Convenient?" Laurence's sardonic laugh cut through the room. "Cousin, nothing about Elizabeth Cooper appears convenient. A scarred spinster with a sharp tongue and sharper mind, who challenges your authority at every turn? You could have had your pick of docile debutantes. Instead, you married the one woman in London who seems immune to your charm."

"She's not entirely immune," Cecil muttered before he could stop himself, remembering the way Elizabeth had trembled under his touch, the flush that crept up her neck when he stood too close.

Percival's eyebrows shot up. "Oh? Do tell."

"There's nothing to tell," Cecil said quickly, but his friends' knowing looks told him he'd already revealed too much. "We have an arrangement, nothing more."

"An arrangement that has you thinking about her reactions, analyzing her every move," Percival pointed out. "When was the last time you spent this much effort understanding a woman's mind rather than just pursuing her body?"

Cecil's jaw clenched. "You make me sound like some lovesick fool."

"Not lovesick," Laurence observed coldly. "But certainly preoccupied. You've barely touched your brandy, and you've adjusted your cravat three times in the last quarter hour—something you only do when thoroughly unsettled."

"The only thing unsettling me is this interrogation," Cecil growled, though he forced his hand away from his cravat. "I came here for a quiet evening among friends, not an inquiry into my marriage."

"Did you?" Percival leaned forward. "Because it seems to me you came here hoping we'd convince you that your growing attachment to your wife is merely temporary madness."

"I am not growing attached," Cecil insisted, but the words sounded hollow even to his own ears. "Elizabeth is...she's just..."

"Just what?" Laurence prompted when Cecil fell silent.

Cecil stared into the depths of his glass, seeing instead the way Elizabeth's eyes lit up when she solved a problem, the gentle way she spoke to the staff, the fierce pride with which she carried herself despite the scar that made lesser people turn away.

"She's unexpected," he finally said, his voice rough. "Everything about her is unexpected."

"And that vexes you?" Percival's tone held a hint of amusement.

"She's hardly the convenient match I anticipated," Cecil admitted, standing to pour himself another drink. "Do you know what she said when I mentioned my reputation? That she wasn't some innocent miss who faints at the mention of marital duties."

Percival's laugh echoed through the room. "Your new countess seems determined to keep you on your toes."

"Indeed." Cecil drained his glass and set it down with more force than necessary.

CHAPTER SIX

The flickering candlelight cast dancing shadows across the walls of Cecil's study as Elizabeth stood in the doorway, her heart hammering against her ribs. She'd expected to be summoned to his bedchamber— isn't that where rakish husbands typically demanded their wives' presence? Instead, here she was, watching him lounging behind his massive desk like a predator at rest.

"Come in, wife," Cecil drawled, gesturing to the chair across from him. A decanter of amber liquid sat between them, two crystal glasses already poured. "I trust you weren't expecting something more...intimate?"

Elizabeth forced herself to move forward with measured steps, refusing to let him see how his mere presence affected her. "I've learned not to expect anything conventional from you, my lord."

"Cecil," he corrected, his eyes following her movement. "I believe we established that particular intimacy already."

She settled into the chair, painfully aware of how the candlelight would illuminate her scar. Even in the dim light, she couldn't help but wonder if he found it as repulsive as every other man had. Not that it mattered—this was a marriage of convenience, nothing more.

"Drink with me," he said, sliding one of the glasses toward her. "Consider it a proper

beginning to our...nightly arrangements."

Elizabeth's fingers closed around the cool crystal. "Nightly arrangements?"

"Mm." His smile held a dangerous edge. "I'll be calling you here each evening. Unless you'd prefer my bedchamber?"

"The study suits me perfectly well," she replied quickly—too quickly, judging by his knowing smirk.

"Does it?" He leaned forward, resting his elbows on the desk. "Tell me, Elizabeth, are you always this...defensive when alone with a man?"

"Only when that man has explicitly forbidden me from certain rooms in my own home," she shot back, emboldened by either the brandy or her own recklessness. "Speaking of which, your behavior this afternoon was absolutely?—"

"Careful, wife." His voice dropped lower, sending an involuntary shiver down her spine. "You're beginning to sound like you're reprimanding me."

"And what if I am?" She lifted her chin. "Does the great Earl of Stonefield not tolerate criticism from his wife?"

Cecil's eyes darkened as he rose from his chair with fluid grace. "I'm not accustomed to women attempting to scold me like an errant schoolboy. They usually find...other ways to express their displeasure."

He moved around the desk, and Elizabeth felt her pulse quicken with each step he took toward her. When he reached her chair, she instinctively pulled back, though whether from fear or something else entirely, she couldn't say.

"Now who's being defensive?" he murmured, reaching out to trace the air just above her scar, not quite touching but close enough that she could feel the heat of his hand. "I've never forced my attentions on an unwilling woman, Elizabeth. They typically beg for my touch."

The implications of his words made her face flush. "Then you'll find me a disappointing wife indeed, my lord, for I have no intention of begging for anything—least of all your touch."

"No intention of begging?" Cecil's laugh was low and dangerous as he perched on the edge of his desk, looming over her. "Not even for an heir? Isn't that what good wives are supposed to provide?"

Elizabeth forced herself to meet his gaze steadily, though her hands trembled in her lap. "I don't want children."

She saw the surprise flash across his face before he could mask it. "Never?"

"Never." Her voice was firm despite her racing pulse. "I have no desire to be a mother."

Something shifted in Cecil's expression—curiosity? But it vanished as quickly as it had appeared, replaced by that calculating look she was beginning to know too well.

"Well then," he said softly, "perhaps we should make this more interesting."

"Interesting?" Elizabeth didn't like the predatory gleam in his eyes.

"A challenge, if you will." He moved closer, until his leg brushed against her skirts. "I won't touch you unless you beg for it. You have my word."

She couldn't help the skeptical arch of her eyebrow. "The word of a rake?"

"The word of your husband," he corrected, his voice dropping to that dangerous whisper that made her skin tingle. "But make no mistake, Elizabeth—within these three months, you will beg."

"You seem very confident, my lord."

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"Because I know something you don't." He leaned down, his breath fanning against her ear. "Once you discover what real pleasure feels like, you won't be able to stop craving it. And I'm very, very good at providing pleasure."

Elizabeth's heart thundered in her chest, but she refused to give him the satisfaction of seeing how his proximity affected her. "Your reputation precedes you, but I assure you, I'm made of sterner stuff than your usual conquests."

"Oh, I'm counting on it." His smile was pure sin. "It will make your eventual surrender all the sweeter."

"And if I don't surrender?" Elizabeth challenged, though her voice emerged huskier than intended. "What then?"

"Then you'll have proven yourself the first woman in London capable of resisting my charms." His fingers traced the air along her neck, following the path of her scar without touching. "Though that lovely blush suggests you're not quite as immune as you pretend."

Elizabeth cursed the betrayal of her own body. Even without contact, his proximity made her breath catch, her skin flush with unwanted awareness. "Perhaps it's merely irritation, my lord. You do seem to excel at provoking that particular response."

"Do I?" His smile widened as he noticed her slight shiver. "And yet you haven't moved away. Shall I tell you what I think, Elizabeth?"

She should leave. Every instinct screamed at her to flee before this dangerous game

went too far. Instead, she heard herself ask, "What do you think?"

Cecil's hand came to rest on the back of her chair, effectively caging her in. "I think you're curious. I think you lie awake at night, wondering what it would feel like to be touched—really touched—by someone who knows exactly how to pleasure a woman."

"You presume too much," she whispered, but the breathless quality of her voice betrayed her.

"Do I?" He leaned closer still, his lips nearly brushing her ear. "Then why are you trembling, wife? Why does your breath quicken when I'm near? Why haven't you run from this study the moment I suggested our little challenge?"

Elizabeth gripped the arms of her chair, fighting the urge to lean into his warmth. "Because I refuse to let you win. You may be London's most notorious rake, but I won't become another conquest in your collection."

"No," he agreed, his voice dropping even lower. "You'll be my wife who tried to resist me...and failed spectacularly. The fact that you're mine makes the challenge all the sweeter."

Elizabeth gathered her courage and stood abruptly, forcing Cecil to step back. "You overestimate your charms, my lord. I've spent years turning down unwanted attention?—"

"And yet," he cut in, his eyes darkening with predatory intent, "none of those men were your husband. None of them had the right to pursue you...as thoroughly as I intend to."

Before she could react, he caught her wrist—not roughly, but with enough authority

to halt her retreat. His thumb brushed over her racing pulse point, and Elizabeth felt heat spiral through her body at that simple touch.

"You feel that?" he murmured, his eyes locked on hers. "How your body responds to even the lightest caress? Imagine what it would feel like if I touched you...here." His free hand hovered over her collarbone, not quite making contact. "Or here." Lower, tracing the air above the swell of her breast.

"Stop," she breathed, though she couldn't bring herself to pull away.

"I'm not touching you," he reminded her with wicked amusement. "Just showing you what you're denying yourself. Would you like to know more, Elizabeth? Would you like me to tell you exactly what I could do to make you forget every proper thought in that clever head of yours?"

She should say no. Should tear herself away from his grip and flee to the safety of her chambers. Instead, she heard herself whisper, "You wouldn't dare."

"Wouldn't I?" His smile was pure temptation. "I could tell you how I'd start with soft kisses along your neck, following the path of this fascinating scar that you try so hard to hide. How I'd learn every sensitive spot until you were gasping my name. How I'd use my hands, my mouth, to make you feel pleasure you've never even imagined."

Elizabeth's face flamed at his bold words, but something molten pooled in her belly. "You're being deliberately shocking."

"Tell me, Elizabeth," Cecil's voice remained low but took on a more serious note, "why do you truly resist? Is it fear of what others might think? Or fear of what you might discover about yourself?"

She tried to step back, but found herself against his desk. "I fear nothing, my lord.

Least of all your supposed charms."

"Then prove it." He released her wrist and moved away, creating space between them. "Accept my challenge. Three months. If you can truly resist me for that long, I'll leave as planned and never question your resolve again."

"And if I can't?" Elizabeth forced herself to ask, though she dreaded the answer.

"Then you'll have to admit that even in a marriage of convenience, certain...pleasures shouldn't be denied." His eyes held hers with unsettling intensity. "After all, we both might as well enjoy our temporary arrangement."

"You speak of this with remarkable confidence for a man who claims to want nothing but an heir," she observed, finding her footing again in their verbal sparring.

Something flickered across his face—pain? Regret? But it vanished so quickly she might have imagined it. "The terms are simple enough. I won't touch you unless you ask. But make no mistake, wife—I will do everything in my power to make you want to ask."

"Through scandalous words and improper suggestions?" She lifted her chin defiantly.

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"Through truth," he countered. "About what you're denying yourself. About what we could be together, if you'd only let yourself feel."

"And what if I told you," Elizabeth said, forcing steel into her voice, "that I have no interest in feeling anything with you? That our arrangement suits me perfectly well as it is?"

Cecil's laugh was soft and dangerous. "Then I would say you vastly underestimate the effect a man can have on his wife." He moved closer, his presence overwhelming yet still honoring his word not to touch her. "Tell me, Elizabeth, do you pleasure yourself at night? Or are you as proper in your private chambers as you pretend to be in my presence?"

"You are absolutely depraved," she managed, though her voice emerged mortifyingly breathy. "To speak of such...such things..."

"Are you scandalized, wife?" His lips ghosted near her ear, close enough that she could feel the warmth of his breath. "I'm merely being a considerate husband, ensuring my wife's needs are met since she claims to want nothing from me. Though I must say, the way you're trembling suggests you might want quite a bit."

Elizabeth tried to step back but found herself against his desk. "You know nothing of what I want."

"On the contrary." His hand came to rest on the desk beside her hip, caging her in without touching. "I know exactly what you want. You want me to break my word. To grab you by that delectable waist, bend you over this desk, and make you forget

every proper thought in that clever head of yours. To make you scream my name so loudly the servants will blush at breakfast."

"You are utterly?—"

"Wicked? Indeed." His other hand traced the air above her collarbone, following her scar's path downward. "And you're fascinated by it. Since you're so certain of your victory in our little challenge, perhaps you should practice finding your own pleasure in the meantime. After all, three months is a very long time to deny yourself...especially when you'll be thinking of me every time you touch yourself in the dark."

Elizabeth felt her face flame scarlet, equal parts scandalized and inflamed by his vulgar suggestions. "You are without doubt the most insufferable man I have ever met."

"And you," he murmured, finally stepping back with that infuriating smirk, "are the most enticing woman I've ever had the pleasure of watching blush. Sweet dreams, wife. Do try to think of me when you're alone in your bed tonight."

She stopped at the threshold, her hand gripping the doorframe. "You are absolutely depraved."

"Depraved?" She could hear the smile in his voice. "I'm merely being a considerate husband, offering suggestions for your...comfort. Since you've made it clear you don't want my direct assistance."

Elizabeth didn't trust herself to respond. She fled down the corridor to her chambers, her heart pounding and her skin burning where he'd almost—but hadn't quite—touched her.

Once safely behind her locked door, she pressed her hands to her flushed cheeks. The nerve of that man! To suggest such...such scandalous things. To make her body respond so treacherously to his mere proximity. To challenge her in ways that made her question everything she thought she knew about desire.

Her eyes fell on her bed, and Cecil's wicked suggestions flooded back unbidden. Do try to think of me when you're alone...

"Absolutely not," she muttered, though her fingers tingled with forbidden temptation. She would not give him the satisfaction, even in the privacy of her own chambers.

But as she lay in bed later, sleep proved elusive. Every time she closed her eyes, she saw Cecil's knowing smile, felt the phantom trace of his almost-touches along her skin. His words echoed in her mind: Once you discover what real pleasure feels like, you won't be able to stop craving it.

Elizabeth rolled over, punching her pillow in frustration. She would prove him wrong. She had to. Because if she didn't—if she gave in to this maddening attraction—she would lose far more than their little challenge.

She would lose her heart to a man who had already declared he had no interest in keeping it.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The morning sun streamed through the windows of Stonefield Manor's drawing room as Elizabeth sat with her closest friend, Dinah Barnes, who had arrived unexpectedly with Baron Trowbridge in tow. Elizabeth couldn't help but notice how her father had positioned himself as far from her as propriety allowed, his disapproving gaze sweeping over the changes she'd already implemented in her new home.

"The earl has been most generous," Luke announced, breaking the uncomfortable silence. "The debt has been settled completely, though heaven knows I didn't expect such swift resolution given the...circumstances."

Elizabeth's fingers tightened around her teacup. "How fortunate that my hasty marriage proved so convenient for your finances, Father."

Luke's expression hardened. "Mind your tone, daughter. Just because you wear a countess's coronet now doesn't mean you can forget your duty to show proper respect."

"And what of your duty?" The words slipped out before she could stop them. "Have you even asked how I fare in my new position?"

"Your position," Luke replied coldly, "is to be an obedient wife to the earl. Nothing more, nothing less. You would do well to remember that, considering your...limitations." His eyes flickered to her scar.

Dinah reached over to squeeze Elizabeth's hand, her quiet support worth more than any words could express. At twenty-one, Dinah had been Elizabeth's only true friend through countless London seasons, never once flinching from her scar or treating her as anything less than whole.

"Tell me," Luke continued, his tone growing more instructional, "have you been ensuring the earl's comfort? Managing his household properly? A man of his standing expects certain standards?—"

"I assure you," Elizabeth cut in, her voice steady despite her rising anger, "I am quite capable of managing an estate. I've had ample practice, after all."

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The barb struck home, and Luke's face flushed. Before he could respond, the butler appeared in the doorway.

"My lady, Miss Barnes's maid has arrived with a package she forgot in their carriage. Shall I have it brought in?"

Elizabeth seized the excuse for escape. "I'll help Dinah retrieve it myself. Father, please excuse us for a moment."

She practically pulled Dinah from the room, desperate for a moment away from Luke's critical gaze and barely veiled disappointment.

Once safely away from Luke's earshot, Dinah pulled Elizabeth into a nearby parlor, closing the door behind them. "Now then, tell me everything. Harriet's letter arrived at my house yesterday—she still doesn't know about the change in brides, does she?"

Elizabeth sank into a chair, her composure finally cracking. "No, she doesn't. I haven't known how to tell her. She'll be devastated, thinking she forced me into this match."

"Didn't she?" Dinah asked gently, producing a sealed letter from her reticule. "This came for you. She's still at your aunt's estate, wondering why she hasn't heard from either of you."

Taking the letter with trembling fingers, Elizabeth broke the seal. "I should have written to her immediately, but everything happened so fast. The wedding, moving here, learning to navigate Cecil's moods?—"

"Cecil, is it?" Dinah's eyebrows rose. "Not 'my lord' or 'the earl'? Do tell, dearest. What exactly has transpired between you and your rakish husband?"

Elizabeth felt her face heat as she remembered their encounter in his study, the challenge he'd issued, the way he'd almost—but hadn't quite—touched her. "He's...not what I expected."

"Meaning?"

"He's infuriating," Elizabeth burst out. "One moment he's issuing commands about forbidden rooms, the next he's..." She trailed off, her blush deepening.

"He's what?" Dinah leaned forward eagerly.

"He passes me in corridors and his hand brushes mine, as if by accident. He stands too close when we speak, his voice dropping to this maddening whisper. He looks at me as if..." Elizabeth shook her head. "As if he can see right through every defense I've built."

"Good heavens," Dinah breathed. "And you don't welcome these attentions?"

"I don't know what I want," Elizabeth admitted. "He proposed a challenge—said he wouldn't touch me unless I begged for it. Called it a game, but sometimes I think..." She twisted her handkerchief nervously. "Sometimes I think he's trying to drive me mad."

"Or perhaps," Dinah suggested with a knowing smile, "he's genuinely attracted to you, and this game is his way of showing it without frightening you away."

"Attracted? To me?" Elizabeth's hand unconsciously rose to her scar. "Don't be absurd. He's Cecil Gillet, the most notorious rake in London. He could have any

woman he wants."

"And yet," Dinah pointed out, "he seems rather focused on having you."

"He doesn't want me," Elizabeth insisted, though something in her chest tightened at the thought. "He wants an heir, nothing more. He said as much himself."

"Did he?" Dinah tilted her head thoughtfully. "Then why waste time with these games? Why not simply exercise his husbandly rights and be done with it?"

Elizabeth opened her mouth to respond, then closed it again. She'd wondered the same thing during her sleepless nights. Why would a man known for his direct pursuit of pleasure suddenly turn to such subtle tactics?

"And these forbidden rooms you mentioned," Dinah pressed. "What?—"

The door swung open, and Elizabeth's heart leaped into her throat as Cecil himself appeared in the doorway. His tall frame filled the entrance, and his eyes immediately found hers with an intensity that made her pulse quicken.

"My apologies for interrupting," he said smoothly, though his gaze remained fixed on Elizabeth. "I returned early from my business in town and heard we had visitors."

"My lord," Dinah curtsied prettily, and Elizabeth didn't miss how Cecil's charm immediately surfaced as he turned to her friend.

"Miss Barnes, isn't it?" His smile was devastating. "I remember you from Lady Morrison's ball last season. You were wearing blue, if I'm not mistaken."

Dinah blushed becomingly. "I'm flattered you remember, my lord."

"How could I forget? You were the only lady who dared to critique my waltz technique." He winked, and Dinah actually giggled.

Elizabeth felt an unexpected surge of something that definitely wasn't jealousy tighten her chest. She'd seen Cecil deploy his charm before, but watching him use it on her dearest friend made her want to?—

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"Your father awaits us in the drawing room, I believe?" Cecil's voice cut through her thoughts as he offered his arm to Elizabeth. "Shall we?"

She took his arm, trying to ignore how even this simple contact made her skin tingle. As they walked, he bent his head close to her ear and whispered, "Your pulse is racing again, wife. Surely you're not jealous of my attention to your friend?"

"Don't be ridiculous," she hissed back, but she felt his low chuckle rumble through his chest where their arms connected.

"If you want my attention," he murmured, his lips barely brushing her ear, "you need only ask."

They entered the drawing room to find Luke pacing before the fireplace, his expression darkening at the sight of his daughter's flushed cheeks. Cecil's grip on Elizabeth's arm tightened imperceptibly as he guided her to a seat, then positioned himself between her and her father—a subtle gesture that didn't go unnoticed by anyone in the room.

"Ah, Stonefield," Luke's attempt at a jovial tone rang false. "I was just discussing with Elizabeth the importance of proper wifely duties?—"

"Were you?" Cecil's voice dropped several degrees in temperature. "How fascinating that you feel qualified to instruct my wife on her duties in my own home."

Luke faltered slightly. "I merely meant to ensure?—"

"That she maintains the high standards expected of a countess?" Cecil's smile didn't reach his eyes. "I assure you, your daughter has exceeded every expectation. The estate has never run more efficiently."

Elizabeth looked up at her husband in surprise. He hadn't mentioned any approval of her changes to the household management.

"Yes, well," Luke shifted uncomfortably, "there are other duties a wife must?—"

"I believe," Cecil cut in, his tone now arctic, "that any discussion of my wife's duties falls under my purview alone. Unless you're suggesting you know better than I what I require in my marriage?"

The challenge in his voice was unmistakable. Luke had the grace to look abashed, though his eyes still held that familiar disapproval when they flickered to Elizabeth.

"Of course not, my lord. I simply want to ensure Elizabeth remembers her place?—"

"Her place," Cecil interrupted again, "is as my countess. And I'll thank you to remember yours, baron."

The silence that followed was deafening. Dinah looked between them all with wide eyes while Elizabeth held her breath, watching her father's face turn an interesting shade of puce.

"Perhaps," Luke managed finally, "it's time we took our leave. Miss Barnes?"

Dinah rose quickly, shooting Elizabeth an apologetic look. "Thank you for your hospitality, my lord, my lady."

Cecil's charm returned as he bowed over Dinah's hand. "A pleasure as always, Miss

Barnes. Do call again—though perhaps with different company next time."

The pointed remark wasn't lost on Luke, who struggled to maintain his dignity as he made his farewell bow.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The moment her father and Dinah departed, Elizabeth found herself alone with Cecil in his study, the air between them thick with unspoken tension. She stood by the windowsill, watching their carriage disappear down the long drive, gathering her courage for what she needed to say.

"Cecil," she began, her voice steady despite the storm brewing inside her. "You need to be more careful. You're being too...familiar with every lady you meet."

Cecil turned to her, a playful smirk dancing on his lips. "Jealous, are we?"

Elizabeth's cheeks flushed, but she held her ground. "Certainly not. I merely think you should be more mindful of your actions. This is not the behavior you promised me."

Cecil stepped closer, his eyes never leaving hers. "You're right. I promised you many things, didn't I?" His voice was a low rumble, a sound that sent an involuntary shiver down Elizabeth's spine. She needed to change the subject, to escape the intensity of his gaze.

"I want to make some changes," she blurted out, her eyes darting to the door of the room he had forbidden her from entering. "That room, for instance. It's high time it saw some light and fresh air."

Cecil's expression darkened briefly, a shadow passing over his features. "That room is

off-limits, Elizabeth. You know that."

Elizabeth lifted her chin, defiance sparking in her eyes. "Yes, but I want to change it. Those paintings, for instance?—"

"Those paintings stay," Cecil interjected, his voice firm. Elizabeth bristled at his tone, her suspicions about the paintings' origins fueling her resolve. She still believed them to belong to an ex-lover, a thought that ignited a fire within her.

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"Fine," she said, her voice barely above a whisper. "But I want to make changes. I need to do this, Cecil."

Cecil regarded her for a moment, his expression inscrutable. Then, slowly, a smile curved his lips. "Very well. You can make your changes. But on one condition."

Elizabeth's heart pounded in her chest. "And what might that be?"

Cecil stepped closer, his voice dropping to a low murmur. "You give me something in return."

Elizabeth's breath hitched, her mind racing with possibilities. She didn't truly care for the room, but the principle of it, the need to assert her presence in this manor, drove her to agree. "Alright," she said, her voice barely a whisper. "What do you want?"

Cecil's gaze slithered over Elizabeth, his eyes burning with a raw hunger that made her skin prickle. He raked his gaze over the curve of her neck, the swell of her breasts, and she could practically hear him growling like a beast stalking its prey. The flickering candlelight caressed her body, casting long, dark shadows that only served to fan the flames of his desire.

"You have no clue what you do to me," he rasped, his voice low and dangerous. "How much I want to tear your clothes off and make you senseless right here and now."

Elizabeth's pulse quickened, and she fought the urge to squirm under his intense scrutiny. She knew she should put some distance between them before things got out

of hand, but her traitorous body betrayed her, rooting her to the spot like a deer caught in headlights.

Cecil prowled around her, moving with a grace that belied his size and strength. "Every time I see you," he said, his voice barely more than a whisper, "all I can think about is bending you over that desk and sinking deep inside you."

His fingers traced a path along the nape of her neck, sending a shiver down her spine. Goosebumps rose on her arms, and she clenched her fists to keep from grabbing onto him.

"Cecil..." She tried to make her voice sound firm, authoritative, but it came out as a breathy plea instead. She knew she should tell him to back off, but the words died on her lips as his fingers tightened in her hair.

He leaned in close, his breath hot against her ear. "Tell me to stop," he dared her, his tone confident, domineering. "Tell me you don't want to feel my hands all over you. My mouth on your skin.."

Her breath hitched at his crude words, and she bit her lip to stifle a moan. She knew she should be outraged by his presumption, but all she could think about was how badly she wanted him to do exactly what he'd just described.

His hand slid down her back, stopping at the curve of her waist. His touch was possessive, demanding, and she couldn't help but arch her back, pressing herself against him.

Before she could say anything, his mouth claimed hers in a bruising kiss. She gasped in surprise, and he took advantage of her parted lips, thrusting his tongue inside to explore the warmth of her mouth. His kiss was rough and unapologetic, and she could feel the barely restrained power in his muscles as he held her against him.

Elizabeth's hands clung to his shoulders, her fingers digging into the fabric of his shirt as if trying to hold onto something solid in the midst of the whirlwind of sensation. And then, just as suddenly as it had begun, the kiss was over.

Cecil pulled back, his eyes dark and stormy with desire. "That was just a taste, love," he growled, his thumb brushing over her swollen lips. "I'm going to take my time with you. I'm going to explore every inch of your body, find out exactly what makes you moan, what makes you scream."

The raw, animalistic quality in his voice sent a shiver down her spine, and she knew that she was in way over her head. But even as she tried to tell herself to run, to get as far away from him as possible, her body refused to cooperate, still humming with the aftershocks of pleasure.

Cecil's lips curved into a cruel smile, as if he knew exactly what she was thinking. "Oh, don't worry," he said, his voice low and deadly. "You'll be begging for more long before I'm done with you."

Without another word, she fled the study, her heart pounding in her chest. Behind her, she heard his low laugh follow her down the corridor, a sound that both thrilled and infuriated her.

"Run all you want, wife," he called after her, his voice laced with amusement and something darker, more enticing. "But we both know you'll be back."

CHAPTER NINE

The drawing room at Stonefield Manor echoed with feminine laughter as Elizabeth watched her new sisters-in-law settle onto the settees with the easy familiarity of women who had grown up in these very rooms. The Duchess of Greyhall and Viscountess of Kensington had arrived unannounced that morning, their husbands in

tow, declaring they would not be denied the chance to meet their new sister any longer.

"I cannot believe you married without us present," Madeleine, the younger of Cecil's sisters, declared for perhaps the third time since their arrival. Her pregnancy was just beginning to show beneath her fashionable morning dress. "After all the times you lectured me about propriety during my own courtship!"

"There was no courtship to speak of," Cecil replied dryly from his position by the fireplace. "And as I recall, you and Charles hardly followed convention yourselves."

Emily, the elder sister, shot her brother a wicked smile that reminded Elizabeth startlingly of Cecil's own. "Speaking of unconventional behavior, shall we tell Elizabeth about the time you climbed onto the roof to rescue that mangy cat, only to need rescuing yourself?"

Cecil's eyes narrowed. "You wouldn't dare."

"Oh, but I would, dear brother." Emily turned to Elizabeth, her eyes sparkling with mischief. "He was twelve, you see, and absolutely determined to prove he could do anything. The poor creature had been stuck up there for days, and Cecil decided he would be its savior."

"Emily," Cecil's warning tone only seemed to encourage his sister.

"He made it onto the roof easily enough," Madeleine chimed in, clearly delighting in her brother's growing discomfort. "But then his breeches caught on a loose tile. When he tried to free himself, he lost his balance and?—"

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"Ended up hanging by his coat from the drainage pipe," Emily finished with a laugh. "Father was absolutely furious, but Mother couldn't stop laughing long enough to scold him properly."

Elizabeth found herself smiling despite her initial nervousness about meeting Cecil's family. The image of a young, impetuous Cecil dangling from the rooftop was impossible to resist. "Did you at least save the cat?"

"The wretched beast made its own way down while I was hanging there," Cecil admitted, though Elizabeth noticed his lips twitching. "Had the audacity to look quite pleased with itself as it sauntered past the gathering crowd."

"That wasn't even his most outrageous escapade," Madeleine added, leaning forward conspiratorially. "Wait until you hear about the time he decided to teach himself to fence using Mother's best parasols..."

"Absolutely not," Cecil interrupted, moving to sit beside Elizabeth on the settee. "I believe we've had quite enough stories about my misspent youth."

"Spoilsport," Emily declared, but her attention shifted to Elizabeth with keen interest. "Tell me, sister, has he shown you the library yet? Cecil used to spend hours in there as a boy, reading the most scandalous Gothic novels he could find."

"The library?" Elizabeth's brow furrowed. She'd explored most of the house by now, but she hadn't come across a proper library.

"It's being renovated," Cecil said smoothly, though his hand came to rest possessively

on the small of Elizabeth's back. "Perhaps we should find some other entertainment for the afternoon. A game, perhaps?"

Percival, who had been quietly observing the exchange with obvious amusement, brightened at the suggestion. "An excellent idea. Your wife hasn't yet experienced your legendary competitive streak, has she?"

"Oh yes," Madeleine clapped her hands together. "Let's play cards. Vingt-et-un, perhaps? Elizabeth, you must join us. Cecil is absolutely terrible at hiding his tells."

"I most certainly am not," Cecil protested, but Elizabeth could feel the tension in his body where it pressed against hers.

"I'd be delighted to play," Elizabeth said, surprising herself with her eagerness. There was something wonderfully normal about sitting around a card table with family, even if that family wasn't her own. "Though I should warn you, I've spent countless hours playing cards with the ton's most formidable dowagers."

Charles, who had been quiet until now, laughed. "I believe that's a challenge, Stonefield. Your new countess seems to have some spirit."

"More than you know," Cecil murmured, his breath warm against Elizabeth's ear as he helped her rise. The intimate gesture sent a shiver down her spine, and from the slight curve of his lips, she knew he'd noticed.

As the servants brought the card table and Charles began to deal, Elizabeth found herself caught up in the easy banter between siblings. No one stared at her scar or whispered behind their fans. Even when she laughed—a real, unrestrained laugh at one of Percival's dry observations—no one seemed scandalized by her lack of proper restraint.

The first few hands passed quickly, with fortunes rising and falling around the table. Elizabeth discovered that Madeleine had a habit of humming when she held good cards, while Emily's left eyebrow would twitch ever so slightly when she bluffed. And Cecil...

"You're staring, wife," he murmured, low enough that only she could hear.

"Merely studying your tells, husband," she replied primly, though her pulse quickened at his proximity.

His hand found her knee under the table, hidden from his family's view by the tablecloth. "And what have you discovered?"

The warmth of his palm through her skirts made it difficult to concentrate on her cards. "That you're trying to distract me because I'm winning."

"Your new sister is quite formidable at cards," Charles observed as Elizabeth won another hand. "Where did you learn to play so well?"

Elizabeth gathered her winnings, keenly aware of Cecil's hand still resting on her knee. "One learns many things while chaperoning a debutante through multiple seasons. The dowagers are particularly fond of teaching useful skills."

"Useful skills indeed," Cecil's thumb traced small circles against her skin through the fabric. "Though I wonder what else those dowagers taught you."

Elizabeth's cards trembled slightly in her hands. "Only the most proper accomplishments, I assure you."

"Is that so?" His fingers skimmed higher, just above her knee. "And here I thought they might have shared some...interesting gossip about married life."

"Cecil," she hissed under her breath, though she didn't dare move away for fear of drawing attention to his wandering hand.

"Your bet, Elizabeth," Madeleine called out cheerfully, oblivious to her brother's mischief.

Elizabeth placed her wager, trying to focus on her cards rather than the heat of Cecil's touch. She had an excellent hand—one that would likely win her the game. But as she prepared to reveal her cards, Cecil's lips brushed against her ear.

"Have you been practicing what I suggested, wife?" His whispered words made her shiver. "Late at night, when you're alone in your bed, do you think of me?"

Her cards scattered across the table as her hands jerked in surprise. "I...I apologize," she stammered, gathering them quickly. "They slipped."

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"Are you well, Elizabeth?" Emily asked, concern evident in her voice. "You look rather flushed."

"Perfectly well," Elizabeth managed, though she could feel the heat in her cheeks. "Though perhaps a bit warm."

"It is rather stuffy in here," Cecil agreed innocently, though his fingers now traced the sensitive spot behind her knee that he'd discovered made her gasp. "Shall I open a window?"

"No!" Elizabeth said too quickly, knowing she'd never maintain her composure if he moved away. "That is, I'm sure I'll be fine. Whose turn is it?"

The game continued, but Elizabeth's concentration was thoroughly shattered. Every time she thought she'd regained her focus, Cecil would find some new way to torment her—a brush of his fingers along her thigh, a warm breath against her neck, a whispered suggestion that made her cheeks flame.

"I believe that's game," Percival announced after what felt like an eternity. "Though I must say, Elizabeth, your play became rather erratic toward the end."

"Yes," Cecil drawled, finally withdrawing his hand. "How unusual for someone who started so...confidently."

Elizabeth shot him a glare that promised retribution, but before she could respond, Madeleine rose from her seat.

"Oh, speaking of confident beginnings, that reminds me—Elizabeth, has Cecil shown you Mother's paintings yet? The ones in that lovely sitting room?"

Elizabeth's breath caught in her throat. "His mother's paintings?"

"Oh yes," Emily joined in, her expression softening with nostalgia. "Mother was quite talented. She painted almost every day in that room—it was her sanctuary. The one of Cecil with the wooden sword was always Father's favorite."

Elizabeth's mind raced, remembering her assumptions about the paintings' origins. She'd been so certain they belonged to some former lover, had even let that belief fuel her jealousy. But now...

"It's why we weren't surprised Cecil kept them all," Madeleine continued, seemingly unaware of the tension that had suddenly gripped her brother's frame. "Though I must say, turning it into a sitting room was inspired. Mother would have loved that—she always said that room needed more light."

Elizabeth glanced at Cecil, noting how his earlier playfulness had vanished entirely. His jaw was set in that familiar way that suggested he was fighting to maintain his composure.

"She was a wonderful mother," Emily added softly. "Always encouraging our creative pursuits, no matter how outlandish. Remember how she used to let you practice your fencing in the gallery, Cecil? Father was furious about the scratches on the floors, but she just laughed and said it gave the house character."

"Perhaps we should move to the dining room," Cecil cut in, his voice carrying an edge that made his sisters exchange puzzled looks. "It must be nearly time for supper."

As they rose to move to the dining room, Elizabeth caught a glimpse of Cecil's expression. For just a moment, she saw something raw and painful in his eyes—not the possessive heat from earlier, nor the practiced charm he usually displayed, but something altogether more vulnerable.

Then it was gone, hidden behind his usual mask of cool control. But Elizabeth couldn't forget it.

CHAPTER TEN

Sleep eluded Elizabeth as she paced her chambers, the moonlight casting long shadows across the floor. Her new sitting room beckoned—the sanctuary she'd created from Cecil's mother's paintings. Though she now knew their origin, something about them still called to her, as if they held secrets yet untold.

Wrapping her dressing gown more tightly around her nightgown, Elizabeth slipped into the darkened corridor. The house was silent save for the occasional creak of ancient timbers settling. As she passed her husband's study, however, a telltale glow beneath the door caught her attention. Candlelight flickered, suggesting Cecil was still at work despite the late hour.

She hesitated, her hand hovering near the door. Propriety dictated she return to her chambers—what sort of lady wandered the halls in her nightclothes? But something stronger drew her forward, some need to bridge the growing gulf between them.

Before she could second-guess herself, she knocked softly.

"Enter," Cecil's deep voice commanded.

Elizabeth opened the door to find him at his desk, his cravat loosened and coat discarded. The sight of him in such casual disarray made her pulse quicken. He

looked up, and she watched his eyes darken as they traveled over her thin dressing gown.

"I couldn't sleep," she explained quickly, fighting a blush. "I thought perhaps..."

"You thought to visit your sanctuary?" His voice held an edge she couldn't quite interpret. "The room you've made from my mother's paintings?"

Elizabeth lifted her chin. "I find peace there. Though I confess, I don't understand why they trouble you so."

The silence stretched between them, heavy with unspoken things. Finally, Cecil set down his pen. "Walk with me."

As they moved through the darkened corridors, Elizabeth was acutely conscious of his presence beside her, the whisper of his footsteps matching hers. The sitting room looked different in darkness, the paintings mere suggestions of shape and color until Cecil lit several wall sconces.

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"My mother painted every day in this room," he said finally, his voice low and controlled. "She claimed the light was perfect here. That she could capture truth in her brushstrokes."

Elizabeth watched his face, seeing the muscle tick in his jaw. "And did she? Capture truth?"

His laugh held no humor. "She captured what she wanted others to see. The perfect countess, the devoted mother, the loving wife." His fingers traced the air above a painting of children playing in a sunlit garden. "We were all so blind."

"Tell me," Elizabeth said softly, drawn by the raw pain in his voice. "Help me understand."

Cecil's shoulders tensed, but he didn't turn to face her. "Why are you really here, Elizabeth? What do you seek in these halls at night?"

She recognized the deflection but answered honestly. "Sometimes the house feels...too quiet. Too full of things unsaid." She wrapped her arms around herself, suddenly aware of her thin nightclothes. "My mother used to walk at night too, when she couldn't sleep. Father's silences drove her to restlessness."

"Tell me about her," Cecil said, his voice gentler than she'd ever heard it.

Elizabeth hesitated, moving to stand by the window. For years, she'd guarded these memories, kept them locked away where they couldn't hurt her. "I'm not sure I can..."

"You can't sleep at night," Cecil observed quietly. "You wander these halls like a ghost. Why?"

She stared out at the moonlit gardens, gathering her courage. "Because sometimes I see her in my reflection. Not as she was at the end, but as I remember her from my childhood. Beautiful, graceful...hopeful." Her voice caught. "Before Father's disappointment crushed that hope from her."

"What happened?"

"She was gentle," Elizabeth said finally, her words barely above a whisper. "Afraid of her own shadow, really. The ton's disapproval of her common origins made her desperately eager to please. When she couldn't give Father the sons he wanted..." She touched her scar unconsciously. "She blamed herself for everything—for my mark, for bearing daughters, for not being what he wanted."

"And you blame yourself as well?" Cecil's question was careful, measured.

Elizabeth turned to face him, surprised by the understanding in his eyes. "How could I not? I was her firstborn—the one who should have been a son. Instead, I emerged marked, damaged. Father never let either of us forget it."

"What was she like?" Cecil pressed gently. "Before his disappointment wore her down?"

A sad smile touched Elizabeth's lips. "She used to sing while she worked on her embroidery. French lullabies her mother had taught her. Sometimes, late at night, I'd find her in the conservatory, dancing by herself to music only she could hear." She blinked back unexpected tears. "But after my birth, after this—" she gestured to her scar "—she stopped singing. Stopped dancing. Started apologizing for taking up space in her own home."

"And you?" Cecil finally turned to face her. "Do you blame her?"

Elizabeth was quiet for a long moment, considering. "No," she said finally. "I blame the world that turned a vibrant woman into a shadow of herself. That made her believe her only worth lay in giving her husband sons. That taught her to apologize for things beyond her control until she forgot how to do anything else." She wrapped her arms around herself. "Do you know what her last words to me were?"

When Cecil shook his head, she continued, "She said 'I'm sorry I couldn't be a better mother.' As if she hadn't given us everything she had, everything she was, until there was nothing left."

"Is that why you've never married before now?" Cecil's voice was careful, neutral.

"Partly," Elizabeth admitted. "But also because I saw what happened to the few men who expressed interest despite my scar. The way their mothers would pull them aside, whisper about the risks of damaged bloodlines." Her laugh held no humor. "Eventually, it seemed easier to be the spinster aunt, to focus on giving Harriet the chances I never had."

Something shifted in Cecil's expression—a crack in his carefully maintained facade. "Is that why you fear motherhood? You think you'll share her fate?"

Elizabeth's breath caught. How had he seen through to her deepest fear so easily? "I saw what marriage and motherhood did to her," she admitted. "How it slowly extinguished her light until nothing remained but duty and regret. I won't—I can't become that."

"Elizabeth." The way he said her name made her shiver. He stepped closer, close enough that she could feel the heat radiating from his body. "You seem confused by my actions lately."

"I am," she admitted, acutely aware of his proximity. "One moment you're distant, the next...you look at me as if..." She trailed off, unable to voice the desire she saw in his eyes.

"As if what?" His voice dropped lower, more dangerous. "As if I want to devour you whole?"

Elizabeth's breath caught at his bold words. "Yes."

Cecil's smile was pure wickedness as he traced the air near her scar, not quite touching. "Perhaps because that's exactly what I intend to do. Why else would I keep you on edge, wondering what I'll do next?"

"I don't understand."

"Don't you?" He leaned closer, his breath warm against her ear. "A proper seduction requires...anticipation. The not knowing when I might touch you, where my hands might wander. It's all part of the game, my dear wife."

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"You're playing with fire," Elizabeth managed, though her voice emerged breathier than intended.

"No, my dear." His fingers finally made contact with her skin, tracing the line of her scar with deliberate slowness. "I'm playing with you. Every touch, every glance, every moment of distance...it's all designed to make you want more."

Elizabeth's heart thundered against her ribs at his bold declaration. "You're very sure of yourself, my lord."

"I am." His thumb brushed her lower lip. "Because I can feel how you tremble when I'm near. How your breath quickens when I touch you. You may resist now, but soon enough..."

Elizabeth's heart thundered against her ribs at his words. His fingers still traced her scar, each light touch sending sparks of awareness through her body. "Perhaps," she whispered, surprised by her own boldness, "I don't want you to stop."

Cecil's hand stilled against her neck. "You don't know what you're asking for."

"Then show me." The words emerged before she could stop them, hanging in the air between them like a challenge.

His other hand came up to cup her face, tilting it toward the candlelight. "Look at me, Elizabeth."

She opened her eyes to find his gaze dark with barely contained desire. The intensity

there should have frightened her, but instead it made her feel powerful, wanted.

"I am not a gentle man," he warned, his thumb brushing her lower lip. "And you are far too tempting in your nightclothes, walking these halls like a ghost seeking absolution."

"Is that what you're seeking?" she asked softly. "Absolution?"

Something dangerous flickered in his eyes. "What I seek would shock your sensibilities, wife."

"You underestimate me." Elizabeth lifted her chin, though her voice trembled slightly. "I am not some fragile bloom to wilt at the first hint of passion."

"No," he agreed, his fingers sliding into her hair, loosening pins until curls tumbled around her shoulders. "You're something far more dangerous. A temptress who claims to want no children, yet stands before me in nothing but silk and moonlight."

"Cecil..." Her voice emerged as little more than a breath.

"Shh." He stepped back abruptly, leaving her swaying at the sudden loss of his touch. "Go back to your chambers, Elizabeth. Before I forget myself entirely."

"And if I don't want to go?"

His laugh was low and dark. "Then tomorrow night, you'll join me in my study. We'll play a game of my choosing—one that will show you exactly what kind of man you're provoking."

Elizabeth's pulse jumped at the promise in his voice. "What kind of game?"

"One where the stakes are measured in cloth and skin." He moved to the door, his control visibly strained. "Goodnight, wife. Dream of me."

She watched him leave, her body humming with unfulfilled desire. Only when his footsteps faded did she notice she was trembling.

The paintings watched silently from the walls, their subjects caught forever in moments of innocent joy. Elizabeth wondered what Cecil's mother would think of her now, standing in her former sanctuary with her hair tumbled down and her body aching for a man who promised both pleasure and ruin.

"What secrets did you keep?" she whispered to the nearest portrait. "What truths lie beneath these brushstrokes?"

But the paintings kept their counsel, and Elizabeth was left alone with her racing thoughts and the phantom sensation of Cecil's touch still burning on her skin.

The following evening found Elizabeth outside Cecil's study once more, though this time fully dressed in an evening gown of deep emerald silk. Her hand trembled slightly as she knocked, remembering his promise from the night before.

"Enter," came his familiar command.

The study looked different tonight. The massive desk had been cleared, a deck of cards and two crystal glasses of brandy arranged precisely on its surface. Cecil stood by the fireplace, his evening attire immaculate save for his missing coat.

"Ah, my fearless wife arrives." His smile held a predatory edge that made her pulse quicken. "Tell me, did you dream of me as instructed?"

Elizabeth forced herself to meet his gaze steadily. "I believe you promised me a

game, my lord, not an inquisition."

"So I did." He gestured to the chair across from his. "Though I wonder if you'll be quite so bold once you hear the rules."

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She settled into the offered seat, arranging her skirts with deliberate care. "And what rules might those be?"

"Simple ones." Cecil sat across from her, his movements fluid and controlled. "We play hands of cards. The loser of each hand removes one article of clothing."

Elizabeth's breath caught, but she refused to show her shock. "Rather scandalous for a man who spoke of maintaining distance just yesterday."

"Perhaps I grew tired of distance." He began shuffling the cards with practiced ease. "Unless you're afraid to test your skills against mine?"

"The real question," Elizabeth replied, lifting her chin, "is whether you're prepared to lose, my lord. I've spent countless hours playing cards with the ton's most formidable dowagers."

Cecil's eyes darkened with interest. "Have you indeed? Then by all means, wife, choose your game. Show me what these dowagers taught you."

"Vingt-et-un," she decided, watching his hands move over the cards. "A game of chance and strategy."

"How fitting." He dealt with fluid grace. "Though I should warn you—I rarely lose at games of chance."

"There's a first time for everything," Elizabeth murmured, picking up her cards. A thrill went through her as she realized she held an excellent hand.

The first round passed in tense silence, broken only by the snap of cards and the crackle of the fire. To Elizabeth's satisfaction, Cecil lost the first hand.

"Well played," he conceded, reaching for his cravat. The white silk whispered as he unknotted it with deliberate slowness. "I see those dowagers taught you well."

Elizabeth tried not to stare as the removal of his cravat revealed the strong column of his throat. "Your turn to deal, my lord."

His smile was wicked. "So eager to lose something yourself?"

The next hand proved less fortunate for Elizabeth. She stared at her losing cards, heat rising to her cheeks as Cecil's expectant gaze fell upon her.

"Your gloves, perhaps?" he suggested silkily. "Unless you'd prefer to start with something more...substantial."

Elizabeth removed one of her gloves with as much dignity as she could muster, laying the delicate kid leather beside her cards. The air felt cool against her bare hand, making her suddenly aware of how exposed even this small uncovering left her.

"Your scar," Cecil said unexpectedly as he dealt the next hand. "You never finished telling me about it."

She touched the mark reflexively. "There's little to tell. I was born with it—a reminder, my father always said, of how close to death I came during my birth."

"And you believed him?" Cecil's voice held an edge. "Believed it was something to be ashamed of?"

"The ton certainly thought so." Elizabeth arranged her cards, not meeting his eyes.

"It's rather difficult to make a good match when every potential suitor can't bear to look at you."

"Fools," Cecil muttered, laying down his hand. Another winning one. "Your other glove, if you please."

As Elizabeth removed it, his fingers caught her bare wrist. The touch sent sparks of awareness racing up her arm. "What are you doing?"

"Looking at you," he said simply, his thumb brushing over her pulse point. "Since apparently, I'm the first man wise enough to do so properly."

"You're doing considerably more than looking," she managed, though she made no move to pull away.

His smile was sin itself. "Would you like me to stop?"

"I..." Elizabeth's voice failed as his fingers traced up her bare arm.

"Your breath betrays you, wife," he murmured, noting how her chest rose and fell in quick, shallow movements. "It hitches every time I come near. Does my presence affect you so?"

"No," she whispered truthfully. "I'm afraid of myself. Of how much I want..."

"Yes?" His voice dropped lower, sending shivers down her spine.

But Elizabeth gathered her composure and pulled her arm back. "I believe it's my turn to deal, my lord."

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Cecil's laugh was warm and rich. "So it is. Though I must say, you're proving far more intriguing than any dowager's card lessons."

The next hand went to Elizabeth, and she couldn't suppress a triumphant smile as Cecil unbuttoned his waistcoat. The fine silk brocade joined his cravat on the desk, leaving him in just his shirt and trousers.

"The night is still young," he reminded her, eyes glittering in the firelight. "And you have far more layers to lose than I do."

Several hands later, Elizabeth had lost both her shoes and her shawl, while Cecil's shirt hung loose, partially unbuttoned. The brandy had left a pleasant warmth in her belly, making her bolder than she might otherwise have been.

"You never answered my question," she said, studying her cards. "About your mother's paintings."

Cecil's fingers stilled on his cards. "You're remarkably persistent."

"And you're remarkably evasive." She met his gaze steadily. "Even while trying to divest me of my clothing."

"Perhaps I simply prefer to focus on more pleasant subjects." His eyes traced the line of her scar. "Like how the firelight makes your skin glow."

"Now who's being evasive?" Elizabeth laid down her cards—another winning hand. "Your shirt, my lord."

A muscle ticked in his jaw, but he complied, each button coming undone with deliberate slowness. "You play a dangerous game, Elizabeth."

"I thought that was rather the point." Her voice remained steady, though her pulse quickened as his shirt joined the growing pile of discarded clothing.

The sight of his bare chest caught her breath in her throat. Broad and muscled, marred here and there with small scars—evidence of a life lived fully. One particularly vicious mark curved along his ribs.

"Hunting accident," he said, noticing her gaze. "Though my mother always claimed it was punishment for my recklessness."

"Was she right?"

"She was..." Cecil paused, dealing the next hand. "She was many things. Kind, yes. Talented, certainly. But she was also..." He broke off, his expression darkening.

"What else?" Elizabeth asked softly, puzzled by his hesitation. "Are you not telling me more?"

His laugh held no humor. "You could say that." He studied his cards.

"Perhaps we should take a break from the game," Cecil suggested, his voice low and controlled. He stood up, the muscles of his bare chest catching the firelight, casting shadows that accentuated his powerful form.

Elizabeth's heart pounded as he moved around the desk, his intent clear in his eyes. She stood her ground, her breath hitching as he came to a stop mere inches away. The heat radiating from his body enveloped her, and she could smell the faint scent of brandy and the masculine aroma that was uniquely his.

"Cecil," she whispered, her voice barely audible. His name on her lips was a plea, a question, and an invitation all at once.

He reached out, his fingers tracing the line of her jaw, then slowly trailing down her neck. His touch was light, almost reverent, but it sent shivers of anticipation coursing through her. Her skin felt alive, every nerve ending sparking with awareness.

"You are exquisite, Elizabeth," he murmured, his eyes following the path of his fingers. They traced her collarbone, then dipped lower, skimming the edge of her gown. "Every inch of you calls to me, begs to be touched, to be explored."

She swallowed hard, her throat dry with desire. His words were as intoxicating as his touch, weaving a spell around her that made it impossible to think, to do anything but feel.

His hands moved to her back, deftly unbuttoning the fastenings of her gown. Each button released was a tiny surrender, a giving over of control. The gown slid off her shoulders, catching briefly on her hips before pooling at her feet. She stepped out of it, kicking it aside, left only in her corset, chemise, and stockings.

Cecil's breath hitched as he took in the sight of her, his eyes darkening with unbridled lust. "You are a vision," he said, his voice rough with desire. "A goddess disguised as a mortal woman."

He reached out again, his hands cupping her shoulders, then sliding down her arms. His thumbs brushed the sides of her breasts, sending a jolt of pleasure through her. She gasped, her head falling back slightly, exposing the long line of her throat.

Cecil leaned in, his lips pressing softly against the pulse point in her neck. He lingered there, his tongue flicking out to taste her skin. Elizabeth's breath came in short pants, her body trembling with need.

His hands moved to her corset, expertly unlacing the ribbons. The constraining garment fell away, leaving her in just her thin chemise. The cool air of the room brushed against her nipples, making them harden into tight peaks.

Cecil's eyes dropped to her chest, a low growl rumbling in his throat. "Look at you," he said, his voice thick with desire. "So responsive, so eager for my touch."

He reached out, his hands cupping her breasts through the thin fabric of her chemise. His thumbs brushed over her nipples, sending sparks of pleasure shooting through her. She moaned softly, her back arching into his touch.

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He took his time, exploring her breasts, his fingers circling and teasing her nipples until they were taut and aching. Then, he slid his hands down her ribcage, his thumbs tracing the curve of her waist, the flare of her hips.

Hooking his fingers into the waistband of her chemise, he slowly pulled it down, revealing her inch by inch. The cool air brushed against her bare skin, making her shiver with anticipation. The chemise pooled at her feet, and she stepped out of it, left standing before him in nothing but her stockings.

Cecil's intake of breath was sharp, his eyes roving over her naked body with an intensity that made her feel both vulnerable and powerful. "You are a masterpiece," he said, his voice hoarse with desire. "A work of art more beautiful than any painting."

He reached out, his hands skimming her hips, then sliding down her thighs. His touch was feather-light, almost teasing, as if he were memorizing every curve and line of her body.

Then, he guided her to the desk, lifting her gently so she was perched on the edge. He stepped between her legs, spreading them wide to accommodate his body. His hands slid up her thighs, his thumbs brushing against the tender flesh of her inner thighs.

Elizabeth's breath hitched, her body trembling with anticipation. She could feel the heat of his body, the hard length of his arousal pressing against her thigh. She wanted him, wanted this, with a desperation that stole her breath.

Cecil leaned in, his lips capturing hers in a searing kiss. His tongue invaded her

mouth, exploring and claiming, while his hands continued their leisurely exploration of her body. He cupped her breasts, his thumbs brushing over her nipples, sending jolts of pleasure coursing through her.

She moaned into his mouth, her body arching into his touch. He swallowed the sound, his kiss deepening, becoming more demanding, more possessive.

She moaned softly as his skilled fingers found their target, exploring her most intimate place with deliberate care. Her hips bucked involuntarily at the novel sensation, her body responding with an eagerness that both thrilled and frightened her.

He broke the kiss, his lips trailing down her jaw, her neck, her collarbone. His fingers continued their gentle exploration, tracing the folds of her sex, circling the sensitive nub at her core.

Elizabeth's breath came in short pants, her body trembling with need. She could feel the pleasure building, a tight coil of sensation low in her belly. She whimpered, her hips lifting, seeking more of his touch.

Cecil obliged, his fingers delving deeper, exploring her slick folds. He found her entrance, his fingers circling the sensitive flesh, then slowly sliding inside.

Elizabeth moaned, her head falling back, her eyes fluttering closed. The sensation of him filling her, stretching her, was exquisite. She could feel every ridge of his fingers, every knuckle, as he moved slowly in and out of her.

"You feel divine," he breathed against her neck. "So warm, so responsive to my touch."

"Cecil," she gasped, her voice trembling. "I've never...I didn't know it could feel like

this."

His thumb found her clit, circling the sensitive nub in time with his thrusts. The dual sensation was overwhelming, pleasure spiraling through her, building with each stroke of his fingers.

"Let go for me," he murmured, his voice rough with desire. "I want to watch you come undone."

"I can't..." she whimpered, though her body arched into his touch. "It's too much..."

"You can," he assured her, his free hand tangling in her hair. "Trust me. Give yourself to me completely."

Her hands gripped the edge of the desk, her knuckles white with the strain. She was close, so close, her body trembling on the precipice of release.

Cecil seemed to sense her need, his fingers moving faster, deeper. His thumb pressed harder against her clit, his circles becoming tighter, more precise.

And then, she was falling, her body convulsing as wave after wave of pleasure crashed over her. She cried out, her back arching, her hips lifting off the desk. Cecil held her there, his fingers drawing out her orgasm, his thumb circling her clit until the last tremors of pleasure had faded.

She collapsed back onto the desk, her body limp, her breath coming in ragged gasps. Cecil withdrew his fingers, bringing them to his lips. He sucked them into his mouth, his eyes locked on hers, a wicked smile playing at the corners of his lips.

"You taste divine, wife," he said, his voice rough with desire. "I could feast on you for hours and never grow tired."

Elizabeth suddenly stiffened as reality crashed over her. What was she doing? She scrambled up from the desk, her hands trembling as she hastily straightened her clothing.

"I should go," she whispered, unable to meet his eyes as mortification flooded through her. What must he think of her, behaving so wantonly?

"Running away again?" His voice held that dangerous edge that made her shiver. "At least take some instruction with you—when you're alone tonight, remember how my hands felt. Practice what I showed you."

Elizabeth's eyes widened in surprise, a thrill of excitement coursing through her. The idea of pleasuring herself, of exploring her own body, was scandalous, forbidden. But it was also tempting, enticing.

"You are utterly infuriating," she said, her voice shaking with a mixture of desire and frustration. She knew she should be outraged by his presumption, not trembling with want. "This isn't...we shouldn't..."

She slid off the desk on unsteady legs, desperate to regain some semblance of dignity. When she bent to retrieve her chemise, Cecil stopped her, his hand on her arm.

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"Leave it," he said, his voice commanding as he snatched up her chemise and tossed it into the fireplace. The delicate fabric caught immediately.

"What are you—" Elizabeth gasped in outrage, instinctively moving to cover herself. "The servants?—"

"—won't be anywhere near this floor tonight," he finished with a predatory smile. "I've made quite sure of that."

Understanding dawned, making her cheeks flame even hotter. "You planned this," she accused. "This whole evening was a trap."

"A seduction," he corrected, his eyes dark with satisfaction. "And you fell into it beautifully. Now, go to your chambers like this, wearing nothing but your stockings. Feel the cool air on your skin, the brush of your hair against your back. Let every step remind you of who made you feel such pleasure."

Elizabeth's hands clenched into fists. "You are impossible," she hissed, though she couldn't deny the thrill that ran through her at his words. "What if someone sees me?"

"Trust me," he murmured, tracing the air above her collarbone. "The path is clear. Unless...you'd prefer to stay?"

She turned away quickly, not trusting herself to respond. It was infuriating how easily he could make her body betray her better judgment. "And Elizabeth," he said, his voice low and rough. "When you touch yourself, imagine it is my hands on your body, my fingers inside you, my mouth tasting you. Imagine it is me bringing you

pleasure, me making you cry out in ecstasy."

A shiver of desire ran through her at his words. She nodded once more, then slipped out of the room, her body already aching with renewed need.

As she made her way to her chambers, she was acutely aware of every sensation. The cool air on her skin, the soft brush of her hair against her back, the silken slide of her stockings against her thighs. She felt alive, her body thrumming with desire and anticipation.

Once in her chambers, she climbed onto her bed, her heart pounding with a mix of excitement and nerves.

She lay back against the pillows, her breath coming in shallow pants. For a moment, her hand drifted towards her body, curiosity and desire warring within her.

"No," Elizabeth whispered firmly to herself, pulling her hand away. She would not give him the satisfaction of breaking her resolve.

She took deep, measured breaths, forcing her racing thoughts to calm. The earl might think he could unsettle her with his provocative words, but she was made of sterner stuff. She would show him that she was not some simpering miss to be easily manipulated.

Determinedly, Elizabeth reached for a book on her bedside table, channeling her restless energy into reading and pushing away the dangerous temptations.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

"I assure you, my lord, this is entirely unnecessary," Elizabeth protested as Cecil handed her down from the carriage before an elegant shop front on Bond Street. The

gold lettering on the window proclaimed "Madame Laurent's Fine Modiste" in sweeping script.

"On the contrary," Cecil replied, his hand lingering at her waist a moment longer than strictly proper. "My countess requires a proper wardrobe."

"I have perfectly serviceable gowns?—"

"'Serviceable' is not the word I want associated with my wife." His eyes held that dangerous glint that made her pulse quicken. "Besides, I find myself rather looking forward to seeing you in something of my choosing."

Before Elizabeth could formulate a suitably cutting response, the shop door opened to reveal a striking woman of middle years, her silver-streaked dark hair arranged in an elegant coiffure.

"My lord Stonefield!" The modiste's French accent was pronounced but warm. "What an unexpected pleasure. And this must be your new countess?"

"Madame Laurent." Cecil executed a small bow. "May I present my wife, Lady Stonefield?"

The modiste's eyes widened slightly at Elizabeth's scar but, to her credit, she recovered quickly. "Enchantée, my lady. Please, come in. I have just received the most exquisite silks from Lyon..."

Inside, lengths of fabric in jewel tones and delicate pastels draped the walls. Elizabeth found herself running her fingers over a bolt of emerald silk before she could stop herself.

"Ah, you have excellent taste, my lady," Madame Laurent approved. "This shade

would complement your coloring beautifully."

"The emerald," Cecil decided, his voice brooking no argument. "And that sapphire as well." He gestured to another bolt of fabric that shimmered like deep water. "Both with necklines that show her throat."

Elizabeth's hand flew to her scar instinctively. "My lord, surely?—"

"Why do you insist on hiding your most intriguing feature?" Cecil moved closer, his fingers brushing her neck where her hand covered the mark. The touch sent shivers down her spine. "The scar makes you unique, wife. Like a rare diamond with a distinctive flaw that only enhances its value."

"I hardly think?—"

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"And that's precisely the problem." His smile held a wicked edge. "You think far too much about what others might say, rather than embracing what makes you extraordinary."

Madame Laurent cleared her throat delicately. "If I may suggest, my lady, the emerald gown could be cut to emphasize your elegant neck while remaining entirely proper for evening wear. Perhaps with some strategic ruching here..." She gestured to her own collar.

As Madame Laurent fluttered around with measuring tape and pins, Cecil lounged in a velvet chair, his predatory gaze following Elizabeth's every movement.

"A nightgown as well, I think," he announced casually, making Elizabeth nearly choke. "Something in ivory silk."

"My lord!" Elizabeth hissed, her cheeks flaming. "That's hardly?"

"Appropriate?" His smile was pure sin. "I'm merely being a considerate husband, ensuring my wife has proper attire for all occasions."

"Including occasions where I might wish to maintain some dignity?"

"Dignity?" Cecil's laugh was low and dangerous. "Is that what you're thinking of when you lie alone in your bed at night, wife?"

Elizabeth jabbed him with her fan, forgetting herself entirely. "You are absolutely insufferable."

"And yet you haven't run away screaming." He caught her wrist, his thumb brushing over her pulse point. "In fact, I'd say you rather enjoy our little exchanges."

"Enjoy being scandalous?" But she couldn't quite suppress her smile. "You clearly don't know me at all, my lord."

"No?" He released her wrist but his eyes still held hers captive. "Then perhaps you'll indulge my curiosity. Do you dance, wife?"

Elizabeth shifted under his intense scrutiny. "I...know the steps."

"That's not what I asked." Cecil rose from his chair with fluid grace. "Do you dance, Elizabeth?"

"I haven't had much occasion to practice," she admitted. "Being a chaperone usually involves watching from the sidelines rather than participating."

"And before that?" He moved closer, lowering his voice so Madame Laurent couldn't hear as she sorted through lace samples. "Surely during your own season..."

"My season was rather abbreviated." Elizabeth lifted her chin, refusing to show how much the memory stung. "Young lords tend to lose interest in dancing when they notice certain...imperfections."

Cecil's expression darkened. "Fools, all of them."

"Careful, my lord. That almost sounded like a compliment."

"Perhaps it was." His fingers traced the air above her scar, not quite touching but close enough to make her shiver. "We have Lady Morrison's ball tomorrow night. I look forward to seeing if you're as skilled at dancing as you are at wielding that sharp

tongue of yours."

"I never said I was skilled," Elizabeth protested. "Merely that I know the steps."

"Then I suppose I'll have to hold you very close," he murmured, his breath warm against her ear, "to ensure you don't stumble."

"My lord," Madame Laurent interrupted, holding up a length of delicate lace. "Perhaps you might approve the trim while your lady tries on the first gown?"

"By all means." But Cecil's eyes remained fixed on Elizabeth. "Though I doubt any amount of decoration could improve upon what nature has already provided."

Elizabeth escaped behind the dressing screen, her pulse racing. As her maid helped her into the emerald silk, she tried to steady her breathing. The neckline was indeed daring—not scandalously low, but cut in a way that drew attention to her throat rather than hiding it.

When she emerged, Cecil's expression made her breath catch. He'd risen from his chair again, his eyes darkening as they traveled over her form.

"Turn," he commanded softly.

Elizabeth complied, the silk rustling around her ankles. The mirror showed her reflection—a woman she barely recognized, elegant and almost exotic with her scar displayed like an ornament rather than a flaw.

"Perfect." Cecil's voice had dropped to that dangerous register that made her skin tingle. "Though something seems to be missing..." He approached the modiste's jewelry display and selected a delicate gold chain with a single emerald drop. "This, I think."

Before Elizabeth could protest, he was behind her, his fingers brushing her nape as he fastened the necklace. The emerald came to rest precisely where her scar began.

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"There." His fingers lingered at her neck. "Now you look exactly as a countess should."

"Like a possession to be decorated?" Elizabeth meant it to sound sharp, but her voice emerged breathless.

"Like a treasure to be displayed." He met her eyes in the mirror. "One that grows more intriguing with each passing day."

The heat in his gaze was too much. Elizabeth stepped away, her heart thundering against her ribs. "I should...I should change back."

"Running away again, wife?"

"Merely being practical." She forced lightness into her tone. "Unless you intend for me to wear this home?"

"I intend for you to wear it tomorrow night," he corrected, "when every man in that ballroom will curse himself for not seeing your true worth sooner."

"And you'll enjoy their envy, no doubt."

"Immensely." His smile was wolfish. "Almost as much as I'll enjoy having you in my arms during the waltz."

"Bold of you to assume I'll accept your invitation to dance."

"You will." The certainty in his voice made her shiver. "If only to prove me wrong about your skills."

Elizabeth retreated behind the dressing screen, grateful for the temporary escape from his intense regard. "Perhaps I'll accept Lord Ashworth's invitation instead. I hear he's an excellent dancer."

Cecil's laugh was dark and rich. "Now who's being bold, wife?"

"Merely practical," she called back, proud that her voice remained steady. "Since my own husband seems determined to question my abilities."

"Oh, I question nothing about your abilities, Elizabeth." The way he caressed her name made heat pool in her belly. "I simply look forward to discovering them...intimately."

Elizabeth was grateful for the screen hiding her flaming cheeks. She needed to escape before she did something foolish—like beg him to kiss her right there in the modiste's shop.

"I believe we're finished here," she announced, emerging in her original gown. "Unless you'd like to scandalize Madame Laurent further with talk of nightgowns?"

"Another time, perhaps." But his eyes promised that discussion was far from over. "Though I do hope you'll remember this conversation when you're alone in your bed tonight."

Elizabeth fled to the waiting carriage, her body humming with awareness. The worst part wasn't his outrageous flirtation—it was how much she'd begun to enjoy it.

Lady Morrison's ballroom blazed with hundreds of candles, their light reflecting off

gilded mirrors and crystal chandeliers. Elizabeth touched her emerald necklace nervously as she and Cecil were announced, acutely aware of the whispers that followed their entrance. The new gown felt both magnificent and terribly exposed—she couldn't remember the last time she'd attended a ball as anything other than a chaperone.

"My lady Stonefield!" Dinah's familiar voice cut through Elizabeth's anxiety. Her friend approached with a warm smile, though her eyes widened slightly at Elizabeth's daring neckline. "You look absolutely stunning."

"As do you," Elizabeth replied, grateful for the friendly face. Dinah wore pale blue silk that complemented her fair coloring perfectly.

"Indeed," Cecil agreed smoothly, bowing over Dinah's hand. "Though I confess myself rather partial to emerald these days."

Elizabeth felt a flush creep up her neck at his words, remembering their charged encounter at the modiste's shop. She was about to respond when a striking blonde in lavender silk approached their group.

"Lord Stonefield!" The woman's voice was breathy with admiration. "We missed you terribly at Lady Rutledge's musical evening last week."

"Lady Pembroke." Cecil's smile held that devastating charm that Elizabeth had come to know so well. "I assure you, the loss was entirely mine. Though my wife's company has made such absences rather more bearable."

Lady Pembroke's perfect features arranged themselves into a pout. "You must allow him some amusement, Lady Stonefield. We've grown quite used to his wit enlivening our gatherings."

"I assure you, madam," Elizabeth replied with careful politeness, "my husband is free to seek whatever amusements he desires."

But something twisted in her chest as she watched Lady Pembroke lay a gloved hand on Cecil's arm, laughing musically at something he'd said. Within moments, three more ladies had joined their circle, each seeming to vie for Cecil's attention.

"Your husband cuts quite the figure," Dinah observed quietly. "Though I daresay he's met his match in you—that gown is causing quite a stir."

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"The stir is hardly positive," Elizabeth murmured, noting the sideways glances and whispered comments behind fans. "I fear I've given the gossips fresh fodder by displaying my...imperfection so boldly."

"Nonsense." Dinah squeezed her arm. "You look regal. Though I must say, your lord husband seems to have developed quite the possessive streak. He's watching you even now."

Elizabeth glanced up to find Cecil's dark blue eyes fixed on her over Lady Pembroke's shoulder, his expression holding something that made her breath catch. Even surrounded by society beauties, his gaze remained locked on her.

"He's probably ensuring I don't embarrass him," Elizabeth said, but the words lacked conviction. There was nothing of criticism in that heated look—only a promise that made her skin tingle with awareness.

The first set of dances began, and Elizabeth noticed Cecil engaged in conversation with a group of gentlemen near the far side of the ballroom. He seemed entirely disinterested in dancing, despite being one of the most sought-after partners.

"I'm surprised the earl isn't dancing," Dinah observed, following Elizabeth's gaze. "Usually, he's the center of attention."

"Perhaps marriage has tempered his social appetites," Elizabeth replied, though her voice held a hint of uncertainty.

"I thought you said your marriage was one of convenience," Dinah ventured

carefully. "Yet you sound almost?—"

"Don't say it." Elizabeth tore her eyes away. "I'm merely observing."

"They think," Dinah said gently, "that the Earl of Stonefield can't keep his eyes off his wife, even while conversing with others. He's looked your way at least four times during this set alone."

"Probably ensuring I haven't fled in embarrassment." Elizabeth touched her scar unconsciously. "I've noticed the stares, Dinah. The whispers behind fans. They all wonder what sort of spell I must have cast to trap London's most eligible rake into marriage."

"Or perhaps they wonder why he looks at you as though he'd like to devour you whole, protocol be damned."

Elizabeth's cheeks flamed at her friend's frank observation. "Dinah!"

"Well, he does. In fact—" Dinah's eyes widened slightly. "He's heading this way now."

Elizabeth turned to find Cecil approaching, his expression holding that dangerous intensity that never failed to make her pulse race.

"My lady wife," he said, executing a perfect bow. "I believe this next set is mine."

"I wouldn't want to interrupt your conversations," Elizabeth said, a slight challenge in her voice. "You seemed quite engaged with your companions."

Cecil's smile held a hint of mischief. "There's nowhere I'd rather be than with you."

Cecil's fingers tightened around hers as he led her onto the floor. "Jealous, wife?"

"Of your popularity? Hardly." But she couldn't quite meet his eyes as they took their positions for the waltz. "I'm well aware of your reputation for charm."

"And yet," he pulled her closer than strictly proper as the music began, "you're the only woman in this room wearing my mother's emerald necklace."

Elizabeth's breath caught at his proximity. Despite her earlier protests about knowing the steps, her body followed his lead naturally, as if they'd danced together a hundred times before. His hand at her waist burned through the silk of her gown, making it difficult to concentrate.

"I didn't realize it was your mother's," she managed, trying to focus on the conversation rather than the way his thumb traced small circles against her back.

"It suits you." His voice dropped lower, meant for her ears alone. "Though I must say, the gown itself is proving rather distracting. I've spent most of the evening imagining how it would look pooled at your feet."

"Cecil!" She nearly missed a step, heat flooding her cheeks. "There are people watching."

"Let them watch." His smile held a wicked edge. "Let them see how their dignified countess flushes so prettily when her husband whispers in her ear. Let them wonder what other sounds I might draw from those perfect lips when we're alone."

Elizabeth's heart thundered against her ribs. "You're being deliberately shocking."

"I'm being honest." He guided her through a turn that brought their bodies flush together for a moment. "Though I notice you haven't stepped on my toes yet. Perhaps

you weren't entirely truthful about your dancing abilities?"

"I never claimed to be incompetent," Elizabeth retorted, though her voice lacked bite.

"Merely...out of practice."

"Then we shall have to practice more often." His hand splayed possessively across her back. "Though preferably somewhere more private, where I won't have to maintain such rigid propriety."

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A couple dancing nearby shot them a scandalized look, no doubt noting their intimate proximity. Elizabeth felt her earlier insecurities resurface as she caught fragments of whispered conversation.

"Did you see her scar?"

"—can't believe he married?—"

"Must have been desperate for an heir?—"

"Stop," Cecil commanded softly, his fingers tightening on hers. "I can practically hear you retreating into yourself."

"I'm merely being realistic." Elizabeth forced a smile that didn't reach her eyes. "Your reputation may survive dancing with your scarred wife, but mine has already caused quite enough gossip for one evening."

Cecil's expression darkened. "Shall I tell you what I see when I look at you tonight?"

"My lord?—"

"I see a woman who outshines every diamond-draped debutante in this room. I see grace in every move you make, fire in every word you speak." His voice dropped to a dangerous whisper. "I see the way that gown clings to your curves, making me want to?—"

"Now who's being improper?" But her voice emerged breathless, betraying her.

"Improper would be telling you how that dress makes me want to?—"

"My lord!" Elizabeth cut him off, though her pulse raced at the heat in his voice.

"You promised to teach me to dance, not scandalize me entirely."

"Are you quite certain those goals are mutually exclusive?" His hand at her waist drew her imperceptibly closer. "Because I find myself rather enjoying the combination."

Elizabeth tried to summon a suitably cutting response, but something was happening to her heart—something terrifying and wonderful that made it difficult to remember why she'd ever tried to resist this man.

Oh God. She was falling in love with her husband.

The realization hit her with such force that she nearly missed a step, saved only by Cecil's sure grip.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Cecil stared unseeing at the ledger before him, his mind drifting far from the columns of numbers. He was losing control, and he knew it. His wife had become a dangerous distraction—consuming his thoughts at the most inopportune moments. What had begun as a calculated seduction was becoming something far more perilous. He was developing feelings he couldn't afford to acknowledge.

These moments of weakness were unacceptable. He was the Earl of Stonefield, not some lovesick youth to be swept away by a pair of green eyes and a sharp tongue. He needed to maintain distance, to remember the original terms of their arrangement. Three months. An heir. Nothing more.

Yet even as he tried to steel himself, images of Elizabeth invaded his mind—the way she managed his household with quiet competence, her unexpected wit, the soft gasp she made when he touched her just so...

Damn it all.

He gripped his pen more tightly, determined to focus on the accounts before him.

"My lord?" Mr. Harrison's impatient tone suggested it wasn't the first time he'd tried to get Cecil's attention. "These accounts require your immediate?—"

A soft knock at the study door made Cecil's pulse quicken embarrassingly. He knew that knock.

"Enter," he called, perhaps too eagerly.

Elizabeth appeared in the doorway, a becoming pink staining her cheeks. She wore a simple morning dress in pale blue that somehow made her more alluring than any ball gown. "I apologize for interrupting, but I wondered if you might have time for..." She glanced at Mr. Harrison and faltered. "It can wait."

"No," Cecil said quickly, rising from his desk. "Mr. Harrison was just leaving."

The accountant clutched his papers protectively. "My lord, these matters are most urgent?—"

"Not as urgent as my wife." Cecil's tone brooked no argument. He fixed Harrison with a look that had sent bolder men scurrying. "We'll continue tomorrow."

Harrison opened his mouth as if to protest further, but something in Cecil's expression made him think better of it. With a stiff bow to Elizabeth and a rather

sulky one to Cecil, he gathered his things and departed.

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When the door closed behind him, Cecil turned his full attention to his wife. She still hovered uncertainly near the threshold, her fingers twisting in her skirts. "You mentioned something about dancing lessons?"

Her blush deepened. "I thought...that is, if you're not too busy..."

"I'm never too busy for you." The words emerged more intensely than he'd intended. To cover his slip, he moved to clear space in the center of the study, pushing chairs aside. "Though I must warn you, I'm a demanding instructor."

"So I've noticed," she murmured, and the slight huskiness in her voice made his blood heat.

Cecil held out his hand, and after only a moment's hesitation, she placed her smaller one in his palm. The simple touch sent awareness spiraling through him. How was it possible that this woman affected him so powerfully with the merest contact?

He drew her closer, positioning them for a waltz. "We'll start with the basic steps. Place your hand here..." He guided her palm to his shoulder, fighting back a shiver as her fingers curled into the fabric of his coat. "And I'll place mine here." His own hand settled at her waist, perhaps a bit lower than strictly proper.

Her breath hitched. "Like this?"

"Perfect." He began leading her through the steps, though in truth she moved with natural grace. He'd known at the ball that she'd been lying about her dancing abilities. "One-two-three, one-two-three...you see? You're a natural."

"Only because you make it easy." She glanced up at him through her lashes, then quickly away. "I don't want to embarrass you again. At the ball, when everyone was watching..."

Cecil's jaw tightened as he remembered the whispers, the sideways glances that had made her shrink into herself. "You could never embarrass me," he said roughly. "Those gossips are merely jealous that I managed to secure the most fascinating woman in London as my wife."

Her step faltered. "You don't mean that."

"Don't I?" He pulled her closer, propriety be damned. "Why would I lie?"

"Because..." She swallowed hard. "Because of my scar. Because I'm not what anyone expected for the Earl of Stonefield."

"No," he agreed, his voice dropping lower as he bent his head toward hers. "You're far more than I expected."

Elizabeth's breath caught. They had stopped dancing, though his hand still burned at her waist, his thumb tracing small circles that made her shiver. "Cecil..."

"Yes?" His voice was low, dangerous, filled with an intimacy that made her pulse race.

She struggled to maintain her composure. "We should continue dancing," she managed, though her body betrayed her by leaning slightly closer.

Cecil's smile held a predatory edge. "Are you afraid of what might happen if we stop?"

"Afraid?" Elizabeth lifted her chin, trying to summon her earlier bravado. "Of what, precisely?"

"Of this." His hand moved higher, fingers brushing the sensitive skin just above her waist. "Of how your body responds to me when I'm this close."

"I'm not responding to anything," she protested, even as a flush crept up her neck.

He leaned closer, his breath warm against her ear. "Your pulse tells a different story." His fingers traced the line of her neck, following her racing heartbeat. "Tell me truly, Elizabeth. What are you afraid of?"

She swallowed hard. "I'm not afraid."

"Then why do you tremble?" Cecil's voice dropped lower, more intimate. "Why can't you look me in the eye?"

Elizabeth forced herself to meet his gaze, her breath catching at the intensity she found there. "Because you make it impossible to think clearly."

"Good," he murmured. "I'd hate to be the only one so affected."

"Is that what this is?" she challenged, finding a spark of her earlier spirit. "A game to see who can unsettle the other more?"

Cecil's laugh was rich and low. "Perhaps. Though I'm beginning to think you enjoy our little battles as much as I do."

"Enjoy?" Elizabeth's indignation was only half-feigned. "You're impossible."

"Your scar," he murmured, his free hand rising to trace the air just above the mark,

not quite touching but close enough that she could feel the heat of his skin. "Do you know what I think when I look at it?"

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She shook her head mutely.

"I think of how brave you are. How strong." His fingers finally made contact, following the path down her neck with exquisite gentleness. "How every mark, every imperfection only makes you more beautiful to me."

A small sound escaped her throat—something between a gasp and a whimper that made his blood surge. "May I touch you, Elizabeth?"

Her eyes, dark with desire, met his. "Yes."

Cecil's control snapped at that single word. He pulled her flush against him, one hand tangling in her hair while the other pressed against the small of her back. Her softness molded to his harder frame perfectly, as if she'd been made for him.

"Tell me to stop," he growled against her throat, his lips tracing the path his fingers had taken. "Tell me this isn't what you want."

But Elizabeth's only response was to arch into him, her hands clutching his shoulders as he explored the sensitive skin of her neck. When his teeth grazed her pulse point, she gasped his name.

The sound undid him completely. He backed her toward his desk, lifting her to sit on its edge. Ledgers and papers scattered to the floor, but he couldn't bring himself to care. Not when she was looking at him with such trust, such naked want in her eyes.

"You're exquisite," he murmured, his hands sliding down her sides to her hips.

"Every inch of you deserves to be worshipped."

Her cheeks flushed beautifully at his words. "Cecil, please..."

"Please what, hmmm?" He pressed open-mouthed kisses along her collarbone, relishing how she trembled beneath his touch. "Tell me what you want."

"I..." She broke off with a moan as his hands slid beneath her skirts, caressing her ankles, her calves, the sensitive skin behind her knees. "I want you to touch me. Everywhere."

"As my lady commands," he breathed, sinking to his knees before her. His hands slid higher beneath her skirts, caressing the silken skin of her thighs. Her breath came in short pants now, her head falling back as he explored her with reverent touches.

Cecil had known pleasure before, had taken his fill of willing women in his rakish days. But nothing compared to this—to the sight of his proud, proper wife coming undone beneath his hands. To the way she trembled and gasped his name, her fingers threading through his hair as he worshipped her with his mouth.

She was magnificent in her abandon, all trace of insecurity forgotten as pleasure overtook her. When she shattered beneath his touch, crying out his name like a prayer, Cecil felt something shift inside his chest—something dangerous and wonderful that he wasn't ready to examine too closely.

He pressed one last kiss to her inner thigh before rising, drinking in the sight of her. Her hair had come partially loose, dark curls framing her flushed face. Her lips were parted, swollen from where she'd bitten them to keep quiet. She had never looked more beautiful.

Cecil, still kneeling before Elizabeth, let his hands linger on her thighs, feeling the

delicate tremors that rippled through her muscles. He looked up at her, his eyes dark with desire and something more profound—a reverence that neither of them had expected. Her cheeks were flushed, her breath coming in shallow gasps, and her eyes held a mixture of anticipation and vulnerability that stirred something deep within him.

Slowly, deliberately, he let his hands slide higher, the warmth of her skin seeping into his palms like a brand. He could feel her heartbeat, quick and erratic, through his fingertips. The sensation was intoxicating, a powerful awareness that he was the cause of her undoing.

"Elizabeth," he whispered, his voice a low rasp. "Look at me."

She opened her eyes, her lashes fluttering against her cheeks, and met his gaze. The depth of emotion in her eyes was nearly his undoing. He leaned forward, pressing a gentle kiss to the inside of her knee, feeling her shiver beneath his touch.

"Do you trust me?" he asked, his breath warm against her skin.

She nodded, her eyes never leaving his. "Yes," she breathed, her voice barely a whisper.

Encouraged, Cecil let his fingers dance higher, tracing the soft skin of her inner thighs. He could feel the heat radiating from her core, the subtle moisture that gathered as her desire grew. It was a heady sensation, knowing that she was aroused by him, that her body responded to his touch with such eager abandon.

He let his lips follow the path of his fingers, pressing soft, open-mouthed kisses along her thighs, feeling the way her muscles quivered beneath his touch. He inhaled deeply, the scent of her arousal filling his senses, making his own desire surge and throb. But he held back, determination swelling within him. This moment was not

about his pleasure; it was about hers, about showing her just how cherished and desired she was.

As he approached the apex of her thighs, Elizabeth's breath hitched, her fingers tightening in his hair. He paused, looking up at her with a question in his eyes. She nodded almost imperceptibly, her lips parting on a silent gasp as he let his breath fan over her most intimate place.

Cecil felt a wave of tenderness and awe as he marveled at her trust, her surrender. With a gentle touch, he parted her folds, revealing the glistening pink flesh that lay hidden. He couldn't help the small groan that escaped him at the sight, the sheer beauty of her making his chest ache.

He leaned in, letting his tongue delve slowly, carefully along her slit. She tasted like the sweetest nectar, like something ethereal and forbidden. Her gasp echoed through the room, her fingers clenching convulsively in his hair as she arched towards him. "Cecil," she whispered, his name a plea and a prayer. He hummed softly against her, the vibration making her shudder. With deliberate slowness, he began to explore her with his tongue, learning the intricacies of her body, the places that made her gasp and squirm.

He paid close attention to her reactions, to the way her breath hitched when he circled her clit, to the way her hips arched when he dipped his tongue into her entrance. It was a dance of discovery, a sensual journey that he reveled in, each shiver and moan from her a victory that made his heart soar.

As he continued his ministrations, he let his hands wander, caressing the soft curves of her thighs, her hips, her abdomen. He could feel the way her muscles tensed and relaxed under his touch, the way her body was coiling with pleasure. It was a beautiful sight, the way she surrendered to him, trusting him completely.

He focused his attention on her clit, letting his tongue flick and tease the sensitive bundle of nerves. Elizabeth's breath grew more ragged, her fingers tightening in his hair as she held him close. He could feel the way her body was building towards release, the subtle tensing of her muscles, the increasing wetness under his tongue.

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He slid a finger inside her, marveling at the way her inner walls clenched around him. She was so warm, so tight, so utterly perfect. He began to move his finger in a slow rhythm, matching the strokes of his tongue against her clit. The dual sensations made her cry out, her body arching towards him as she sought more.

More. The word echoed through his mind like a mantra. He wanted more of her, more of this, more of the mindless pleasure he could give her. He added a second finger, stretching her gently, feeling the way her body welcomed him with slick heat. He curled his fingers, finding that secret place inside her that made her gasp and shudder.

"Cecil," she moaned, his name a desperate plea. "Please..."

He recognized the signs of her impending release, increasing his ministrations with practiced skill. When Elizabeth finally came undone, it was with a breathless cry that seemed to release all the tension between them. Her body trembled, muscles clenching as waves of pleasure swept through her.

Cecil watched her carefully, noting the way her skin flushed, her breath coming in soft, uneven gasps. There was something deeply satisfying in bringing her to this moment of complete surrender. He pressed one last, gentle kiss to her inner thigh before rising to his feet. The sight of her, so utterly undone, so thoroughly pleased, made something in his chest swell. He had never cared so much about another person's pleasure, had never found such joy in giving himself completely over to their needs.

Elizabeth looked up at him, her eyes soft and dazed, her cheeks flushed a beautiful pink. She reached out a hand, her fingers brushing against his cheek. "Cecil," she

whispered, her voice still breathless. "That was...I've never..."

"Shh," he murmured, leaning down to press a gentle kiss to her lips. He could taste her on his mouth, a sweet reminder of the gift she had given him. "You don't need to say anything."

She nodded, her eyes never leaving his. The trust, the warmth, the love in her gaze was nearly overwhelming. He felt a surge of something deep and powerful, a need to protect her, to cherish her, to make her his in every way.

He stepped back, his eyes wandering over her. She looked utterly ravished, her hair loose and wild, her dress rumpled and askew. It was the most beautiful sight he had ever seen. His fingers itched to touch her again, to explore every inch of her, to claim every part of her as his own.

But he pulled back, the intensity of his own desire making him retreat. He knew if he stayed, he would take her completely, would claim her body with his own.

"The dance lesson is over," Cecil said, his voice rough with restrained desire. He stepped back, putting distance between them. "I should go."

Elizabeth reached for him, confusion and hurt flashing across her features. "Cecil?—"

But he was already moving away, straightening his clothing with trembling hands. He paused at the door, unable to look directly at her. "Before I forget myself entirely," he added softly, then fled his own study like a coward.

In the corridor, he leaned against the wall, his breath coming in harsh pants.

What was happening to him?

Since when did the notorious Earl of Stonefield run from a willing woman?

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Elizabeth was in the morning room reviewing household accounts when Harrison appeared in the doorway. "My lady, Miss Harriet Cooper has arrived."

Her heart leaped at the mention of her sister. She hadn't seen Harriet since helping her escape, though they'd exchanged letters through Dinah. Setting aside her ledgers, Elizabeth rose just as Harriet burst into the room, her cheeks flushed from travel.

"Elizabeth!" Harriet flew into her arms. "Oh, I've missed you terribly. When I received your letter about the marriage, I couldn't stay away another moment."

Elizabeth held her sister tightly, inhaling the familiar scent of lavender that reminded her so much of home. When they finally pulled apart, she saw tears glistening in Harriet's eyes.

"This is all my fault," Harriet whispered, touching Elizabeth's cheek. "You married that rake because of me. Because I was too cowardly to face Father myself."

"Hush now." Elizabeth guided her sister to sit beside her on the settee. "The marriage was...not what any of us expected, but I assure you, I'm well settled here."

Something must have shown in her expression because Harriet's eyes narrowed. "Settled? Or something more?"

Elizabeth felt heat rise to her cheeks. How could she explain that Cecil had awakened feelings in her she'd never thought possible? That his touches, even the most innocent ones, set her blood on fire? "The earl has been...kind," she managed.

"Kind?" Harriet's voice cracked. "Like James was kind before he..." She broke off, pressing her fingers to her lips.

"Harriet? What happened?"

"He left," her sister whispered. "Without a word, without even a letter. All his grand promises about waiting until he inherited his uncle's title..." She gave a bitter laugh. "I was such a fool."

Elizabeth gathered her sister close as fresh tears fell. "Oh, my darling. I'm so sorry."

"I thought he loved me," Harriet sobbed against her shoulder. "I would have ruined myself for him, if you hadn't stopped me."

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Elizabeth stroked her sister's hair, fury building in her chest at the man who'd broken her sister's heart. "Perhaps it's time to go home," she suggested gently. "Father will forgive you, especially now that I'm..." She hesitated. "Well settled."

Harriet pulled back, wiping her eyes. "You'll come with me?"

"Of course, if you wish?—"

"No." Harriet straightened her spine, and Elizabeth saw a flash of their father's stubbornness in her expression. "No, I need to face him myself. You've protected me long enough, sister."

Elizabeth studied her sister's newly composed expression with a mixture of pride and concern. It seemed their separation had matured Harriet in ways she hadn't expected.

"Are you certain?" Elizabeth asked, reaching to tuck a stray curl behind Harriet's ear—a gesture she'd performed countless times during their childhood. "Father can be...difficult when his pride is wounded."

"Which is precisely why I must go alone." Harriet captured Elizabeth's hand in hers. "But first, tell me truly—are you happy here? I've heard such stories about the earl's reputation, his previous broken engagements..."

Elizabeth felt her pulse quicken at the mention of Cecil. Images from their latest encounter in his study flashed through her mind—his hands on her skin, his lips against her neck—and she pushed the memories away, fighting a blush. "The stories don't tell the whole truth of him," she said carefully.

"Your cheeks tell quite a different story," Harriet observed with a ghost of her old teasing smile. "Good heavens, Elizabeth—you're actually fond of him, aren't you?"

"It's...complicated," Elizabeth hedged, rising to pour them both tea to hide her flustered state. "Cecil is not what I expected. He can be demanding and infuriating one moment, then surprisingly thoughtful the next."

"You speak of him quite familiarly now. And you're blushing again, sister."

Elizabeth handed Harriet a cup with perhaps more force than necessary. "You're reading far too much into simple courtesy between husband and wife."

"Am I?" Harriet took a delicate sip. "Then why won't you look at me when speaking of him? The last time I saw you this flustered was when Lord Pembroke's son tried to steal a kiss in the garden and you slapped him."

"That was entirely different," Elizabeth protested. "I was outraged by his presumption."

"And now?" Harriet pressed. "What presumptions does your husband make that put such color in your cheeks?"

Elizabeth nearly choked on her tea. If only her sister knew about the wicked things Cecil whispered in her ear, the way his hands...

She cut off that dangerous line of thought. "We've reached an...understanding," she said primly.

Harriet set down her teacup with an unladylike snort. "An understanding? Is that what we're calling it now? Because the way you keep touching your neck when speaking of him suggests something far more interesting than an understanding."

Elizabeth's hand dropped from where it had indeed been tracing the path Cecil's lips had taken just yesterday. "You're being scandalous," she chided, though her voice lacked conviction.

"I'm being observant," Harriet countered. "And what I observe is my proper, responsible sister looking rather...well-kissed."

"Harriet!" Elizabeth glanced anxiously at the door, though she knew the servants wouldn't dare eavesdrop. "You cannot say such things."

"Why not? You're married to him, after all." Harriet's expression softened. "And I must say, it's refreshing to see you so...alive. You've spent so many years being Mother and Father and chaperone all at once. Perhaps it's time you allowed yourself to simply be a woman."

Elizabeth felt tears prick at her eyes at her sister's words. "I hardly know how anymore," she admitted quietly. "For so long, my only thought was ensuring your future. And now..."

"And now you find yourself with a devastatingly handsome husband who clearly affects you deeply." Harriet reached for her hand. "Tell me truly, Elizabeth—are you falling in love with him?"

The question struck Elizabeth like a physical blow. She'd been so careful not to examine her growing feelings for Cecil too closely, knowing their arrangement was temporary. Three months, he'd said. And already half that time had passed.

"It doesn't matter what I feel," she said finally. "Cecil has made it clear this is a marriage of convenience only. Once he has his heir..." She trailed off, remembering how she'd told him she didn't want children. Had she unknowingly sealed the fate of their marriage with those careless words?

"But that's not what you want anymore, is it?" Harriet's voice was gentle. "I can see it in your face when you speak of him."

"What I want hardly matters," Elizabeth replied, her fingers twisting in her skirts. "Cecil has his own demons to battle. And I..." She touched her scar unconsciously. "I'm hardly the sort of wife a man like him would choose to keep."

"Stop that," Harriet said sharply. "You've spent years hiding behind that scar, letting Father's cruel words convince you it makes you somehow less. But I've seen the way the earl looks at you—even at the masquerade, before he knew who you were. He couldn't take his eyes off you."

"He was probably trying to determine if I was the sister he was meant to marry," Elizabeth said dryly.

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"Or perhaps he saw what I've always seen—a beautiful woman who's too busy taking care of everyone else to notice her own worth." Harriet squeezed her hand. "The question is, dear sister, what are you going to do about it?"

Elizabeth stood abruptly, pacing to the window. Outside, the gardens Cecil's mother had lovingly tended stretched toward the horizon. "There's nothing to be done," she said. "Even if I...even if my feelings have changed, Cecil was clear about his expectations. Three months to secure an heir, then freedom for us both."

"And what if his feelings have changed too?" Harriet pressed. "Have you asked him?"

Elizabeth gave a hollow laugh. "Asked the most notorious rake in London if he's developed tender feelings for his scarred, temporary wife? I think not."

"The same rake who hasn't been seen at any of his usual haunts since your marriage? Who, according to Dinah's letters, spends his evenings in his study with you rather than carousing with his friends?" Harriet rose to join her at the window. "Men don't change their habits so completely unless their hearts are engaged."

"Or unless they're honoring their word about fidelity," Elizabeth countered, though something warm flickered in her chest at her sister's observations.

"Fidelity?" Harriet's eyes widened. "You made the Earl of Stonefield promise to be faithful? And he agreed?"

"It was a condition of our arrangement," Elizabeth muttered, though she could still hear Cecil's dark laugh when she'd made her demand. Still feel the heat of his breath

against her ear as he'd promised to make her beg for his touch.

"An arrangement that seems to grow more interesting by the minute," Harriet observed. "Tell me, does this arrangement also include the way your breath catches whenever you speak his name? Or how your eyes darken when you think no one's watching?"

"I don't—" Elizabeth began, but Harriet cut her off.

"You do. Just as you're doing now." She touched Elizabeth's flushed cheek. "Oh, Elizabeth. You've spent so long being strong for everyone else. Perhaps it's time to be brave for yourself?"

"Brave?" Elizabeth whispered. "Or foolish?"

"Sometimes the bravest choices look foolish to others," Harriet said softly. "Like helping your sister escape an unwanted marriage, knowing you might take her place."

Elizabeth's throat tightened. "That was different."

"Was it?" Harriet's eyes filled with fresh tears. "You saved me from a marriage to a man I never loved, only to find your own heart at risk with him instead. The irony would be amusing if I didn't feel so wretchedly guilty."

"Don't," Elizabeth said fiercely, pulling her sister close. "Never feel guilty for following your heart, even if it led you astray. At least you had the courage to try."

"And now?" Harriet pulled back to study her face. "Will my brave sister find the courage to fight for her own happiness?"

Elizabeth opened her mouth to respond, but the sound of approaching footsteps in the

corridor made them both freeze.

"I should go," Harriet said quickly, pressing a kiss to Elizabeth's cheek. "Think about what I said, sister. Some risks are worth taking."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The Gentleman's Club

The distinctive sound of fists striking leather echoed through the private boxing room at White's as Cecil ducked another of Laurence's precise jabs. Sweat dampened his shirt, plastering the fine linen to his chest as he circled his opponent. His cousin had always been the more technically skilled fighter, but today Cecil's distraction made him an embarrassingly easy target.

"Your guard is dropping," Laurence observed coldly, following up with a swift combination that Cecil barely managed to block. "I've seen drunken lords show better form."

From his position by the wall, Percival made a sound suspiciously like a suppressed laugh. "Perhaps if our friend weren't so preoccupied with thoughts of his new countess..."

Cecil's attention wavered at the mention of Elizabeth, and Laurence's next strike caught him squarely in the ribs. He stumbled back, cursing under his breath.

"I see I've hit a tender spot," Laurence remarked, though whether he meant the physical blow or the mention of Elizabeth remained unclear. "Shall we take a break before you embarrass yourself further?"

"Your concern is touching," Cecil muttered, but he didn't protest when Percival

tossed him a towel. His body ached, though more from tension than exertion. He hadn't slept properly in days, his dreams haunted by images of Elizabeth—her smile when she thought he wasn't looking, the way she trembled under his touch, the quiet strength with which she faced every challenge.

"You're brooding again," Percival observed, pouring three glasses of brandy. "I haven't seen you this out of sorts since...well, since before your father's passing."

Cecil's hand tightened around his glass. "Less than a month," he said abruptly, changing the subject. "That's all that remains of my agreement with Elizabeth. Then I'll leave London as promised."

"And is that what you want?" Laurence asked, his voice cutting through Cecil's defenses like one of his precise strikes. "To abandon your estate—and your wife—simply because you made some ill-conceived promise?"

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"What I want is irrelevant." Cecil tossed back his brandy in one harsh swallow. "The agreement was clear: three months, an heir, then freedom for us both."

"An agreement you made before you knew her," Percival pointed out. "Before you saw how perfectly she manages your household, how well she fits into your life?—"

"Enough." The word emerged sharper than Cecil intended. He set down his glass with careful precision, fighting for control. "I won't become—" He cut himself off, but not before he saw understanding flash in Percival's eyes.

"You won't become your father," his friend finished softly. "A man who loved so deeply he nearly destroyed himself when he discovered?—"

"I said enough." Cecil's voice dropped to a dangerous whisper. The look he leveled at his friend would have sent braver men running, but Percival merely sighed.

"You haven't seen your sisters since the wedding," Percival continued, his tone deliberately casual. "Madeleine asks after you constantly. She's convinced you're avoiding her."

"I am not avoiding her," Cecil muttered, though the words felt hollow even to his own ears. "I simply haven't found the time."

"Time?" Laurence's eyebrow rose skeptically. "You seem to have plenty of time for brooding in this club."

"I've been preoccupied," Cecil said, his voice carrying a note of warning that would

have silenced lesser men.

Percival leaned forward. "Preoccupied with your new wife, perhaps?"

Cecil's jaw tightened. "My affairs are my own."

"Are they?" Laurence's cold voice cut through his defenses. "Because you look like a man being slowly tortured by something—or someone."

Cecil shot his cousin a dangerous look, but Laurence merely raised an eyebrow, unmoved. The Duke of Westrow had always been immune to Cecil's attempts at intimidation.

"Speaking of your lovely countess," Percival interjected smoothly, "Madeleine insists on hosting a small dinner party tomorrow evening. Nothing elaborate—just family. She won't take no for an answer."

"I'm otherwise engaged," Cecil said automatically, though they all knew it was a lie.

"Are you?" Percival's smile held a knowing edge. "Because your wife has already accepted the invitation."

Cecil's head snapped up. "When did you?—"

"This morning. I called at Stonefield Manor while you were..." Percival gestured to Cecil's disheveled state. "Otherwise occupied. Elizabeth was quite gracious about accepting, though she did mention you've been rather scarce lately."

Something that felt dangerously like guilt twisted in Cecil's chest. He had been avoiding Elizabeth, throwing himself into business affairs and spending long hours at his club. Anything to escape the way his body yearned for her presence, the way his

heart lightened at her smile.

"If you're trying to maintain distance," Laurence observed dryly, "you're going about it all wrong. The whole ton is buzzing about how the notorious Earl of Stonefield seems to have been thoroughly tamed by his unexpected bride."

"I am not—" Cecil began hotly, but Percival cut him off.

"Tamed? Perhaps not. But you can't deny she affects you. I've known you since we were boys, Cecil. I've never seen you like this—not even during your most desperate attempts to outrun your father's grief."

The mention of his father made Cecil's jaw clench. "You're overstepping, Percy."

"Am I?" His friend's voice gentled. "Or am I simply pointing out what you refuse to see? That perhaps, just perhaps, you've found something worth staying for?"

"You presume too much," Cecil warned, but his voice lacked its usual bite. The truth was, he felt exhausted—not from the boxing, but from constantly fighting his growing feelings for Elizabeth. Each day brought some new discovery about her that made his chest ache: the way she hummed softly while reviewing household accounts, how her eyes lit up when she solved a problem, the gentle way she spoke to even the lowest kitchen maid.

"Do I?" Percival lounged back in his chair, studying Cecil with the same shrewd look he'd worn since their school days. "Then explain why you've taken to haunting this club like a ghost. The Cecil I know would be home right now."

"Perhaps I've grown tired of the game," Cecil muttered, though they all knew it for the lie it was.

"The game?" Laurence's laugh held no warmth. "Is that what you call it when you stare at her across ballrooms like a starving man eyeing a feast? When you practically growl at any man who dares approach her? When you?—"

"Your point is made," Cecil cut in sharply. "Though I fail to see how my marriage concerns either of you."

"It concerns us," Percival said quietly, "because we watched what your father's grief did to him. How he withdrew from everything and everyone. And now we're watching you make the same mistake—letting fear of the past poison your future."

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Cecil surged to his feet, his chair scraping harshly against the floor. "You know nothing about?—"

"I know you're terrified," Percival interrupted, his voice still gentle but implacable. "Terrified of trusting her. Of loving her."

The truth of his friend's words hit Cecil like a physical blow. He gripped the back of his chair, his knuckles white with strain. "And what would you have me do?" he asked, his voice rough. "Risk everything? Give her the power to?—"

"To make you happy?" Laurence suggested dryly. "How terribly inconvenient that would be."

"The dinner party will be intimate," Percival continued, ignoring Cecil's thunderous expression. "Just family. Though I must say, your wife seemed rather eager for the opportunity to spend an evening in your company. You've been spending an extraordinary amount of time away from home lately."

"Some matters require attention," Cecil deflected, but the words rang hollow even to his own ears.

Laurence, never one for subtlety, cut directly to the heart of the matter. "You're running from your wife."

Cecil's fingers tightened around his glass. "I'm not running. I'm maintaining necessary distance."

"Distance?" Laurence's voice dripped with dry contempt. "Is that what we're calling your complete avoidance these days?"

A muscle ticked in Cecil's jaw. The truth clawed at his throat—Elizabeth had done something no other woman had ever managed. She'd seen past his carefully constructed walls, understood the pain he'd hidden for years, and made him want things he'd sworn never to desire again.

"Some boundaries are meant to be maintained," Cecil said finally, his voice rough. "Especially when feelings become...complicated."

Percival leaned forward. "Feelings are rarely simple, my friend. Especially in marriage."

"My parents taught me that feelings can destroy a man," Cecil muttered, the memory of his father's devastating grief surfacing unbidden.

Laurence's expression softened almost imperceptibly. "Not all marriages are the same, Cecil."

The silence that followed Percival's words hung heavy in the air, charged with unspoken truths. Cecil stared into his empty glass, seeing not his reflection but Elizabeth's face—the way she'd looked at him that morning, hope and hurt warring in those expressive green eyes before he'd made some excuse and fled.

"The dinner party begins at seven," Percival said finally, breaking the heavy silence. "Madeleine has instructed me to ensure you arrive promptly. Something about wanting to see if married life has improved your notorious tardiness."

A ghost of a smile touched Cecil's lips despite himself.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The Duke of Greyhall's dining room glittered with candlelight, but Elizabeth found her attention drawn repeatedly to her husband's taut expression. Cecil had barely spoken since their arrival, responding to his sisters' cheerful chatter with nothing more than curt nods. Even now, he seemed distant, his fingers tapping an irregular rhythm against his wineglass.

"You're awfully quiet tonight, brother," Madeleine observed, her hand resting unconsciously on her growing belly. "Surely married life hasn't made you this somber?"

Cecil's fingers stilled on his glass. "Perhaps I simply have nothing of interest to contribute."

"Nonsense," Emily countered, reaching for another slice of roast. "You always have something clever to say. Though I must admit, you've been different since—" She broke off, something flickering across her face. "Well, since Father passed."

Elizabeth watched her husband's jaw tighten, the muscle there jumping beneath his skin. She longed to reach for his hand beneath the table, to offer some comfort, but his rigid posture warned against it.

"Do you remember," Madeleine said, her voice softening with nostalgia, "how Mother used to let us hide in her painting room when Father was cross about some childish mischief? She'd distract him with tea while we giggled behind her easel."

"She was always protecting us," Emily agreed, her eyes misting slightly. "Even from our own foolishness. Remember when Cecil tried to teach himself fencing using her best parasols?"

Elizabeth noticed how Cecil's knuckles whitened around his glass at the mention of his mother. She'd seen that same tension whenever the paintings were mentioned, but now there was something darker in his expression—something that made her chest ache with an emotion she didn't dare name.

"Mother would have loved you, Elizabeth," Madeleine continued, oblivious to her brother's growing discomfort. "She always said Cecil needed someone who could match his wit and temper his worst impulses. Cecil, don't you think?—"

"Enough." The word cracked through the room like a whip. Cecil stood abruptly, his chair scraping against the floor. "Elizabeth, we're leaving."

"But we haven't even had dessert," Emily protested. "And you haven't said a word about?—"

"I said enough." Cecil's voice dropped dangerously low. He turned to Percival, who had been watching the exchange with shrewd eyes. "My apologies, but we must take our leave. Elizabeth?"

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She rose quickly, not wanting to cause more of a scene. But as Cecil practically dragged her from the dining room, she caught a glimpse of his sisters' bewildered expressions and felt her heart twist. Whatever demons haunted her husband, they clearly had deep roots in his family's past.

The carriage ride home was silent save for the clatter of hooves and the occasional creak of wheels. Cecil stared out the window, his profile harsh in the intermittent lamplight, while Elizabeth's mind raced with questions she wasn't sure she dared to voice.

The moment they arrived at Stonefield Manor, Cecil strode from the carriage without offering Elizabeth his hand—a small slight that spoke volumes. She watched him disappear inside, his long legs carrying him swiftly toward the stairs that led to his private chambers.

Her sensible side urged her to retire to her own room, to give him space to wrestle whatever demons had emerged during dinner. But something stronger—something that felt dangerously like love—made her gather her skirts and follow.

"Cecil," she called, catching up to him in the darkened corridor. "Wait."

He paused, his hand on his bedchamber door. "Go to bed, Elizabeth."

"No." The word emerged stronger than she'd intended, echoing slightly in the empty hallway. "Not until you tell me what's wrong."

He turned then, and the raw pain in his eyes made her breath catch. "Some truths are

better left buried."

"Like the truth about your mother's paintings?" She took a step closer, emboldened when he didn't retreat. "About why you can barely look at them, yet can't seem to part with them either?"

"Elizabeth." Her name was a warning on his lips. "Don't."

But she was already moving forward, close enough now to catch the scent of brandy on his breath. "Your sisters clearly adored her. Yet whenever she's mentioned, you look as if you're being slowly tortured. Why?"

"Because they didn't know her!" The words exploded from him with such force that Elizabeth actually stumbled back. Cecil caught her arm, steadying her even in his anger. His fingers burned through the silk of her gown. "They didn't see—" He broke off, his breath harsh in the silence.

"What didn't they see?" Elizabeth whispered, laying her free hand against his chest. She could feel his heart thundering beneath her palm. "Tell me, Cecil. Please."

He stared down at her for a long moment, something desperate and wild in his gaze. Then, without warning, he yanked open his chamber door and pulled her inside.

Elizabeth barely had time to register that she was in her husband's bedroom—a place she'd never been permitted to enter—before he released her and began to pace like a caged animal.

"I was eighteen," he said finally, his voice rough. "Young enough to still believe in perfect things. Perfect families. Perfect love." He gave a bitter laugh that made Elizabeth's chest ache. "I found her in the garden with him. Some nobleman whose name I never learned. They were..." He swallowed hard. "Well, let's just say their

embrace wasn't motherly."

Elizabeth watched as Cecil poured himself a generous measure of brandy, his movements sharp with suppressed emotion. "I told myself I must have misunderstood," he continued, staring into the amber liquid. "That perhaps I was seeing things that weren't there. After all, she was the perfect countess, the perfect mother. How could she possibly—" He broke off, downing half his glass in one swallow.

"But you knew," Elizabeth said softly.

"I knew." His laugh held no humor. "Though I tried desperately to forget. Even after her death, I kept telling myself it had been nothing. An aberration. A moment of weakness." He set down his glass with more force than necessary. "Until I found the letters."

Elizabeth's breath caught. "Letters?"

"Hidden in her painting room. Dozens of letters, spanning years," Cecil said, his voice raw with old pain. "Declarations of love. Secret meetings arranged in code so obvious a child could have broken it."

He turned away, unable to meet Elizabeth's eyes. "At first, I didn't know what to do. I was young, scared. I thought if I kept them hidden, protected everyone from the truth..."

"How long did you keep them hidden?" Elizabeth asked softly.

Cecil's laugh was bitter. "Years. I told myself I was protecting my sisters. Protecting my father from the truth about the woman he worshipped." His fingers clenched. "But when he finally found them in my room, it destroyed him. He was sick within

months. The physician called it a fever, but I knew. The truth killed him as surely as any illness."

"You were trying to protect your family," Elizabeth said gently. "A boy trying to shield those he loved from a painful truth."

"Was I protecting them?" His voice dropped, filled with self-loathing. "Or was I just a coward, carrying this secret that ate away at me?"

"The truth," Elizabeth whispered, finally understanding. "The truth about a woman he'd loved without reservation."

"I should have burned them the moment I found them. Should have?—"

But Elizabeth was already closing the distance between them, her hands coming up to frame his face. "Listen to me," she said fiercely. "You were eighteen years old, carrying a burden no child should bear. You tried to protect everyone you loved, even if it meant suffering alone."

"Elizabeth—" His voice was hoarse, his hands coming up to circle her wrists as if to pull away.

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"No." She held his gaze, willing him to believe her. "Your father's death was not your fault. Your mother's choices were not your fault. You were just a boy who loved his family too much to break their hearts."

Something broke in Cecil's expression then—some wall he'd built around his pain crumbling at her words. Before she could react, his mouth was on hers, desperate and demanding.

The kiss was different from their previous encounters—rawer, more desperate. Cecil kissed her like a drowning man seeking air, his hands tangling in her hair as pins scattered to the floor. Elizabeth melted into him, offering the comfort he seemed to desperately need.

"I should stop," he breathed against her mouth, even as his hands tightened on her waist. "I've already said too much, revealed too much?—"

"No." Elizabeth pulled back just enough to meet his gaze. In the flickering candlelight, she could see the vulnerability beneath his usual mask of control. "No more hiding, Cecil. No more pushing me away."

His thumb traced the line of her scar with exquisite gentleness. "You deserve better than a man haunted by ghosts."

"I deserve the truth," she whispered, turning her face to press a kiss to his palm. "And you've given me that tonight."

A shudder went through his powerful frame. "Elizabeth." Her name was both warning

and plea. "If you stay, I won't be able to?—"

"Then don't." She reached up to trace his jaw, feeling the tension there. "Let me in, Cecil. Let me help you forget, just for tonight."

His control snapped. The next kiss was searing, stealing her breath as he backed her toward his massive bed. Her hands found his shoulders, feeling the coiled strength beneath his evening coat. When her legs hit the mattress, she pulled him down with her, needing to feel his weight, his solidity.

"You trust me too much," he muttered against her throat, his hands working at the fastenings of her gown. "After everything I just told you about betrayal?—"

"I trust you," she cut him off, arching as his lips found a sensitive spot behind her ear, "because you've proven worthy of that trust. Because you sacrificed your own happiness to protect those you loved."

He stilled above her, his eyes searching her face in the dim light. What he saw there must have convinced him, because his next kiss was achingly tender. His hands, when they returned to her gown, moved with reverent care.

Elizabeth's own fingers weren't idle, working at his cravat, his waistcoat, needing to feel his skin against hers. Each newly revealed inch of him made her breath catch—the strong column of his throat, the broad plane of his chest, the ridges of muscle that spoke of hours spent in physical pursuits.

"My beautiful wife," he breathed, finally freeing her from her gown. His eyes darkened as he took in the sight of her in nothing but her thin shift. "So perfect. So—" He broke off as her hands found the buttons of his trousers. "Elizabeth, wait. You should know—I won't risk getting you with child. Not when you've made your feelings clear on the matter."

Elizabeth's heart swelled at his consideration, even in this moment of passion. "I trust you," she whispered again, the words carrying more weight than before.

Cecil groaned, capturing her mouth in another searing kiss as his hands skimmed down her sides. The thin fabric of her shift did nothing to dull the heat of his touch. When his fingers found the sensitive spot behind her knee that he'd discovered during their dance lessons, she gasped against his lips.

"You're so responsive," he murmured, his voice rough with desire. "Every touch, every kiss...do you know what it does to me, seeing you like this?"

Elizabeth could only whimper in response as his mouth traced the line of her scar—that mark she'd spent years hiding, which he seemed to worship. His tongue flicked against her pulse point, making her arch beneath him.

"Cecil, please..." She wasn't even sure what she was begging for, only that she needed more.

"Shh," he soothed, though his own breathing was uneven. "Let me take care of you, love."

Elizabeth's breath caught as Cecil drew closer, his dark blue eyes searching her face with an intensity that made her heart race. In that moment, she saw not the earl, not the rake, but a man haunted by a burden too heavy for any child to carry alone. "Elizabeth," he breathed her name like a prayer, his fingers ghosting along her cheek. "Tell me to stop. Tell me this isn't what you want."

But Elizabeth found herself leaning into his touch, drawn by some magnetic force she couldn't resist. "I want..." she whispered, her voice trembling slightly. "I want you to let me in. To trust me."

Something shifted in Cecil's expression—a crack in his carefully constructed walls. His thumb traced the line of her scar with exquisite gentleness before sliding into her hair. "You don't know what you're asking for," he murmured, even as he drew her closer.

"Then show me," Elizabeth challenged softly, tilting her face up to his.

The first brush of his lips against hers was achingly tender—so different from the passionate kisses they'd shared before. This felt like surrender, like trust. Elizabeth's hands came up to grip his shoulders, steadying herself as waves of sensation washed over her.

Cecil kissed her as if memorizing every detail—the soft gasp she made when his teeth grazed her lower lip, the way she melted against him when his tongue traced the seam of her mouth. His other hand settled at her waist, pulling her flush against his body until she could feel the thundering of his heart matching her own frantic pulse.

When he finally drew back, his breathing ragged, Elizabeth saw raw need warring with restraint in his darkened gaze. She knew he was giving her one last chance to retreat, to maintain the careful distance between them.

Instead, she reached up to trace his jaw, feeling the tension there. "No more hiding, Cecil," she whispered. "No more pushing me away."

A shudder went through Cecil's powerful frame at her words. His control snapped, and his next kiss was searing—stealing her breath as he backed her toward his massive bed. Elizabeth's hands found his shoulders, feeling the coiled strength beneath his evening coat. When her legs hit the mattress, she pulled him down with her, needing to feel his weight, his solidity.

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"You shouldn't trust me so easily," Cecil murmured, his fingers hovering just above the fastenings of her gown. A shadow of uncertainty crossed his face. "After what I've just revealed about my family's past..."

Elizabeth reached up, her hand catching his. "Trust isn't given because someone is perfect," she said softly. "It's given to those brave enough to be vulnerable."

Her words seemed to shatter something within him. For a moment, raw emotion flickered in his eyes—pain, hope, vulnerability—before he gathered her close. His next kiss was different from any before: not demanding, not teasing, but achingly sincere. Elizabeth's own fingers weren't idle, working at his cravat, his waistcoat, needing to feel his skin against hers. Each newly revealed inch of him made her breath catch—the strong column of his throat, the broad plane of his chest, the ridges of muscle that spoke of hours spent in physical pursuits.

"My beautiful wife," he breathed, finally freeing her from her gown. His eyes darkened as he took in the sight of her in nothing but her thin shift. "So perfect. So—" He broke off as her hands found the buttons of his trousers.

Cecil's hand closed around her wrist, stopping her movement. His breath came ragged, tension evident in every line of his body. "Wait," he said, his voice a low, urgent rasp. "We cannot—I will not compromise you completely."

Elizabeth met his gaze, seeing the war of desire and restraint in his eyes. "I'm not some fragile creature to be protected," she whispered, her fingers trailing along his jaw. "I know exactly what I want."

For a moment, something dangerous flickered between them—a shared understanding that went far beyond the physical moment. Cecil's grip on her wrist softened, becoming a caress that spoke of something deeper than mere passion.

"Are you certain?" he asked, and the question held the weight of everything unspoken between them.

Her answer was a simple, breathless "Yes" that changed everything.

Cecil gathered her closer, his lips exploring new paths across her skin. Each touch held reverence, as if he was mapping territory both familiar and thrillingly new. When his mouth found the sensitive hollow of her throat, Elizabeth's fingers tightened in his hair.

"You're a miracle," he whispered against her skin. "Every time I touch you, it feels like the first time all over again." His hands traced patterns down her sides, finding new places that made her gasp and tremble.

Elizabeth arched into his touch, overcome by the tenderness in his exploration. This wasn't like their earlier passionate encounters—this was slower, deeper somehow. Each caress felt like a confession, each kiss a promise.

"Cecil," she breathed, her voice catching as his hands found particularly sensitive spots. Her body remembered his touch, yet somehow each new caress felt like a revelation.

"I know, my love," he murmured, his own voice rough with emotion. "Let me worship you properly. Let me show you exactly how precious you are to me."

His hands, having lingered at her waist, began to explore higher, brushing the sides of her breasts through her shift. Elizabeth's breath hitched at the novel sensation. She'd

never been touched like this—with such reverence and care.

"You're exquisite," Cecil whispered against her skin, his fingers tracing patterns that made her shiver. "Every inch of you deserves to be worshipped."

His mouth followed the path of his hands, pressing open-mouthed kisses along her collarbone before moving lower. Through the thin fabric of her shift, she felt the heat of his breath against her breast, making her gasp and clutch at his shoulders.

Cecil's lips brushed against her ear, his voice a low, dangerous whisper. "Shall I show you exactly how much pleasure your body is capable of feeling?"

She inhaled sharply, her breath catching. "You're insufferable," she managed, even as her body betrayed her growing desire.

"Insufferable? Or simply honest? I could make you cry out my name before you even realize what's happening."

Elizabeth's cheeks burned. "You talk far too much."

"Would you prefer I demonstrate instead?" His smile was pure sin. "Because I assure you, I'm very good at proving my point." "Don't stop," Elizabeth breathed, her fingers threading through his dark hair. The sensation of his mouth through her shift was exquisite torture, making her arch into his touch.

Cecil's eyes darkened. "Gladly."

Cecil's hands slid lower, bunching her shift around her thighs. His touch was reverent as he explored the newly exposed skin, making Elizabeth tremble with anticipation. When his fingers brushed her inner thigh, she gasped, her body jerking at the intimate contact.

"Now, spread those pretty thighs and let me make you feel good," he whispered against her skin, his other hand still tracing soothing patterns along her hip. "Let me show you how to come undone."

Elizabeth nodded shakily, overwhelmed by sensation but trusting him completely. She felt his smile against her skin before his fingers slid higher, finding her most intimate place.

The first touch made her gasp, her back arching off the bed. . Cecil's mouth returned to her neck, alternating between kisses and gentle nips as his fingers explored with maddening slowness.

"That's it," he murmured encouragingly as she writhed beneath his touch. "Let go for me, love. Let me see you come undone."

His skilled fingers found a particularly sensitive spot that made Elizabeth cry out, her hand flying to cover her mouth. Cecil caught her wrist gently, pulling it away.

"No," he said softly. "I want to hear you. Every gasp, every moan. You're beautiful like this, lost in pleasure."

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Cecil's lips traced a gentle path along Elizabeth's scar, his touch filled with reverence rather than revulsion. The tenderness of his gesture brought tears to her eyes - here was a man who saw her marks as beautiful rather than flawed.

"I should have told you sooner," he murmured against her skin. "How brave you are. How strong. Every mark, every imperfection only makes you more precious to me."

Elizabeth's heart swelled at his words, her hands coming up to frame his face. "And you," she whispered, "are far braver than you know."

His eyes met hers, vulnerability warring with something deeper. She saw the scared boy who'd discovered his mother's betrayal, the young man who'd sacrificed his own happiness to shield his family from pain.

"Elizabeth," he breathed her name like a prayer. "You make me want to be worthy of your trust. Of your heart."

"You already are," she assured him, pulling him down for a tender kiss. His hands cradled her face as if she were something infinitely precious.

When they finally parted, both breathing heavily, Elizabeth saw raw emotion in his gaze. Tonight had changed something between them—broken down walls they'd both built around their hearts.

The intensity in Cecil's gaze made Elizabeth's breath catch. Without breaking eye contact, his hand resumed its intimate exploration, finding that sensitive bundle of nerves that made her gasp. His skilled fingers moved in slow circles, building her

pleasure with deliberate care.

"You're so beautiful like this," he murmured, watching her reactions with rapt attention. "So responsive to my touch. Tell me what you feel, love."

Elizabeth could barely form words through the haze of sensation. "I want...I want it so badly," she managed, her voice breathy and uneven. "I feel like I'm on fire, Cecil."

He growled against her neck, increasing the pressure of his touch. "That's right, love. Let yourself feel it. No one can see you here but me. And I love watching you come."

The combination of his words and touches pushed Elizabeth closer to the edge. Her hands clutched at his shoulders, needing something to anchor her as waves of pleasure threatened to overwhelm her.

"Cecil," she gasped, her head falling back against the pillows. "I...I don't know if I can?—"

"You can," he assured her softly, his free hand stroking her hair. "Trust me, Elizabeth. Let go. I've got you."

His mouth found her breast through her shift just as his fingers pressed more firmly.

Then he carefully positioned his cock against her trembling thighs, letting her feel the length of him but ensuring he wouldn't go any further. Elizabeth moaned into his mouth, her arms wrapping around his shoulders as their kisses grew more fervent.

"Cecil," she breathed, her voice shaky and full of desire. "I...I want to feel you, too."

"No more than this," he murmured, his voice rough with restraint. "Though I know exactly how to please you by now."

He rocked his hips gently against her, the movement creating a delicious friction that made her moan. With careful precision, he kept his cock pressed against her thighs, never letting it slip inside her. His hand continued to work between her legs, his fingers skilled and sure as they brought her closer and closer to the edge.

Elizabeth's body arched beneath him, her head falling back against the pillows. Her fingers dug into his shoulders, and he could feel the tension building in her muscles. With a final, precise touch, he sent her over the edge, her cry of pleasure vibrating through them both.

Cecil held her tightly as she shuddered and trembled in his arms, her release incredibly sweet and fulfilling. He kissed her gently, feeling her breath slowly steadying.

"That was...incredible," she whispered, her eyes fluttering open to meet his gaze.

He smiled, his heart full of love and tenderness. "You deserve every bit of pleasure, Elizabeth. And I'm honored to have been the one to give it to you."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The morning light filtered through Cecil's chamber windows, rousing him from a fitful sleep. His body tensed as memories of the previous night flooded back—Elizabeth's soft sighs, the way she'd trembled beneath his touch, her complete trust in him even after learning his darkest secrets.

Trust. The word made his chest constrict painfully. He'd revealed too much, let her slip past defenses built over years of guarding his heart. Worse still, when she'd offered herself to him, he'd put her wishes above his own needs. The heir he desperately required to secure his lineage—he'd willingly forgone that chance because she didn't want children.

Cecil ran a hand through his disheveled hair, cursing under his breath. This wasn't supposed to happen. Their arrangement had been simple: three months, an heir, then freedom for them both. Instead, he found himself lying awake at night imagining a future with her—watching her manage his household with quiet competence, seeing her confidence bloom as she stepped into her role as countess, perhaps even...

No. He cut off that dangerous line of thought. He couldn't afford such weakness, not after witnessing how love had destroyed his father. The Earl of Stonefield had worshipped the ground his wife walked on, only to have his heart shattered by her betrayal. Cecil had sworn he'd never make the same mistake.

Yet here he was, breaking his own rules for a woman who'd somehow made him forget every hard-learned lesson about keeping his heart guarded. A woman who'd seen his vulnerability and offered comfort rather than judgment. A woman who made him want to be worthy of the trust she so freely gave.

"Damn it all," he muttered, throwing back the covers and rising to pace the room. He needed to end this before it went any further. Before he completely lost the ability to walk away.

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The sound of servants moving in the corridor reminded him that Elizabeth would be expecting to join him for breakfast. His chest tightened at the thought of facing her, of seeing the soft understanding in her eyes that made him want to confess every secret, every fear he'd ever harbored.

No. Better to crush this dangerous attachment now.

Elizabeth stood before her mirror, her fingers trembling as she adjusted her morning dress. Had it truly been just hours ago that Cecil had held her, touched her with such tenderness? Her body still hummed with the memory of his caresses, of the way he'd worshipped every inch of her—even the scar she'd spent years hiding.

More precious than his physical touch had been the trust he'd shown in revealing his past. She'd seen the wounded boy beneath the earl's polished facade, understood finally what drove him to keep everyone at arm's length. Her heart ached remembering the raw pain in his voice as he'd spoken of his mother's betrayal, of his father's devastating discovery.

"He needs time," she whispered to her reflection, smoothing nonexistent wrinkles from her skirts. After years of guarding such painful secrets, it must have shaken him to share them. But surely last night had changed things between them. The way he'd held her afterward, pressing tender kisses to her temple—that hadn't been mere physical satisfaction.

Her cheeks warmed remembering the intensity of their shared pleasure. She'd never imagined intimacy could feel like that—not just the physical sensations, but the profound emotional connection. For the first time in her life, she'd felt truly seen,

truly cherished.

Hope bloomed in her chest as she made her way to the breakfast room. Perhaps now Cecil would see what she'd begun to realize—that their "arrangement" had become something far deeper. That the walls they'd both built around their hearts had crumbled in the face of growing affection.

The words "I love you" trembled on her lips, ready to be spoken. After years of being overlooked, of believing herself unworthy of such profound emotion, she'd finally found someone who saw past her scars to the woman beneath.

She paused outside the breakfast room, gathering her courage. Through the partially open door, she could see Cecil already seated at the table, his broad shoulders tense as he stared unseeing at the morning paper.

"Good morning," she said softly, stepping into the room. Her heart fluttered as she waited for him to look up, to give her that devastating smile that made her knees weak.

But the man who raised his head was a stranger—his face a cold mask she hadn't seen since their first days of marriage.

"My lord," Elizabeth faltered, thrown by the glacial look in his eyes. Gone was the tender vulnerability of last night, replaced by the notorious rake's practiced indifference.

"Lady Stonefield." His formal address hit her like a physical blow. "Please, join me."

Elizabeth sank into her usual chair, her breakfast appetite evaporating as tension filled the air between them. The casual intimacy they'd developed over the past months had vanished, leaving only frigid politeness in its wake.

"I trust you slept well?" she ventured, desperately seeking some crack in his icy facade. Surely last night hadn't been a dream—the way he'd held her, whispered endearments against her skin, trusted her with his deepest wounds.

"Well enough." Cecil didn't look up from his paper, his voice carrying that dangerous edge she'd come to recognize as a warning. "Though I've been considering our arrangement."

Elizabeth's heart stuttered. "Our arrangement?"

"Yes." He finally met her gaze, his blue eyes cold as a winter sea. "It seems pointless to continue this charade for the remaining days. You've made your position clear regarding children, and I have no desire to waste either of our time further."

The words struck her like arrows, each one finding its mark with devastating precision. "I don't understand," she whispered, her voice trembling. "Last night?—"

"Was a pleasant diversion," he cut in smoothly. "But let's not pretend it was anything more. We had an agreement: three months, an heir, then freedom. Since you've no intention of fulfilling your part of the bargain, I see no reason to delay my departure."

Elizabeth felt the blood drain from her face. How could he dismiss their intimacy so casually? The secrets they'd shared, the trust they'd built? "Cecil, please?—"

"My lord," he corrected sharply. "Let's maintain proper distance, shall we?"

She watched in growing desperation as he rose from the table, every movement controlled and deliberate. Before he could reach the door, words burst from her lips: "Would it make a difference?"

He paused, his back still to her. "I beg your pardon?"

"If I agreed to give you an heir," she forced out past the lump in her throat. "Would you stay?"

In the heartbeat of silence that followed her desperate question, Elizabeth saw Cecil's shoulders tense. For a brief moment, something flickered across his face—pain? regret?—before his features smoothed back into that impenetrable mask.

"No," he said finally, his voice devoid of emotion. "I find I'm no longer interested in an heir. Or in continuing this marriage beyond our agreed-upon terms."

The casual cruelty of his words stole her breath. This was worse than any rejection she'd faced before—to be dismissed so completely by a man who'd held her with such tenderness merehours ago. Who'd whispered that she was precious, perfect, worthy of worship.

"You're lying," she challenged, rising on shaky legs. "Last night, you said?—"

"I said many things," he cut in smoothly. "As one often does in the heat of passion. Surely you don't expect a notorious rake to mean every pretty word whispered in the dark?"

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Elizabeth flinched as if he'd struck her. The calculated mention of his reputation—a reminder of all the women he'd presumably seduced and abandoned—felt like salt in an open wound.

"How dare you," she whispered, anger finally breaking through her shock. "How dare you make me trust you, make me believe—" She broke off, unwilling to reveal just how thoroughly he'd conquered her defenses.

"Believe what, my lady?" His smile held no warmth. "That a scarred spinster had somehow reformed London's most notorious libertine? That a few months of convenient marriage had transformed me into someone worthy of your precious trust?"

"Stop it." Her voice cracked on the words. "This isn't you. The man who held me last night, who shared his pain, his secrets?—"

"Was a fool," Cecil snapped, his composure finally cracking. "A weak fool who forgot himself for a moment. But rest assured, I won't make that mistake again."

Tears burned behind her eyes, but Elizabeth refused to let them fall. She would not give him the satisfaction of seeing how deeply his words wounded her.

"Very well," she said, proud that her voice remained steady. "If you wish to end our arrangement early, I won't stop you. But at least have the courage to tell me the truth—was any of it real? Or was I simply another conquest to add to your collection?"

Something dangerous flashed in Cecil's eyes, and for a moment she glimpsed the raw pain beneath his cold facade. He took a step toward her, then seemed to catch himself, his hands clenching at his sides.

"What difference does it make?" he asked, his voice rough. "In a few days, we'll both be free of this farce. You can return to your quiet life, and I..." He gave a harsh laugh. "Well, I'm sure the ton will be delighted to have their favorite rake back in circulation."

"Is that what you want?" Elizabeth challenged, moving closer despite her better judgment. "To return to your empty pursuits? Your meaningless affairs? We both know that's not who you truly are."

"Do we?" His smile was razor-sharp. "Perhaps you've simply seen what you wanted to see. A wounded soul in need of healing. A man worth saving." He leaned closer, his breath fanning her cheek. "But I warned you from the start, Elizabeth. I will ruin you."

"You already have," she whispered, finally letting him see the depth of her pain. "Not with scandal or social ruin, but by making me believe in something more. By making me trust you."

For a heartbeat, Cecil's mask slipped completely. She saw anguish in his eyes, a yearning that matched her own. His hand lifted as if to touch her face, then dropped back to his side.

"Trust is a dangerous thing," he said finally, his voice barely audible. "I thought I'd learned that lesson long ago. But you..." He shook his head, taking a deliberate step back. "It seems we both have painful lessons to learn."

Elizabeth watched him retreat, her heart cracking with each step he took away from

her. All her life, she'd guarded herself against this very pain—the agony of opening her heart only to have it shattered. "You don't have to do this," she said softly. "Whatever demons you're fighting, whatever fears drive you to push me away—we could face them together."

Cecil's back went rigid. "There is no 'together,' Elizabeth. There never was. We made a business arrangement, nothing more."

"A business arrangement?" She gave a hollow laugh. "Is that what you tell yourself to justify last night? To excuse the intimacy we shared?"

"Intimacy?" His voice dripped with calculated disdain as he turned back to face her. "Come now, surely you're not so naive. Men of my...reputation are quite skilled at creating the illusion of connection. It makes the seduction so much sweeter."

"I don't believe you," Elizabeth said, her voice wavering between anger and hurt. "Something inside me—call it intuition, call it a sixth sense—knows you're lying."

Cecil turned, his expression deliberately neutral. "What you choose to believe is entirely your prerogative," he said flatly. "I'm simply stating facts."

"Facts?" She gave a bitter laugh. "Those weren't facts. Those were walls. Defenses."

"And what of it?" He shrugged, almost casually. "I never promised you anything more than what we agreed upon. Three months. An arrangement."

"An arrangement doesn't explain the way you looked at me," Elizabeth pressed. "The secrets you shared. The way you?—"

"Careful," Cecil interrupted, a warning edge creeping into his voice. "You're dangerously close to believing something that doesn't exist."

"And what is that?"

"That I'm capable of more than a transaction." His eyes were cold, challenging.

"Believe what you want, Elizabeth. I truly couldn't care less."

"Liar," she whispered, her hand lifting to touch his face.

Cecil caught her wrist before she could make contact.

He had slipped past every defense and made her believe she was worthy of love despite her scars.

He walked away without saying anything else.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The summer breeze drifted through the open windows of Trowbridge Manor's dining room, carrying with it the faint scent of roses from the garden. Elizabeth barely noticed either the warmth or the fragrance, her attention fixed on the untouched roasted pheasant before her. She pushed a morsel around her plate with the same listless energy that had plagued her for days—ever since Cecil had...

No. She wouldn't think of him now.

"You've hardly touched your food," Harriet observed quietly from across the table. Her sister's worried gaze had been following Elizabeth all morning, noting every sigh and distracted glance. "Cook prepared the pheasant specially, knowing it's your favorite."

"Did she?" Elizabeth managed a wan smile. "How thoughtful. The journey from Stonefield must have tired me more than I realized."

They both knew it wasn't true. She'd arrived two days ago, and sleep had been as elusive as her peace of mind. The dark circles beneath her eyes told that tale clearly enough.

"Perhaps some tea might help restore your appetite," Harriet suggested, already half-rising to ring for the servant.

"No, thank you." Elizabeth's fingers tightened around her fork. "I'm quite well, truly."

Their father sat at the head of the table, seemingly engrossed in his own meal, but Elizabeth could feel his disapproving glances. The silence stretched between them, broken only by the gentle clink of silverware against china and the distant sound of birdsong from the garden.

"The weather has been remarkably fine," Harriet ventured, her tone deliberately bright. "Perhaps we could walk in the garden after luncheon? The roses are in full bloom, and?—"

"When can we expect news of an heir?"

Luke's question cut through the air like a knife, causing both sisters to start. Elizabeth's fork clattered against her plate, the sound sharp and jarring in the sudden silence.

"Father, I—" Elizabeth began, but her voice failed her.

"It's been three months." He dabbed at his mouth with a napkin, his movements precise and controlled. Each tap of the linen against his lips seemed to punctuate his words. "Surely the earl has... attended to his duties by now."

"Father!" Harriet's cheeks flushed pink. "That's hardly appropriate conversation for the dining table."

"When else should we discuss it?" Luke's stern gaze fixed on his eldest daughter. "The ton will talk if there's no announcement soon. Lady Weatherby mentioned just yesterday that she'd heard nothing of your...condition."

"Lady Weatherby," Elizabeth said stiffly, pushing her plate away, "would do better to mind her own affairs."

"Your condition is her affair." Luke's voice hardened. "It's the affair of every person of consequence in London. Or have you forgotten how this marriage came about?"

Elizabeth's fingers instinctively rose to her neck, tracing the raised line of her scar. How could she forget? The whispers, the stares, the way potential suitors' eyes would drift to her marred skin before quickly looking away. Until Cecil...

"This marriage secured our family's position," Luke continued, either not noticing or choosing to ignore his daughter's distress. "Your sister's indiscretion was forgotten because of it. The least you could do is ensure its success."

From the corner of her eye, Elizabeth saw Harriet flinch at their father's words and felt a familiar surge of protectiveness. "Harriet has nothing to do with this," she said, her voice quiet but firm. "She's home now, and the scandal has passed."

"Thanks to your marriage to the earl." Luke's eyes narrowed. "A marriage that needs securing with an heir."

"Perhaps we could discuss something else," Harriet pleaded, reaching across the table to touch Elizabeth's hand. The contact was brief but warm, a reminder of countless childhood comforts exchanged in moments of distress. "Elizabeth looks pale. She should rest after her journey."

"Rest?" Luke scoffed, his knife scraping against his plate with unnecessary force. "She's had nothing but rest since she arrived. What she needs is to attend to her responsibilities."

"And what responsibilities would those be, Father?" Elizabeth's voice was barely above a whisper, but there was steel beneath the softness. "To provide an heir? To secure the family name? To make up for the shame of my—" Her fingers brushed her scar again.

"Don't take that tone with me, Elizabeth." Luke set down his cutlery with deliberate care. "You know very well what's expected of you. The ton will talk if there's no announcement soon. You know how they love to gossip, especially about..." His eyes flickered to her scar before darting away.

A servant entered with a fresh decanter of wine, and the conversation paused. Elizabeth used the moment to gather her composure, though her hands trembled slightly as she reached for her water glass.

"More wine, Father?" she offered, desperate to change the subject.

"Don't attempt to distract me," Luke warned. "This matter cannot be ignored. When I saw the earl at his club last week, he seemed...distracted."

Elizabeth's heart stuttered at the mention of Cecil. "You saw him?"

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"Indeed." Luke's voice took on an edge. "He was rather absorbed in his cards. Barely acknowledged me when I greeted him. I trust you haven't given him cause for concern?"

"Father, please," Harriet interjected again. "Can't you see Elizabeth isn't well?"

"She'll be less well if she fails in her duties." Luke reached for the wine himself, pouring a generous measure. "Come now, Elizabeth. Surely you understand the importance of this. The earl?—"

"Cecil is gone."

The words burst from her like water through a broken dam, hanging in the suddenly still air of the dining room. The servant who had been clearing the dishes froze mid-reach, then quietly retreated from the room at Luke's sharp glance. Harriet's face had gone pale, while their father sat unnaturally still, his expression darkening like storm clouds gathering on the horizon.

"What do you mean, gone?" Luke's voice was deadly quiet.

Elizabeth's hands trembled in her lap, but she forced them still. Years of practice at maintaining composure in the face of society's scrutiny served her well now. "He left. A week ago."

"Left?" The wine glass hit the table with enough force to make the liquid slosh dangerously close to the rim. "What did you do?"

"I didn't?—"

"You must have done something!" His voice rose with each word. "No man abandons his wife without cause. Did you refuse him? Drive him away with your stubborn pride?"

Something inside Elizabeth snapped. She rose from her chair, her napkin falling forgotten to the floor. The movement was sharp, decisive—so unlike her usual careful grace that Harriet gasped.

"Is that what you truly think of me?" Her voice trembled with suppressed emotion. "That I would deliberately sabotage my own marriage?"

"What else am I to think?" Luke stalked to the window, then whirled back to face her. His reflection fractured across the glass panes behind him, multiplying his fury. "The earl is a man of means and position. He married you despite that hideous scar, and this is how you repay his charity? By driving him away with your stubbornness? You are saying he's gone?"

"Yes, he's gone!" Elizabeth's voice cracked. Her chest felt too tight, each breath a struggle. The weight of the past week, of all the sleepless nights and tearful dawns, pressed down upon her. "Just like you were gone when Mother needed you most. When she lay in her sickbed, begging for a kind word, for any sign that you still cared!"

Luke recoiled as if she'd struck him. "How dare you?—"

"How dare I? How dare you!" The words poured out of her like a flood breaking through a dam. "You want to know why I never wanted children? Because I watched you treat Mother like she was nothing more than a vessel for an heir. I watched you ignore her, belittle her, break her spirit piece by piece until there was nothing left!"

"Elizabeth!" Luke's face had gone purple with rage. "You forget yourself?—"

"No, Father. For once in my life, I remember exactly who I am." She pressed her palms flat against the table to stop their trembling. "I am my mother's daughter. And I promised myself I would never?—"

"Enough!" Luke's fist crashed down on the table, making the crystal glasses jump and chime. "You speak of things you don't understand. Your mother?—"

"Was the kindest, most loving person I've ever known," Elizabeth cut in, her voice thick with unshed tears. "And you couldn't even give her the courtesy of your presence in her final days."

Harriet had risen too, hovering uncertainly between them. "Please, both of you?—"

"Stay out of this, Harriet," Luke snapped. "Your sister seems to have forgotten that it was her marriage to the earl that saved you from ruin. Or have you forgotten that scandal as well, Elizabeth?"

"I haven't forgotten anything," Elizabeth said quietly. "I remember every slight, every cruel word, every time you made Mother cry. And now you stand there, demanding an heir, just as you demanded one from her until it killed her."

The silence that followed was deafening. Even the birds outside seemed to have fallen quiet, as if holding their breath along with the occupants of the room. Luke stood rigid, his face a mask of fury and something else—something that might have been shame, if Elizabeth didn't know better.

"You have no idea what being a parent means," Luke said, his voice dangerously low. The morning sunlight caught the silver at his temples, making him look older, more bitter than ever. "The sacrifices required?—"

"Sacrifices?" Elizabeth's laugh was hollow. "Like sacrificing your wife's happiness for your pride? Or sacrificing your daughter's confidence for your obsession with a male heir?" She met his gaze steadily, refusing to back down. "No, Father. I understand sacrifice all too well. I watched Mother sacrifice everything for you, piece by piece, until there was nothing left of her to give."

For a moment, her father seemed to age before her eyes, his shoulders sagging under the weight of her words. Then his jaw tightened, and he straightened to his full height. "I see your time with the earl has made you forget your place," he said coldly. "Perhaps when he returns, he'll remind you of it."

"He's not coming back," Elizabeth whispered, all the fight suddenly draining from her. She sank back into her chair, her legs no longer able to support her. "He made that quite clear."

The room felt suffocating now, the afternoon sun that streamed through the windows doing nothing to warm the chill that had settled in her bones. The remains of their lunch lay forgotten on the table, a stark reminder of how quickly everything had shattered.

"Nonsense," Luke scoffed, though something flickered in his eyes—uncertainty, perhaps. "Every man desires an heir. You must have misunderstood?"

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"I understood perfectly well." Elizabeth raised her eyes to meet her father's, and something in her gaze made him fall silent. "He looked me in the eye and told me he was no longer interested. Just as you looked Mother in the eye and told her you had no interest in her beyond the children she could give you."

"Then you must go to him," Luke declared, his voice brooking no argument. He began to pace, his boots clicking against the polished floor. "A wife's place is with her husband. Whatever grievance exists between you?—"

"Father, stop!" Harriet moved to stand between them, her usually gentle demeanor hardening with determination. "Can't you see you're making things worse? Elizabeth needs our support, not your lectures."

Luke's face reddened. "What she needs is to remember her duty. The earl?—"

"The earl made his choice," Elizabeth said quietly, her fingers absently tracing the pattern on the tablecloth. Each loop and swirl of the embroidery reminded her of the way Cecil would trace her scar in their intimate moments, as if memorizing its path. "He told me our time was up. That he no longer desired an heir." The words still burned her throat like bitter wine.

"Nonsense," Luke scoffed again, but his voice held less conviction now. "Every man desires an heir. You must have misunderstood?—"

"I understood perfectly well." Elizabeth raised her eyes to meet her father's, and something in her gaze made him fall silent. "He told me plainly enough. Just as you told Mother her worth lay only in the children she could give you."

"You twist my words," Luke protested, though his complexion had paled considerably. "Your mother and I had an understanding. She knew her duty, her place. We made a good match, a proper match, until—" He faltered, something like regret flickering across his features. "Until she began filling your head with romantic notions about love and choice. Look where that's led us."

"Stop it Father. Mother and you were exactly what I feared Cecil and I would become." Elizabeth's voice cracked. "But he wasn't like you, Father. He was kind, and gentle, and he made me feel..." Her voice caught. "He made me feel beautiful. Even with this." She gestured to her scar.

Harriet reached across the table, squeezing her sister's hand. "Elizabeth..."

"And now he's gone," Elizabeth continued, the words tumbling out like water over stones, "but not because of my face or my pride. He's just... gone."

The silence that followed was deafening. Even the birds outside seemed to have fallen quiet, as if holding their breath along with the occupants of the room.

"Elizabeth." Her father's voice had lost its edge, replaced by something that might have been regret. But Elizabeth had long since stopped looking for signs of tenderness in Luke Cooper's face.

"I should rest," she said, rising from her chair with as much dignity as she could muster. "The journey has tired me after all."

"I'll come with you," Harriet said quickly, shooting their father a warning glance as she followed Elizabeth from the dining room.

They made their way up the familiar stairs in silence, their footsteps muffled by the thick carpet. Elizabeth's old bedroom remained unchanged, a shrine to the life she'd

lived before Cecil. Before everything. The same pale blue wallpaper, the same worn novels lining her shelves, even the same slight creak in the floorboard by the window.

As soon as the door closed behind them, Harriet pulled her sister into a fierce embrace. "Oh, Elizabeth," she whispered, "I'm so sorry. I should have known something was wrong the moment you arrived."

"How could you have known?" Elizabeth managed a weak smile as they parted. "You've had your own troubles to deal with. Though I notice Father seems to have forgiven you rather easily."

Harriet's face fell. "Only because you married the earl in my place. That's the only reason he welcomed me back so quickly." She sank onto the edge of the bed, patting the space beside her. "He keeps saying how fortunate we are that you secured such an advantageous match. As if I didn't cause a scandal by running away. As if you didn't sacrifice everything to protect me."

"It wasn't a sacrifice," Elizabeth said softly, joining her sister. "At least...it didn't feel like one at the time."

"Tell me everything," Harriet urged, taking her hand. "What happened with Cecil?"

So Elizabeth did. She told her sister about the growing warmth between her and Cecil, about the nights in his study playing cards, about the way he'd taught her to dance. She spoke of his gentle teasing and the way he'd made her feel desired for the first time in her life. And finally, she told her about that last night, when he'd opened his heart to her about his mother, when she'd given herself to him completely.

"And then the next morning, he was...different," Elizabeth concluded, twisting her handkerchief between her fingers. "Cold. Distant. As if the man I'd come to know had vanished overnight."

"Men," Harriet muttered darkly. "They're all the same in the end, aren't they? Even the ones who seem different." She squeezed Elizabeth's hand. "You should leave him."

Elizabeth's head snapped up. "Leave him?"

"Why not? He's already left you," Harriet said, her voice taking on the same determined tone she'd had when planning her own escape. "You could file for divorce on grounds of abandonment. Father would be furious, of course, but when isn't he?" Her eyes gleamed. "He forgave me easily enough once you married Cecil. Perhaps he'll forgive this too, in time."

"It's not that simple," Elizabeth whispered, rising to walk to the window. The garden below was in full bloom, roses climbing the trellises just as they had in her childhood. "Father only forgave you because the earl's position and wealth made the scandal disappear. If I leave Cecil..."

"Then we'll weather that storm together," Harriet insisted. "We could go to Bath, or perhaps even Scotland. Somewhere far from London society and their endless gossip. You're the one who taught me to be brave, remember? When I wanted to run away rather than marry him?"

"I love him." The words hung in the air between them, simple and devastating in their truth.

Harriet fell silent, watching as Elizabeth pressed her forehead against the cool glass of the window. "Oh, Elizabeth," she said finally, her voice gentle. "That only makes it worse."

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"Does it?" Elizabeth turned back to face her sister, managing a weak smile. "Sometimes I think it makes it better. At least I know now that I'm capable of it. That someone could love me back, even if only for a little while."

"He doesn't deserve your love," Harriet declared fiercely. "Not if he could walk away so easily. Not after you saved me from having to marry him myself."

But that was just it, wasn't it? Nothing about Cecil's departure had seemed easy. The pain in his eyes when he'd told her their time was up, the way his hands had trembled slightly when he'd turned away from her...

No, whatever had driven him away, Elizabeth was certain it hadn't been easy.

"Perhaps not," she conceded quietly. "But love isn't about deserving, is it? It's about feeling something so profound that it changes you forever." She touched her scar absently, remembering the way Cecil had kissed it that last night. "And I am changed, Harriet. No matter what happens next."

Harriet crossed the room to join her at the window, taking her hand. "Then what will you do?"

Elizabeth squeezed her sister's fingers, drawing strength from the contact. "I don't know," she admitted. "But I can't run away. Not this time." She took a deep breath, straightening her shoulders. "Father may have forgiven you easily because of my marriage, but I have to face whatever comes next. Even if it means facing a life without Cecil."

Somewhere in the house, they could hear their father's study door slam.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

London

The crystal decanter clinked against Cecil's glass for what felt like the hundredth time that evening. Shadows lengthened across his London townhouse's study, but he hadn't bothered to light more than a single lamp. The dimness suited his mood.

"Perhaps you've had enough," Laurence suggested from his position by the window, his stern profile outlined against the fading daylight.

Cecil let out a harsh laugh. "I haven't even started." He raised the glass to his lips, ignoring how his hand trembled slightly. When had he last eaten? The days had begun to blur together since he'd left Stonefield. Since he'd left her.

"You look terrible," Percival observed bluntly, settling into one of the leather chairs across from Cecil's desk. "When was the last time you slept?"

"I sleep," Cecil muttered, though the dark circles under his eyes betrayed the lie.

"In a bed? Or here at your desk?" Laurence turned from the window, his usually cold demeanor showing hints of concern. "This isn't like you, cousin."

Cecil's jaw tightened. No, it wasn't like him at all. The great Earl of Stonefield, reduced to a sleepless, lovesick fool. He'd spent the past week drowning himself in work during the day and whiskey at night, trying to forget the look in Elizabeth's eyes when he'd told her their time was up.

"Your butler mentioned you haven't been taking meals regularly either," Percival

added, exchanging a worried glance with Laurence. "This has to stop, Cecil."

"What would you have me do?" Cecil demanded, slamming his glass down hard enough that amber liquid sloshed over the rim. "Return home? Pretend everything is fine?"

"Yes, actually," Percival said. "Return to your wife. Apologize for whatever foolish thing you've done this time. God knows I've had to do it often enough with Madeleine."

Cecil's fingers tightened around his glass. "This is different."

"How?" Laurence's deep voice carried across the room. "You're clearly miserable without her. And from what Emily tells me, your wife is equally devastated."

"I can't." The words came out rougher than Cecil intended. "I won't become him. I won't let myself—" He cut himself off, reaching for the decanter again.

"Become who?" Percival leaned forward, his expression intent. "Your father?"

Cecil's hand froze halfway to the decanter. "I trusted her," he said quietly. "I told her things I've never told anyone. Made myself vulnerable, just as my father did with my mother. And look what that led to."

"Your wife is not your mother," Percival said firmly. "And you are not your father. The only one destroying himself here is you."

"You don't understand," Cecil growled, pushing away from his desk with enough force to make the decanter wobble. "I've seen what love can do to a man. I watched my father waste away after learning of my mother's betrayal. He was strong once, respected. And in the end..." He swallowed hard, pacing the length of the study. "In

the end, he died of a broken heart."

"So instead, you break your own heart?" Laurence's tone dripped with sarcasm. "A brilliant strategy, cousin."

Percival shot Laurence a warning look before turning back to Cecil. "You're not thinking clearly. When was the last time you were at Stonefield? Your real home, not this..." He gestured at the dark, oppressive study of the London townhouse. "This self-imposed exile?"

"A week." Cecil's voice was barely audible. "Seven days, thirteen hours, and—" He caught himself, running a hand through his disheveled hair. When had he become the type of man who counted the hours since he'd last seen his wife?

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"And in that time, have you once considered that perhaps you're punishing Elizabeth for crimes she hasn't committed?" Percival pressed. "Madeleine tells me your wife is different from any woman she's ever met. That she challenges you, matches your wit, makes you laugh?—"

"Enough!" Cecil's voice cracked like a whip through the room. "I made my decision. I won't risk?—"

"Risk what?" Laurence interrupted, pushing away from the window. "Risk being happy? Risk having a real marriage instead of the cold, empty thing you've condemned yourself to?"

Cecil turned to face his cousin, his eyes blazing. "Risk loving her more than I already do!"

The words echoed in the sudden silence of the study. Percival and Laurence exchanged glances, and for the first time that evening, a hint of hope crossed Percival's features.

"Well," he said quietly, "at least you've finally admitted it."

Cecil sank back into his chair, suddenly feeling every hour of sleep he'd missed this past week. "It doesn't matter," he muttered. "What's done is done."

"It matters entirely," Percival countered, leaning forward. "You love her. And from what I observed at dinner last month, she loves you too. Only a fool would throw that away."

"Then I'm a fool." Cecil reached for his glass again, but Laurence moved faster, snatching it away.

"Enough drowning your sorrows," his cousin said firmly. "You're the Earl of Stonefield. Start acting like it."

A sharp knock at the door interrupted whatever retort Cecil had been about to make. Harrison, entered with the precise efficiency that had served the household for twenty years.

"Begging your pardon, my lord," Harrison said, his face carefully neutral, "but you have a visitor."

Cecil's heart leaped traitorously in his chest. Could it be...? "Who is it?"

"Lady Harriet Cooper, my lord."

The hope that had flared in Cecil's chest died as quickly as it had kindled. Not Elizabeth then. Of course not. Why would she come after the way he'd left things?

Percival stood, straightening his waistcoat. "Perhaps that's our cue to leave."

"Indeed," Laurence agreed, setting Cecil's untouched glass on the desk. "Try not to do anything foolish, cousin."

Cecil barely registered their departure, his mind racing. Why would Harriet come to see him? Had something happened to Elizabeth? Was she unwell?

"Show her in," he ordered Harrison, forcing himself to his feet. He ran a hand through his hair in a futile attempt to look more presentable, acutely aware of his rumpled appearance and the heavy scent of whiskey in the air.

Harrison bowed and withdrew, returning moments later with Harriet. Cecil's sister-in-law stood in the doorway, her face set in lines of determination that reminded him painfully of Elizabeth.

"Lady Harriet," he managed, attempting to summon some semblance of his usual composure. "This is...unexpected."

"Not as unexpected as your abandonment of my sister," Harriet replied, her voice sharp as ice. She remained standing, ignoring Cecil's gesture toward a chair.

The accusation hit him like a physical blow. "I didn't?—"

"Didn't what? Didn't abandon her? Didn't break her heart?" Harriet's eyes flashed with anger. "I've spent the past week watching my sister pretend she isn't falling apart, Lord Stonefield. She barely eats. Barely sleeps. Though from the look of you, perhaps you're familiar with that particular affliction."

Cecil gripped the edge of his desk, his knuckles white. "Why are you here, Lady Harriet?"

"Elizabeth didn't want to come herself." Harriet lifted her chin, looking every inch the nobleman's daughter she was. "She didn't want to see you at all, actually. But something needs to be done."

A cold dread settled in Cecil's stomach. "What do you mean?"

"She wants a divorce."

The words hit him like a bullet to the chest. For a moment, he couldn't breathe, couldn't think. Divorce? His Elizabeth wanted to...to end their marriage?

"No," he said hoarsely, before he could stop himself.

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"No?" Harriet arched an eyebrow. "I don't believe you have a choice in the matter, my lord. You abandoned her. That's grounds enough."

"I didn't abandon her," Cecil protested, though the words sounded hollow even to his own ears. "I just needed time to?—"

"To what? To break her spirit completely? To make her believe she truly is unmarriageable, as our father always claimed?" Harriet's voice trembled with barely contained fury. "She trusted you. She believed in you. And you proved to be just like every other man who's ever looked at her scar and found her wanting."

"That's not—" Cecil ran a hand over his face. "You don't understand."

"Then explain it to me," Harriet challenged. "Explain why you left my sister without so much as a proper goodbye. Explain why you made her fall in love with you only to cast her aside."

The words "fall in love" hit Cecil like a physical blow. He staggered back, bracing himself against his desk. "She...loves me?"

"Of course she does, you fool!" Harriet threw up her hands in exasperation. "How could you not see it? The way she lights up when you enter a room, how she defends you even now to our father, how she—" She cut herself off, shaking her head. "But it doesn't matter anymore. She wants to end this farce of a marriage, and I'm here to make sure you comply."

"I can't," Cecil whispered.

"You can't?" Harriet's eyes narrowed dangerously. "You seemed perfectly capable of walking away from her a week ago. Why is this different?"

Cecil pushed away from his desk, his movements agitated. "Because I love her too!" The words burst from him with unexpected force. "Because every moment I've been away from her has been torture. Because I've spent every night this week staring at the ceiling, wondering if she's sleeping, if she's eating, if she's..." He broke off, running a hand through his already disheveled hair.

"Then why did you leave?" Harriet demanded, though some of the fire had gone out of her voice.

"Because I'm terrified!" The admission echoed in the quiet study. "I watched my father die of a broken heart after discovering my mother's infidelity. I saw what love did to him, how it destroyed him piece by piece. And with Elizabeth..." He swallowed hard. "With Elizabeth, I feel more than I ever thought possible. It terrifies me."

"So you chose to leave?" Harriet's voice was careful, measured, though her disapproval was clear. "Without even attempting to face these fears?"

Cecil flinched. "I thought...I thought if I left now, before I fell any deeper, I could protect both of us."

"How noble of you," Harriet said dryly. "And did it work? Are you protected now, my lord? Because from where I'm standing, you look like a man who's doing an excellent job of destroying himself without any help from my sister."

"Lady Harriet?—"

"My sister has suffered enough," she said quietly, her voice firm but controlled. "I cannot bear to see her hurt again."

She pulled a folded document from her reticule and placed it on his desk with deliberate care. "These are the divorce papers from Elizabeth. Have your solicitor review them and send them to Trowbridge Manor when they're signed."

Cecil stared at the papers as if they might bite him.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

The late afternoon sun cast long shadows through the windows of Trowbridge Manor, but Elizabeth barely noticed the fading light. She had spent another day wandering the halls of her childhood home like a ghost, touching the familiar wallpaper and avoiding her father's study. Though Luke Cooper had taken to spending his days away from the estate—a small mercy she hadn't expected—every corner of this house held memories that threatened to suffocate her.

Still, it was better than returning to Stonefield. There, Cecil's presence lingered everywhere: in the library where he'd first kissed her, in the painting room where he'd opened his heart to her, in their bed where she'd foolishly believed they'd found something real. Her chest tightened at the thought of him, as it had every day since he'd walked away.

The sound of raised voices from the entrance hall pulled her from her melancholy. Elizabeth recognized her sister's sharp tone immediately, but the deeper voice that answered made her heart stutter in her chest. Impossible. She hurried toward the commotion, her skirts rustling as she moved through the corridor.

"You have no right to be here!" Harriet was saying, her small frame blocking the doorway with surprising effectiveness. "After what you did to my sister?—"

"I must speak with her." Cecil's voice was rough, desperate in a way Elizabeth had never heard before. He towered over Harriet, but made no move to force his way past

her. "Please."

Elizabeth gripped the doorframe, steadying herself. He looked terrible—magnificent still, curse him, but terrible. Dark circles shadowed his eyes, and his usually immaculate cravat was slightly askew. She watched as he ran a hand through his hair, a gesture of frustration she knew well.

"Leave now," Harriet demanded, "or I shall call for?—"

"Harriet." Elizabeth's voice was barely more than a whisper, but both of them turned to her immediately. Cecil's eyes found hers, and the intensity of his gaze nearly knocked the breath from her lungs. "Let him in."

"Elizabeth, no!" Harriet protested, moving toward her sister protectively. "He abandoned you without a word. He doesn't deserve?—"

"Please." Elizabeth touched her sister's arm gently. "I need to speak with him."

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Harriet's face softened with concern. "Are you certain?"

No, Elizabeth wanted to say. She wasn't certain of anything anymore. But she nodded anyway, because the alternative—sending him away without knowing why he was here—would haunt her far longer than any memories.

"The drawing room," she said, proud of how steady her voice remained. "We can speak there."

Cecil inclined his head slightly, a ghost of his usual courtly manners. As he stepped past Harriet, Elizabeth caught the scent of him—sandalwood and leather—and her traitorous heart quickened. She led the way to the drawing room, painfully aware of his presence behind her, of every step that brought them closer to being alone together again.

Once inside, she moved to stand near the window, needing the distance between them. The late afternoon light caught the crystals of the chandelier, scattering tiny rainbows across the walls. She focused on them, anything to avoid looking directly at him.

"Why are you here?" she asked, hating how her voice trembled slightly. When he didn't immediately answer, she forced herself to turn and face him. "After what you did—after walking away without a word—what right do you have to come here now?"

"Elizabeth." Her name on his lips was like a physical touch. He took a step toward her, then stopped himself, his hands clenching at his sides. "I..."

"You knew," she continued, weeks of pain and anger finally spilling out. "You knew I had fallen in love with you, and still you left. Without an explanation, without—" Her voice broke, and she pressed her lips together, determined not to cry in front of him.

Cecil moved suddenly, striding across the room until he was mere feet from her. "I am a selfish devil," he said, his voice rough. "A coward who ran from the best thing that ever happened to him. But I cannot—" He broke off, raking a hand through his already disheveled hair. "I cannot sign those papers."

Elizabeth stared at him, confusion momentarily overtaking her anger. "What papers?"

"The divorce papers." His blue eyes were stormy as they met hers. "I know I have no right to refuse, that I forfeited any claim to you when I left, but I cannot—will not—let you go."

"Divorce papers?" Elizabeth repeated, her mind spinning. "What divorce papers?"

Something flickered across Cecil's face—confusion, then dawning comprehension. "Your sister came to me," he said slowly. "She said you wanted nothing more to do with me. That you demanded a divorce."

Understanding crashed over Elizabeth like a wave. "Harriet," she whispered, closing her eyes briefly. Of course her sister would try to protect her, even if it meant?—

"You didn't send her?"

The hope in his voice made her heart ache. She opened her eyes to find him watching her intently, as if trying to read the truth in her face. "No," she said softly. "I did not send her."

Cecil exhaled sharply, taking another step toward her. "Elizabeth?—"

"That doesn't change what you did," she cut in, raising her chin. The afternoon sun streaming through the window caught the scar on her neck, and she resisted the urge to turn away. "You left me. Without a word of explanation, without?—"

"Because I am a fool who does not deserve you," he interrupted, his voice raw. "Because I looked at you that morning, sleeping beside me, and I realized I had done the one thing I swore I never would."

"And what was that?" Elizabeth demanded, her hands trembling at her sides.

"I fell in love." The words seemed torn from him. "Completely, irrevocably in love. And it terrified me."

Elizabeth's breath caught in her throat. She forced herself to remain still, though every fiber of her being yearned to go to him. "So you ran?"

"I told myself it was better this way," he said, beginning to pace. "That I would only hurt you in the end, as my father was hurt. That I would become him—a shell of a man, destroyed by loving someone too much." He stopped abruptly, turning to face her. "But I was wrong. I became him anyway, Elizabeth. These past weeks without you?—"

"Don't," she whispered, but he continued as if he hadn't heard her.

"I cannot sleep. Cannot eat. Cannot think of anything but you. The way you smile when you best me at cards. The sound of your laugh when you're truly amused. The feel of your skin beneath my hands." His voice dropped lower, making her shiver. "I thought leaving would protect us both, but all I did was destroy everything good between us."

Elizabeth wrapped her arms around herself, trying to hold herself together. "And now? What do you want now?"

He moved closer, close enough that she could see the flecks of darker blue in his eyes, the slight tremor in his hands as he reached for her but stopped just short of touching her.

"I want you," he said simply. "In whatever way you'll have me. If you tell me to go, I will go. If you truly want that divorce, I will sign the papers, though it will kill me to do so. But if there is any chance—any at all—that you might forgive me..."

"Stop," Elizabeth said, pressing her fingers to her temples. Her thoughts were a whirlwind, made worse by his proximity. "You cannot simply appear here, say these things, and expect?—"

"I expect nothing," Cecil interrupted softly. "I deserve nothing. But I had to tell you the truth, even if you send me away afterward."

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"The truth?" She gave a bitter laugh. "Which truth would that be? That you love me, yet left without a word? That you trust me, yet ran at the first sign of vulnerability?" Her voice cracked on the last word, and she saw him flinch.

"Elizabeth—"

"No," she cut in, stepping away from him. She needed distance to think clearly. "You asked me that morning if having your heir would make you stay. When I said yes, you told me you weren't interested anymore. Was that a lie too?"

Cecil's expression tightened with pain. "I couldn't bear the thought of you doing something you didn't want, simply to keep me. You spoke so passionately about never wanting children, about your fears?—"

"And you never thought to ask if my feelings had changed?" Elizabeth demanded. "Never considered that perhaps, after seeing what kind of man you truly were, I might want something different?"

He stared at her, hope and disbelief warring in his eyes. "Had they? Changed?"

"It doesn't matter now, does it?" She turned toward the window, watching as the sun dipped lower on the horizon. "You made that decision for both of us."

"Elizabeth." His voice was closer now, though he still didn't touch her. "Please look at me."

She closed her eyes instead, fighting back tears. "Why should I?"

"Because I need you to see the truth in my eyes when I tell you that leaving you was the greatest mistake of my life." His voice was raw, stripped of all its usual polish. "Because I have spent every moment since then hating myself for hurting you. Because the thought of you wanting my child makes me want to fall to my knees and beg your forgiveness."

Despite herself, Elizabeth turned to face him. He stood so close now that she could see the stubble on his jaw, the shadows beneath his eyes that spoke of sleepless nights.

"I told myself I was protecting you," he continued, his gaze never leaving hers. "That I was saving us both from the pain my parents' marriage caused. But I was wrong, Elizabeth. So terribly wrong. I wasn't protecting anyone—I was simply a coward, running from the best thing that ever happened to me."

"And what happens the next time you're frightened?" she whispered. "The next time your past threatens to overwhelm you?"

Cecil's hands clenched at his sides, as if physically restraining himself from reaching for her. "I cannot promise I will never be afraid again," he said honestly. "But I can promise that I will never run from you again. That I will trust you with every part of me, even the darkest parts. That I will spend the rest of my life trying to be worthy of your love, if you'll let me."

A single tear slipped down Elizabeth's cheek. "Pretty words," she said softly. "But how can I trust them?"

"Because I am not offering you just words," Cecil said, his voice hoarse. "I am offering you everything I am. My heart, my soul, my life—they are yours to do with as you wish." He took a shuddering breath. "You may break them, cast them aside, or cherish them. But they are yours, Elizabeth. They have been since the moment you

challenged me over those paintings of my mother."

Elizabeth's hand flew to her throat, fingers brushing against her scar—a gesture he had come to recognize as a sign of her distress. "You cannot say such things," she whispered.

"I must. Even if you send me away, I must tell you this." He moved closer, close enough that she had to tilt her head back to maintain eye contact. "Do you know what these weeks without you have taught me?"

She shook her head mutely.

"That I would rather face every demon from my past, every fear that haunts me, than spend another day without you." His voice dropped lower, more intimate. "That I would rather risk having my heart shattered like my father's than never feel your touch again. That I?—"

"Stop," Elizabeth breathed, pressing her hands against his chest. Whether to push him away or hold him closer, she wasn't certain. "You cannot simply appear here and say these things as if—as if?—"

"As if what?" His hands came up to cover hers where they rested against his chest. "As if I love you? As if I have been half-mad without you? As if every moment we're apart feels like slow torture?"

"Cecil—"

"Tell me you don't still love me," he challenged, his grip on her hands tightening slightly. "Tell me you don't want me here, and I will go. Tell me you truly wish to divorce me, and I will sign whatever papers necessary, though it will destroy me to do so."

Elizabeth could feel his heart pounding beneath her palms, its rapid beat matching her own. "I—I cannot tell you that," she admitted.

Hope flared in his eyes. "Then tell me what you want, my love. Anything—anything at all—and it's yours."

"I want..." She swallowed hard, gathering her courage. "I want to trust you again. I want to believe that you won't run the next time something frightens you. I want—" Her voice broke slightly. "I want my husband back."

Cecil made a sound deep in his throat, something between a groan and a sob. "Elizabeth." His forehead pressed against hers, his breath warm on her face. "My brave, beautiful Elizabeth. I swear to you, I will spend every day proving myself worthy of that trust. I will never leave you again. Never doubt you again. Never?—"

"If you do," she interrupted, her fingers curling into the fabric of his coat, "if you ever try to leave me again, I will hunt you down myself."

A startled laugh escaped him. "Will you?"

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"Yes." She met his gaze steadily. "And you will not enjoy the consequences."

"There's my fierce wife," Cecil murmured, a hint of his old smirk playing at his lips. "I have missed her terribly."

"Have you?" Elizabeth tried to keep her voice stern, but she could feel her resolve weakening. The familiar warmth of his touch, the scent of him surrounding her—it was becoming increasingly difficult to remember why she was supposed to be angry.

"More than you know." His thumb traced circles on the back of her hand, sending shivers up her arm. "I missed everything about you. Your smile when you best me at cards. Your fierce protectiveness of those you love. Even your stubbornness when you believe you're right—which is almost always."

Despite herself, Elizabeth felt her lips twitch. "Almost?"

"Well," he said, his eyes twinkling with familiar mischief, "you were wrong about one thing."

She raised an eyebrow. "Oh?"

"You thought I wouldn't want you because of this." His free hand came up to trace her scar gently, from her cheek down to where it disappeared beneath her collar. "When in truth, it was one of the first things that made me fall in love with you."

"Cecil," she whispered, her eyes stinging with tears.

"It shows your strength," he continued, his fingers still trailing along the mark. "Your resilience. How you've faced every challenge life has thrown at you and emerged stronger. More beautiful." His voice dropped lower. "More precious to me than you could possibly imagine."

Elizabeth's heart thundered in her chest. "You cannot say such things."

"Why not?"

"Because—" She struggled to find the words. "Because I am still angry with you."

"As you should be." His thumb brushed her bottom lip. "I deserve your anger. Your fury. Whatever punishment you deem fitting."

"Do you truly mean that?"

"Every word." His eyes held hers, serious now. "Name your price for forgiveness, Elizabeth. Whatever it is, I will pay it gladly."

She studied his face—the earnestness in his expression, the vulnerability he no longer tried to hide from her. "Perhaps," she said slowly, "we could start with you explaining exactly what you meant earlier about wanting children."

Cecil's breath caught audibly. "Are you saying?—"

"I'm saying that people can change their minds," she interrupted, her cheeks flushing. "That perhaps, after seeing what kind of father you might be, after watching how you are with your sisters..." She trailed off, suddenly uncertain.

"Elizabeth." His voice was rough with emotion. "Are you telling me you want?—"

"I'm telling you that I'm not opposed to the idea anymore," she said quickly. "That I might be willing to consider—oh!"

Cecil had pulled her fully into his arms, crushing her against his chest. "My love," he breathed into her hair. "My incredible, amazing love."

"You haven't let me finish," Elizabeth protested weakly, though her arms had already wound around his neck of their own accord.

"Then finish," he murmured, but he didn't release her. "Tell me everything you want. Everything you dream of. I want to hear it all."

She drew back just enough to see his face, though she remained in the circle of his arms. "I want us to try again," she said softly. "Properly this time. No more running from our fears. No more hiding from each other."

"Yes," he agreed instantly. "Anything else?"

"I want—" She hesitated, then gathered her courage. "I want to see you smile when you look at those paintings of your mother. Not because you've forgotten the pain she caused, but because you've learned to remember the good parts too. The way your sisters do."

Cecil's arms tightened around her. "Elizabeth..."

"And I want," she continued, her voice growing stronger, "to wake up beside you every morning. To argue with you over cards and dance lessons. To make new memories in every room of our home, until the painful ones fade away."

"Our home," he repeated, his voice thick with emotion. "Yes. A thousand times yes."

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"And perhaps," she added, her cheeks warming, "someday, when we're ready...I want to hear the patter of little feet in those halls. To see you teaching our children how to be as strong and brave as their father."

A sound somewhere between a laugh and a sob escaped him. "Our children," he whispered, pressing his forehead to hers. "You cannot know what it does to me to hear you say such things."

"I think I have some idea," she said, a hint of her old teasing entering her voice. "You're trembling."

"Because I love you," he said simply. "Because I cannot believe I almost threw this away. Because—" He broke off, pulling back slightly to look at her. "May I kiss you, Elizabeth? Or am I still being punished?"

She pretended to consider it, though her heart was already racing at the thought. "I suppose," she said slowly, "that would depend on the quality of the kiss."

Cecil's eyes darkened. "Is that a challenge, my love?"

"Perhaps." She tilted her chin up defiantly. "Though I seem to recall you once claiming you could make me beg?—"

His mouth captured hers before she could finish the sentence, and Elizabeth melted into him with a sigh. This wasn't like their previous kisses—desperate or passionate or teasing. This was something deeper, sweeter, full of promises and hope and love.

When they finally broke apart, Cecil kept his forehead pressed to hers, as if he couldn't bear even that small distance between them. "Come home," he whispered. "Come home with me, Elizabeth."

"Yes," she breathed, then remembered something and pulled back slightly. "But first, we need to speak with my sister."

As if summoned by her words, there was a sharp knock at the drawing room door. "Elizabeth?" Harriet's voice called through the wood. "Are you well? Do you need me to fetch someone?"

Cecil chuckled softly. "Your sister is quite the protective little dragon, isn't she?"

"She learned from the best," Elizabeth replied with a small smile. Then, raising her voice, she called, "Come in, Harriet. We need to speak with you."

CHAPTER TWENTY

The door opened slowly, and Harriet peered in cautiously, her face pinched with worry. When she saw them standing so close together, her eyes narrowed to slits. She marched into the room with all the righteous fury of a protective sister.

"What has he done to you?" she demanded, her gaze darting between them. "What lies has he told? If he's threatened you in any way?—"

"Harriet," Elizabeth said gently, though she made no move to step away from Cecil. "We need to discuss the visit you paid to my husband."

Her sister's steps faltered, a telling flush creeping up her neck. "I...that is..." She twisted her gloved hands together. "I only wanted to protect you. After everything that happened..."

"By telling me my wife wanted a divorce?" Cecil's voice held no anger, only a sort of bemused affection that made Elizabeth's heart swell. His thumb traced idle patterns on her hip where his hand rested. "That was quite clever of you, actually. Terrible, but clever."

"I..." Harriet lifted her chin defiantly, though her lower lip trembled. "You hurt her. You left her without a word, after everything she'd done for you. What was I supposed to do? Stand idly by while you broke her heart again?"

"You were supposed to let me handle it," Elizabeth said, though she couldn't quite manage to sound stern. "Though I suppose I should thank you." She glanced up at Cecil with a small smile. "Your interference brought him back to me."

"Then you've forgiven him?" Harriet asked incredulously. "Just like that? After all those nights you cried yourself to sleep? After watching you waste away these past weeks?" Her voice cracked. "Have you forgotten how broken you were?"

"Not just like that," Cecil answered before Elizabeth could. He turned to face Harriet fully, though he kept one arm firmly around Elizabeth's waist. "Your sister has given me another chance that I don't deserve. One I intend to spend the rest of my life earning."

"Pretty words," Harriet scoffed. "But words are cheap, my lord. Especially from a man who abandoned his wife without so much as a note of explanation."

"Harriet," Elizabeth warned, but Cecil squeezed her hip gently.

"No, she's right to be suspicious." His voice was soft but firm. "I've given her every reason to doubt me. But I swear to you, Miss Cooper, I will never hurt your sister again."

Harriet studied him with narrowed eyes. "And if you do? If you break this promise as easily as your marriage vows?"

"Then I give you full permission to come after me with whatever weapon you deem appropriate," he said solemnly. "Though I suspect your sister would beat you to it."

"She would," Harriet agreed, her lips twitching despite herself. "Elizabeth has always been the fiercer of us two, even if she doesn't show it as openly."

"I've noticed," Cecil said dryly, and Elizabeth jabbed him lightly in the ribs. "Ow! You see? Absolutely ruthless."

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The momentary levity faded as Harriet's expression grew serious once more. "And what of Father?" she asked suddenly. "Have you thought about how he'll react to this...reconciliation?"

"Father will only be pleased," Elizabeth said firmly, though her fingers clenched in the fabric of Cecil's coat. "As long as the marriage remains intact, he'll have no cause for complaint."

"You know that's not true," Harriet said softly. "He'll want to know why his lordship left in the first place. He'll demand explanations."

Cecil's arm tightened around Elizabeth's waist. "I should speak with him," he said, his voice taking on an edge that made both sisters look up sharply. "Explain my actions."

"You don't owe him any explanations," Elizabeth protested, turning to face him fully. "Cecil, please. There's no need to?—"

"I do," he cut her off gently, bringing his free hand up to cup her cheek. "Not for my sake, but for yours." His fingers traced idle patterns on her hip as he spoke. "I won't have him thinking you're to blame for any of this." A hint of his old wolfish grin appeared. "Besides, I believe I still owe him some choice words about how he's treated you over the years."

"Cecil," Elizabeth warned, though warmth bloomed in her chest at his protectiveness. "He's still my father."

"And you're my wife," he countered, his eyes glinting dangerously. "Don't worry, my

love. I'll be perfectly civil." He paused, that wicked smile widening. "I'll simply remind him that you're now a countess, and if he ever speaks to you disrespectfully again, he'll find himself unwelcome in every notable house in London."

Harriet let out a startled laugh. "Oh, I should very much like to see that conversation. Father's face would be quite the sight."

"Harriet!" Elizabeth tried to sound scandalized, but she was fighting back a smile herself. "You shouldn't take such delight in it."

"Shouldn't I?" Harriet raised an eyebrow. "After all the times he made you feel worthless? All the cruel comments about your scar? The way he blamed you for Mother's death?" Her voice softened. "He deserves to be taken down a peg or two, sister. And who better to do it than your devoted husband?"

"My thoughts exactly," Cecil murmured, pressing a kiss to Elizabeth's temple. "Though I suspect your sister would prefer I show some restraint."

"Since when have you ever shown restraint, my lord?" Harriet asked innocently, making Cecil chuckle.

"You make an excellent point, Miss Cooper. Perhaps I should let my natural inclinations guide me after all."

"Both of you are impossible," Elizabeth declared, though she couldn't keep the fondness from her voice. "I should never have let you two meet. You're far too alike for comfort."

Harriet's expression softened as she looked between them. The rigid set of her shoulders gradually relaxed, and something like acceptance flickered across her face.

"Well," Harriet said thoughtfully, settling back onto the settee, "when Father first suggested this match, I would have created quite the scandal if I was here. May be drag you away from the whole situation."

Elizabeth couldn't help but laugh. "And how well do you think that would have gone? Cecil is not a man easily dragged anywhere." "And as if I would have let you," Cecil said mildly, though his arm tightened protectively around Elizabeth's waist.

"No, I don't suppose you would have." Harriet's lips curved into a small smile. "Though I must admit, your devotion to my sister is...unexpected."

"Why?" Cecil challenged, his voice taking on an edge. "Because of her scar? Did you think me so shallow?"

"Cecil," Elizabeth murmured, placing a calming hand on his chest. "She didn't mean?—"

"No," Harriet interrupted, stepping forward. "Let me answer this." She met Cecil's gaze steadily. "I thought you shallow because you left her. Because you made her believe she wasn't enough. The scar never mattered to those who truly loved her—it was your actions that made me doubt your character."

A moment of tense silence followed before Cecil inclined his head. "Well said, Miss Cooper. I deserved that."

"Yes, you did." Harriet's expression softened further. "But perhaps I was too quick to judge. The way you look at her now... it's different than before."

"Everything is different now," Cecil said quietly, his gaze dropping to Elizabeth's face. "I was a fool before, running from my own feelings. Running from her."

"And now?" Harriet pressed. "What's changed?"

"Now I know what it means to lose her," he answered simply. "I won't make that mistake again."

Elizabeth reached up to touch his face, her eyes bright with unshed tears. "You haven't lost me. You won't."

"Promise me," Harriet said suddenly, drawing their attention back to her. "Promise me you'll cherish her as she deserves. That you'll never make her doubt her worth again."

"I swear it," Cecil replied without hesitation. "On my title, my fortune, my very life—I swear to spend every day showing your sister exactly how precious she is to me."

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"Well then." Harriet smoothed her skirts, though her hands trembled slightly. "I suppose I should help Elizabeth pack her things properly this time. Since it seems she'll be staying."

"Harriet," Elizabeth breathed, pulling away from Cecil to embrace her sister. "Thank you."

"Don't thank me yet," Harriet mumbled into her shoulder. "I still reserve the right to change my mind if he ever hurts you again."

"Of course you do," Elizabeth laughed softly. "Though I suspect you'll have to get in line behind his sisters."

"Ah yes, the formidable Ladies Emily and Madeleine," Cecil said dryly. "They've already promised me various creative forms of torture should I ever hurt Elizabeth again."

Elizabeth pulled back from her sister's embrace, surprise evident in her expression. "Your sisters knew you were coming here?"

A flash of sheepishness crossed Cecil's face. "They practically forced me to come," he admitted, running a hand through his hair. "Though I suspect they would have dragged me here themselves if I'd waited much longer."

"And how exactly did they convince the mighty Earl of Stonefield to do anything?" Harriet asked, her tone caught between curiosity and amusement.

"You've never met my sisters, Miss Cooper," Cecil said with a wry smile. "Emily threatened to tell every eligible young lady in London about the time I fell into the duck pond at Lady Rutherford's garden party."

"You didn't!" Elizabeth gasped, delighted. "When was this?"

"I was twelve," Cecil defended himself, though his eyes danced with humor. "And Madeleine had just pushed me."

"What did you do to deserve that?" Harriet asked, clearly warming to the conversation.

"I may have...hidden a frog in her reticule." At Elizabeth's shocked laugh, he added, "In my defense, she had ruined my favorite riding crop the week before."

"And Emily?" Elizabeth pressed. "What was her threat?"

Cecil's expression turned pained. "She promised to tell you about the time I tried to impress Miss Katherine Blackwood by reciting poetry."

"Oh, this I must hear," Harriet said eagerly, perching on the edge of a nearby chair.

"Another time, perhaps," Cecil deflected smoothly. "For now, I believe your sister mentioned something about packing?"

Harriet pouted but rose from her seat. "Very well, my lord. Keep your secrets for now." She paused at the door, her expression growing serious once more. "I expect both of you at dinner next week. Someone needs to keep an eye on you two."

"We would be delighted," Elizabeth said warmly.

"Splendid." Harriet's eyes twinkled mischievously. "Perhaps then you can tell us about this poetry recital, my lord."

Before Cecil could respond, she slipped out of the room, closing the door behind her with a soft click. The sudden silence felt weighted with possibility, and Elizabeth found herself acutely aware of Cecil's presence at her back.

He stepped closer, his hands coming to rest on her shoulders, thumbs brushing against the sensitive skin of her neck. "Alone at last," he murmured, his breath stirring the loose curls by her ear.

Elizabeth shivered, leaning back against his chest. "You're changing the subject," she accused softly. "I want to hear about this poetry."

"Do you now?" His lips brushed her temple. "I'd rather tell you something else entirely."

Cecil turned her gently in his arms, cupping her face in his hands with such tenderness that her breath caught. His thumb traced the edge of her scar with a reverence that made her heart ache.

"I love you," he said softly, his voice rough with emotion. "I should have said it properly before, not in the midst of all my desperate explanations. I love you, Elizabeth Gillet, more than I ever thought possible."

Elizabeth's heart soared at hearing her married name from his lips. "Cecil, I?—"

"Let me finish," he murmured, pressing his forehead to hers. "When I left, I convinced myself I was protecting you. That you deserved better than a man who couldn't trust, who couldn't open his heart fully." His fingers trembled against her skin. "But I was wrong. So terribly wrong. The only thing I succeeded in doing was

breaking both our hearts."

"And now?" Elizabeth whispered, her hands coming up to grip his wrists. "What's different?"

"Now I know that loving you isn't a weakness." His eyes searched hers intently. "It's the bravest thing I've ever done. The best thing I've ever done."

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"I love you too," she whispered back, tears spilling onto her cheeks. "Even when I was angry with you, I never stopped. Even when it felt like my heart would break from it, I couldn't stop loving you."

He kissed away her tears, his lips feather-light against her skin. "My brave, beautiful Elizabeth. How did I ever think I could live without you?"

"You don't have to," she said, sliding her hands up to tangle in his hair. "You're stuck with me now, my lord. I won't let you run away again."

"Promise?" The vulnerability in his voice made her chest tight.

"With all my heart." She traced the line of his jaw, marveling at how he leaned into her touch. "Though I warn you, if you ever try something like this again, I might take Harriet up on her offer to cause a scandal."

His laugh was warm against her skin. "I wouldn't blame you." He pulled back just enough to meet her gaze, his own full of mischief. "Though I must say, the thought of you creating a scandal is rather intriguing."

"Cecil!" she gasped, though heat pooled in her belly at his tone.

"What? You can hardly blame me for finding the idea appealing." His thumb brushed across her lower lip. "You're quite magnificent when you're righteously angry. All flashing eyes and flushed cheeks..."

"You're impossible," she muttered, trying to ignore the way her body trembled at his

touch.

"Impossibly in love with you," he corrected, then kissed her before she could respond, soft and sweet and full of promise.

Cecil pulled back with visible reluctance, though he kept her close in the circle of his arms. "We should go home," he said, his voice husky with emotion. "Though I warn you, the staff may be a bit...overwhelming when they see you."

"Overwhelming?" Elizabeth raised an eyebrow, smoothing her hands over his rumpled lapels. "Whatever do you mean?"

"They've been quite vocal about my mood these past weeks," he admitted sheepishly. "Mrs. Winters has taken to muttering prayers whenever I enter a room."

"The formidable Mrs. Winters?" Elizabeth's eyes widened in mock horror. "Surely not. I've never seen that woman fazed by anything."

"She called me a 'brooding menace' just yesterday." He affected an injured expression that made her laugh. "Said I was haunting the halls like some sort of Gothic ghost and threatened to resign if I didn't stop frightening the maids."

"Poor darling," Elizabeth teased, reaching up to straighten his cravat. "How terribly you've suffered. Though I must say, 'brooding menace' does have a certain romantic appeal."

"Does it now?" His eyes darkened as he caught her hand, pressing a kiss to her palm. "Shall I continue brooding for your entertainment, my love?"

"Absolutely not," she declared firmly. "I much prefer you smiling." She traced his lips with her finger. "Though perhaps not quite so wolfishly. You'll scandalize poor

Mrs. Winters even more."

"She'll recover," he murmured, nipping at her finger. "Especially once she sees you've returned. The entire household has been in mourning since you left."

"Now you're exaggerating," Elizabeth protested, though warmth bloomed in her chest at the thought of the staff missing her.

"I assure you, I'm not. Cook hasn't made your favorite lemon tarts since you left—says they remind her too much of you. And Roberts has been polishing the same silver service every day, waiting for you to return and host dinner parties again."

"And Harrison?" she asked softly, thinking of the elderly butler who had always been so kind to her.

"Ah, Harrison." Cecil's expression grew rueful. "He's taken to giving me disapproving looks over the breakfast tray. Though to be fair, that might be because I've been taking most of my meals in my study."

"Cecil," she chided gently. "You haven't been eating properly?"

"I haven't been doing anything properly without you," he admitted, pressing his forehead to hers. "I've been an absolute bear, according to everyone. Even Percival commented on it when he visited last week."

"Then we should definitely return home," she decided, her heart swelling at how naturally the word 'home' fell from her lips. "Before Mrs. Winters actually does resign and Cook forgets how to make lemon tarts entirely."

"As my lady commands." His smile was tender as he stepped back, offering her his

arm. "Though perhaps we should rescue your sister from packing duties first. I believe I heard something crash a moment ago."

As if summoned by his words, a muffled thud echoed from above, followed by Harriet's distinct voice exclaiming, "Oh, bother!"

"Perhaps we should investigate," Elizabeth laughed, but Cecil held her back for a moment.

"Before we do," he said, his expression growing serious, "I meant what I said, Elizabeth. I will spend the rest of my life making this up to you. We should go home. There are quite a few rooms that need new memories made in them."

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"Cecil!" she gasped, though heat pooled in her belly at his words. "You can't say such things."

"Can't I?" He grinned, unrepentant. "I'm merely suggesting we create happier memories to replace the painful ones. What did you think I meant, my innocent wife?"

"You know exactly what you meant," she muttered, fighting a smile. "And you're not nearly as charming as you think you are."

"No?" He pressed a kiss to her temple. "Yet you love me anyway."

"Heaven help me, I do." She reached up to touch his face, suddenly serious. "Promise me something?"

"Anything," he replied without hesitation.

"Promise me that if something troubles you again, you'll talk to me. No more running away, no more noble sacrifices. We face things together."

Cecil caught her hand, pressing a fierce kiss to her palm. "I promise. No more secrets, no more fears kept hidden. You are my partner in all things, Elizabeth. My heart, my home, my everything."

Another crash from above made them both jump, followed by Harriet's voice calling, "Elizabeth! I may have accidentally knocked over your jewelry box!"

"We should rescue your belongings," Cecil chuckled, though he made no move to release her. "Before your sister redecorates the entire room."

"In a moment," Elizabeth murmured, rising on her tiptoes to kiss him softly. "I just want to remember this perfect moment."

He cradled her face in his hands, kissing her with exquisite tenderness. "We'll have countless perfect moments, my love. Our story is far from over."

"Promise?" she whispered against his lips.

"With all my heart." He smiled, that special smile that was hers alone. "Now, shall we collect your things and go home?"

"Lead the way, my lord."

"Always," he replied softly, offering his arm once more.

EPILOGUE

Two months later...

The drawing room at Greyhall was filled with afternoon sunlight and laughter, a sound that still made Elizabeth's heart swell with joy. Emily sat beside her on the settee, one hand resting on her growing belly, while Madeleine occupied the armchair nearest the window. Their husbands were engaged in a heated debate about horse breeding with Laurence, who had arrived that morning from his Scottish estate.

"Lord, but it's good to hear laughter in these rooms again," Madeleine said, her eyes twinkling. "Do you remember, Emily, how dreadfully serious everything was before Cecil married our dear Elizabeth?"

"Indeed! Our brother would skulk about like some Gothic hero, all brooding looks and thunderous sighs," Emily replied with a dramatic flourish. "Now look at him—practically domesticated."

"I heard that," Cecil called from across the room, though his lips twitched with poorly suppressed amusement. "I assure you, I was never 'brooding.' Merely...contemplative."

"Contemplative?" Madeleine snorted most unladylike. "Is that what we're calling it now? Tell me, Elizabeth dear, does he still practice his contemplative scowls in the mirror each morning?"

Elizabeth bit back a laugh as her husband's ears reddened. "I couldn't possibly betray my husband's confidence," she demurred, though her eyes danced with mischief. "Though I will say the mirrors in our bedchamber have witnessed many...interesting expressions."

"Minx," Cecil mouthed at her, making her heart flutter even after months of marriage.

"Speaking of interesting expressions," Emily leaned forward conspiratorially, "do you remember when Mother caught him practicing his swordplay in the gallery? Using her best parasol as a rapier?"

"Good Lord, not this story again," Cecil groaned, but Elizabeth noticed his smile didn't fade at the mention of his mother—progress indeed.

"Oh, but we must tell Elizabeth!" Madeleine insisted. "You see, sister dear, our mighty earl was not always so graceful with a blade. There he was, barely twelve, swishing about Mother's prized silk parasol like some deranged musketeer—"

"I was teaching you both proper defensive techniques," Cecil protested. "As any good

brother would."

"Is that what you told Mother when she found us?" Emily laughed. "All three of us frozen like guilty statues, her favorite parasol bent beyond recognition?"

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"And do you remember what she said?" Madeleine's eyes glowed with the memory. "She just stood there, taking in the scene, and then-"

"Well, if you're going to learn, you might as well learn properly," all three siblings chorused together.

"The next day, she had Master Richards himself come to give us lessons," Emily added, wiping tears of mirth from her eyes. "Poor man had no idea what to do with two young ladies demanding to learn swordplay."

"Mother always did have her own way of doing things," Cecil said softly, and Elizabeth reached to squeeze his hand, proud of how naturally he now spoke of Catherine.

From his position by the window, Laurence made a sound that might have been amusement. "Aunt Catherine was certainly unique," he said, his usually stern features softening slightly. "I remember her sending me detailed letters about the Scottish wildflowers I'd mentioned in passing. Pages and pages of her paintings and observations."

"The paintings!" Madeleine exclaimed. "Oh Elizabeth, has Cecil shown you Mother's entire collection? She was remarkably talented. Remember how she used to set up her easel in the gardens? She'd be out there for hours, trying to capture the perfect light."

"Until Father would come looking for her," Cecil added, surprising them all with his gentle tone. "He'd pretend to be cross about her missing tea, but then he'd just end up sitting with her while she finished."

A comfortable silence fell over the room as they all absorbed this peaceful memory. Elizabeth studied her husband's profile, noting how the tension that usually accompanied mentions of his parents had eased into something softer, more contemplative.

"They did love each other," Emily said softly, voicing what they were all thinking. "Whatever else happened, I believe that was true."

Cecil's hand tightened briefly around Elizabeth's before relaxing. "Yes," he agreed, his voice steady. "They did. It wasn't perfect, but it was real." His eyes met Elizabeth's, full of meaning. "Sometimes love is stronger than our mistakes."

"Speaking of love," Laurence drawled, breaking the moment with practiced precision, "I require considerably more brandy before this conversation becomes any more maudlin."

"You always need more brandy, cousin," Cecil retorted, but there was warmth in his voice. If anything, he seemed grateful for Laurence's particular brand of gruff deflection.

"I say," Percival interjected, rising from his chair with the easy grace that had first caught Madeleine's eye, "wasn't there some wager about that new French brandy I acquired? Something about Scottish spirits being superior?"

"Was there?" Laurence's eyebrow arched imperiously. "I don't recall making any such bet."

"That's because you were three glasses deep in whisky at the time," Charles, Emily's husband, supplied helpfully. "Something about French spirits being fit only for, what was it? 'Dandies and dilettantes,' I believe were your exact words."

"How fortunate that I've never been known to suffer from excessive pride," Laurence said dryly, though his lips twitched. "Very well, Percy. Lead on. Let us settle this debate like gentlemen."

"Through excessive consumption and questionable wagers?" Madeleine teased. "How terribly burdensome for you, cousin."

"The trials I endure for my homeland," Laurence agreed solemnly, though there was a glint in his eye that made him look years younger.

As the men moved toward Percival's study, the patter of small feet announced a new arrival. Adelaide, Emily's daughter, came bursting into the room with her nurse close behind, her golden curls bouncing with each determined step.

"Uncle Cecil! Uncle Cecil!" she exclaimed, making a beeline for her favorite relative. "You promised me a story!"

Cecil scooped her up without hesitation, his dignified earl's persona melting away as he settled her on his knee. "Did I indeed? And what sort of story would my favorite niece like to hear?"

"I am your only niece," Adelaide informed him with all the gravity a four-year-old could muster.

"Ah, but that makes you even more precious, does it not?" Cecil tweaked one of her curls, making her giggle. "Now then, shall we have tales of knights and dragons? Perhaps a dashing pirate or two?"

"No!" Adelaide's curls bounced as she shook her head emphatically. "I want the story about the lady with the pretty mark! The one the fairies blessed!"

Elizabeth felt her cheeks warm as Emily and Madeleine exchanged knowing looks. Over the past months, Cecil had developed quite the repertoire of stories for their niece, but this particular tale—his heavily romanticized version of how he'd met Elizabeth—had become Adelaide's clear favorite.

"The fairy blessing story again?" Cecil's eyes found Elizabeth's, dancing with mischief. "Well, I suppose it is rather a good one. Though I must warn you, princess, your aunt might object to some of my embellishments."

"Aunt Elizabeth never objects," Adelaide said confidently. "She always smiles when you tell it, even when she pretends to scowl."

"Does she indeed?" Cecil's grin widened. "How very observant you are, my dear. Very well then—once upon a time, there was a beautiful lady who had been blessed by fairies at birth..."

"Blessed by fairies?" Elizabeth mouthed at him, touching her scar with amused exasperation.

He merely winked before continuing, "They gave her a special mark, you see, so that only the cleverest of men would recognize her true worth. But many foolish people couldn't see past the mark to the treasure beneath..."

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"Until the handsome earl came along!" Adelaide bounced excitedly. "That's you, Uncle Cecil!"

"Well, I wouldn't say handsome," Madeleine cut in, grinning. "Perhaps 'tolerably good-looking' at best."

"Devastatingly handsome," Cecil corrected with mock severity, making Adelaide giggle again. "And very clever indeed, for he saw right away what a rare and precious jewel the lady was."

"Though not clever enough to avoid making a complete cake of himself first," Emily added with a laugh. "As I recall, you practically had to be forced into admitting your feelings."

"I prefer to think of it as a carefully planned strategic retreat," Cecil said loftily, though his ears had reddened slightly. "Followed by a masterful comeback."

"Is that what we're calling it now?" Laurence's dry voice came from the doorway, where he had reappeared with a fresh glass in hand. "I seem to remember more drinking and brooding than strategy."

"Uncle Laurence!" Adelaide squirmed off Cecil's lap and ran to her other uncle, who caught her deftly with his free hand. "Will you stay for dinner? Uncle Cecil tells the best stories, but you make the funniest faces!"

Something flickered in Laurence's usually stoic expression—a softness that seemed at odds with his stern demeanor. "I suppose I could be persuaded," he said gravely. "If

you promise to keep your Uncle Cecil from telling any more embellished tales about his own heroics."

"I do not embellish," Cecil protested, pulling Elizabeth closer to his side. "Every word I say about my wife is absolutely true. If anything, I understate her perfection."

"Now who's embellishing?" Elizabeth murmured, but she couldn't help leaning into his embrace, savoring the warmth of him.

"Mother would have adored being a grandmother," Madeleine said softly, watching Adelaide chatter away to an indulgent Laurence. "Can't you just imagine her with a whole brood of little ones?"

"She would have spoiled them terribly," Cecil agreed, and this time his smile held no shadows. "Probably would have had an entire nursery filled with her paintings of them."

As the others continued to reminisce, Cecil leaned close to Elizabeth, his breath warm against her ear. "Your smile is too pretty for your own good, my love," he whispered, making her cheeks flush. "I think we need to return home soon so I can demonstrate just how devastatingly handsome you find me."

Elizabeth turned to meet his gaze, seeing the familiar mix of mischief and devotion that never failed to make her heart skip. "We've only just arrived for the afternoon," she whispered back, though she couldn't help but smile at his impatience.

"Mmm, and you've been driving me to distraction the entire time." His fingers traced a subtle pattern on her palm where their hands were joined, hidden from view by the folds of her skirt. "The way you keep biting your lip when you're trying not to laugh at my sister's stories...most provoking, wife."

"I wasn't aware you found my attempts at politeness so troublesome," she teased, though her pulse quickened at his touch.

"Everything about you troubles me," he murmured, his voice dropping lower. "In the most delicious ways. For instance, right now I'm having the most inappropriate thoughts about that little catch in your breath when I do this..." His thumb brushed over her wrist, making her shiver.

"Cecil!" she hissed, glancing around to make sure no one had noticed their intimate exchange. "We're in company."

"Then perhaps we should make our excuses," he suggested, his eyes dark with promise. "After all, what sort of husband would I be if I allowed my wife to remain...troubled?"

Later that day Elizabeth stood by the window of their private sitting room, watching as the last rays of sunlight painted the garden in shades of gold. The peaceful moment was interrupted by an unusual sound—a muffled whimper coming from the direction of Cecil's study. Her brow furrowed in confusion. What could he possibly be up to now?

"Cecil?" she called out, gathering her skirts as she moved toward the connecting door. "Is everything quite all right?"

"One moment, darling!" His voice carried a note of barely contained excitement that made her smile. Cecil was many things, but subtle had never been among them. "I have something rather special to show you."

Elizabeth's heart quickened. Over the months of their marriage, she had grown to both anticipate and slightly fear his surprises. The last one had involved convincing her to ride astride like a man—scandalous, thrilling, and resulting in the most

delightful afternoon gallop through their private woods.

The door creaked open, and Cecil emerged, one hand conspicuously hidden behind his back. His usually immaculate cravat was slightly askew, and there was a boyish gleam in his eyes that made him look years younger.

"Close your eyes," he instructed, his voice rich with suppressed laughter.

Elizabeth arched an eyebrow. "The last time you made such a request, I ended up with my new riding habit completely ruined."

"And as I recall, you didn't mind in the least." His grin was positively wicked. "But I promise, this surprise is entirely different. Trust me?"

The last two words were spoken softly, almost vulnerably, and Elizabeth's heart melted. "Always," she whispered, letting her eyes flutter closed.

She heard him move closer, felt the warmth of his presence, and then—a wet nose pressed against her hand, followed by an enthusiastic lick.

Elizabeth's eyes flew open to find herself staring down at the most adorable spaniel puppy she had ever seen. The littlecreature was golden-brown with floppy ears and enormous dark eyes that seemed to contain all the love in the world.

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"Oh!" she gasped, dropping to her knees without a thought for her expensive muslin gown. The puppy immediately scrambled into her lap, tail wagging so hard its entire body wiggled with joy.

"Do you like him?" Cecil asked, and there was something in his voice—a touch of uncertainty that made Elizabeth look up. Her husband, usually so confident and commanding, was watching her with an almost shy expression.

"Like him? Cecil, I adore him!" She gathered the squirming puppy close, laughing as it attempted to lick every inch of her face. "But whatever made you think of getting a puppy?"

Cecil knelt beside her, his fingers gentle as he scratched behind the puppy's ears. "I thought...well, that is to say..." He cleared his throat, a faint flush coloring his cheeks. "I thought it might be good practice. For us. For when we...that is, if you wish...when we have children of our own."

The words hung in the air between them, laden with meaning and hope. Elizabeth's heart seemed to grow three sizes at once, and she had to blink back sudden tears.

Elizabeth reached out to cup Cecil's cheek, her touch infinitely tender. "You want to practice being a father?"

"I want to be worthy of it," he admitted, his voice rough with emotion. "My own father was...well, you know what he was. I don't want to repeat his mistakes. I thought perhaps if we started with something smaller..." He gestured to the puppy, who had flopped onto its back, begging for belly rubs with shameless enthusiasm.

"Cecil." Elizabeth's voice held such warmth that he had to look at her. "You are nothing like your father. Nothing. And you prove it every day with how you treat everyone around you—from the lowest stable boy to the highest peer."

"You make me want to be better," he murmured, turning his face to press a kiss to her palm. "Every day, in every way."

The puppy, apparently feeling neglected, chose that moment to wedge itself between them, demanding attention with a series of small, adorable whimpers.

Elizabeth laughed, the sound like music. "Well, it seems our new addition has your commanding presence, my lord. Though perhaps with slightly more charm."

"Minx." Cecil's eyes sparkled with amusement. "Are you suggesting that I lack charm?"

"Never." She leaned forward to kiss him quickly, mindful of their squirming audience. "Though I must say, this particular surprise has rather exceeded your usual standard. Does our new companion have a name?"

Cecil's expression turned sheepish. "I thought perhaps you might like to do the honors. Though I warn you, he's already displaying quite the personality. The breeder said he's the most spirited of the litter."

"Of course he is." Elizabeth scratched under the puppy's chin, earning a look of pure bliss. "You wouldn't have chosen any other, would you? Always drawn to the challenging ones."

"I married you, didn't I?" His grin was unrepentant as she swatted his arm.

Elizabeth studied the puppy thoughtfully. "What about Perseus? He certainly seems

brave enough, trying to fit in all this exploration at once."

Indeed, the puppy had already begun investigating the sitting room, nose twitching with interest as he discovered each new scent and sound.

"Perseus." Cecil tested the name. "Yes, I think it suits him. Though I suspect he'll end up being called Percy more often than not."

As if recognizing his new name, the puppy—Percy—came bounding back to them, nearly tripping over his own oversized paws in his excitement.

"Careful, little one," Cecil cautioned, catching the puppy before he could tumble into a delicate side table. "I believe we'll need to make some adjustments to accommodate our new family member."

Elizabeth's heart swelled at his use of the word 'family.' She watched as her husband—the fearsome Earl of Stonefield, known throughout London for his sharp wit and sharper business acumen—gently guided the puppy away from potential mischief, his large hands impossibly gentle with the tiny creature.

The evening light had softened to a gentle purple haze, casting long shadows across the sitting room floor. Percy had finally exhausted himself and lay curled in Elizabeth's lap, his tiny chest rising and falling with each contented breath.

Cecil found himself transfixed by the scene before him—his beautiful wife, her dark curls escaping their pins, her face suffused with such tender affection as she stroked the sleeping puppy. The way the fading light caught her profile, the gentle curve of her neck, the way her lashes cast shadows on her cheeks...

"You're staring, my lord," Elizabeth murmured without looking up.

"Can you blame me?" His voice was husky. "You make quite the picture, you know. I only wish I had the skill to capture this moment properly."

At that, she did look up, curiosity brightening her eyes. "What do you mean?"

Cecil felt an uncharacteristic flush creep up his neck. This wasn't how he'd planned to tell her, but then, Elizabeth had a way of drawing his secrets out before he was ready to share them.

"I've been...that is to say..." He cleared his throat. "I've taken up drawing. Or attempting to, at least."

"Drawing?" Elizabeth's eyes widened with genuine surprise. "When did this begin?"

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"About two months ago." He moved to sit beside her on the settee, careful not to disturb the sleeping puppy. "Do you remember that afternoon when Lord Ashworth was droning on about his new collection of Italian masters?"

"The afternoon I thought you'd fallen asleep with your eyes open?" A smile tugged at her lips.

"I wasn't sleeping," he admitted. "I was watching how the light played across your face during his tedious lecture. The way it caught in your hair, the subtle changes in your expression as you valiantly attempted to look interested..." He shook his head, smiling at the memory. "I couldn't stop thinking about how I wished I could capture that moment. So I... well, I hired an instructor. In secret."

Elizabeth's free hand found his, her fingers intertwining with his larger ones. "Cecil...why didn't you tell me?"

He brought their joined hands to his lips, pressing a kiss to her knuckles. "I wanted to wait until I had something worth showing you. Though I'm beginning to think that may take considerably longer than anticipated. Art, it seems, requires rather more patience than I'm accustomed to exercising."

"Will you show me?" she asked softly. "What you've done so far?"

Cecil hesitated, an unusual sight that made Elizabeth's heart flutter. This powerful man who commanded respect in every room he entered, who could reduce seasoned businessmen to stammering with a single raised eyebrow, was nervous about showing her his drawings.

"They're quite awful," he warned, but rose anyway, carefully extracting his hand from hers. "Promise you won't laugh?"

"I would never," she assured him, though her eyes sparkled with affection at his uncharacteristic uncertainty.

Percy stirred in her lap as Cecil crossed to his study, letting out a tiny yawn that made Elizabeth's heart melt all over again. By the time her husband returned, the puppy had resettled, nose tucked under his paw.

Cecil held a leather portfolio close to his chest, his knuckles white against the dark material. "Perhaps this isn't the best time?—"

"Cecil." Elizabeth's voice was gentle but firm. "Come here."

He moved back to her side as if drawn by an invisible thread, sinking down beside her on the settee. With careful movements, he opened the portfolio and withdrew several sheets of paper.

"They're just sketches," he said quickly. "Rough attempts, really. Nothing worth?—"

His words died as Elizabeth reached for the first drawing. It was her, caught in profile, her face turned toward a window they both recognized from their morning room. The lines were perhaps not as polished as a master's might be, but there was something captivating about the way he'd captured her expression—thoughtful, dreaming, with just a hint of a smile playing at her lips.

"Cecil," she breathed. "This is..."

"Terrible, I know." He reached to take it back, but she held it out of his reach.

"Beautiful," she corrected firmly. "You've captured... I can't explain it, but looking at this, I remember exactly what I was thinking that morning."

His eyes searched her face. "You do?"

"Mmhhh." She smiled softly. "I was thinking about you, actually. About how you'd looked at breakfast, all rumped and cross because your favorite tea blend had run out. And how even then, even at your most irritable, all I wanted was to kiss that frown right off your face."

The heat that flared in Cecil's eyes made her breath catch. "Did you now?" His voice had dropped to that low, velvet tone that never failed to make her shiver. "And here I thought you were contemplating something far more profound."

Elizabeth carefully set the drawings aside, mindful of the sleeping puppy in her lap. "I think," she said softly, "that you underestimate your talents, my lord. Both artistic and...otherwise."

"Do I?" Cecil's voice remained low, intimate, as he reached out to brush a stray curl from her cheek. "Perhaps you should enlighten me about these... other talents you speak of."

"Gladly." She turned her face into his touch, pressing a kiss to his palm. "Though I believe a demonstration might be more effective than mere words."

Percy chose that moment to wake, stretching and yawning before hopping down from Elizabeth's lap to explore his new surroundings once more. Cecil watched the puppy pad away, then turned back to his wife with darkened eyes.

"I believe," he murmured, sliding closer, "that you were about to demonstrate something?"

Elizabeth's breath caught at the heat in his gaze. Even after months of marriage, he could still make her heart race with just a look. "Was I? How forgetful of me."

"Minx." His hand cupped her cheek, thumb brushing across her lower lip. "Shall I remind you?"

"Please do."

The first brush of his lips against hers was gentle, almost reverent. Elizabeth sighed into the kiss, her hands coming up to rest against his chest. She could feel his heart thundering beneath her palm, matching the rapid beat of her own.

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"Elizabeth," he breathed against her mouth. "My darling, my love, my everything..."

She melted at the words, at the raw emotion in his voice. Her fingers curled into his cravat, pulling him closer as the kiss deepened. Cecil groaned softly, his free hand sliding down to her waist, drawing her against him.

"You are extraordinary," he murmured between kisses. "Do you know that? The way you accept all of me—even my terrible attempts at art..."

"Not terrible," she corrected, nipping lightly at his lower lip. "Beautiful. Like everything you do."

A small crash from across the room made them break apart. Percy had discovered the fireplace fender and was regarding it with profound suspicion, having apparently knocked it slightly askew.

Cecil laughed softly, resting his forehead against Elizabeth's. "I believe our new addition requires supervision."

"Mmm." She stole another quick kiss. "Much like his father, always getting into mischief when left unattended."

Cecil rose to rescue the fender from Percy's continued investigation, scooping up the puppy in one smooth motion. "Come here, you little troublemaker. I believe it's time we established some ground rules about appropriate behavior for a gentleman's companion."

Percy responded by licking his chin enthusiastically, causing Elizabeth to laugh. "Oh yes, he's definitely taking your instruction very seriously."

"Much like someone else I know," Cecil said pointedly, returning to the settee with the puppy tucked securely in his arms. "Someone who was supposed to be learning proper deportment from her governess but was instead climbing trees and reading forbidden novels."

"And yet you married me anyway." Elizabeth reached over to scratch Percy's ears. "Perhaps you have a weakness for the unmanageable ones."

"Perhaps I simply recognize true quality when I see it." His voice softened as he gazed at her. "Elizabeth...I want to paint you properly. Not just sketches, but a real portrait. You and Percy both, just as you were earlier, bathed in that perfect evening light."

Her heart skipped at the intensity in his eyes. "But you've only just started learning to draw..."

"Then it shall be my masterpiece to work toward." He shifted Percy to one arm so he could reach for her hand. "Something to practice for, to strive toward. Like being a good father." His thumb traced patterns on her palm. "I want to capture every moment with you, my love. Every smile, every laugh, every perfect imperfection that makes you uniquely, wonderfully you."

Elizabeth felt tears prick at her eyes. "Cecil..."

"I know it's foolish," he continued quickly. "A man of my position, taking up art at this age. Society will likely mock?—"

She silenced him with a kiss, pouring all her love and pride into the connection.

When she finally pulled back, both of them were breathing heavily.

"Let them mock," she said fiercely. "You are so much more than they could ever understand. My talented, surprising, wonderful husband." She squeezed his hand. "And you will be an amazing father. You already are, look."

She nodded toward Percy, who had fallen asleep in the crook of Cecil's arm, tiny paws twitching as he dreamed.

"We'll learn together," she continued softly. "All of it. The art, the parenting, everything. Just as we've learned everything else."

Cecil's free hand came up to cup her cheek, his touch infinitely tender. "What did I ever do to deserve you?"

"You loved me," she said simply. "Just as you were, just as I was. No pretense, no masks. Just us."

"Just us," he echoed, leaning in to kiss her again. This kiss was different from the passionate ones before—slower, deeper, full of promises for their future together.

A future that now included art supplies scattered among the business ledgers, a puppy sleeping by the fire, and countless moments of joy yet to be captured on paper and in their hearts.

When they finally parted, the room had grown dark around them, lit only by the gentle glow of the banked fire. Percy snuffled in his sleep, making them both smile.

"I love you," Cecil murmured, pressing his forehead to hers. "More than I could ever capture in any drawing or painting."

"Then you'll just have to keep practicing," Elizabeth teased softly. "We have a lifetime ahead of us, after all."

"A lifetime," he agreed, his voice rough with emotion. "And it still won't be enough time to show you just how much you mean to me."

"Oh, I don't know about that." She curled into his side, careful not to disturb Percy. "I think you're doing a rather good job of it so far."

As soon as they reached their chambers, Cecil kicked the door shut behind them, his heart pounding with a familiar anticipation. Elizabeth stood by the window, the moonlight casting an ethereal glow on her skin. The way she looked at him over her shoulder, eyes dark with desire, nearly undid him completely.

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"Do you know what you do to me, wife?" Cecil's voice was rough as he stalked toward her. "How maddening it is to watch you all day, knowing I cannot touch you as I wish?"

Elizabeth's lips curved into that teasing smile he adored. "And how do you wish to touch me, my lord?"

"Minx," he growled, coming up behind her. His hands settled on her waist, drawing her back against him. "You know precisely what you do to me. The way you looked at me during dinner..."

"I merely glanced your way once or twice," she protested, though her breath hitched as his lips found that sensitive spot behind her ear.

"Once or twice?" His chuckle was dark and promising. "You were practically undressing me with your eyes, darling. Not that I minded, of course." His hands slid up to cup her breasts through her gown. "Though I must say, I prefer the real thing."

Elizabeth gasped as his thumbs circled her nipples through the fabric. "Cecil...someone might hear..."

"Let them," he murmured against her neck. "I want everyone to know how thoroughly I pleasure my wife. How beautifully you come apart in my arms."

"You are absolutely wicked," she breathed, but her body arched into his touch.

"Only for you, my love." His hands worked at the fastenings of her gown. "Only ever

for you. Tell me what you want, Elizabeth. Tell me how to please you."

She turned in his arms, her fingers tangling in his cravat. "I want...I want you to kiss me properly. None of these teasing touches."

"As my lady commands." Cecil's smile was pure sin as he backed her toward their bed. "Though I warn you, once I start, I may not be able to stop."

"Then don't." Elizabeth's eyes held a challenge that made his blood burn. "Show me exactly what you've been thinking about all evening."

"Dangerous words, wife." He lifted her onto the bed, his hands sliding up her legs. "Are you certain you're prepared for the consequences?"

"Are you trying to frighten me, my lord?" Her smile was wicked as she began unbuttoning his waistcoat. "Because I assure you, I am quite capable of handling whatever you have planned."

"Is that so?" Cecil caught her hands, pressing them above her head as he leaned over her. "Then perhaps I should demonstrate exactly what I've been imagining. How I've dreamed of peeling away every layer of your proper facade until you're writhing beneath me, begging for my touch."

Elizabeth's breath caught at his words. "You seem very sure of yourself."

"I am." His free hand traced the neckline of her gown, fingers ghosting over her skin. "Because I know how your body responds to me. How you tremble when I touch you here..." His thumb brushed her nipple through the fabric, making her gasp. "How your breath catches when I kiss you here..." His lips found her pulse point. "How you moan when I..."

"Cecil!" She squirmed beneath him as his hand slid lower, bunching her skirts around her thighs.

"Yes, my love?" His voice was pure innocence, though his touch was anything but. "Is something troubling you?"

"You know very well what's troubling me," she managed, her voice breathy. "You're being deliberately cruel."

He laughed softly against her skin. "Cruel? I'm being thorough, darling. Savoring every moment, every sound you make." His fingers traced patterns on her inner thigh. "Would you rather I rushed? Took you hard and fast without proper appreciation?"

"I would rather you stopped talking and kissed me properly," Elizabeth demanded, making him grin.

"As my lady wishes." Cecil finally captured her mouth with his, swallowing her moan of relief.

The kiss was deep and thorough, a promise of pleasures to come. Elizabeth's hands fisted in his shirt, pulling him closer as his tongue swept into her mouth. He tasted of brandy and desire, intoxicating in ways she couldn't describe.

"Tell me what you want," he murmured between kisses. "Tell me how to please you, my love."

"I want..." She hesitated, still shy about voicing such things despite their months of marriage.

"Say it," he encouraged, nipping at her lower lip. "There's nothing to be ashamed of between husband and wife."

"I want to feel you," she whispered. "All of you. No more teasing."

Cecil's eyes darkened at her words. "As you wish, my darling. Though I warn you..." His smile turned wicked. "I intend to take my time worshiping every inch of you before I grant that particular request."

"You're still wearing far too many clothes," Elizabeth observed, her fingers working at his cravat. "How am I to properly appreciate my husband when he's so thoroughly covered?"

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Cecil laughed against her throat. "Impatient, are we?" His teeth grazed her pulse point, making her gasp. "And here I thought you enjoyed our little games of anticipation."

"Not tonight," she breathed, finally freeing him from his cravat. "Tonight I want..."

"Yes?" He pulled back to study her face, his eyes dark with desire. "Tell me what you want, my love. You know how I adore hearing you voice your desires."

Elizabeth's cheeks flushed beautifully. "I want to see you. All of you."

"As my lady commands." Cecil straightened, making quick work of his waistcoat and shirt. "Though I expect equal cooperation from you, darling. These gowns of yours are becoming increasingly complicated."

"That's because you keep destroying them," she pointed out, sitting up to help him with her laces. "Mrs. Winters was quite scandalized by the state of my blue silk last week."

His grin was unrepentant. "Worth every moment of her disapproval." His hands replaced hers on the laces, working with practiced ease. "Though I must say, you make it exceptionally difficult to maintain my control when you wear things like this."

"Do I?" Elizabeth's innocent tone was belied by the mischief in her eyes. "How fascinating. And here I thought you preferred me in simpler attire."

"Minx." He pressed a kiss to her newly exposed shoulder. "I prefer you in nothing at all, as you well know. These gowns are merely pretty wrapping paper to be carefully...or not so carefully...removed."

She shivered as more of her skin was revealed to the cool night air. "Cecil..."

"Yes, my love?" His fingers traced the line of her spine. "Something troubling you?"

"You're doing this deliberately," she accused, though there was no real anger in her voice. "Drawing it out to torment me."

"Torment?" He feigned offense. "I am simply being thorough in my appreciation of my beautiful wife." His lips followed the path of his fingers. "Would you deny me that pleasure?"

Elizabeth's laugh turned into a gasp as he found a particularly sensitive spot. "I would deny you nothing, as you well know. But I might expire from frustration if you continue at this pace."

"We can't have that." Cecil's voice held a wicked promise as he finally slid her gown from her shoulders. "What kind of husband would I be if I let my beloved wife expire from such a treatable condition?"

"An absolutely wretched one," she agreed, helping him push the heavy fabric away. "Though I must say, you seem to delight in bringing me to the brink of madness."

"Only because you're so enchanting when you're desperate for my touch." His hands skimmed over her stays. "The way your breath catches, how your skin flushes..." He pressed an open-mouthed kiss to her collarbone. "How you tremble when I do this..."

"Cecil!" She arched into his touch as his clever fingers found the laces of her stays.

"Yes, exactly like that." His smile was pure sin. "Tell me, my love...what would you have me do next? Would you like me to unlace you slowly, drawing out every moment? Or should I simply tear these bothersome garments away and have done with it?"

"Don't you dare," Elizabeth managed, though her voice was breathless. "I actually like these stays."

"More than you like what I plan to do once they're removed?" He nipped at her earlobe.

"You are impossible," she declared, but her hands were already helping him with the laces. "Absolutely impossible."

"And yet you love me." It wasn't a question, but his voice held a note of wonder that made her heart ache.

Elizabeth caught his face between her hands, forcing him to meet her eyes. "I do," she said softly. "More than I ever thought possible."

Something vulnerable flickered in Cecil's expression before he captured her mouth in a searing kiss. This wasn't like his earlier teasing kisses—this was deep and desperate, full of emotion neither of them quite dared to voice.

When they finally broke apart, both breathing heavily, Cecil rested his forehead against hers. "You undo me completely," he murmured. "Every time I think I have control of myself, you say something that makes me want to forget every careful plan."

"Then forget them," Elizabeth whispered, her fingers threading through his hair. "We don't need plans or games tonight. Just us."

His eyes darkened at her words. "You don't know what you're asking for."

"Don't I?" She smiled up at him, all traces of shyness gone. "I'm asking my husband to make love to me. To stop thinking so much and simply feel."

"Elizabeth..." There was a warning in his voice.

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"Yes?" She deliberately shifted beneath him, making him groan. "Something troubling you, my lord?"

"You," he growled, finally attacking the last of her laces with renewed purpose. "You trouble me constantly. Drive me to distraction with your wit and your beauty and your damnable ability to see right through every defense I build."

"There," Cecil announced triumphantly as the last of Elizabeth's stays finally gave way. "I believe that's a new record for unlacing without damage to the garment."

"Such restraint," Elizabeth teased, helping him slide the fabric away. "I'm impressed by your newfound patience, my lord."

His eyes darkened as he took in the sight of her in nothing but her thin shift. "Don't praise my patience yet, darling. The night is still young."

"And what exactly do you have planned for this young night?" She reached for the buttons of his shirt, her fingers working with deliberate slowness.

"Hmm." He pretended to consider this as her hands moved lower. "Perhaps I should demonstrate rather than explain."

Elizabeth's breath caught as his lips found her neck, trailing kisses down to her collarbone. "I do appreciate a thorough demonstration."

"I've noticed." His smile was wicked against her skin. "You've always been an exceptionally...eager student."

"Only because I have such an attentive teacher." She pushed his shirt from his shoulders, her hands splaying across his chest. "Though I must say, some of your lessons are rather scandalous."

Cecil laughed softly, the sound sending shivers down her spine. "Scandalous? My darling, you haven't seen scandalous yet." His hands found the hem of her shift. "Shall I show you what true scandal looks like?"

"Please do." Elizabeth's voice held a challenge that made his blood burn. "Though I warn you, I may require multiple demonstrations to fully grasp the concept."

"Temptress." He groaned as her nails scraped lightly across his chest. "You'll be the death of me with that clever tongue of yours."

"Oh?" Her smile was pure innocence. "And here I thought you rather enjoyed my clever tongue."

Cecil's eyes blazed at her bold words. "Elizabeth..."

"Yes, my lord?" She blinked up at him, the picture of wide-eyed innocence despite her state of undress.

He pushed her back onto the bed, his body covering hers. He trailed kisses down her neck, her collarbone, her breasts, his tongue laving her nipples, his teeth nipping lightly.

Elizabeth moaned, her body arching up to meet him, her legs wrapping around his waist. Cecil groaned, his hands gripping her bottom, his fingers digging into her soft flesh. He kissed her stomach, her hips, her thighs, his body moving downwards.

He hooked his fingers into the waistband of her drawers, pulling them down slowly,

his eyes never leaving hers. He tossed them aside, his gaze raking over her naked body. "Mine," he growled, his voice thick with possession. "All mine."

Elizabeth nodded, her breath coming in short gasps. "Yours, Cecil," she breathed. "Always yours."

Cecil grinned, a wolfish grin that sent a thrill coursing through her. He pushed her legs apart, his eyes feasting on her glistening folds. He leaned down, his tongue darting out to taste her. Elizabeth gasped, her hips bucking off the bed. Cecil chuckled, his hands gripping her hips, holding her steady as his tongue explored her, teased her, tasted her.

"Cecil!" Elizabeth cried out, her body writhing beneath him. He growled against her, the vibrations sending waves of pleasure coursing through her. His tongue found her sensitive nub, circling it, teasing it, before sucking it into his mouth.

Elizabeth screamed, her body convulsing as her climax hit her. Cecil held her steady, his tongue lapping at her, his fingers entering her, prolonging her pleasure.

When her body finally stilled, Cecil climbed up her body, his lips capturing hers in a fierce kiss. Elizabeth could taste herself on him, a musky, sweet taste that sent another wave of desire coursing through her.

Cecil kissed her slowly, languidly, his hands roaming over her body, stoking her desire once more. He pulled back slightly, his forehead resting against hers. "I want you on all fours darling. As if you're begging me to take you," he murmured, his voice thick with desire. "I want to see your beautiful bottom as I claim you."

Elizabeth gasped, her eyes widening at the image his words conjured. She nodded, her body already trembling with anticipation.

Cecil growled low in his throat, a sound of pure male satisfaction. He climbed off her, his hands gripping her hips, flipping her onto her stomach. He leaned down, his lips pressing against her shoulder, her spine, her lower back. He kissed her bottom, his teeth nipping lightly, his tongue soothing the sting.

Elizabeth gasped, her body arching up to meet him, her bottom pressing against his mouth. Cecil groaned, his hands gripping her cheeks, spreading them apart. He kissed her intimately, his tongue darting out to taste her.

Elizabeth cried out, her body convulsing at the shocking pleasure. Cecil chuckled, his hands holding her steady as his tongue explored her, teased her, tasted her. He trailed kisses up her spine, his body covering hers, his manhood pressing against her entrance.

"Cecil," Elizabeth breathed, her body trembling with need. "Please, Cecil."

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:01 am

Cecil groaned, his hips flexing, his manhood entering her slowly, inch by inch. Elizabeth moaned, her body stretching to accommodate him, her hips pushing back to meet him.

Cecil held her steady, his body claiming hers, his hips moving in a slow, steady rhythm. Elizabeth moaned, her body moving with him, her hips meeting his thrusts. Cecil groaned, his pace increasing, his body claiming hers, his hips slapping against her bottom.

"Elizabeth," he growled, his body tensing, his climax approaching. He leaned down, his teeth finding her shoulder, biting lightly. Elizabeth cried out, her body convulsing around him, her climax hitting her hard and fast.

Cecil roared, his body following hers into bliss, his seed spilling into her. He collapsed on top of her, his body slick with sweat, his breath coming in ragged gasps.

Elizabeth lay beneath him, her body sated, her heart full. She turned her head, her lips pressing against his cheek. "I love you, Cecil," she whispered, her voice thick with emotion.

Cecil pulled back slightly, his eyes soft as they met hers. "I love you too, Elizabeth," he murmured, his voice hoarse with spent passion. "More than words can express."

The End?