



The Replacement Duchess

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Category: Romance, Adult, Historical

Description: "She does not want you, Your Grace. Can I take her place?"

A suspected murderer, Duke Colin did not expect the hellion that crashed into him in the garden. Nor the way she kissed him and fled into the night...

After realizing she accosted a criminal, Diana wants to forget it all and go back to raising her sister in her deadbeat father's stead. Only to find the man at her door, apparently betrothed to her sister. So she does what she must to protect her: she takes her place. Yet she knows better than to trust her new husband. Even if their kiss haunts her every moment...

*If you like powerful Dukes, loving Duchesses and a marvelous depiction of the majestic Regency and Victorian era, then *The Replacement Duchess* is the novel for you.

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PROLOGUE

“God, why did he even come back?” Samantha asked, grunting.

The girls’ father had disappeared for two years, then returned, and seemingly was determined to make his two daughters all the poorer for it. It began when he sent his sister away once more after she had cared for them as if they were her own, then he went on to not care for either of them at all, and then acted as though they were the ones at fault for that.

“Let us just get him inside, and then we will discuss that later,” Diana replied, pulling the left half of his body towards the door whilst her sister pulled the right.

It had been seven and ten years since his return. One would assume that in those seven and ten years, the Earl might have had enough time to reflect, and to realize that he had two girls to care for, but he never had. Instead, he had cast them off to the maid they shared, who for all her kindness was not what one might call intelligent. The two girls had effectively been left to fend for themselves, and with Diana being the oldest, it had been on her shoulders.

Samantha cared a great deal about that; Diana never did.

“Why on earth do they even serve him?” Samantha huffed as they dragged him. “You would think that they would know better than to let him get himself into such a state as this.”

“They make money, I suppose. I imagine that he is one of their very best customers.”

“Yes, a gentlemen’s club would probably thrive on drunkards.”

“I am not a drunkard,” he slurred, and Diana dropped his arm.

“Very well,” she said firmly, “walk inside on your own, then.”

“I will,” he grumbled, trying in vain to haul himself to his feet.

On the fourth failed attempt, Diana pitied him and signaled to her sister to grab him again.

“So,” Samantha said carefully, “the Beckwith ball is on Friday, and I was thinking that we could both attend?”

“You would think that with how often we do this, we would have found a better method by now.”

“You are avoiding my question.”

“Perhaps you should take his arms and I take his legs? We would have to lift him, of course, but it might be easier.”

“Diana!”

“Yes?”

“The ball?”

“Yes, I hope that you shall enjoy it. I hope that you will find a wonderful suitor and escape this wretched house.”

“It is not wretched.”

“It is a little.”

It was true. Their house was not worn down by any means. They had restored it since the fire, and it had been decorated twice during their aunt’s stay, but upon his return, their father had refused to have anything fixed or renovated. It all had to stay the same, no matter what.

“Well, if you truly do think that.” Samantha smiled, though she was panting from her efforts. “Then it is all the better that you attend the ball with me. You can escape for a while, too.”

“I would hardly call that an escape. I do not know how you do it.”

“It is easy once you get over the first few comments. Not only that, but it is quite delightful to meet all of those people. Surely you must see the beauty in it?”

“Not at all,” Diana huffed.

“Then it shall be quite difficult for you to make a match for yourself. That means you will not leave this house, either. Isn’t that what you want?”

“It is what I want for you. It does not matter what I do.”

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“You are wrong, Sister. It matters a great deal to me. I want you to be happy.”

“Then go to the ball without me, find love, and make a life of your own. It is all I have ever wanted. Besides, if I am gone, who will take care of him?”

“I can take care of myself,” their father spat, and the two girls sighed.

“Oh, no, is that him?” their maid, Elizabeth, asked, rushing to their aid. “This is the third time this week, and it is Wednesday!”

“Believe me, we know,” Diana sighed. “Now, perhaps I am right and it would be better to loft.”

“It would certainly be better for his clothing.” Elizabeth nodded. “As the person responsible for cleaning those grass stains out of his shirts, it is certainly my preference.”

“Wonderful.” Diana nodded. “Then it is settled. Samantha, you take his arms, I shall take his legs, and Elizabeth if you could support the middle.”

“Is that... appropriate?”

“If it is between that and cleaning a green shirt that was once white, which would you prefer?”

The maid’s preference, as it turned out, was the former.

They propped the Earl up on the sofa, with him still grumbling that he was fine, that there was no need for such fuss, that he required a drink, and then left the room, locking the door behind them.

“He shall be furious later,” Samantha said quietly.

“He shall be asleep within ten minutes, more like,” Diana replied. “And he will not remember a thing. He never does.”

“I know, but I worry that one day he will, and then what will he do?”

“In an ideal world, he might learn something, but I will not hold my breath for that.”

“Nor will I, but there is one thing that I can count on, is there not?”

“Please do not tell me anything more about this ball,” Diana grimaced. “I do not wish to attend. I do not charm like you do.”

“If I charmed even half as much as you claim I do, I would not be twenty and unmarried.”

“You are unmarried simply because you choose to be. I know that if you tried, you would be perfectly fine. Father may have squandered a lot of money on his... indulgences, but at least he has not touched our dowries, so you at least have that. You might as well have mine, too.”

“I will pretend not to have heard that last part, Di, for you will find a husband of your own one day. Besides, I do not want a husband because it means that I would have to leave you. I do not wish to do that, it is not right. Not after everything that you did for me.”

“I hardly did much for you.”

“You taught me everything!”

By now, their maid was at least out of earshot.

“You are the reason that I can read and write, and the reason that I can speak French and that I can do some mathematics and play the violin without it sounding like a very unfortunate cat. Should I end up a wife, it shall be all thanks to you for preparing me so well.”

“And it will have been an honor to do so, I assure you. Samantha, I did not do all of those things just to have you wait for me. I did it so that you would shine. I want that for you, and so I need you to at least try.”

“And I will, just as soon as you do the same. If I must find a husband, then so should you. I have to play the part of the perfect lady, and so it is only fair that you do the same.”

Samantha rarely won a battle of wits, but Diana had to admit defeat. There was nothing that she could say to refute her words; she had expectations, and so she had to meet them herself in order to be fair.

“One ball,” she sighed. “One. I will endure a single night of the looks and the comments just for you, and nothing more, simply because I do not think my heart could take anything more than that.”

“You are being dramatic.”

“Only slightly.”

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“Very well. One it is, and then when you have a wonderful night and you are begging me to attend another together, I shall laugh brightly and remind you that I told you so.”

“If you insist, but that will not happen. I have done all of this before, remember?”

“That was different. That was seven years ago, when Father had forced you out when you did not wish to be and you were seen in London for the first time since?”

Neither one of them could bring themselves to say it, even then.

“What I mean to say is,” Samantha continued, “it was a shock to them all, and they were bound to talk. This time is different, though. This time, I shall be there too, and it will be the two of us facing it, if there is even anything to say at all.”

“Of course, there will be things to say about us.”

“With all of the scandals in London? You cannot believe that. There will be some viscount that has had an illegitimate heir, or a daughter of some duke that hopes to marry a commoner, or some other such thing that is far more interesting than the two Winston sisters re-entering Society.”

“I do not believe that even slightly.”

“And you are probably correct not to.” Samantha grinned. “But we will not know for sure if we do not try. If it is truly terrible, then we shall leave immediately and never attend another ball, and I shall never pester you again.”

“Yet another thing that I wholeheartedly do not believe.”

“Well, this time you are wrong. I promise not to mention it ever again if you truly do hate it.”

Diana hated that she couldn't say no to her sister.

The following day, the two of them ransacked their wardrobes, searching for a gown each. There had not been any money for their clothes in a long time; their father was positive that it was a waste of money, as they would only outgrow them. Neither sister felt like telling him that they were ladies now and would not grow any taller than they were. It would have been pointless to do so.

“What about this?” Samantha asked, pulling a pale green gown out of the pile. “This would be perfect for you. It is the same color as your eyes.”

“It is also a size too small. It always was. I shall already be quite uncomfortable all evening, and so I should like my gown to not add to that.”

“That is a shame, because it is the best gown we seem to have.”

“Then you can wear it. You are smaller than me, and you ought to outshine me anyway, as you are the one on the marriage mart.”

“I could never outshine you,” she sighed. “But it is such a lovely gown. Very well, I shall. And you can wear... this one!”

Diana's breath caught in her throat. In her sister's hands, there was a light blue gown, one that was all too familiar to her even if Samantha did not recognize it.

“What is it?” Samantha asked. “Do you not like it?”

“I like it all too much. It’s Aunt Roberta’s.”

It had been one of her favorites, and throughout the two years that she had stayed with them, Diana had watched her walk around in it and dream of having one of her own one day.

“Then you simply must wear it.” Samantha nodded firmly. “If it fits you, then it is meant to be. Let us try it on you!”

“No!” Diana yelled, and her sister jumped back slightly.

“What is it?”

“It is just so perfect. It is not mine to wear. Besides, what if it does not fit me at all? It shall only waste time.”

“But it looks to be your size. What is the worst that could happen?”

I could look at myself, Diana thought to herself, and not be half the lady she was.

“It isn’t the right one,” she replied, shaking her head. “What about this one?”

“That hideous yellow one? That simply will not do. No, it will be the blue one. At least try it on.”

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Diana once more cursed the fact that she couldn't say no to her sister, and with a sigh allowed her to put it on her. She looked at herself in the mirror, only to gasp at her reflection. It had been her aunt's dress, but it was as though it had been made for her.

"This fits... all too well," she breathed.

"Then it is settled! This is the one that you shall wear. How wonderful, we both have incredible dresses, and nobody shall be any the wiser that they are not new."

They would assume it to be the case, of course, but at least it would be speculation and nothing more. There would be much speculation about the two of them, but one look at herself in her aunt's blue gown and she knew that she would be able to hold herself together through it. If Aunt Roberta could leave her life behind for two years to raise two girls as if they were her own, even if one of them was determined to be difficult, then Diana could manage a ball. She would not enjoy it, and she would never wish to attend a second, but she would get through it and that was all that mattered.

"Now for the hardest part," she sighed.

"Dazzling theton?"

"No." She laughed sadly. "Finding a way to get Father there."

"Surely he will not drink tomorrow? He must know how important it is that we make a good impression."

"The man has never cared for the impression he gives, you know that."

“No, I know. I thought that maybe with all of the pressure for us to marry, though, he might be different.”

“He might,” Diana replied, though she was not at all convinced of it.

“And if he does not,” Samantha said softly. “What do we do then?”

“I will fix it.”

There was a confidence in Diana’s voice that she did not feel, but she had to make her sister believe her. She would find a way to make Samantha happy no matter what, even if it meant crossing oceans for her.

“Or...” Samantha laughed sadly. “We could live out the rest of our days as spinsters. I do not think it would be too terrible, you know.”

“Yes, you do.”

“On the contrary! It would allow me to spend my time doing things I’d rather do, like reading or traveling.”

“You cannot travel, you know that.”

“No, but a girl can dream, can she not?”

“Samantha,” Diana asked shakily, “you do wish to marry, do you not?”

“In all honesty, Sister,” Samantha replied carefully, “no.”

“What?”

“I know, I know. It is what you have wanted for me all of my life, but the truth is... I do not want to be a wife, or a mother. I cannot think of a worse fate for myself than being some gentleman’s lady. I want to have a life in the real world, and be responsible for myself.”

“You do not want that. I know that it might sound inviting, but it is not half as wonderful as you might think. It would be incredibly difficult.”

“And you have prepared me for that. Let us not forget that you were the one that made me so accomplished. You made me more than that, though. You made me determined. I could do it, I know that I could.”

“I love that you are a dreamer,” Diana said gently, taking her sister’s hands in her own, “and perhaps one day that shall be possible, but for now you must be reasonable. A husband and children and a home.”

She watched her sister’s face fall, and she couldn’t stand it, but she knew that she was doing the right thing. Samantha would not have to miss anything like she had, and she had already done all that she could to ensure that. They had come too far to fail now, and it would not happen.

“You are disappointed now,” Diana said gently, “and perhaps you are even angry with me now, and that is perfectly alright. One day, you will be in your drawing room and one of your little ones will come stumbling in and crawl into your arms, and you will feel as though everything was worth it, and you will find such happiness.”

“Do you truly think so?”

“Of course I do. There is nothing in the world that I am more certain of.”

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Samantha nodded with a smile, beginning to put the gowns away. “Very well. That can all begin tomorrow, for the both of us.”

Diana simply hoped that she was right.

CHAPTER 1

“Alright,” Diana sighed as they approached the manor. “Now that I am here, and there is no possible way that I can turn back, you have to tell me something.”

“Anything.” Samantha nodded, positively buzzing.

“What is the real reason that we are here?”

Samantha blinked at her. “To enjoy our evening, of course. What other motive could I possibly have?”

“I do not know, but you have been acting out of sorts all day, and it is not the jitters one has before a ball. It is far more extreme.”

“Perhaps I am simply very excitable for no reason other than the fact that you and I will have a splendid evening.”

“Sister, I know you better than anyone, and I know perfectly well that something is on your mind. Now, you can either tell me or have it stay with you all evening without release, and I know which of the two I would prefer.”

“Alright, I will tell you, but you mustn’t tell Father.”

“And when have I ever done that? Look at him, he is already searching for the whiskey.”

“Oh, heavens,” the younger sister huffed. “I thought we might have succeeded completely.”

“At least he has arrived like a decent human being. We might have an hour or so before we are chased away.”

“Then that should be enough time.”

“Enough time for what, exactly?”

“Well, you see, there is a professor here, and?—”

“Please do not tell me you wish to marry a professor of all things.”

“What? No, of course not! No, I was simply hoping to meet with him and discuss something with him. I read one of his papers last week, and it has inspired me, save for the fact that there is a part I did not completely understand.”

“And... And that is why you are like this?”

“I didn’t think anyone would notice.” Samantha grimaced slightly. “I ought to calm myself before I meet him. It would be most undignified to be in such a state when in front of a scholar. He will already think that I’m a fool.”

“He will think no such thing. You are so intelligent, Samantha, anyone can see that.”

“But it is nothing in comparison with gentlemen that attended university. Oh, could you imagine it, Di?”

“The thought has never once crossed my mind. I had other tasks at hand, such as preparing you for marriage, even though it appears that that is?—”

“The last thing on my mind, yes.”

“Well, you wanted to attend this ball, and I have done my part and come along. Now, if you do not mind, I wish to receive all of the glares and speculation at once so that we might be done with it.”

“As you wish!” Samantha grinned, giving her sister’s arm a squeeze.

Samantha’s enthusiasm was quite infectious, and had Diana felt even the smallest amount of desire to have been there that night, it may have passed on to her. However, she did not wish to be there, to play a game of pretend until she could go back to her life as a spinster.

After all, with nothing to lose, you can only ever win.

And as much as Diana had wanted to believe her sister, and that nobody would bat an eye about their presence, she knew that it would not be the case, and she was proven right the second they entered.

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“Is that—no, it cannot be...”

“That is not the Winston sisters, is it? I thought they passed away?”

“No, though their poor mother did.”

“A fire, wasn’t it? Horrible.”

“No, what is horrible is the beast of a gentleman that they call their father. You know, I heard that he trapped the late Countess inside on purpose.”

Samantha seemed not to hear any of it, continuing to walk through the ballroom as if nothing was being said at all. Diana was fortunate that in the training of her younger sister, she had also learned a great deal of patience, because had she not, then she would have been responsible for the removal of her entire family.

“You mustn’t speculate,” another voice came. “Though I must admit, I had also heard that the young ladies had passed.”

“Yes, their father abandoned them, and then whilst staying with their aunt, they caught fevers and never recovered.”

“Well, here they are, alive and well. I suppose that shows you just how ridiculous gossip can be.”

Diana would have been grateful for that last comment if it were not punctuated by laughter. It was as though they were treating her life as some hilarious anecdote, as if

the entire point of their little pastime was to mock others. She hated it, and she especially hated that they would be getting through it unscathed.

She hated theton. She hated the airs and graces and falseness of it all, but she adored her sister, so it would have to be alright. It would only be for one evening, and then Samantha could make contact with the professor and then everything could go back to the way it was, not that she particularly liked the way it was either.

“It is quite warm in here,” she said with a falsely nonchalant tone.

“It is your nerves,” Samantha replied. “I am not surprised, though I will say that I am astonished that you held your tongue. In fact, you keeping yourself quiet was the only reason I managed to do so myself.”

“It was the same for me.”

“Horrid old ladies,” she scoffed. “And as for the gentlemen, I should think that when they can do anything they wish to, they would do so, rather than engaging in such ridiculousness. Why, if I were a man?—”

“Not here,” Diana hissed. “Not now.”

“But it is true. If men could simply spend their time doing all of the things that they could do, instead of passing judgment on women, then perhaps we might actually be able to accomplish more as a whole. Do you not agree?”

“Of course I do, but now is not the time for all of that. Not when this evening shall be difficult enough as it is.”

“I suppose not. Are you alright? I know you have nerves and all, but you are pale.”

“I think it is my corset. Tricky things to breathe in, are they not?”

“I hardly think it is that. Besides, perhaps if you wore one every day, as is expected of you, it might not trouble you so.”

“Then perhaps I am truly going to catch a fever and pass away, just like that gentleman thought we had done.”

“You are not in the slightest bit entertaining, I hope you know that.”

“I rather see myself as a fool right now. Do not forget that I am here for you. I will not prevent you from having a wonderful evening, but beyond that, I will do what I must to endure this.”

“You speak as if you are to be executed.”

“Am I not?”

“Diana, I know that this is not your idea of fun and that you are being a wonderful sister in being here with me tonight, but would it be possible for you to at least try to enjoy yourself? It is a ball.”

“I cannot enjoy myself, not when every member of the ton is scowling at us.”

“And who are they? Why do you care what they think of us? Our postures are correct, we are pretty young ladies, and we are intelligent. Even if they do truly have an issue with either of us, it shows an awful lot more about themselves than it ever could us.”

“Samantha, I know that you are right, but?—”

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“Then do not argue. I can see the professor—he is just over there! Would you like to accompany me?”

“No, thank you,” Diana replied, although she had to admit that some intelligent conversation was precisely what she needed at that moment. “It is your moment, and I would hate to intrude.”

“Nonsense! I would love for you to speak with him too. It may even give me some credibility, prove that my family is not a complete lost cause.”

“We are not lost causes!”

But they were. They were, and they knew it, and it seemed that they did too. They were shut-ins, motherless, and practically fatherless. In fact, fatherless would almost be preferable to the drunkard that they would be faced with when they found him. There was no amount of airs and graces that could excuse that, and sometimes Diana didn't know why she ever tried in the first place.

“Diana, you really are pale. Can I maybe fetch you a refreshment?”

“No, go and see that gentleman of yours, I insist. I will be right here when you are done.”

“Are you quite sure?”

No, she was not. Not at all.

“Yes, of course, now go.”

Even with the small laugh she had injected into her words, she knew that her sister didn't fully believe her, but either way, she turned and walked towards the professor, leaving her alone.

It was not terrible, being alone. Diana quite enjoyed it; it gave her time to think and dream, although as of late she had been thinking too much and dreaming too little. Besides aiding Samantha and helping run her household, there was hardly anything for her to do, so her free time was typically spent alone, in silence, thinking.

“Good evening, Miss,” a voice came. “Is something wrong?”

She looked up to see a gentleman standing before her. In truth, the first thing that she noticed was the way his pale blue eyes stood out from his tanned complexion and mess of dark hair, but she couldn't tell herself that. He towered over her, though she had to admit that for the first time that evening, she did not feel at all threatened.

“Not at all,” she said quickly, “I was simply going to go to the refreshments table.”

“I wouldn't if I were you. The lemonade here tastes... well, it leaves a lot to be desired.”

“Is it too sour? I hate it when lemonade is like that.”

“Incredibly so. In fact, I am simply grateful that nobody had to bear witness to the face I made upon taking a sip. I do hope that that plant over there appreciates it more than I do.”

“You did not!”

“Of course I did, why wouldn’t I? I did not like it, and I am not going to stand here all evening holding a glass of lemonade that I am not going to drink. Is that what you would do?”

“Yes,” she bluffed. “Now if you’ll excuse me, I am to dance.”

“Are you?” He eyed her carefully. “Because I do not see any names on your dance card.”

She quickly put her hands behind her back, feeling her cheeks flame. “He did not write it down.”

“To be sure. Well, he is a fool, because if I were him, I would have written my name three times and had you to myself for the evening.”

“A charmer, is that what you are?”

“Something of the sort.”

“A rake?”

“Someone that requires an escape for the evening. Perhaps we might leave it there?”

“I am more than happy to. I could use an escape myself.”

She willed herself to stop talking, to stop telling a stranger so much about herself when she had never, ever been the sort of person that did, but he seemed so kind that she could not help herself.

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“What are you running from?” he asked.

“For a start.” She laughed. “Attendees here that are sourer than the lemonade.”

“I could not agree more. Horrible things, aren’t they?”

“Aren’t we,” she sighed. “Normally, I can ignore the fact that I am supposedly one of them, but when I have to stand here among them, it is impossible.”

“So, you are...?”

“None of your concern.”

“Well, since you shall be dancing tonight, allegedly, one can assume you are unmarried, so that is a start.”

“And as you are so determined to speak with an unmarried lady, even offering to dance with her, one can assume the same of you.”

“A right assumption to make.”

“So what is it that you want from me?”

“A conversation, is that a crime?”

When the conversation pertained to the life of a spinster, Diana thought that it quite well ought to be. She did not want to answer his unending questions, or make small

talk and smile politely until she was blue in the face. She wanted her sister to finish her conversation so that they could return home, but that did not appear to be happening any time soon.

She realized this as she saw her sister hand an empty glass to a gentleman, who exchanged it for another. She always was a charmer.

“Alright,” she huffed, “I do not mean to sound condescending, or unkind, or any other such thing, but I am not happy to be here, and I am only forcing myself to be in order to make my sister happy. I am not a lady that cavorts around making conversation.”

“I could tell. That is why I thought you might.”

“Do not think of me at all!” she snapped. “I understand that you seem to enjoy trying to act the fool and play the charmer, but it is not an act I wish to be involved with. I simply wish to get through this evening and go home.”

“You are wrong.”

“About my feelings? Who are you to dictate them?”

“I am talking about your opinion of me.” He smirked. “I am not a fool. I understand you rather well, at least. Now, if you wish to be miserable all of your life, then you are welcome to do so, but I think you would be far prettier if you put on a smile like the other ladies here. Maybe then you would not be a spinster.”

“Excuse me?”

“I told you I understood you. A bitter spinster, that is right, isn’t it?”

“You do not know anything about me.”

“Then why are you scarlet?”

“Because...” she stammered. “Because you are speaking to me, and I wish that you would stop. Is that too much to ask?”

“It is when you are such excellent conversation.”

“I am not. You certainly are not, in any case, and I wish to be alone.”

“Then be my guest, but your sister is clearly enjoying herself, and so you might have that loneliness that you so crave for a good long while.”

“That is all the better,” she snapped, turning to leave.

She wished that she had followed her sister, even if it would have meant standing on the outskirts of their conversation and not truly being a part of it. At least then she might have been saved from this gentleman who had no reason to be as close to her as he was.

Not that she had noticed such a thing, of course.

CHAPTER 2

Diana had meant every word that she had said. She did not want to be around him, and he was not at all interesting, and she wanted to be alone. Thus, escaping to the gardens made perfect sense.

And yet, as she listened to the others in attendance, she couldn't help but feel that horrible sense of longing once more—longing to be a part of things, longing to not be under their judgment. It did not matter how little she valued their opinion, she did value it at least a little, and it was enough for it to have eventually gotten to her.

The gentleman couldn't have known that of course. He was likely the same as everyone else in his thoughts on the matter. She was nothing more than an unfortunate girl from an unfortunate family, and she was unable to do what her younger sister could and break away from that.

She wondered what Samantha was discussing with the professor and his companions. Her sister could have picked up on any old thing and discussed it for hours; that was just how she was, and in some ways, Diana envied that. She did not, of course, envy the fact that there was nothing Samantha could do with all of the knowledge in her mind, but at least she had something to begin with.

There had already been one dance that evening, and she knew a second one was to begin, meaning they were only halfway through the evening. She would have to go through it all for longer, and she didn't want to, and it made her feel utterly ridiculous.

“There are those that cannot even feed themselves,” she whispered to herself. “This is a privilege. Act like it.”

“It isn’t the privilege that you think it is,” the voice came once again.

“Was I not clear enough?” she snapped, turning to the same tall gentleman that she had walked away from mere moments ago.

“You certainly were, but I did not want to leave things how they were.”

“I am perfectly happy to. That is my preference, in fact.”

“Then at least tell me your name.”

“Do you honestly mean to say that you do not know who I am?” she asked.

He eyed her carefully, but it was how she felt. It had certainly seemed as though everyone knew who she was when they had entered the ballroom, and he was all too interested in her for her not to question why.

“Well, do you not know who I am?” he asked in return, and she blinked.

No, she did not. She did not know anyone in the town save for herself, her sister, her father, and her aunt. Everyone else was utterly inconsequential unless they were making some sort of remark about her mother.

“There.” He smiled triumphantly. “Then might we assume that it is entirely possible not to know someone even if there are others that do?”

“I suppose,” she grumbled. “Very well, my name is Lady Diana Winston, the eldest daughter of the Earl of Colton.”

“It is a pleasure to meet you.”

“For the first and last time,” she sighed, rolling her eyes. “I do believe that it is now your turn to speak.”

“You are right in supposing that.” He laughed. “Colin Novak, the Duke of Abaddon.”

“You are a duke?”

“Yes,” he replied, though he did not seem all too proud of it.

“Well then, goodnight, Your Grace.”

“Why are you so eager to leave?”

“Why are you the exact perfect opposite of prim and proper? Is it not your duty to be an upstanding citizen?”

“What am I doing that is improper, exactly?”

“You are out in the dark with a lady, alone.”

“And you with a gentleman, and so I hardly think that you are in any position to talk.”

“Oh, I suppose you are right.”

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“Besides, there is nobody here. They are all watching the dance. There is only you and I out here, which is only one more than you might have preferred, and so I think you might be able to find peace with that.”

“You might see it as one more, but I see it as twice as many. It sounds far more that way, does it not?”

“Well, when you put it that way, I can see the problem. Whatever will you do?”

“I shall leave and find my sister.”

“What does she even want to speak about with that professor?”

“I am not entirely sure, she did not wish to bore me with it, even though she could not have done that. She is most interesting when she speaks of her passions. I would assume the current topic of conversation is science, as she so loves it.”

“Science?” he echoed. “She is a debutante, is she not?”

“It may come as a surprise to you, but ladies are more than capable of having their own minds and passions beyond the art of embroidery.”

“To be sure,” he said quickly. “Forgive me, I was only surprised that she had chosen science of all things.”

“It was never my preference, either. Sometimes I wonder if that is why she chose it as her favorite subject, but that is unfair to her. She also adores reading and

mathematics, and?—”

“Do you talk of anything other than your sister and your desire to be alone?”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Well, it seems that you can only speak about one of the two matters. That is not necessarily a bad thing, but it is something I have noticed.”

“We have had but one conversation, Your Grace.”

“Yes, but?—”

“And I must say, you have not told me all too much about yourself either.”

“There is not much to tell. I am a duke, and that is all you ladies ever care about.”

She scoffed at that, and she knew that he heard her.

“I could not care less about your title.” She laughed. “Why would it be of any consequence to me?”

“Because you are of marrying age. An unmarried duke should be held above all, should it not?”

“You certainly think rather highly of yourself. No, an unmarried prince would be seen in higher regard. In any case, it is of no consequence to me because I am not of marrying age, in spite of what you might think. I am a spinster.”

“You are hardly a spinster. You could have fooled me, at least.”

“I am five and twenty with no marriage prospects. I am a spinster. That is perfectly fine.”

“Why is that?”

“Because...” she said, trying to think of a good reason. “Because my sister is my priority. Not only that, but our father is... unwell. It is better that I remain at home and care for him.”

“Is that not a task for your mother?”

She bristled. She had heard so many times that her mother should have done different things, as if what had happened was her fault and not a horrible accident.

“My mother passed away when I was young,” she whispered.

“Oh, oh my, I do apologize.”

“It is alright,” she replied with a weak smile and tears in her eyes. “You couldn’t have known.”

“No, but I should not have assumed, especially given that...”

“Given that what?”

“It is unimportant. Regardless, I should know better.”

“Well, all is forgiven.”

She hated that the mere mention of her mother had upset her so. It had been almost twenty years since she lost her, and no matter how much she tried to forget about what had happened, she almost couldn't help but blame her mother too. She shouldn't have been left like that. It wasn't fair, nor had it been fair to Samantha.

She scolded herself. It had never been their mother's fault. It had been their father's.

“So, do you suppose that we might start again?”

“No,” she said softly, shaking her head, “I do not like to start again. I cannot start again anymore. I just want to keep moving forward.”

“You are strong, Lady Diana. Do not forget that.”

It felt strange that he said that to her like that. It was as he said—he did not know her, and all that she could speak of was her sister and her spinsterhood, and now her mother. She truly did not want to be there with him.

“Thank you, Your Grace.”

“You know, I am still adjusting to that, the title. It is not something I was expecting to have.”

“Were you not prepared from birth for it?”

“Not exactly, but that hardly matters now.”

“Perhaps we have more in common than we think.” She laughed softly. “Neither of us was ready for the lives we must lead, and neither of us thinks that it matters.”

“I suppose you are right. I must say, though, that it is a wonder that you are unmarried. You are not unfortunate-looking, and you are more than capable in conversation. Given that you seem so proud of your sister, one can only assume that it was you who helped her there, so you must be quite intelligent too.”

“That changes nothing.”

“You are a lady of marriageable age no matter what you might think, and you are tolerable. The gentlemen in that ballroom should have proposed to you the second they saw you.”

“Well, that would be a question for those gentlemen, I suppose. In any case, I am perfectly content to be unmarried. It gives me freedom, which is something that a married lady does not have.”

“An unhappily married lady, to be sure, but there are husbands that do not limit their wives.”

“Which is a chance that I do not wish to take. As long as I am alone, I need only answer to myself. I need not be meek and simper to my husband and cater to his every need. It may come as a surprise to you, Your Grace, but we are not all so

desperate to do that.”

“And yet you are happy to do so for your father?”

“That is quite different. He raised me.”

“Be that as it may, you are limiting yourself. Do you not agree?”

“I do not. There is no difference at all between caring for a father and caring for a husband, save for the fact that a father has been responsible for his daughter and has therefore at least earned it. You do not deserve a life of luxury simply because you marry a lady.”

“It certainly feels that way at times,” he sighed.

“Are they awful?” she asked, laughing again. “I can imagine how young ladies are in your presence. They likely see you as a way out of their situations, or perhaps even a way to a better life than their already wonderful ones.”

“It is something like that. Sometimes I look at them and I see it, that desperation to not become a spinster, and I wonder why they are made to feel that way in the first place. Perhaps that is why I am so puzzled by you.”

“Puzzled? I should think I have made my position quite clear.”

“You certainly have, and yet you are still here. You are in a dark garden with a stranger, and you are doing nothing about it even if you continue to say that you must.”

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“Because if we were to be seen, I would be ruined.”

“Is that not what you want?”

“Not when my sister must marry,” she huffed. “I will not destroy her in the process of whatever terrible things I do.”

“Is this so terrible?” he asked, brushing her arm with the tips of his fingers.

Perhaps it was because she had grown tired, or that she hadn’t felt anything beyond contempt in a long time, or even that she had never been touched before, not by a gentleman at least, but his touch felt like lightning against her skin.

She could feel her breathing grow shallow, and her heart pounding. She was aware that they had been close, far too close, but she never would have expected him to close the gap between them. What caught her even more off guard was how much she liked it.

“Your Grace,” she whispered.

“Lady Diana,” he replied softly.

She shook her head, hoping her thoughts would leave as she did. This was improper and asking for trouble. No matter how much she thought she might like him, or how much she enjoyed the feeling of him, it was wrong of her to be there, and she needed to leave.

“I must go.”

“But—”

“No,” she snapped. “No, this is wrong of me. I am risking my sister’s future by being here with you. Being here right now is a very, very bad idea.”

“And what if a bad idea is precisely what you need?”

And maybe it was because she had never thought of that before, or because she knew in a way that he was right, but she decided to close the gap entirely. She hadn’t even realized what she had done until his lips had been on hers for quite some time, and for whatever reason, he had given in to her and had kissed her back, perhaps even more intently.

This couldn’t be wrong, at least that was what she told herself, because the gentleman’s lips on hers certainly felt anything but. Besides, it was perfectly normal for a lady of her age to kiss a gentleman, provided of course that she was married to him, but that was a mere detail.

But then she thought of how she was risking Samantha’s future for a gentleman she was not even sure if she liked at all, and in any case one that she would never see again. But she did not care. He was there and he was nice to her, but he was making her question things that she could not question and so she had to quieten him in some way.

If only she hadn’t thought of that method first.

She pulled away suddenly, her face showing confusion and perhaps even anger, and she noticed that his expression was one of shock, plain and simple.

“Lady—”

“Do not say a word,” she said coldly. “Not now, and not ever, not about any of this. You are to forget that it ever happened, and we will never speak again at all.”

“But, Lady Diana, I?—”

“I do not care what you want. I cannot concern myself with it. What I must concern myself with is my dear sister, who is in the ballroom just over there and will one day be a wife, and I cannot allow my willfulness to jeopardize that. It cannot. It will not.”

“You must know that you have done nothing wrong.”

“I have. I have, and I think you know that. My sincerest apologies, Your Grace. Have a good night.”

She was aware of him trying to call after her, but he was at least doing the respectable thing and doing it quietly so that he did not draw the attention of anyone else.

But she did not turn back.

CHAPTER 3

For the first time in her life, Diana did not wish to listen to her sister.

She did not care to hear a single word about her wonderful evening, nor about how the professor had called her prodigy of science and other wonderful things, not when she was so conflicted.

She also hated that she was conflicted. There was no need to be, after all; it was so clear that she was completely wrong for what had happened, and it was her fault

entirely, and she should have just allowed the Duke to be kind to her and smiled and spoken meekly like she was expected to, then he might have left her alone.

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The remainder of the evening passed by in a blur, which she saw as a blessing. There were no more mysterious encounters, no more tempting scandal, and unlike what felt like everyone else in attendance, she was quite happy for that to be the case.

“Are you even listening to me?” Samantha asked, and it pulled her back to the present.

They were in the carriage, returning home, and their father was sitting across from them with his eyes looking everywhere but at his daughters. It was not unusual for him to be like that, of course, and it was in fact preferable for the two of them, as it meant that they did not need to look at him either.

“My apologies, Sister,” Diana sighed. “The evening has been rather intense, that is all.”

“Ah. That is alright, then. We can discuss it tomorrow. I simply must tell you about it, though. It has left me furious.”

Usually, the idea that her sister was in such spirits would be enough for her to abandon her own feelings in order to listen to her, but it didn’t. Diana was far too preoccupied with telling herself how careless she had been.

She had never acted in such a brazen manner. Even then and there, with the clarity returning to her mind, she couldn’t understand why she had done it. It was certainly not that she loved the Duke—far from it! It was also not that she was trying to trap him in marriage. In fact, there was nothing at all to do with the Duke that she thought mattered.

She had wanted to prove a point, even if nobody had seen it but herself and the poor gentleman that she had used to prove it. Frankly, she kissed him because she wanted to, and she wanted to because she knew that high society didn't want her to. It was terrible and forbidden and exactly what she had needed to feel something other than the emptiness that had been eating at her.

But that beautiful clarity was hanging over her. She was not bold and brave for what she did—she was reckless. She risked her sister's future simply because she wished to have a small moment of rebellion, and she could not even say that it was worth it. She had done all of that for nothing, and she hated herself for it.

And she could not even tell Samantha about it. After a sleepless night, she went to breakfast and was confronted by her younger sister, who was eating toast and staring at her.

"You look terrible, Di," Samantha gasped. "Have you been taken ill?"

"I do not believe so," Diana said gently, seating herself beside her. "Though with all of the excitement of last night, I cannot say that I slept very well."

"Nor did I. Oh, Diana, please tell me that you can listen to me now!"

"Of course. I apologize that I could not last night."

"I shall start from the beginning. As you know, I wanted to speak to the professor last night. Well, when I did, I introduced myself, and he smirked at me. He told me that he was married, as if that was what I was speaking to him for."

"I saw the gentleman, and frankly he needs to take a good look at himself too. I highly doubt any young lady is looking at him in such a way, much less one such as yourself."

“In any case, I tried to ignore it. I thought that he had been accosted already that evening, or that he simply wished to shut down any lady speaking to him out of respect for his wife, which I of course understand. No, the part that infuriated me was that when I tried to discuss the part I was curious about, and I asked him a question, he laughed at me. Laughed, I tell you, as did his friends.”

“Was your question one that warranted such a reaction?”

“Not at all, I do not think. And, you know, I reread the part this morning, and I now know exactly what the problem was. He had not written it correctly. He had misspelled two words, and the way it was written made it utterly incomprehensible. It was not my fault at all.”

“Which is likely why he laughed, Sister. He did not wish for it to be his own fault, and so it had to be yours.”

Diana winced as she said it. Her behavior that evening had not been too dissimilar.

“In any case, I hope to never have the misfortune of seeing him again. Horrible man.”

“You can at least have pride that you were more intelligent than him. He knows it, too. That is why he had no choice but to act in the way he did.”

“I suppose. Thank you, Diana. You always know what to say to me.”

“Well, I should expect so after speaking to you for twenty years.”

“Did you manage to speak with anyone last night?”

“No,” Diana replied a little too quickly, hoping that her cheeks were not flaming and giving her away.

“I expected as much, but not to worry. I can tell you all about the scandal that unfolded.”

The hairs on the back of her neck bristled. She could hear it so clearly. “A lady was caught with a duke alone! They are trying to find her as we speak.” That was all that she needed to hear for her to collapse completely.

“Oh, Di, I know that societal matters do not matter to you, but this one is serious! It is a mystery, and I know how much you love those. It just so happens that this mystery pertains to a duke, which you find less interesting, but nevertheless do you not think it would be incredible if?—”

“I do not know what you are talking about.”

Samantha stared at her. Diana stared back.

“I know,” Samantha said slowly. “That is why I am telling you about it.”

“I do not care for the affairs of some duke, rather.”

“But it pertains to a murder!”

At this, part of Diana breathed a sigh of relief and another part of her only felt worse. To be sure, it meant that it had nothing to do with her, but it also meant that it was far, far worse than a scandal. This was not some silly little love affair—it was a murder, an actual crime rather than a social one.

“Alright,” she sighed, “go ahead.”

“I knew you would be interested! Alright, so there is a duke who was present at the ball last night, and he was shunned by the ton upon his entry. You would think that is weird, given his position and all, but then I overheard a discussion about him. He is new in town, and he has immediately been the talk of the ton. I mean, anyone would be if they were a murderer.”

“To be sure.”

“And the more I heard about him, the more it infuriated me. I mean, I was already angered by the encounter I had had with that horrid gentleman, but the way they all

spoke of this duke as if he was guilty, even though he has of course not even been tried for it, was awful. It is as though they have judged him without knowing him, and you and I know precisely how that feels.”

“But you are talking about it even now.”

“Well, yes, because you are my sister, and it is not as though you have anyone to tell. Besides, you seem out of sorts, and I will do anything to fix that.”

“You are incredibly sweet, Samantha, but I assure you that there is no need for that. I shall be fine by tomorrow morning.”

Because, by then, she would know whether or not they had been seen, and whether or not she had ruined her sister.

“Well, I for one think it is all ridiculous. The ton will believe anything, and as for what interests them... that can only be described as anything as well. It makes me almost happy to have never been a part of it.”

“I have to agree. You and I are most fortunate in that respect, even if others might not see it that way.”

“Yes, we at least get to be seen as people!”

“Good morning, ladies.”

The two of them turned to see their father in the doorway, ready for breakfast for the first time in as long as they could remember, which was only a sign that it had never happened.

“What are you doing here, Father?” Samantha asked.

“What does it look like? I am having breakfast with my girls.”

He was happier than Diana had ever seen him. In any other family, this would have been a good thing, but when it came to her father, it was anything but good that something had brought him joy.

“How did the two of you find the evening?” he asked, taking a piece of fruit. “I know that we do not tend to go to events, so I suppose it was quite the novelty.”

“It was wonderful, Father,” Samantha replied dutifully. “Actually, I was hoping to attend another in the near future. Diana agrees that it is a good idea, do you not, Sister?”

Diana did not. She certainly did not want to attend another high society event again for a long time, if ever. One had been quite enough, and she was all too happy to tell her sister that but not her father. He only required one of his daughters to be against it for his resolve to strengthen and buttress his opinion that they needn’t go anywhere or do anything.

“Yes, Father.” She nodded, her smile forced. “It would be wonderful in terms of the opportunities that it could offer Samantha, too. I would be happy to accompany her myself, should you ever not wish to go. Given my situation, it only makes sense.”

“Oh, but there will be no need for any other events,” the Earl said brightly, and both girls stared at him.

Diana’s blood ran cold. Of all the people who could have seen her with the Duke and would now pressure her to marry, could it have been her own father? How would she convince him that she would remain a spinster and that she would be a better carer for him than Samantha would?

“What do you mean?” Samantha asked, which Diana was grateful for because she was quite sure that she could not speak.

“You are engaged, Samantha.”

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Both ladies fell silent. Diana willed her sister to maintain her composure and to politely ask what he meant, lest it devolve into a screaming match within seconds.

“What?” Samantha asked finally.

“Do not speak to me that way.”

“My apologies, Father, but what do you mean? I am not even being courted. How can I be engaged?”

“Ah, it is not exactly the sort of proposal you shall wish to tell your future children, but I can tell you if you wish. After we returned home, I went to White’s. There was a gentleman there, and he approached me and asked if I had a daughter. I may or may not have forgotten you, Diana, but that does not matter. What matters is that I said yes and that her name was Samantha.”

Diana was unsure of whether or not to be grateful to have been forgotten.

“Then what happened?” Samantha asked carefully, the color drained from her face.

“Quite simply, he asked me if you were married, and then I told him that you were not. He said that was all he needed to know, and that he would marry you. I accepted. You will now be a wife, and my work as your father is done. You are most welcome.”

Both ladies remained quiet. Diana wondered what exactly was going through her sister’s mind, but she knew that the only thought in her own was that some gentleman

was clearly looking for the first lady he stumbled upon. It just so happened to have been Samantha, and their father could not care less about what had led such a gentleman to make such a request.

“Who is he?” Samantha asked softly. “The gentleman I am to... marry.”

“That is not the correct way to show gratitude, young lady. Have I taught you nothing?”

Yes, Diana thought, yes, that is precisely it, you have taught her nothing.

“Thank you, Father,” Samantha sighed. “Now, might you answer my question?”

“In truth, I do not know who he is, but it is no matter. He will be a husband, in any case, and he seemed quite desperate for you. Now, the two of you must finish quickly and put your finest gowns on. He shall be here soon.”

Neither one of them dared tell him that they were already in their finest the night before. They finished eating within seconds and ran out of the dining hall.

“The one time that he joins us,” Samantha said coldly when they reached their bedchambers, “and it is to tell us that?”

“Oh, Samantha, I am so sorry. Try not to think about it. Perhaps he will not come at all. Perhaps it was nothing more than two drunkards talking to one another and not meaning a word of it, or maybe Father imagined it and it did not happen at all. That has happened before!”

This was true, but her sister shook her head all the same.

“He spoke with too much conviction for that,” Samantha sighed. “You heard him, he

was completely sure of himself.”

“There is still hope,” Diana promised, taking their second-best gowns and dressing herself in her own.

Their hopes were soon dashed, however, when they approached the drawing room and heard the voice of a second gentleman. Diana froze, realizing that she recognized the voice, but Samantha continued on.

“Well, there is no time like the present.” Samantha laughed emptily. “Come, let us meet my husband.”

Diana wanted to pull her sister away, realizing all too late that she did not wish to come face to face with the suitor. Samantha had already walked through the door, and she had already followed her.

Right into the drawing room. Right in front of the man she had kissed.

CHAPTER 4

It had been his first week in town, and upon receiving an invitation to a ball he almost declined, but he decided that he had been through quite enough and deserved a moment to himself, not that such events typically permitted time to oneself.

He almost did not attend. He knew what the rumors were, and that he did not wish to hear of them. However, he was also quite aware that no appearance would be even worse, only further provoking suspicion. It was better if he simply put on a brave face and suffered through it.

And then he met her.

She was not the sort of lady to be prim and proper. She spoke to him as if he were a friend of hers or more so her enemy, but that was beside the point. What mattered was that she was speaking with him and that she seemed to be the one person in the room that did not know who he was, and he craved more of that.

Perhaps that was why he followed her out into the garden.

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He had never been the sort to act in such a way, not with anyone. He was not a rake, and if anything, she had almost seemed to want the ruin. She was going to take him down with her, and he was more than happy to allow her to. It was all well and good until she was gone again, and he realized that he would not be salvageable if he did not make a conscious effort to change.

Drowning his sorrows in whiskey was not a change, not in the slightest, but it was something. He needed to forget about her, no matter the consequences, even if those consequences entailed finding some drunkard slurring his speech and offering to marry his daughter. The gentleman did not ask him for a rank or title, and Colin certainly did not offer it to him. If anything would turn a father away from marrying his daughter off, it would be a man with scandal such as his own hanging over him.

At least whoever the poor young lady was, becoming a duchess would be better than being her father's daughter. Then he would be a husband, and he would have no choice but to stay on the straight and narrow. It was as infallible as a plan can be.

Thenshe was in front of him again.

"You," he said, fortunately quietly.

"Girls," the father said, "this is... My sincerest apologies, Sir."

"The Duke of Abaddon," Colin answered for him, bowing and greeting the two of them.

Both ladies had a very different reaction to him. The older one, Lady Diana, scowled

at him, making him feel most unwelcome, although he could hardly blame her. He was not a welcome visitor in her home and given the circumstances, he understood such a position. Lady Samantha, however, seemed to cower, as if afraid of him.

Clearly, one of the sisters had heard about his reputation.

“Go on, Samantha,” her father pressured her. “You know what to do.”

“Hello, Your Grace,” Samantha said, eyeing her sister. “My name is Lady Samantha Winston. It is a pleasure to meet you.”

It was not a pleasure, of course, and Colin was well aware of that, but he was grateful to her for at least trying.

“There. That was not so difficult, was it? Tea will be served momentarily.”

“Father, might I have a word?” Lady Diana asked, and her father looked straight past her.

“But we are celebrating, Diana.”

“And we can celebrate with them soon enough. For now, I require a word.”

Colin quickly realized two things. The first was that the youngest of the sisters had been trained impeccably well, as she served him his tea and then managed to ignore her sister and father, which went along with the second thing he learned—Lady Diana had a few choice words for her father, and she did not care who knew it.

“How could you do this?” she demanded, speaking in what was quite possibly the loudest whisper that he had ever heard. “You are marrying off Samantha to that man? You do not know the first thing about him.”

“You do not know the first thing about how society works.”

“And you do?”

“How is your tea, Your Grace?” Lady Samantha asked.

“It is wonderful, thank you. I do apologize for all of this, I know that it is not what you want, but?—”

“It is perfectly fine. I know that it is not exactly ideal, but there are worse fates that can befall a young lady.”

“If you are not happy, it is perfectly alright. You can tell me.”

“I am very much content.”

He knew that she was not. No person could sit with knuckles as white as hers and a face as drawn as hers and be happy. But she was not going to argue with him, and so there was no use in forcing the issue. She was certainly not like her sister, that was for sure.

“So, have you been in the city long?” she asked, before shaking her head. “You need not answer that, I already know.”

“Oh? How do you know that?”

Judging by the way her face fell, he knew exactly how she had come to know about it.

“Well, I have not seen you before, and I did not know who you were at all, and I am quite good at remembering faces.”

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“I will not stand for this,” Lady Diana said in the silence between them. “Samantha has dreams, and they will not be dashed simply because you do not wish to do things correctly.”

“I found her a husband. That is the correct thing to do.”

“Not when she is not ready. Look at her. Does she look like a duchess to you?”

“Why do you not have any faith in her? You would think that you would care for her enough to encourage this.”

“It is because I care for her that I am against this. You should be too.”

“So,” Lady Samantha continued, “what do you propose we do about this?”

“What would you like to do about it?”

Run as far from him as she possibly could and not look back, he assumed.

“I am not entirely sure, but you must know that I was not planning on marrying for a long time.”

“Yes, your sister was telling me that you are quite the academic.”

“When did she tell you that?”

It was his turn to be uncomfortable.

It was not a surprise to him that Lady Diana had not told her what had transpired between the two of them, but he hadn't expected to have mentioned it himself. He was not typically that careless, although given his recent actions, he had to wonder if that was truly the case.

"I must be confusing the two of you with someone else."

Whether she believed him or not, she accepted his excuse. That was all that he could ask for.

"Well, you are correct in your assumptions in any case. I would much rather engage in more scholarly pursuits, but given my status, let us just say that it will not be possible to. That does not mean, however, that I am so willing to give up on my dream. I should still like to fill my days with the things I love. In that respect, I would be a terrible wife. I would be far too selfish."

"It is not selfish to do what you must," he said firmly. "And if this is not what you want, then?—"

"No, it is as I told you. I am perfectly fine with this. If I must be a wife, then I might as well take the opportunity to become a duchess, but you must understand that I need some time to adjust."

"But you are not listening to me. I will not force you to do anything that you do not wish to do. If you do not wish to marry me, I shall find a wife elsewhere."

He saw her relax at that, as if she believed him. It was exactly what he wanted, for it was the truth. He was not going to force her hand. There had been no contracts signed, only a handshake between the two men, and even if it did come down to a duel, Colin was quite confident that it would go in his favor.

“That will not be necessary,” the Earl declared, joining the two of them. “My daughter has something to say.”

Colin turned to Lady Diana, who was flushed scarlet. He couldn’t help but think that she was perfectly lovely, before cursing himself for thinking about her that way. She was the sister of his would-have-been wife, and now she was nothing to him.

“If it is all the same to you, Your Grace, I do not wish for any scandal or rumors to fly around. I would like to take my sister’s place.”

“There would be no rumors,” Colin explained, but she raised a hand to silence him.

“There would be. You know how things are in London, whether you spend time here or not. You will have been seen walking into our home by someone, and soon enough there will be questions. I do not want that. I also wish for my sister to have everything that she wants out of life, and so I will take her place if that is alright with you.”

“There is no need for that,” Lady Samantha began. “The Duke and I have?—”

“That will be fine by me,” Colin said without thinking.

The three of them stared at him.

“But, Your Grace,” Lady Samantha said softly, “we agreed not to marry. It is alright.”

“But your sister makes an excellent point. There will be rumors, ones that could damage your reputation, as well as that of your family. I could not do that to you, you do not deserve that. No, this is the right thing to do. Your sister is wise.”

“That she is, I suppose.”

“Then the matter is settled.” The Earl beamed. “I must thank you, Your Grace, for taking pity on my daughter. She may not be what a gentleman wants in a wife, but she will be good to you. Isn’t that right, Diana?”

She looked at him, and Colin wondered if she was thanking him or cursing his name. It would be too late for her to refuse him now.

“Yes.” She nodded. “That’s right.”

He returned home with his mind racing. Fortunately for him, he had already asked his solicitor to meet him at his home, and he knew that he would be waiting for him. And there he was in the hallway.

“Charles, you could have gone to the drawing room. What is mine is yours, you know that.”

“Of course, but given the circumstances, I thought it best to wait for you here.”

“I am a fool, aren’t I?”

“Yes. I do not like to say that of you, but yes.”

“I do not know what came over me, and it has only gotten worse this morning.”

“All will be well, but perhaps you might like to tell me what exactly you have done?”

“I decided that it was time for me to find a wife. I was not looking for anything spectacular, just a quiet, little wife that would do her duty as a duchess, and I thought I had found that in Lady Samantha Winston.”

“I have only heard good things about her, I must say, save for her family situation, but that is no fault of her own. She would have been perfectly acceptable.”

“Indeed, had she been in want of a husband. She is not, however, and I am not going to have a wife that resents me for marrying her. Besides, she is but twenty, still a bit young for me.”

“It is for the best, you know.” Charles nodded. “You ought to avoid any entanglement with that family. They are not known for keeping up with Society.”

“Then it is just as well that I am to marry her sister.”

“Lady Diana?” he gasped. “Why on earth are you doing that?”

“She told me she wanted to.” Colin shrugged. “Well, not that she wanted to, but that she would rather marry me than have her sister do so.”

“But Lady Diana? Are you sure? I know that she is not exactly unfortunate looking, but did you truly envision yourself with a bluestocking?”

“I do not believe that she is a bluestocking, it is more that she is uninterested in being the perfect lady. In a way, that is part of the reason why I accepted her proposal.”

“You accepted her proposal. It is a funny thing, you must agree, a bluestocking proposing to a duke and the Duke accepting.”

“She is not a bluestocking,” he repeated. “She will be a better wife than the sort I was

looking for, in any case. She is not proper and demure, and thus will not lie to me, nor try to use me for her benefit. She is the simplest option, do you not agree?"

"I agree that you have lost your mind if that is what you are telling me."

"I have never once suggested otherwise, but I have to admit that it could be far worse."

"Yes, you could have been rejected by both ladies. Then where will you be? Besides living a simpler life, of course."

I do not think the life of an unmarried duke is any simpler than that of a married one. At least when I am no longer available, there may be fewer whispers about me."

"I somehow doubt that."

And as much as he wanted to argue, Colin knew that Charles was right. People did not simply forget rumors such as the ones about him. It was not something that typically happened, even if the one the rumors were about was someone as upstanding as a duke.

But then, that tended to happen when one was accused of murder.

CHAPTER 5

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Five and twenty and being courted by a murderer. Diana decided that that was just her luck, and she had made her peace with it.

Then she scolded herself for believing it. It was a silly rumor, nothing more, and there was no reason to pay it any mind. She was never the sort to listen to such horrid things, and she had once prided herself on that. She was not going to be like the other members of theton; she loathed them and refused to see herself in them.

But she saw the look on Samantha's face.

She knew instantly what the look was. It was one of fear, something that her sister rarely ever had. She was fearless and bold, every bit as much as Diana was herself, with the exception that she knew when to act like the perfect lady. Maybe that was the real reason why her father failed to mention her existence to the Duke, not that it mattered anymore.

"You didn't have to do that," Samantha said wistfully. "He told me we did not have to marry, and in all honesty, it would not have reflected badly upon us to have rejected a duke, not when he is the duke in question at least."

"Samantha, you never pay any heed to such gossip. Why now?"

"Have you seen him? There was a sort of look in his eyes, and at first, I thought it was one of a deranged man, but as we talked, I realized it was more so one of desperation. It changes nothing, however. You do not wish to marry him, and you had no reason to say that you would. Why did you do it?"

“Because,” Diana said, as if she had a good reason, “I pity him. I do not wish to believe these rumors. Perhaps they are the same as the ones about us and are completely fabricated by people with nothing better to do.”

“But who would do that to a duke? That would be too dangerous if it were not the case. Besides, the rumors about us are not fabricated. I dare say they are completely true.”

“They are not.”

“Oh? So we do not have a drunkard for a father? Has he not squandered every last penny on whiskey at White’s?”

“Not every last penny. We have our dowries.”

“If we are to believe Father, which I do not. It was for the best that we did not wish to marry, and now the Duke shall receive quite the shock.”

“If you are right, that is.”

“I am hardly ever wrong, not when it comes to him. For example, I knew the second he appeared in the doorway that something very bad indeed was going to happen, and now look where we are.”

“I do not think that it is all bad. I mean, even if Father has squandered our dowries, it shall be of no consequence to the Duke, with all of the money that he has, and it will serve you greatly in your endeavors not to marry at all. Perhaps you would do better to see things in a more positive light.”

“How are you so calm?”

“What other choice do I have, Samantha? If I do what I truly wish to, and scream until my body is sore and run until I cannot any longer, what will that achieve? Nothing at all. I have chosen what is to happen to me, and given the fates of others, I dare say that I am fortunate.”

“Unless the rumors are true, and he truly is a horrible and murderous man. Then you would be the most unfortunate lady in all of England.”

“You are not amusing.”

“I am not trying to be! I know that we are in agreement that the rumors are downright bizarre, but that is not to say that we can trust this man completely.”

“Why do you not trust him? He was completely understanding of your situation.”

“He also found a man who seemed to be a terrible father and asked to marry one of his vulnerable daughters who would be less likely to refuse him in the first place. Do you not think that is strange?”

“I think that, if he planned to give someone a better life away from a terrible father, he certainly chose right with us.”

“I just want you to be careful,” Samantha sighed.

“Remind me of who the older sister is here.” Diana smirked.

“You are not thinking properly, and so it is my duty to help you do so.”

“I am well aware that I am not thinking clearly, but I am acting in your best interests, so that is what will happen. I do not regret it, you know.”

“If you are sure, but you must promise me that if he does not make you happy, you shall call it all off. I shall gladly be ruined, truly.”

“I cannot allow that.”

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“Then why are you marrying him? His reputation is even worse than ours, and so it would only serve to make mine even worse.”

“Scandal fades. Ours only remained because we returned, the same as the Duke’s seems to have. Situations change, and you shall be far better off as the sister of a duchess no matter what path you choose to follow.”

“I cannot argue with that.”

“No, you cannot.” Diana giggled. “I know that I may not always do what makes sense to you, but you are always my priority. If you try and see the things that I do in that way, then you will understand more.”

“And when are you going to do something for yourself?”

“Whenever I am given the opportunity to do so without it affecting you. Who knows? Perhaps I shall be given free rein over the decorations in my new home.”

“You are not amusing,” Samantha said, but she was at least laughing now, albeit quietly.

The Duke called on them, and after a brief greeting, they went on a promenade together, followed by Elizabeth, who seemed to be watching quite intently.

“I do apologize for my family,” Diana sighed. “My sister is still quite wary of you, and my father... Well, he is my father.”

“I do not mind at all. It is no surprise that your sister is unsure of me. Given the circumstances, I would be the same if I were her. I can hope to win her over, eventually.”

“You may well do just that, especially if you engage her in conversation about science. The professor I told you about was completely disinterested in her.”

“But your sister seems intelligent, not to mention well-spoken. Why would he dismiss her?”

“Intelligence means nothing when you are a woman. She will never be taken seriously as an academic, and it infuriates me. I truly did think that she was laughing with them because they were having a discussion, but as it turns out, they were mocking her. I do not understand it. I shall never understand it. It isn’t fair.”

“Perhaps as the sister of a duchess that might change?” he suggested. “If not, I shall be happy to accompany her the next time she wishes to discuss such things with gentlemen. They will not say a word if I am there, I can assure you.”

Diana hated that the first reason she thought that would be the case was due to his current reputation.

“Is that—it cannot be!” a voice nearby whispered.

“A Winston sister out in public? I cannot believe it.”

“Not only that, but look beside her!”

“Is that the Duke of Abaddon? How on earth is he still allowed to be among us?”

“It is terrible that they are not investigating him. Do they not know that he could

strike again?"

One look from the Duke seemed to silence them instantly. Diana did not like hearing the whispers, but she certainly did like that he had the power to quieten them. In truth, she did not care what was said of her, so long as she did not have to hear it.

"Does it bother you?" she asked after a while.

"Does what bother me?"

"The talk."

"Not at all, no. I like to think that if they have nothing better to do with their time, I shall at least provide some form of interest to them. I consider it helping my community."

"Surely it must become quite grating, though," she replied, her head tilted to one side.

"I know that it becomes hurtful after a while for myself."

"I noticed. Why do you think I gave them that look?"

"Oh. You did not need to do that for me."

"I know, but I cannot set a precedent that my wife can be spoken of in such a manner. I do not care what is said of me, but my duchess shall be another matter entirely."

"I am not your duchess."

“Yet.”

“You are so sure of yourself, aren’t you, Your Grace?”

“Of course. Why would I be anything else? I am engaged to a lovely lady, and she is so very grateful to be engaged to me.”

“We are not engaged!”

“There’s that blush.”

“No, it isn’t!”

But she had raised a hand to her cheek to cover it, and she had been so clear that that was her intention that of course the Duke noticed, and it did not help matters.

“Do not hide it, it is sweet.”

“Ah yes, as Shakespeare once wrote, ‘See how like a maiden she blushes.’”

“Is that not the part of the play where he refuses to marry her?”

“It is, indeed. Perhaps you might do the same?”

“We are not all as fortunate as that.”

“I bestow upon thee the opportunity. Now, be careful, for I shall only offer this once.

Would you give this rotten orange to your friend?”

“Whyever would I do that? That would mean that I could not have you for myself.”

Diana caught herself. Was she flirting? She had never done so before; she had never met a gentleman worth flirting with, and usually, they would take her attitude negatively and comment on it to her father, who was never happy with that. The Duke, however, seemed to almost like it.

It was either that or he was making the best of a bad situation. That was what she was doing, of course. She did not wish to be around him. She wished to be anywhere but beside him in the park, well aware that those out of earshot were discussing the match of the Season.

“The bluestocking and the murderer,” she said without thinking, and he bristled.

“What did you say?” he asked, his voice still quiet.

“Oh, nothing, Your Grace. I was only saying that?—”

“You are a bluestocking, and I am a murderer.”

“That we are seen as those things. I am not saying that I believe what has been said about you. I mean, I only found out because Samantha was concerned.”

“Lady Diana, it is quite alright. I am perfectly aware that you are not the person that people claim you are, nor am I.”

“I am willing to believe that, too.”

“Then we are in agreement. There is no harm in what anyone else says, so long as

that remains unchanged.”

They continued to walk in silence, and Diana liked it. She liked that he was not the sort of gentleman to speak only of himself and how wonderful he was. She felt as though she had found a friend, and given her status, she could not have asked for much more than that.

“Why aren’t you angry with me?” she asked after a while.

“Have you given me a reason to be?”

“Well, I did call you a murderer, as far as you could have known, at least.”

“And you explained what you meant, and you were not truly calling me that. Why would I be angry about that?”

“Why wouldn’t you be?”

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“Because we all say things in a way that misconstrues our feelings from time to time. That does not warrant anger.”

Diana thought back to all of the times she had said something wrong by mistake, and her father had screamed at her. He had always been kinder to Samantha, but they had had their moments too. Anger was all she had truly known as a girl, and the prospect of a life without it was quite tempting indeed, even if it was to be with a man that she did not know.

“And you are quite sure that you are not angry with me?”

“For heaven’s sake, no.”

“There is no need to speak to me in that manner.”

“It appears that there is, as it is the only way to make you listen.”

She bristled. That was not unlike something she had heard a hundred times from her father.

“I apologize.”

“It is alright,” he sighed. “But when I tell you something, I expect you to believe me.”

“Why? I hardly know you at all.”

“Because I am giving you the same grace. Is it truly too much to ask?”

“I... I suppose not.”

“Right. Now, do you have any other questions for me?” he asked. “Because if we are truly to be husband and wife, I would like you to be well prepared for it. There is so much I would like to know about you, but I believe that all good things come with time, and so I am happy to wait.”

“I agree with you. I think that should we be spending the rest of our lives together, then I shall have the rest of our lives to ask you questions. There is no reason to try and do it as quickly as possible.”

The Duke accepted her answer, and they continued in silence. Diana couldn't help but think that Samantha would have liked the Duke a great deal had she given him a chance, but she had not, and now she seemed unwilling to accept him even as her brother-in-law.

And yet she had to scold herself. Here he was, being the perfect gentleman, being respectful and kind and sharing her jokes, and there she was, struggling not to ask him the one question that she truly did wish to ask him. She wondered if he would hate her for asking, or if he would laugh it off, or even if he would answer her seriously. After all, it was the sort of question that only truly had one answer if one were to be asked it.

There were other questions that she wished to ask, of course. What were your parents like? Will our home be large? How many children do you wish to have? Are we even going to have children?

But there was that one again, on the tip of her tongue, and she willed herself not to say it. He had been kind about her saying something in error once, but he did not have to give her the same grace a second time.

Did you do it?

CHAPTER 6

The frightened sister that Diana had left behind seemed in much higher spirits upon her return. Samantha was sitting at the pianoforte, playing a happy little tune—expertly, of course. Diana struggled to remember a time when her sister did not play it perfectly.

“Did you enjoy yourself?” she asked brightly as she heard her enter. “It seems to have been quite a lovely day today.”

“It was lovely indeed.” Diana nodded, though her brow furrowed as she approached. “Where did you find that gown?”

“Oh, isn’t it wonderful?” Samantha asked, standing and twirling. “Father says that given our good fortunes—your good fortunes, I should say—it was time to have some new clothes fashioned for us. He took the gowns we wore at the ball and instructed the modiste to make us twenty each.”

“Twenty?” Diana echoed. “How did she make them so quickly?”

“We do not have twenty each yet.” Samantha giggled. “But she did happen to have two on hand that were quite close to the ones he gave her, and she modified them to make them our size. I shall be wearing this at the ball on Saturday, of course, but I couldn’t resist trying it on! We have not had new clothes in so long.”

That was why she was in higher spirits. At least that was one mystery solved.

“Samantha, you have never cared for such things. What has gotten into you?”

“It is not the clothes, Sister, it is the meaning behind them. Father is right, our fortunes are changing for the better, and it is all thanks to you. It is as you said, perhaps I judged the Duke too soon and I ought to give him a chance. If you believe his intentions are good, then I will believe in you.”

“Oh, Samantha, it is good to see you happy.”

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“It is good to feel happy. You know, I thought that I was at my happiest when I was engrossed in one of my papers, but right now, at this moment, there is this feeling in me that I do not think I have ever felt before. Is this what true happiness is?”

“It is hope, and I dare say that I am feeling it too.”

“Di, I love you, but you are not the sort to feel such a way. Has the Duke won you over, after all?”

“No, I wouldn’t say that, but he is a very nice gentleman. Had we been in another family, I might have invited him to dinner so that you could meet him properly, and the two of you could start again, but unfortunately, I would prefer it if he and Father do not cross paths unless absolutely necessary.”

“Have you not seen Father today?”

“No, why? I assumed that he was in bed, nursing himself after overindulging last night.”

“Quite the contrary. It is the afternoon, and he has yet to drink. Can you believe it?”

Their fortunes seemed to be changing, indeed.

Diana almost did not believe her sister and thought that it was nothing more than a joke and she would see their father and quickly be proven wrong. He was still gruff, and not too pleased to be around them, but the stench of alcohol was no longer there. She wondered what had brought it on, though she was quite sure that it was her

courtship with the Duke. That had been the only change of late.

Regardless, he remained that way until the ball. He was almost human by then, but then again this would be the first time that he would be around alcohol. Neither Diana nor Samantha dared ask him what he planned to do, as they did not wish for him to be defensive about it. It was better with nobody mentioning it and the Earl quietly continuing in his efforts.

“You look beautiful, Sister.” Diana beamed as they left the house. “Green truly is your color.”

“I am inclined to agree, although I must say that I never thought I’d see you in pink.”

“It is winning me over, as I hope the Duke will do.”

“Will he be there tonight?”

“He wrote to me and told me that he would. He thinks it is for the best that we are seen together more. If we do that, then perhaps these rumors may die down a little and we will be seen as relatively normal.”

“One must be normal to be seen as such.” Samantha smirked. “In any case, I do hope that between your dances, I shall have time to speak with him. I wish to know his true intentions with my favorite sister.”

“Your only sister.”

“Which also makes you my least favorite sister, so be careful.”

Diana laughed. Her sister was charming and lovely, and should she ever change her mind about marriage, she was sure to make a most incredible match—Diana had

simply never considered the idea of getting married before her.

“I wish you had married first, you know.”

“Why? You are older than me, and so it is your birthright.”

“But you are my pride and joy. My work is not finished with you yet, and now I shall be going away. It was never meant to be your burden to stay with Father. That was my true birthright, not marriage.”

“I hope that one day you allow yourself to be happy. It is not fair that you have done everything for me, yet you refuse to do anything at all for yourself.”

“I do not deserve this. I have not worked for it like you have.”

“You and I both know that I have not been working towards being a good wife, and even if I had, it would be due to you working twice as much as me. Who else would have trained her sister whilst caring for her father and trying to learn everything herself?”

“I like to believe that you would have, had it been reversed.”

“Of course, but only because I am so brilliant myself.”

The two of them laughed, but then Samantha took Diana’s hands in her own.

“I mean it, Di. You deserve to be loved. If you believe that the Duke can offer you that love, then I will make no further comment on the matter.”

“I do not want him to love me. I would like a husband that I can halfway tolerate. The Duke fulfills that role, and so I am perfectly content.”

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“Very well. In which case, I shall assume that you are happy and will not question you further.”

“Then the matter is settled.”

The ball was no different to the last, as far as Diana was concerned. There were too many people, and certainly too many with opinions that she did not wish to hear. Regardless, her gown was lovely, her sister was smiling, and her father was acting as human as she had ever seen him be. The rest of it was of little consequence.

Then she saw her suitor, and the opinions of others ceased to exist entirely. He was smiling, and she couldn't help but notice that the smile only appeared when he saw her.

“Would you do me the honor of a dance, Lady Diana?”

“It would be my pleasure,” she replied with a curtsy.

Immediately, the whispers began once more.

“Can you believe it? I thought that it was some sort of joke.”

“No, they truly do seem to be courting. I cannot imagine it ending well, of course.”

“Nor can I. They are both completely mad, although I cannot say that I blame poor Lady Diana. After all, look at the only role model she has ever known.”

“Shall I say something to them?” the Duke offered. “It will not be anything too terrible.”

“Leave them be.” Diana laughed. “It is as you said, they simply lead uninteresting lives, and there is no cure for that. We are far better off pretending that they do not exist.”

“As you wish.”

It had been years since Diana had danced, and she had always been the one to lead when she taught Samantha. She was terribly concerned that she would step on the Duke’s toes, and that then he might truly be angry with her, but she seemed to remember what to do.

“So,” he said after a while, “it appears that I am finally having that dance.”

“Ever so begrudgingly, yes.” She smirked.

“Would you like to stop? We could do so right now, and you could run crying out of the ballroom and really give them something to talk about.”

She tilted her head as if she were considering it for a moment, just long enough for him to believe it.

“No, I believe this is quite alright.” She laughed, and after a moment of surprise, he joined her.

She couldn’t help but shake her head in disbelief at him.

“Surely you did not think I would truly wish to do that?”

“I never know what to expect from you. Sometimes I think you wish to marry me, then I wonder if this is all an elaborate way to learn my secrets, then I wonder if you are going to scream at me, then I think you are going to sing. I do not know what to do with you.”

“Marry me, it appears. And I shall tell you my intentions once this dance is over and we can speak properly.”

“Very well, although I do hope that they are good intentions.”

“I like to think that they are. I can only hope that you will agree.”

“I shall do my best to accommodate whatever your desires are.”

Diana’s desires, she realized, were heavily tied to the way his hand felt on her waist.

She had not expected to like the feeling of his arms around her. She had counted on one dance for the sake of being seen by those in attendance, having it be passable, and then never having to do it again. She had not counted on enjoying it, not at all, and now that she was, she did not know how to handle it.

At least she did not take the Duke up on his offer and flee the room. Instead, the dance came to an end, and she followed him outside with Samantha nearby, and she waited for the heat in her chest to dissipate.

“So,” he asked, “what is it that you wished to tell me?”

“It is about our partnership.”

“Partnership. Is that what we shall be calling this?”

“For now, yes. It is not quite a courtship, and we are not engaged, let alone married. Therefore, a partnership seems to be the preferable name for it.”

“Very well, I can do that. Is that all?”

“Of course not.” She laughed softly. “What I mean to say is that I have decided on a question to ask you.”

“You can ask me anything. I am more than willing to answer.”

“What do you want out of our time together?”

“That depends entirely on what you want. I am the one that has caused this, and so giving you the freedom to choose what we have is the least I can do.”

“Well, if anything, I caused all of this, but if I am given the choice, I must admit that I would prefer a marriage of convenience. I do not want to fall in love with you and be completely enamored with each other forever. It is not what I have ever wanted. I never saw myself as a wife, and now that I must be one, I want it to be as far from what is considered a match as possible.”

She wanted him to agree, but the smallest part of her couldn't help but want the opposite. She couldn't help but wonder what he would say if he had wanted her to

love him, even if she knew it was ridiculous and unrealistic and not even what she wanted herself. She did not love him, and she did not want to love him, so she would refuse to. It was that easy.

“Very well, if that is what you want. We will be friends and never anything more. This will be a serious partnership, one with no feelings at all, almost as if it were a business transaction. Given our circumstances, it might be the best option that we have.”

Diana smiled and tried to ignore the small flicker of disappointment within her. She had no reason to be surprised; he had agreed with everything she had said since they had met, only ever disagreeing to tease her, and she found that she had quite liked it even if she had found it incredibly irritating at first.

“I also want you to spend some time with my sister,” she said quickly.

“Yes, you mentioned that. Has she warmed up to me at all yet?”

“A little, yes. She says that she trusts my judgment, and so if I am sure about you, then she will be too, but it cannot hurt for the two of you to at least find some common ground.”

“I have already offered to stand beside her should she ever wish to engage in scholarly topics with gentlemen again. I refuse to believe that they would say anything against her with me present.”

“I do not know that she would accept that. She is quite positive that she will eventually make her own way, with no need for a man to do it for her.”

“I wish she could see that I would be doing nothing for her.”

“But that is not the case. You would be frightening the other gentlemen into respecting her, which is not how we like to be. We like to command respect ourselves instead of relying on gentlemen to do it for us.”

“It is not a reliance, it is help. I understand that it has been the two of you for a long time, but it is clear to me that you and yoursister believe that you do not need anyone. If you only look, then you shall see that there are people willing to be there for you.”

“Are you one of those people?”

“I could be if you could find a way to let me.”

Once more she was too close to him, and once more she refused to change that.

“Let me show you how good it could be,” he said quietly.

She could not help but nod.

CHAPTER 7

All her life, Diana had dreamed that her father might one day become an upstanding member of society, one that would attend social events and laugh and joke like the other gentlemen.

She thought that, surely, if he could simply play the part, then the rest would follow suit and her life would become easier. This did not happen, of course, until the announcement of her engagement to the Duke.

“Where is he?” she asked Samantha, who was wandering aimlessly for what appeared to be the first time in her life.

“The Duke?” Samantha replied, only half listening to her. “I should think he is in his own residence. Why? Are you waiting for him? I did not know that he would be calling on you today.”

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“Nor do I know. That is why I was not asking about the Duke. I am asking about our father. You do remember that we have one, do you not?”

“However could I forget?” Samantha sighed, then laughed sadly. “I believe he left an hour ago. Why do you ask?”

“You are terribly inquisitive today, are you not?”

“If I am, it is simply because I am terribly bored.”

“Ah, you finished the book you were reading.”

Samantha nodded. It was not unusual for her to almost lose her sense of purpose when she finished a story, as if she did not know what to do with herself. Diana envied that—if only her purpose could be so small at that moment.

That was not fair of her. Samantha was to have a greater role than she had ever anticipated; all of the work that a lady running a household would have without the loving marriage to go along with it. Samantha would be caring for the Earl, and it was not what she had ever thought she would be doing.

“It truly was brilliant.” She nodded. “I do not know what else to do with myself, for the time being. I cannot read another, not just yet. I must think on the last one first.”

“In which case, think on it. There is no need to do anything else.”

“No, of course not. You have everything in hand, yes?”

“As I so often aim to do, Sister.”

“And you are sure that you are happy with this?”

“I would not have done so if I were not.”

But in truth, Diana was not happy with what she had done, and she had done it regardless, but Samantha would never know that to be true. She could not know it to be true.

“Might you have the time?” Diana asked, noting the silence that had settled between them.

“It is no longer calling hour if that is what you mean.”

It was not, but it did mean that she did not need to ask that. The Duke would not be coming that day, though Diana was unsure of how she felt about that, which did not help her.

“In which case, I was wondering if you might wish to accompany me to the modiste? Father might be chipper at the moment, but he is hardly going to show his face there in order to arrange the preparations for my wedding gown.”

“Wedding,” Samantha echoed. “Yes, of course. My apologies, Sister.”

“Samantha,” Diana said gently, “I promise you that I am happy. There is no need for you to worry. Besides, you are the one who wished for me to make a match in the first place!”

She nudged her younger sister playfully, but Samantha’s worried expression refused to soften.

“I wished for you to marry for love, not—not whatever this is!”

“And who is to say that, eventually, love will not bloom?” Diana laughed, hoping that it might aid in convincing her sister, not to mention herself. “You have read plenty of books such as that. Is it so fantastical to say it could happen to me?”

“Not with him. I know that we are far beyond the gossip and scandal of high society, but he does not seem completely trustworthy to me. I do not know why—he has been the perfect gentleman to me, but there is something wrong. I do not like it.”

“You will have to learn to,” Diana replied firmly. “This is not ideal, I know, but it is how it must be now. Besides, it is the first time that you and I have seen Father smile in years. If I am to leave you here, it ought to be with a happy man, yes?”

“I cannot believe that you are to leave after your wedding. That makes it all even worse, and I did not think such a thing was possible.”

“It is not as though I will be gone forever!”

But Diana knew the look on her sister’s face. This had nothing to do with her and everything to do with their mother. She had not planned to go away forever, either.

“Regardless,” Samantha said calmly, taking a deep breath, “I shall miss you terribly. You are all that I have ever known, besides Elizabeth of course.”

“And you shall have her when I am gone. I shall not need a lady’s maid more than you, and I am quite sure that arrangements can be made so that I can have one.”

“But—”

“Sister, might we leave for the modiste? I would much rather have this discussion with you whilst taking some fresh air.”

“Very well, but we will be discussing this! You cannot avoid this forever, you know.”

And Diana did know, of course, but even so, she could not help but hope that if she continued to push it to one side for a few fleeting moments at a time, perhaps it might never come up again. It was foolish and infantile, but she hated how upset it made Samantha, so much so that it upset her in return, and it was no good for either of them, but it was how it had to be.

And all because she simply had to open her mouth.

It was, however, nice to take in some air. With calling hour having only just finished, there was an absence of young ladies in the streets of Mayfair, meaning an absence of mamas. It was quite the welcome change to amble without a mocking comment slicing through it.

“And what might you be asking for from the modiste?” Samantha asked, seemingly glad to change the topic now.

“I suppose that I shall be happy with whatever she chooses. It is no secret that I am to be a duchess, and from what I have been told by Father, we have ample funds to cover it, and so she can decide what style is the most fitting.”

“How fortunate you are.”

Diana was unsure of quite how she meant that.

The modiste was, of course, all too happy to be in the presence of the two of them. Her smile reached her ears the moment she saw them, which could only be expected, given that she would receive quite the custom from being the chosen modiste for a duchess.

Even such a notorious one as Diana.

“I must admit, Lady Diana,” she said gently as she measured her, “I have had a lot of ladies here discussing yourself and your husband-to-be.”

“I can hardly say I am surprised,” Diana sighed. “It is quite the scandal, a spinster being chosen by a duke.”

“Especially when your sister is there.”

“I wouldn’t marry him,” Samantha said, almost warning her. “He is quite taken by my sister, you know. I should think them a perfect match.”

“Well, should the two of you overcome all of this scandal, the two of you could overcome anything.”

“Scandal?” Diana asked, an eyebrow raised.

She was more than aware of which scandal the modiste was referring to. Any resident in London would have known. However, all that she knew of was that which Samantha had heard about, which was not a great deal either.

“Well,” the modiste replied cautiously, “you must have heard about the reason why the Duke has returned.”

“No, I do not know a thing about it. Might you enlighten me on the matter?”

“Perhaps it would be better to ask him yourself.”

Acting the fool certainly had its positives. The cutting comments were not nearly as effective when the lady on the receiving end was utterly clueless.

“Oh, did His Grace tell you personally about it?”

“No, of course not, but such issues should be discussed between a gentleman and his wife, rather than the entirety of theton.”

“Yes, quite, so perhaps we might wish to keep it that way?”

Diana’s initial desire had been to draw information from her, information that her betrothed would never disclose himself, but there was something in the way she smirked at her as she spoke that made Diana almost territorial. She couldn’t understand why she had had such a reaction, nor why it was so strong, but she could not help herself.

“In other news,” the modiste began again, fixing her bright smile back. “Your father has thetonin quite a flutter at the moment. It is nice to see him, according to some of my customers.”

“I never thought that I would see the day, personally.” Samantha laughed. “He never was the sort to command attention, nor to enjoy it.”

“In any case, he has never been so seen, and given all of the gowns he has requested I

create for you, the same shall be said of you both soon enough.”

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The rest of their time passed quietly, but at least their conversation had finished on a positive note. They thanked the modiste for her time before stepping out once more into the bustling streets.

“Can you believe the nerve of that woman?” Samantha fumed. “How dare she speak that way of the Duke?”

“Sister, you do not like him either.”

“No, but I would never speak of him that way in front of two ladies that I have just met, especially not when one of them is to marry him!”

“Yes, I suppose that she could have had more tact in that respect.”

“It was kind of you to defend him, though. Maybe your marriage shall be an amicable one, indeed.”

“One can hope. In any case, I shall still have you. Until you marry, that is!”

“Do you think that might be why Father is so sociable all of a sudden?”

“It might well be.”

“That would be a mistake on his part, though, would it not?”

“You cannot call it a mistake simply because you do not wish to marry, you know.”

“No, I know, but I am thinking of him. He shall need someone to care for him, will he not?”

“That was when he was indulging too much. He seems to have stopped that of late.”

“And how long do you suppose that might last?”

“I cannot say, but if you do not expect it to be forever, you might wish to take the first good match that he suggests and escape while you can.”

“Do you...” Samantha trailed off, as if she had begun to ask a question that she either could not finish or did not truly wish to know the answer to.

“Do I what?”

“Do you—Do you care for him?”

“The Duke? Well, not particularly as of yet, but perhaps with time he and I might?—”

“No, I mean Father,” Samantha cut in. “Do you care about Father?”

Diana had not, in truth, given the idea much thought before. She had a great deal of love for her father, as any child would, but did she care for him? She could not truly say.

He was her father, not that he had ever quite acted as one. He had been absent and neglectful and often downright cruel, but he had not been completely bad. It was as he had told them over and over in their youth—he could have sent them to the streets, but he allowed them to stay in his home.

“I care that he lives the life that Mama could not,” she replied finally. “If she could not stay with us, at least Father can. We are fortunate in that respect, whether we see it that way or not.”

“I certainly know that I do not see it that way. I do not think that I care about him at all. Does that make me a villain?”

“Not at all. It makes you human. This is why I think that you should?—”

“Marry, I know, but it is not what I want. Not yet, in any case.”

“It would give you freedom, you know.”

“And with all of the work you put in, I would make a wonderful match, too. That counts for naught if I do not want it. You must hate me for that.”

“Of course not. I could never hate you. I only want you to live the life of your dreams, and marriage can afford you at least part of that.”

“I do not want a part of it. I want it all. Marriage is not the only way for a lady to find freedom, you know.”

“No? Then tell me, Sister, what else you have in mind?”

“It is nothing,” Samantha sighed. “Pretend that I did not say anything. You are right, you want what is best for me, and I ought to listen to you. After all, you are to be a duchess, and I am to be... Well, whatever becomes of me.”

“You will do great things,” Diana said firmly, stopping dead in her tracks and facing her sister. “You will do incredible, wonderful things with your life that others can only dream of.”

“You are only saying that because I am unhappy.”

“I am saying it because it is what I believe. I would never lie to you, you know that.”

“I do, but what do you think I can do? I wish to see the world, and I cannot even leave my household unless I am chaperoned. How can I do anything more? What if I never get to be anything more than what I am?”

“If being a kind and intelligent young woman with her choice of gentlemen is all you ever are, then you will already be better off than anyone else I know.”

“Perhaps one day that might be enough.”

“And if not, you could fall in love with a gentleman who travels the world and leave with him.”

“Or, more likely, live vicariously through him.”

“Would that be enough?”

“No. I sometimes wonder if anything ever would be, you know. Believe me, I am glad that being a wife and mother will be more than enough for you, but it is not the same for me.”

Diana smiled at her sister, but her heart shattered inside her chest. That sort of life was not what she had expected, but would it be good enough?

She couldn't be sure.

CHAPTER 8

There were worse routines that a lady could have, to be sure.

With her father continuing his changes, it made her life far easier, and her morning promenades with the Duke were almost joyful. They felt lovely during, but afterward, she felt so conflicted that she swore to refuse the next day. He was dangerous, a friend and nothing more, and...

Very handsome in the morning sunlight. Then she would blink and they would be promenading once more.

“Have you read the scandal sheet this morning, Sister?” Samantha asked at breakfast.

“I do hope that you haven't been reading those,” their father sighed. “It is never true, and it only serves to hurt those mentioned.”

For once, Diana agreed with her father.

“I am not asking because I wish to gossip,” Samantha replied, rolling her eyes. “It is

because... well, you are better off reading it for yourself, Di.”

Diana eyed her carefully before taking the sheet from her. Samantha pointed to the part she wished her to read.

And such is the issue that I take with Lady Diana Winston and her troublesome Duke. You may wish to note, dear reader, that I am not speaking of His Grace by name. This is quite simply because should he uncover me, he may do unspeakable things in response. However, this author is quite convinced that you all know exactly who I am referring to. There have been matches made of convenience and nothing more, they are more common than love matches, at least, but one cannot help but see such a bizarre pairing and wonder what it is that they see in each other. Lady Diana shall see his riches, that she has lived without all of her life, and his title, which is far greater than her own father's, and perhaps that is all that she requires in a gentleman (she certainly would not be alone in having such requirements) but I wonder what the Duke sees in her?

Should he be in search of beauty, grace, and a lady younger than one of spinsterhood, he need have only looked beside his bride-to-be. Lady Samantha, her sister, is revered by some, and it has not gone unnoticed that she was skipped over in favor of the wallflower spinster whose only notable traits are the two I listed a few mere words ago. If the Duke was not already known for his madness, it would not at all surprise me if he earned the title now.

Then again, I would not be surprised if this was some sort of deal between him and Lady Diana's drunkard father. A business deal to protect his precious one that might actually succeed, or at least find a husband that is not accused of... Well, dear reader, you know precisely what he is accused of, and so I shall not repeat it here. Speaking of accusations, however, Lady Smythe?—

“Why did you show me this?” Diana asked her sister. “To mock me?”

“Of course not. I would never do that to you, and you know that. I am only showing you so that you might be aware of it, that is all. I also thought you might wish to tell the Duke.”

“I believe he is quite aware of it.”

“You were not, and you engage with Society. The Duke does not, and so I highly doubt that he is any the wiser about what is thought of him.”

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“The very same things that you think yourself, is that it?”

“I do not wish to have this conversation again.”

“Good, because there are things that are not for young ladies’ ears,” their father said commandingly, as if he had not been the root cause of their hearing far worse things in their childhoods.

“The Duke is here for you, Lady Diana,” the butler announced in the doorway.

Diana had never been happier to have a meal interrupted.

The Duke was waiting for her in the hallway, and as much as Diana did not wish to see it, she could not help but notice how he lit up when he saw her. She wondered if she had been doing the same thing so noticeably, and from the way her heart was fluttering in her chest, she had to admit that it must have been the case.

“Have you read what has been said about you of late, Your Grace?” she asked as they walked. “I do not mean to pry, and if you do not wish to discuss it, then we need not do so.”

“I am aware of what people say about me if that is what you mean.”

“Not exactly. Frankly, I do not even know what people say about you in the town, but I received this, this morning.”

She handed him the gossip rag, and he scanned it before handing it back to her.

“Pay it no mind.”

“What?”

“There is no need to pay any attention to it. Truly, I do not understand why ladies read them in the first place.”

“It is not only ladies that read them, I assure you.”

“No, of course not. Ladies that have nothing better to do, children that wish to learn abouttonin the only way available to them, and servants that could be doing far more appropriate things.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Do you see what I mean? You ladies wish to be spoken to as if you are gentlemen, but then when we do so, you act like this. Such words are not for your ears. Might we leave the matter there?”

“We certainly will not. I shall have you know that plenty of gentlemen read these, whether they care to admit it or not. As for your thoughts on servants, it astonishes me that you would say such things when yours cater to your every need. You do not know what it is like to struggle.”

“You do not know a thing about me, and you shall refrain from acting otherwise.”

“You will not be telling me what to do. Certainly not whilst we are not married.”

They continued walking for a moment, and Diana knew that she should have been angry, but instead, she was confused. Something had to have happened since their last promenade because this was not the gentleman she had come to know. He was not the

sort to snap at her, or show anger, or to have such views as those he had expressed.

“Regardless of what you might think,” he said after a while, “these scandal sheets mean nothing. It is never the truth that is printed, and the only ones that believe it are those incapable of thinking about matters for more than a few mere seconds.”

“Women, children, and servants if I am understanding correctly, though it is entirely possible that as a weak-minded and simple lady, I have it all wrong.”

“That is not what I meant.”

“Yes, it is.”

Silence fell again. To be sure, Diana pitied the Duke and all of the rumors swirling about him, but in any case, that gave him no right to speak to her that way.

“All I am trying to say is that you do not need to listen to these things,” he sighed. “I am trying to help you.”

“Well, offending my entire sex in the process is not the most tactful way to approach it.”

“No, you are right.”

She wanted to continue with her comments, but an admittance that she was right was as close to an apology as she could expect, so she let it go.

“So you truly do not care?”

“No, not at all. Why should I care? If they are not willing to say it to my face, then that is simply because they are too cowardly to say it to me themselves, and never is that more prevalent than it is for anonymous scribblers whose income is exclusively tied to creating rumors.”

Had he said it in that way the first time, she was more likely to have listened to him.

“Surely it gets to you though, after a while.”

“If I do not read it, then it cannot get to me. I have all the power this way, you see?”

“I suppose that makes sense.”

“Lady Diana, if you do not wish to act in a manner that allows you to hide from such things, then you cannot be surprised when you are an outcast for it. It is not a bad thing to have this happen to you, but you must accept that it will happen so long as you give them something to say.”

“I have always tried to act in a becoming manner,” she argued. “I had to, otherwise it put Samantha’s standing in jeopardy, and I could not risk that. I never could.”

“And that is why you took her place, is that it?”

“It wasn’t just that. I want her to be happy, and marrying you would not have done that, and it would have broken my heart if?—”

“If all of your work had been for nothing.”

“If all of her work had been for nothing. Had she wanted to marry you, I would have stepped aside and wished her every happiness.”

“But she does not wish to marry at all, she told me herself.”

“And she has told me. It is quite a shame, because she would be a wonderful wife.”

“In which case, worrying for her standing is quite?—”

“Illogical, yes,” she replied with a laugh. “I am quite aware.”

“It is alright. She is fortunate to have you there for her.”

“Do you have anyone to do that for you, Your Grace?”

His face fell, and he faltered.

“No,” he replied. “Not since my mother passed.”

“I apologize, Your Grace. I did not mean to pry.”

“It is quite alright. I am aware that our situations are quite similar, you know.”

“Yes, I suppose they are.”

“Now, I do not mean to pry myself, but if you do not mind telling me, what happened?”

Diana bristled. She had not talked about what happened to her mother all that time

ago, never out loud, even to her own sister. Samantha had never outright asked, and Diana had never made a point to inform her. It was almost an unspoken rule between the two of them that one would not ask and the other would not tell, and nobody else had ever cared enough to try.

“There was a fire.”

She said it before she had decided whether or not she was going to.

“My sincerest apologies,” he said gently. “If it is too recent?—”

“It was a long time ago. Samantha was a baby, and I was six years old. To this day, we do not know how it started, but it ended with a beam falling. It landed on my mother as she was trying to escape, and she could not move. She handed Samantha to me and told me to go, and I did.”

“You did the right thing, in case you ever question that.”

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“Of course, it meant that I saved Samantha’s life. I thought my mother might have found a way out, you know. I remember staring at the door, willing her to walk through it, but she never did. She must have been so afraid.”

“If you ask me, I would say she felt pride and love for the two of you. I think she knew that you were going to take care of your sister no matter what happened, and now look where the two of you are. She would not regret it, I assure you.”

“I truly hope not. I can only hope that I have done enough, but with the way Samantha is refusing to marry, I wonder if I might have failed somewhere along the way. It devastates me.”

“If you have helped to raise a young lady that knows her own mind and is unafraid to speak it, then you have only succeeded. You ought to be proud of yourself, not chastising yourself. You could not have done anything more for her.”

“That is the problem. I could not have done more, but I still wonder if it was enough.”

“It was, I assure you.”

She hoped that he was right.

“So... your mother?”

“We do not know to this day. She was perfectly healthy, and then there was this illness that consumed her, and within the month she was gone. We never found out quite what it was.”

“That sounds awful. How was your father?”

“He never quite managed to understand his loss, not even the day he passed away. He would wander the household at times, according to my staff, searching for her. They say he was driven mad, but I do not wish to speculate.”

“Did you ever see him do it?”

“I was not there. That is the thing that I regret. I ran away to my lodgings and never went back. I couldn’t face them. I knew that if I were there, there would be conversations that I did not wish to have and plans that I wanted no part in.”

“Plans?”

“The funeral. The burial. I could not do them. I tried to picture her there, and it felt wrong. To this day, I wonder what might have been different had I been there. My brother never spoke to me after, of course.”

“Brother?” she echoed once more. “You never mentioned a brother.”

“Older brother,” he said emptily, and that was all he needed to say.

Diana understood perfectly well how a title was passed on.

“Well, it appears we both have regrets,” she sighed.

“More than most, to be sure. Perhaps that is why I do not care what is said about me. Nobody is more judgmental of me than I am of myself. It is not something that I notice, in all honesty.”

“Surely you must, at least some of the time.”

“Some of the time, to be sure, but it is easier to pretend it is not happening. Ignorance is bliss, as they say.”

“I wish I could ignore my father.” She laughed softly. “He is behaving like a peacock.”

“He seems happy. I think it might be best not to question it and allow his happiness to become your own. Might you be able to do that?”

“I have certainly done more difficult things than that.”

“You have?”

“That may be a conversation for another time. I have told you quite enough for one day, I believe.”

“I could not agree more. I must admit, just now has been the first time that I have spoken of my family in what feels like forever.”

“This is why I do sometimes wonder if I want children at all.”

“Then we do not need to have any. That is quite alright with me.”

“Do you not need an heir?”

“Should I ever want an heir, we can discuss the matter.”

Once again, Diana returned to her home, wondering why she trusted him so much. He was changeable and frightening, yet she was not afraid to open up to him and to tell him secrets that she had never dreamed of sharing.

Frankly, she could not wait for the next promenade the following morning.

CHAPTER 9

There was nothing Diana had wanted more than for her sister to find some sort of friendship with the Duke.

It was something that she did not truly see happening, given what Samantha knew (or rather, what she thought she knew) about the Duke, but it was something to hope for, nonetheless.

Fortunately, there was a week of rain, and so for their courtship to continue, it was better that the Duke remained in their drawing room throughout their stay.

The first day, Samantha did not come to the room. She did not come to see the Duke, instead going to the gardens and remaining there until he left. It was strange of her to do so, and she would return with dripping hair and her skirts in a mess, but she refused to go anywhere else.

“Have I done something to her?” the Duke asked. “She seemed quite content to be in my presence on my last visit.”

“I believe she is simply shy.”

“Well, she is to be my sister-in-law one day, so that ought to change eventually.”

“I am quite sure that it will.”

At that moment, her father began speaking to the Duke about some ideas for business opportunities, and Diana no longer cared to listen. She sat and waited for the end of the calling hour and then went to find her sister.

“Where were you?”

“I was here. I did not feel welcome in there. Why do you ask?”

“Why did you not feel welcome? You have spoken with the Duke before and found him pleasant, unless that was not the truth.”

“I do not know. The two of you have been spending quite a lot of time together, and I did not wish to intrude. He is to be your husband, after all, not mine.”

“In any case, the two of you will be family. It is my preference that the two of you find some common ground at least.”

“And that will not be found through me being forced to sit in that room listening to the two of you.”

“Is something wrong, Sister?” Diana asked. “Have I done something to upset you?”

“Not at all. I simply do not wish to intrude. That is all it is, I promise.”

“Very well. In that case, I shall tell you that we do not see you as an intrusion. It is quite the opposite, in fact. He asked after you today.”

“Why? I am of no interest to him.”

“You will be his sister-in-law. Now, I need you to keep this between the two of us, but he does not have any family. You are to be his only sibling. Now, can you please, for me, make an effort?”

Samantha shifted, the rain hitting her face. “I suppose I can try, but if he is at all strange, then I shall return out here.”

“Risking illness, yes. Very well.”

And so the next day, when the Duke arrived, Samantha remained with her. Diana could tell that she did not wish to be there, but that was of little consequence—a promise was a promise.

“So, Your Grace,” Samantha began, stirring her tea. “My sister was telling me about your talents with the pianoforte. It is not a particularly common talent for a gentleman to have.”

“Perhaps not, but it is something that my mother had always loved, and so when she asked if I wished to learn it, I couldn’t refuse.”

“That is rather lovely, actually.”

“And do you play?”

“Yes, but I cannot say that I have always enjoyed it. I do not have the lovely tie to it that you do. Being a young lady, there was always the expectation that I would learn and do it well, and so my sister and I worked tirelessly on it until I was perfect, but I cannot say even now that I am passionate about it.”

“But it is such a beautiful instrument,” he sighed with a smile, sitting at it.

“It is certainly nice, and it is a lovely decoration, but as far as utility?—”

He began to play, and the sisters fell silent. He seemed to forget that they were there at all, gently caressing the keys and playing a tune so soft that it seemed impossible that it was coming from such a brutish man.

“The pianoforte, you see”—he smiled as he played—“is an instrument of many facets. You see, you can play softly, or you can play like this.”

He then played differently, hitting the keys harder, in a way that seemed to suit him even more.

“But what is most beautiful of all,” he sighed, stopping for a moment. “Is when both musicians can play in perfect unison. The gentle and the passionate, they come together, and...”

He motioned for Diana to sit beside him, but she shook her head. She saw how his face fell for a moment, and she did not like it at all.

“I do not play,” she explained. “I taught Samantha, but I could never quite do it myself. I could never make my fingers do what I wanted them to do.”

“Ah. This is quite alright, Lady Diana.”

“I can try,” Samantha said quickly, causing both of them to turn to her. “I only—I only mean that it might help me learn to appreciate the instrument, and it is clearly something important to the gentleman that shall be my brother-in-law, so it is only fair that I try, you know?”

The Duke beamed, and she took a seat beside him.

“What shall we play?” she asked. “I have quite the collection of sheet music, not that I know any of it.”

“In which case, we might as well play whatever we like. You can lead, and I shall follow you.”

“I believe it is the proper thing for the gentleman to lead,” she joked.

“Then we shall be most improper indeed.”

They began to play together, and they were good at it. Diana knew that this was supposed to make her happy. At last, her sister and her betrothed were finding some sort of common ground, and from how they laughed together when they made a misstep, they were clearly enjoying each other’s company. This was precisely what she had wanted.

So why was she so hurt?

She watched them together, and her chest ached. She thought back to that first morning in the drawing room, where it had been her sister who was set to marry him, and how Diana had thought she was making a sacrifice by marrying him instead, but seeing how they were together now, it was more like she had forced her way between them and stolen him away from her.

She had made a mistake. It had been with the best intentions in the world, but she had not done the right thing at all. They would have been happy together, sharing passions and music and laughter, and now Samantha would remain single, and the Duke would have to marry a lady that he did not love, and it was entirely her fault.

“I shall leave you both to it,” Diana said suddenly, running out of the room.

She leaned against the wall, trying to steady her breathing. She had to insert herself, find a way to be involved because it pertained to Samantha and heaven forbid anything bad ever happened to her, and she had ruined everything.

And so, the following morning, it was her own turn not to go to the drawing room during calling hour, and she understood why Samantha was happier to go outside in the rain. She heard him arrive at her house, heard her father welcome him, and heard Samantha go downstairs to him.

When she went to the drawing room, the door was closed, so she pressed her ear against it to listen.

“I suppose she will not be attending this morning,” Samantha said gently.

“That is quite alright after what happened yesterday. It was quite sudden.”

“Yes, and very much unlike her. I did not see her for the rest of the day. I believe it shall be better to give her some space for now.”

“I can take my leave if you wish.”

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“No! Stay. It is quite alright, I would rather you did not go out in this weather for no reason. You and I can discuss a few matters if that is alright with you.”

“I suppose so. In which case, you played pianoforte with me, and so I should like you to teach me something about your passions.”

“Well, what would you like to know about?”

“What would you like to talk about?”

Diana could not stand it. What was worse was that she couldn't understand why it hurt her so much. He was her betrothed, to be sure, but they would only ever be friends. He was not hers, and she was not his, and such an arrangement was supposed to make matters less complicated, and now...

Now she was making it difficult, and all because she wanted the two of them to be closer.

Can you never be happy? What will it take for you to just be happy?

Perhaps Samantha was right, and none of this was a good idea and it was better to wait outside. It was cold, and Diana knew that it was cold, but that didn't change a thing. She could not be there another moment, listening to the two of them talk and laugh as if she were not there at all. It made her nauseous.

Frankly, the cold rain was the better option.

It was almost soothing, feeling the icy water hit her skin and soak into her clothes. It was something that she shouldn't have been doing, and it made her feel better, but she was realizing that this had been a trend of late. The sister that had always toed the line was now doing anything but that, but instead of making her feel more in control, she had never felt less in control in her life.

Such a feeling was only made worse the following morning when she awoke with a terrible pain in her head and a weakness spreading throughout her body. It was the worst pain she had been in since the week after the fire.

"You are such a fool." Samantha laughed at her bedside.

That was certainly how Diana felt, in any case.

"Where is the Duke?" she asked. "I believe I require a word with him."

"He will not be coming today," Samantha said gently. "He spoke about you a lot yesterday, though. Fear not, he will come back. What did you wish to speak with him about?"

"It is nothing, Sister. It is nothing for you to hear, at least, not for now."

"Very well, I shall not pry. What happened to you yesterday? I was going to go looking for you, but you seemed so disinterested in speaking with me that I thought it best to leave you."

"You were correct in such an assumption. I needed time, that is all."

"And what you certainly did not need was to act as I did and go out in the rain. You always have gotten ill far easier than I. You should not take the sorts of risks that I do. It is not the same at all."

Diana sneezed, and it was all the agreement that she needed to convey.

“Why did you go outside?”

“I do not know,” she lied. “I suppose I had had quite enough of being inside all day, and that a short while would not do any harm.”

“Well, it certainly did, but it is nothing that you cannot handle. You shall be right as rain in the morning, I assure you.”

“You are slightly too optimistic, Sister.”

Diana wondered if it was optimism that she might have had one day a long time ago, not that she could remember any time at all where she did. Then again, it was thanks to Diana that Samantha was able to hope and dream at all, even if there was a harsh reality incoming that neither knew what to do with.

“This will all be alright, won’t it?” Samantha asked.

“Of course. It is only a small ailment. It is as you say, I shall be fine by morning.”

“I do not mean your ailment. I mean your marriage. You will not be leaving me behind, will you?”

“I am not worried at all that I will have to leave you behind. I am more worried that you will be bright and beautiful forever and be the one to leave me.”

“That cannot happen. It will not. I need you far too much for that.”

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“That, and you and the Duke seemed to have found common ground after all.”

“Yes, exactly as you wanted. He is rather pleasant, actually. It is quite the match for the two of you. It is fortunate, indeed. That is what these scandal sheets should write about you, not all of... that.”

“Well, regardless, this is where we are. I can only hope that our marriage is happy, but there is no possibility at all that you and I will be separated. It will never be a consideration.”

But her sister did not seem too convinced.

“You do believe me, don’t you?”

“Of course.”

“So is there something else on your mind?”

“It is all of this talk of weddings. I do not want it to happen. Are you sure that you cannot find a way out of it?”

“In a way that does not destroy your prospects? No. Thus, there is no way out that I shall consider. Besides, the Duke is not what they say he is. You know that yourself.”

“But you do not love him. There must be a way to prevent this. You do not want to marry him, and so it is not right that you must.”

“Fairness is not a concern of theirs. What matters is that he has proposed and I have gotten as close to accepting it as possible. To back away now would only prove disastrous for the both of us. Is there a reason why you do not want him to marry me?”

Samantha did not respond, instead biting her lip.

“Samantha, if there is something you need to tell me, then you ought to do so now.”

“There is nothing to tell you, Sister. I must go now, though. Father requires twice as much from me when you are unwell, after all.”

“I am so sorry.”

“It is not your fault! Get some rest, and I hope that you recover quickly, for it is the garden party tomorrow.”

“In which case I can only hope that my recovery requires an extra day.”

“You shall enjoy it when you’re there. You shall see.”

Diana somehow struggled to believe that.

CHAPTER 10

Time with Lady Samantha had been quite enlightening, indeed.

There had always been the same things said of the two sisters, no matter where he went. Colin was to marry the wrong lady, for the one more likely to succeed as a duchess was the younger one. The more intelligent of the two was Lady Samantha, the more amenable one was Lady Samantha, the sweeter one was Lady Samantha.

But he was not to be married to Lady Samantha, and he much preferred it that way, and he could not fathom why the ton did not understand that.

Fortunately, at least Lady Samantha understood. She was everything that the ton had claimed her to be, but she was not the sort to think that meant she was above her sister. In fact, she said outright that she owed everything to her, and she knew that her sister marrying him meant that she could live out her dreams too, dreams that did not involve dukes.

“Are you alright, Your Grace?” Lady Samantha asked, and his attention snapped back to her.

They had been invited to a garden party hosted by some lord or other, and had it not been a part of their plan to make the ton see them as a cohesive unit, he would have rejected the invitation altogether, but he and Lady Diana had things to prove, and garden parties were not the worst things ever if he was being honest.

“Yes,” he replied, “I am perfectly well, thank you.”

“It is only that you seem quite distant.”

“There is something on my mind, but it is nothing, I assure you.”

What was on his mind more often than not those last two days was the way Lady Diana had fled the room whilst he was speaking with her sister. He had been confused instantly; she had wanted the two of them to find some sort of friendship, only to seemingly disapprove of it when it happened. Then he thought about the expectation of the ton, and how they had all seen her as the lesser sister. It was no surprise that she expected him to feel the same way.

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“Might you wish to promenade, Lady Diana?” he asked, and it was her turn to shift her attention to him.

“Oh! Well, I guess so.”

“Wonderful.”

They walked in silence for a while. The weather had at last improved, and the air was filled with the sound of birds, which Colin certainly appreciated.

“Are you well now, Lady Diana?” he asked.

“I am much improved, yes. Why? Do I seem unrecovered?”

“Not at all! I only mean that you had me quite concerned about you. I felt your absence when I called on you.”

“I’m quite sure my sister made up for it, though.”

“If you would like my honest answer, I would have to tell you that she did not.”

“That is nonsense, and you know it.”

“Not at all!”

“But you were enjoying her company. The two of you were getting along perfectly.”

“I also get along with mothers of young debutantes if I must, that does not mean I prefer them to you.”

“But—”

“Lady Diana, if we must have a dispute each time I see you, then our marriage will be quite difficult.”

She laughed softly. “Very well, I believe you.”

“Good. Now, you seem ill at ease. Might I be able to help?”

“Walking me away from those in attendance was the best thing you could have possibly done for me.”

“Ah, are you not a fan of garden parties?”

“I cannot stand them.”

“Because of the people?”

“Well, something like that.”

“Then we need not return to it. I should be quite happy to remain here with you until the end of the event, I assure you.”

“No, it is quite alright. Samantha will be left with our father if we do not return, and I cannot do that to her.”

“I understand. In any case, shall we walk a while?”

“I am sure she will forgive that.”

It was pleasurable walking with Lady Diana in silence. She was beautiful when she was outspoken and told those around her just what she thought. She was the same when they were arguing, although it never occurred to him in the moments of the disputes, and she was a bright spark when she was passionate about something, as if a part of her came alive.

What he could not help but notice, though, was the way she did not sparkle when she was at peace, but she glowed. There was a softness to her that not many ladies had, and it was nothing other than beautiful.

“Your Grace,” a gentleman said suddenly, and Colin hated that his thoughts about Lady Diana had been interrupted, particularly by a gentleman he did not know.

“Good afternoon, My Lord.”

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“My Viscountess and I couldn’t help but notice that the two of you were out together.”

“That tends to happen when two people are courting, does it not?”

“Yes, in any other courtship.”

“Congratulations, Lady Diana,” the Viscountess said with a smirk. “At last, there is a young lady amongst you that knows how to play the game on the marriage mart.”

“I beg your pardon?” Colin asked, but Lady Diana’s grip on his arm tightened.

“It is quite alright, Your Grace,” she whispered.

“No, she was willing to say it, so she can be willing to explain what she meant by it.”

“Well, we all know that the famous love matches are few and far between. All I meant is that it is good to see a young lady that understands what truly matters when finding a match, no matter how she will be seen because of it.”

“And what exactly has she done that would warrant being seen in a certain way?”

“Well, it must have been something. We all know that the better of the two sisters remains unmarried, and so you must have done something to ensure that sister was not you.”

“Aside from being the better match for me, no,” Colin said firmly. “And you shall

refrain from speaking that way about a lady, particularly one that is to be a duchess. Am I clear?"

"You will not speak to my wife in such a manner," the Viscount retorted, but Colin held his hand up, silencing him.

He could not stand a bully, especially not one that was doing such things to Lady Diana. Not her.

"You think that you have it all, don't you?" The Viscount smirked, turning to Colin. "You think that you have the title and your estates and the funds, but you need to remember one thing. None of it is yours by right."

"Stop talking." Colin sneered.

"That is what you want, isn't it? You want us to be silent, you want all of London to smile and nod and pretend that you did not do what you thought you had to do, but it is not going to happen. We all know, Your Grace. No amount of willing and insisting will change that."

"And how is it that you inherited your title?" he asked. "Because I hate to inform you I do not know who you are. I have never seen you before in my life, likely because you are so purely inconsequential to us all."

"I am the firstborn son of a firstborn son. I was born for my role. My son was born for the role."

"And yet you are unknown."

"I would rather be unknown than be known for what you did. Your poor father. He must be looking down on you with shame."

“I have done nothing to be ashamed of. Let me make that perfectly clear to you. Everything that I have ever done is something that I am proud of, be it good or bad, for I can at least say the decision was mine. My father knew that, too.”

“Knew it and then some.”

“And what is that supposed to mean?”

“You know exactly what I mean, and it is important to remember, Your Grace, that I am not some weak older man. I am capable of starting and ending a fight.”

“What kind of gentleman threatens another in front of his wife? I would say in front of his child, but it appears your dear firstborn son is not worthy of coming to these events with you. I wonder why that is. Perhaps it is the quality of his lineage?”

“Do you wish to meet me at dawn?”

“I shall meet you fifty meters away if necessary.” Colin sneered. “Now I shall only tell you once more. I will not hear anything more about Lady Diana. She is a lady, and a good and kind one at that. She will be your duchess, and you will either be a friend or an enemy to her. The choice is yours.”

The Viscount looked at Colin, but Colin was taller and far broader than him. Physically, the Viscount was no match for him if push came to shove, not that he would know the first thing to do if they came to blows, not when Lady Diana was watching.

With a scoff, the pair walked away. Once they were a reasonable distance away, Colin watched as Lady Diana breathed deeply and her shoulders slumped. He did not know what to say to her; they were cruel to her, and she had done nothing in response. She had always been happy to stand up to him, but whenever it was

someone else, she seemed to fall apart.

“Are you alright?” he asked.

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“Now that they have taken their leave, I certainly am.” She laughed gently. “They were awful, were they not?”

“Positively dreadful, although it surprised me that you did not have anything to say to them about it.”

“What is there for me to say? They are entitled to think that way of me. I suppose if I were them, I would think much the same. I am a spinster, after all, and you are a duke, and a wealthy and handsome one at that, and?—”

“What did you just say?”

“That I am a spinster and you are a duke.”

Had her cheeks not been scarlet, he might have thought that he had misheard.

“Regardless,” she continued, flustered, “the point stands that I have my place and I need to remember it.”

“Your place is going to be a duchess, my wife, and I certainly agree that you are going to need to remember that. You are going to be among the most important members of Society.”

“But we are not going to be a part of Society. You do not wish to be.”

“If you wish to, we can, but that is not the point. The point is that you will be respected as my wife and their duchess. I do not care what is thought of me, but they

are going to respect you. I will not give you a choice in the matter.”

“But it is alright. I promise that it is.”

“For you, yes. For me, no. From the moment that ring is on your finger, you will be my family, and nobody that walks this earth is going to treat my family in any way but perfectly.”

She looked up at him, her eyes wide and hopeful, and at that moment, he wanted to give her the world. He knew that he could give her it, too, but only if she allowed him to.

“Lady Diana?” he asked, as she was not saying anything to him.

“Why are you so kind to me?”

“Why would I not be?”

“I have been nothing but a burden to you.”

“You have been anything but that.”

“That is not true. You were happy to be a bachelor, and I ruined everything by being willful and spiteful and stubborn, and no matter what I do, I keep falling into trouble and you keep trying to pick up the pieces for me, but how long can we do that for? That cannot be our lives.”

“For a start, I would be happy to rescue you and keep you out of trouble, no matter how many times. For another, it is not your actions that led to this, it is mine. When we kissed that evening, I realized that I was the common thread. The only way that I would become anything more than a rakish duke with no real love in his life would be

if I married.”

“And so you chose my sister, and I ruined that.”

“I never wanted your sister,” he said, exasperated. “Do you truly think I would wish to marry a girl barely out of leading strings? I had never seen your sister before, it just so happened that your father was at White’s and he said he had a daughter of marriageable age and I pitied the poor girl, regardless of who she turned out to be.”

“So you were marrying out of pity?”

“If I were to marry, I at least wished to improve my wife’s life from the one she had known. I still hope to do that, of course.”

“It is not as though my life could be much more difficult.” She laughed emptily. “Very well, but you must promise me one thing.”

“Yes. Anything.”

“We will see my sister as often as possible.”

“That is not in question. You may see her as often as you wish. She could stay with us if the two of you want.”

“If only that were possible. She wishes to care for our father, but I wish to offer her a sort of respite from it all, especially from him.”

“Has he not improved since we met?”

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“He has, but who knows how long this will last? He is fragile right now, and if you ask me, I believe it is only a matter of time before he goes back to how it was, and Samantha doesn’t deserve that.”

“No. No, she does not. It is not a question. She is welcome to stay any time. You need not ask me permission, either. She need only arrive, and we will handle the rest.”

“Thank you,” she whispered.

“You need not thank me,” he said gently. “It is as I told you. We are to be a family, and that includes your sister.”

“A family.” She nodded. “I do like the sound of that, you know.”

“As do I.”

They returned to the others, and it was as though Lady Diana had become the lady he met once more. She smiled and laughed and told people precisely what she thought, which seemed to earn a few gasps and glances, but Colin did not care.

She was bright once more, and she was beautiful.

CHAPTER 11

The festivities of the garden party did not last.

The following morning, Colin's sleep was interrupted by Charles. In any other household, there would be a butler who welcomed guests and asked the man of the house if they could enter, but such a thing was not in place for Charles. Fortunately, he had the decency to wait outside of his bedchambers for him to dress.

"Tell me why I allow you to show up here unannounced," Colin groaned, opening his door.

"Because I am the only friend you have," Charles replied brightly. "Now, there is something I must discuss with you."

"Can you not wait until I am a married man to bring business to me?"

"It is your wife-to-be and business matters that have brought me here."

At this, Colin perked up.

"If you are here to propose something, I must decline, especially if it pertains to my wife."

"It is quite the opposite. I wish to make you aware of something that I have heard about."

"Very well, I shall have Cook prepare some biscuits."

"And perhaps something a little stronger than tea. Believe me, you shall need it."

Soon enough, the gentlemen were seated in Colin's study, eating. Colin eyed him carefully, unsure of what he was going to say about Lady Diana.

"The Earl was at White's last night," Charles began.

“That is a gentlemen’s club, not exactly a place of business, unless you are the owner.”

“Which is precisely my issue. He was in a drunken stupor, his usual state if I am not mistaken, and raving about some business plan he has, and asking anyone who would listen to invest.”

“The Earl has not been drinking. Lady Diana has told me herself. You must be confusing him with someone else.”

“Unlike you, Abaddon, I am aware of those in Society. Believe me, it was him.”

“And what is it that he wants them to invest in, exactly?”

“I do not know, nor does anyone really. He was quite incomprehensible. It is as I said, he was in there raving.”

“Do you suppose Lady Diana is aware of it?”

“If she has not mentioned it to you, I suppose not.”

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Colin kept his voice steady, but inside he could feel the anger burning. The Earl was a fool at best, and he had already thrown his money into his drinking. He couldn't seem to do anything but bring shame upon his daughters, and Colin hated him for that, especially given that the young ladies seemed to believe that he was changing for the better.

“Do you suppose they should know about it?” Colin asked.

“What would you want someone to do if you were them?”

“I do not know. I believe I would rather be kept in the dark about it so that I would not need to be involved in it all. Out of sight, out of mind.”

“Until they find out elsewhere, only to discover that you had known all along.” Charles nodded. “And given yours and your betrothed's reputations, I imagine there are some that would be all too content to tell her out of spite.”

The moment Charles said that, Colin knew that he had to tell her. Just the day prior, they had been accosted by two people who were unafraid to belittle Lady Diana even in front of him. She had faced enough, having a father who exhibited behaviors that she knew about, but to have someone tell her themselves? It was not going to happen on his watch.

“I am grateful to you for notifying me of this.” He nodded.

“So you are going to tell her?”

“I have no other choice. I can only hope that she is not so furious that she takes her anger out on him then and there.”

“I find myself hoping that she does. Heaven knows she is within her rights to do so—the man is ghastly.”

“Yes, but he is her father and is responsible for her sister. She wouldn’t do that if it could change how her sister is cared for.”

“You seem to know the girl quite well.”

Colin could not help but nod. They had not known each other for a long time, but the parts of her that he had seen were enough for him to know how she might react to things and what she might like to have happen.

“Might this be a good match, after all?” Charles asked.

“I like to think so. There is an understanding between the two of us, and I am trying to be amenable to her requests. So far, I have yet to tell her I cannot accommodate her.”

“And what about the situation... upstairs?”

“We will discuss that when the time comes, but it is only one rule, and with all that I have done for her, she will likely accept it.”

“And if she does not?”

“Then I shall decide what to do. It is all in hand.”

“For your sake, I hope that you are right.”

Colin thought about his friend's words as he rode in the carriage to Lady Diana's home. There were things that he had not told her, and it was easy to tell himself that she would not mind when she was not in front of him. Unfortunately, the time would come when she would be standing before him and he would have to reveal some awful things, and he did not know how she would react.

At least he was about to find out how she would cope with such news.

"Your Grace!" She smiled upon seeing him. "It is a surprise to see you this morning, but not to worry. I can have Cook arrange something if you wish."

"That will not be necessary."

"Oh? Is everything alright?"

"It may be nothing at all, but I must inform you of something. Might we find somewhere with some privacy?"

"We can go to the end of the gardens. We shall not be bothered there."

As they wandered the gardens, Colin noticed how happy she seemed to see him, even if he had come with possibly terrible news. The good weather had continued, and the sunlight made her dark hair appear to be streaked with gold.

"I was hoping to see you, Your Grace," she said gently. "I was hoping to thank you for what you did yesterday."

"There is no need to thank me. It is my duty to care for you."

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“But there are many gentlemen who do not carry out such a duty, regardless of whether or not they should. Besides, it is not as though you have any obligations to me as yet, for we are not married.”

“Do you wish to know something, Lady Diana?”

“Certainly.”

“I did not defend you because you are to be my wife. I defended you because I like you a great deal. Such matters as whether or not I have yet to put a wedding ring on your finger do not change how I act. You can take that as you wish, whether you like or dislike my feelings towards you, but that is how it is.”

“I am quite content with that.” She smirked. “Now, what is it that you wished to tell me?”

Suddenly, he did not wish to. He knew that her relationship with her father had been fragile of late and that she had been trying to trust the man for the first time in her life. This was going to destroy that irreparably, and he wanted her to have a little more time with the belief that her father had changed.

But he knew that it would either be him who told her or someone else, someone who was aiming to hurt her.

“It pertains to your father,” he sighed.

“He has been brilliant of late, hasn’t he? I must admit, I had my doubts at first, but so

much time has passed and he is still the father I have always wanted. Samantha is less trusting of it, but I truly do think that he has changed.”

“What exactly has changed about him?”

“He has breakfast with us now, and that may sound like nothing, but after so many years of having absolutely nothing from him, that hour a day feels like an eternity. In a good way, of course.”

“To be sure.”

“And it is though he truly does understand us when we speak with him now. He used to make this sort of grunting sound in response, but now he truly does listen. It is something that I never saw happening, but it is lovely. It makes me wish that it had always been this way, but I know that it is better that he is making an effort now rather than never having done so.”

“And you truly believe he will stay this way?”

“Why do you ask?” she said quietly. “Do you not? Oh, God, do not tell me that he has asked to speak with you. I dread to think what he might tell you about me. I have not done anything terrible, I assure you, but he is still harboring some resentment to me after what happened with Samantha, and?—”

“Your father has been drinking.”

“Drinking?” she echoed. “No he hasn’t. I am yet to see him with a drink in his hand. Not only that, but he has been home all day with Samantha and me.”

“He has been seen at White’s. He has been drinking there, then begging some of the gentlemen there to invest in his business venture, not that anyone is certain of what it

is. I do not know what he is doing that makes it possible for him to resume fatherly duties so effortlessly, but the gentleman who told me is not a fool.”

But he could tell from the look of disbelief on her face that she did not wish to listen to him.

“Are you angry with me?”

“No,” she whispered. “No, of course not. I only—I thought he was going to be better now. I knew that it was wrong of me, but a part of me hoped that I was putting my trust in him for a good reason this time. I feel like such a fool.”

“It may be that I am the one that is wrong.”

He said it too quickly, and he bit his lip immediately. He knew that Charles was right. He knew that the Earl was doing precisely what he had been accused of. There was no doubt in his mind, but for some reason, he had instinctively tried to say something that would make Lady Diana happier.

“I hope you are wrong,” she said softly. “I hope that this is simply a misunderstanding and that all will be as it was and my father truly has changed. I shall speak with him tonight about it, and see if he has any explanation.”

“Would you like me to be there?” he offered. “I could stay here. If he has any questions, I would be happy to tell him all that I can. I want the two of you to find an understanding, no matter the situation.”

“You are kind, but I think it might be best to keep this matter in the family for the moment, just while I learn the truth of the matter.”

He must have looked as hurt by that as he had felt, because the moment she saw him,

she seemed to panic.

“Not that I do not consider you my family!” she said quickly. “I do, in the same way that you do the same for me. I only mean that my father sees me as his daughter, but until we are married, he will not yet see you as his son, and frankly, I believe he is so afraid of you that he will not dare confess anything if you are present.”

“No, of course. I know what you meant.”

“Did I hurt your feelings, Your Grace?”

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“If I had feelings to hurt, you might have.”

“That would be a yes, then, for you have plenty. I apologize. I am not trying to push you away. I do not want to push you away, not when you have been so kind to me.”

“Will you tell your sister?”

“I may. Not yet, though. She has been determined that all of this has been a facade, and once she discovers that she was right, she will not let me live it down. I shall like to spend my final few hours of being right about it.”

“Then I shall tell her I was merely here to bid you good morning.”

“She will think me such a fool. You must think me one too.”

“Not at all. You are not foolish for putting your faith in your father, when as far as you have seen, he truly has changed.”

“But I should have known better. When I was a girl, and our aunt was caring for us, I would sometimes sit by the door and wait. I do not know quite what I was waiting for. I would dream that he would walk through the front door with gifts and a smile and apologies, but he of course never came.”

“And what happened when he did?”

“He was already incapable of speaking. I believe he told us that we were useless as we tried to drag him through the door, but I cannot be sure. After all, he was, again

incapable of speaking.”

“I do wonder how you and your sister are so well adjusted, given the circumstances.”

“As do I at times, but we were fortunate to have our aunt. I should like to speak with her again soon. It has been far too long, but I never know what to say to her. There are only so many ways to thank someone for everything that they have done for you.”

“She did what was expected of her as your aunt. It was kind of her, but you need not feel indebted. Perhaps once we are married, you might send her a letter and invite her to dinner?”

“I would like that a lot, Your Grace.”

“I cannot wait to drop such a formality as that, you know. I hate the reminder that I am a duke. I never wanted to be one in the first place.”

“Well, the moment we are married, we can forget it exists at all. Can you wait that long, do you think?”

From the way he was looking at her, however, his eyes burning into hers, she couldn't help but question whether or not he could.

“I believe so, so long as you do not use those two dreaded words anymore.”

“I believe I can be amenable to such an arrangement.”

With a small laugh, he led her back to her home. She said nothing more about how she was going to bring the topic up to her father, but she did not need to. He hoped that it would at least be as easy as possible for her to get through it so that they could move forward.

He simply wanted her to be happy.

CHAPTER 12

Diana never thought she could dislike her father any more than she did when the Duke told her what he had been doing.

She wanted to believe that it was a mistake and that there was simply another drunkard resembling him that was doing all of it, but she knew that that was not possible. Whoever had told the Duke was clearly someone that he trusted, and so his word was as good as gold, as far as she was concerned.

Samantha.

Once more, she had to decide whether or not she wished for her sister to know before she confronted their father. She knew that it was better to and that Samantha had a right to know that their father was not acting in the way they had hoped, but Diana couldn't bear the thought of Samantha being hurt by him again, especially if there was even the smallest chance that it wasn't like that.

But she was not a fool. She knew that she had to tell her, and she also knew that her sister had watched her walk outside with the Duke and then returned, and it must have been quite evident that something had changed.

"Is everything alright, Di?"

It appeared that her sister had noticed her, indeed.

"Yes, Sister, everything is perfectly fine."

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“Did the Duke not wish to stay? He usually does.”

“He... he had something to do today that required his attention.”

“Ah, so there are things more important to him than his betrothed?”

“You are being unfair, and you know it.”

“I only say it in jest. He likes you a great deal, I can tell.”

“Do you think so?” Diana asked. “I never can tell. Sometimes, it feels as though he could truly like me one day, then other times it feels as though he would find far greater happiness if he were with another.”

“Di, you do not see the way he looks at you when you are not looking at him. His eyes follow you. Even when he and I converse, he is looking for you and he is not secretive about it.”

“You are only saying that to make me feel better.”

“I would never do such a thing, not by lying at least. He is a good man, I truly am starting to believe it, and he would never do anything to us that is not in our best interests. You know that I am right.”

“I do.”

“Then all is well, and I cannot wait to visit you, although I must say that with how

Father has been of late, I may have two households that I enjoy being a part of.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean that you were right. I have been unfair to him. After all this time, he truly does seem to have changed for the better, and I ought to stop holding the past against him.”

Diana chewed on her bottom lip.

“There is something that you are not telling me, isn’t there?” Samantha asked.

“If there were,” Diana replied carefully, “would you want to know?”

“Of course, I would, unless it were a surprise that you had planned for me, but from the look on your face, it would appear that that is not the case.”

“It is not, unfortunately.”

“Then what is it? If it is important, I would like to know sooner rather than later.”

“It is about Father. The Duke has it on good authority that he is still drinking.”

“Ah.”

“So I suppose you were right, after all.”

“I wish I was not. I would have much preferred to be completely wrong and had a father who cared about us enough to keep himself in line.”

“Are you upset?”

“It is hard to be when you hardly expect anything different than disappointment. But it is quite alright. He has simply returned to how he was before. It hardly changes anything.”

But Samantha was still eyeing Diana carefully, an eyebrow raised. “Unless there is something that does change things?” she asked.

“Well, yes there is. He is going to the gentlemen’s club and asking people to invest in his business.”

“Father does not have a business.”

“Which is precisely why I am confused. He usually likes to talk to anyone and everyone about his grandiose plans, when he is capable of doing so of course, but this time he has kept it from us completely. I do not understand.”

“Do you think that he will tell you? He hardly ever gives us honesty.”

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“Believe me, I know. Regardless, I have to try. Perhaps if I am kind about it, he may feel secure enough to confess. That is the best way to do it, at least.”

“I hope that you are right, and I hope that this is all a misunderstanding.”

“As do I, but I shall not know until I try.”

“Good luck, Sister.”

Diana went to find their father then. They had had breakfast together that morning, and he had not told them of any plans to leave afterwards, so she thought that he would be there for a conversation.

It was as she had said to Samantha, she would be kind and try to at least understand what he was doing. Perhaps he knew that his fortunes were changing and so he wished to try a business venture, and he knew what he was doing and simply had not told them. Given his reputation, it was unlikely that any upstanding gentleman would view it positively, and so maybe that was why he had not been taken seriously.

But Diana could not find him, and nobody seemed to know where he had gone. It did not make any sense. They always had the same routine—they would have breakfast together, then he would either accompany them on their trips or he would...

Diana did not know what he would do if they did not have plans.

She felt a chill run down her spine, immediately going to find Samantha again.

“Where does he go during the day, Sister?”

“Father? I do not know. I do not see him after breakfast. Nobody does.”

“Then I will wait for him to return.” Diana nodded. “I shall find him one way or another.”

She dragged a chair to the hallway, took one of the books from the library, and positioned herself comfortably. She was not suspicious at first—gentlemen had things to do outside of their households. But then an hour passed, and then another, and then she was completely unsure of how long it had been since she had seated herself there.

All she knew truly was that the sky had darkened and still he was not there. Then, it happened. She could hear a commotion outside, a sort of clattering and cursing, and then the door swung open and he was there, unsteady on his feet and grumbling. When he saw her, his eyes widened, and he stumbled backwards slightly.

“Diana,” he slurred, “what are you—Why are you here?”

“Go to bed, Father,” she sighed. “We shall discuss this in the morning.”

“You are not my—my mother.”

“To be sure. Goodnight.”

There was no use arguing with him when he was in such a state. It was far easier to send him to his room as if he were a petulant child that had been caught misbehaving, which she had to admit described him well.

One look from her seemed to tell Samantha all that she needed to know. Their father had been waiting until they had gone to bed and then coming home to hide his

activities, and it had been working well, that was until a friend of the Duke had caught him. Perhaps the rest of the accusation was true too.

The following morning, he seemed quite sheepish indeed. He was clearly aware that he had been seen, but instead of anger, all that he could do was shrink down in his seat and pretend they could not see him. Soon enough, he rose from his seat.

“I shall see you girls later,” he said sharply. “I have some matters to tend to.”

“I require a word with you first,” Diana replied.

“Can it not wait? It is vital that I go.”

“Then I shall accompany you. Either that or you sit in the drawing room and we talk. The choice is yours.”

He scowled at her, but he nodded. “Then we shall go to the drawing room.”

“I thought you might say that.”

She gave Samantha a quick glance over her shoulder as they left, and then she walked with her father. He shrunk away from her as if he were afraid, and she almost liked it. He should have been; she knew his secret, and he knew that, but he did not know the extent to which she was aware of what he had been doing.

“Alright,” she said coldly, “I wish to know everything.”

“I am unsure of what you are referring to.”

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“No, you are not. You know exactly what I am referring to, or must I be clear about it myself?”

“Yes, you must. Please enlighten me on how well you know of my activities outside of this household.”

“You have been drinking and then hunting for gentlemen to join you in business.”

The color drained from his face. She had all of the proof that she needed, and it should have broken her heart, and it would have done so had she not seen it coming.

“Who told you?”

“That is of no consequence. How could you? It is one thing to take yourself off and ruin the reputation of your two daughters. It is another thing entirely to do so with pride, and then to act as though you are a respectable gentleman that others should do business with. What are you playing at?”

“You know nothing about what it is to be a man.”

“It appears that I know far more than you, for at least I know how to treat children, and I know how to run a household, which are two things that you have failed in at every opportunity. How does it feel to have two children who hope to not need to see you at all one day? Does it not pain you that neither of us wants anything to do with you because of how you have failed us?”

“Three.”

“What?”

“Three.”

“You are not yet drunk, so do not play the fool. I am asking you questions, and I want you to respond to them.”

“And if you are going to interrogate me like this, you had better have the correct information, which you so clearly do not.”

“What have I said that is untrue?” Diana sighed, exasperated. “You are a drunk, and you have done everything in your power to destroy us, and I will never understand why we were never worth more to you.”

“Because you are not boys. I have told you that before. You are girls and of no use to me. It is because of you and that useless mother of yours that I spent years without an heir, and I will never forgive you for that for as long as I live.”

“Then I suppose we both have the hope that you do not live too long.”

It was the cruelest thing that she had ever said, and he seemed to take it exactly as she had hoped—personally.

“Does it make you feel better when you say such things?”

“In response to you calling us useless burdens? I believe so. I apologize that we were not heirs and that your family name will end with us, but that is not our fault, and you never should have made us feel as though it was.”

“No, it was that mother of yours. I never did find a use for her, besides keeping you occupied.”

“And what is keeping you occupied? This business venture of yours? There is no need for one in the first place. The Duke has ample funds. You will be taken care of, unless you are planning on funding your other activities at White’s, namely being its main client.”

“I do need this, Diana, and I shall have you know that there will be an heir to carry on the family name.”

“Yes, some distant cousin or other to inherit the estate. That does not matter.”

“That is where you are wrong. It does not matter how clever you might think that you are, there are things that you do not know. Perhaps that is why you are so bitter.”

“Then do tell. Who is this wonderful heir that is worth more than your two children?”

“It is as I said,” he snarled, “I havethreechildren.”

CHAPTER 13

A beautiful estate, a good amount of wealth, a well-liked wife, and two charming daughters. It was a perfect life, or it would have been if Jonathan had wanted it in the first place.

He had so hoped to remain a bachelor. He was the youngest of five, the eldest being a son, Edmund. That was supposed to mean that he had no estate to inherit, no title to uphold, no requirement to be perfect. He disliked Society and its watchful gaze and the never-ending rumors, but he at least knew that he would never need to play a part in it. He knew it even at the age of three and ten.

Then his father died, and he felt something beginning even then. In the blink of an eye, his brother was married to a lady that he had never met, and he was the head of

the household. He was but two and twenty and woefully unprepared for all that was to come his way. Fortunately, the two of them had a good bond, one of the best ones that brothers can have.

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“Can I help at all, Brother?” Jonathan asked one evening. “You seem tired.”

“It is nothing for you to concern yourself with, John.”

“But—”

“Be glad that I do all of this so that you need not do it yourself. That will be more help than you could ever know.”

Jonathan nodded with a smile. He was not quite sure of what his brother had meant, but his brother was an intelligent man and so he knew to listen.

He did not like the new Countess. She took over the household the moment she set foot in it, overshadowing even his mother and refusing to allow her to have a say in anything. He would have loathed her entirely, but her way of doing things seemed to work.

Their issue, however, was that three years passed and they did not produce an heir. It was not for a lack of effort, which was how the Countess worded it, but it simply was not meant to be. This was not a solution, however, merely an excuse. At last, the Countess did fall pregnant, but then she lost the baby.

“Where did it go?” was all that Jonathon could ask at the time. “Can we find it again?”

Fortunately, he had asked his mother, who gently explained that sometimes horrible things happened and babies did not survive. He struggled to understand for a long

time, but soon enough, the Countess was once more with child, and she carried it to term and had...

A girl.

The marriage between the Earl and the Countess became a struggle from there. They did not like each other, and they never had. Their marriage had been arranged in a panic when the late Earl had passed, and so Edmund had agreed to a hasty marriage, one arranged with the first young lady who seemed willing. They resented each other, Edmund because his wife could not give him a son and his wife because that was all Edmund cared about. She was a failure in his eyes.

Jonathan wondered if that was why she disappeared one day. It was quite known that she was disliked by most, to the extent that they were quite relieved when she was gone. Then Edmund followed suit, vanishing one night, and all eyes turned to Jonathan.

It no longer mattered that he did not want the title or the wife or the heirs. It did not matter that by then, he was but seven and ten and not at all fit to marry. The day he came of age should have been a celebration, but it felt more like a trip to the gallows. His freedom would be ripped from him in a few mere moments, and he wished he could go wherever it was that his brother went.

"It is quite alright, Brother," Roberta said gently. "Edmund was never any good at being an earl, but you shall fare much better. We all think so."

"But I do not want to. This is Edmund's role, not mine. Can we not find him and bring him back?"

"He has already brought shame on us once. There is no use in locating him and dragging him back only for him to do the same a second time."

“There is a use. It shall save me from a life I would detest.”

“You and Edmund are insufferable, you know.”

“You do not understand!”

“Of course, I do not. John, you shall have a purpose far greater than mine could ever be. You shall have the world at your feet, and you could reach for the moon if you wished. My sisters and I, however, must sit with our needlework and simper in the hopes that a man will marry us. You have choices. We do not.”

“And what if I choose to run away?”

“Then we shall be out on the streets. What Edmund did may seem like a wonderful idea to you, but one day you will understand that what he did was cruel and selfish to us. You are our last hope until you sire an heir.”

“So I need only have a son?”

“Essentially, yes.”

“Then I shall do just that.”

And it may have been because of that conversation that he agreed to marry a young lady the day he came of age, even if he had never met her. He was surprised at first, because she was far prettier than he had expected. She had a soft voice and small hands and seemed quite excited to meet him, but she never gave him a son, and so he hated her.

After two girls, he knew that he needed to leave. He knew that he would face the same fate as his brother, trapped in a loveless marriage without an heir and needing to

remain there else he would ruin his family. Regardless, he had to find a way out.

It was a miracle what a curtain and a candle could do.

He hadn't meant to cause anyone any harm, only ruin the house just enough that they had to leave. He wanted time away from being the Earl of Colton, with his two daughters and no sons. He wanted to be Jonathon Winston, no more and no less, but it was not going to be possible so long as he was there. He had not considered that a fire could not be controlled and that it would not care whether or not his pleasant wife, whom he simply could not bring himself to love, was sleeping. He had no control—not even an earl can dictate who lives and dies in a disaster, even if he caused it.

Even if Jonathon loathed his wife, he couldn't help but fall to his knees when he was informed of her passing. They had married so young that she was all he had ever known, and given that they had only had their first daughter but six years prior, they had spent the longest time just the two of them. He hated the late Countess, but he needed her, and he couldn't stand that.

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“There is a letter here for you,” his butler told him one morning, not long after the fire.

“Leave it on my desk. I shall look at it soon.”

“You may wish to read it now. It is from your brother.”

Jonathan felt his heart stop for a moment. He had not heard from Edmund in years by that point, and he fully believed that he had passed.

He tore the envelope open and scanned the letter immediately. Edmund was well, better than he had been in years, and living in Scotland. Word travels fast, he explained, and that he had come to know of his wife’s passing. How terrible, he said, but how wonderful that it presented him with an opportunity to start anew.

He could go.

Jonathan could make the carriage ride to him in a matter of days, and find the freedom that he had always wanted. The trouble was that he still had his girls, but there was always a solution. His sister arrived to care for the three of them, hoping to guide her poor younger brother through his devastating loss, and the plan formed in his head instantly.

Roberta,

You will hate me for this, possibly forever, but I cannot bring myself to care. I have sacrificed my life for this family, and I cannot do it any longer. I need to find my own

life, and some real happiness of my own, before returning to the hell that I have been suffering for all too long.

We never know when we will lose our lives. Losing my wife has shown me that if I do not act now, I may never have the chance to. I never got to see the world, and I need to do it. I need to see more of life than the same home in the same town with the same people. I cannot do this any longer.

You promised me I could go once I had an heir. Now I shall never have one. I have no choice. I must go. If you never forgive me, then it is a burden I shall bear. Perhaps you might one day understand.

Thank you for the sacrifice you will make for my daughters. We can consider ourselves matched in what we have done for one another.

Jonathan.

It was not the best in terms of saying goodbye, but it was the best way of abandoning his family that he knew. At least he had the grace to leave a note—something his brother had never done.

Scotland was gray, and it rained for the first several days, but it was the most incredible place in the world to him. Everything was new, and he could be anyone and anything. He was happy for the first time since he could remember, and even before he could find his brother, he found her.

She was tall, with deep black curls and the brightest blue eyes. She smiled, and it was as though the room smiled with her when she did. They were in a bar, and he had had far too much to drink, but he was conscious enough to know then and there that she was going to be the love of his life.

“Peggy,” she said softly to him. “I thought it best to introduce myself. I do not believe that we have met.”

“John,” he replied. “It is impossible that we have. I could never have forgotten such a face as yours.”

“I shall take that as a compliment.”

“That is precisely how it was meant.”

She motioned to the door. “You and I should have a look around, I think. I do not believe that you are from around here.”

“Is it so obvious?”

“You sound like someone from England. Might I be correct in such an assumption?”

“It would appear that you are both beautiful and intelligent.”

It was almost too good to be true. After so long, here she was, the perfect woman, the one he had spent his whole life dreaming of and never quite finding, all because he had to be elsewhere. He needed her. He couldn’t leave her, not for anything.

So he didn’t.

She was not a lady of any titled family. There was no grand estate, no incredible wealth of any description, but that did not matter to him. What mattered was that she was there, and she was the most perfect thing to ever stand before him. She lived a comfortable life, one where she did not give too much, nor did she get too much, but she was happy, and he so craved some of that happiness for himself.

And after two mere weeks, perhaps because he was in a drunken stupor, or perhaps because he truly did fancy himself in love, he remembered that he was now unmarried and asked her to marry him.

“This is fantastical.” She laughed. “It is impossible. We have only just met.”

“Where I come from, that is the norm. We could do this, Peggy. Nobody will dare question us, and we can live here and have a family of our own. We could be so happy. I want to make you so happy.”

“Then I have no choice but to accept!”

Gretna Green was Jonathan’s safe haven, and the journey there could not have passed fast enough. One small trip later, he was married for the second time, not that his bride knew that. He had not told her a thing. Peggy was none the wiser about his daughters, or his late wife, or even his title. As far as she knew, he was John Winston, a man of moderate means and nothing more, and he adored that about her.

Their marriage was perfect until that changed.

He hadn’t meant to let it slip, but one day they were in their bedchambers, wrapped in each other’s embrace, and he had not fully awoken from his slumber when he spoke softly.

“I am so glad I left my life behind. I could never live the life of an earl again.”

“Again?”

“Again, yes.”

She pulled away from him, sitting up in their bed and staring at him with wide eyes.

“You are... an earl?”

“In none of the ways that matter. It is a title and nothing more.”

“And you thought it unnecessary to tell me that in the last seven years?”

“Of course, I did. What difference would it make beyond making you see me differently?”

“Because you lied. You told me you were nothing more than a gentleman who had traveled from town to town.”

“That is all I was. It just so happened that instead of traveling from town to town, you just so happened to be in the first town that I came to.”

“Then tell me, John—if that is truly your name—why were you in Scotland? Why were you so far from home?”

“Because I could not do it anymore,” he sighed, exasperated. “I could no longer sit in that house and look at those girls and be reminded of my wife.”

“Oh, God, you have a wife there? You have daughters?”

“Yes. Well, no. My wife passed away. And my daughters, well, they are alive and well, as far as I know, but they were not sons. I have no heir, and so?—”

“And so you thought you would find a way to have one. Is that it? Well, I will not play some part in your plans to abandon your daughters as if they are nothing. Go back to them.”

“I will not abandon you.”

“You will go,” she thundered. “You know perfectly well what my father did to me as a girl. You will not do the same to them simply to fill out the list of demands that came with your title.”

“Peggy, dear, I?—”

“I shall give you until tonight to have your affairs in order, and then you will leave. You and I are not going to continue.”

“I am your husband.”

“You are a liar. You have left those girls, I suppose without so much as a goodbye, and you expect me to be happy about it. I am not. Your duty is to your daughters. Go to them. You have no home here.”

And just like that, he lost the only place that had ever truly felt like home. He should have gone home, and he knew that, but he could not bring himself to. He couldn't look the girls in the eye, knowing that their existence had made him lose the only person he had ever truly loved. If he hadn't hated them before, he certainly did then and there.

After a few more years of living in a stupor, he had nowhere else to go. That had been the only reason why he returned to the manor house, and it was there that he found a letter addressed to him. It was Peggy, and he prayed that it would say that she had changed her mind and that she wanted him to return to her. Instead, it was a letter telling him that she had found him through asking around and that she thought he was a terrible man, but that she was with child, and that as they were married, he was a legitimate heir.

I hope you are content at last, she signed it off, and in spite of what she had called him, he could not help but rejoice.

A son. He had an heir. An heir that was to come of age and take over his estate.

Things needed to change.

CHAPTER 14

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:14 am

Diana did not know what her father expected as he recounted his tale.

Surely, it could not have been sympathy. If it were the case, he certainly was not going to receive any. Disdain and scorn, perhaps, but not sympathy and tenderness.

“You are a coward,” she said at last, coldly.

“You should be thanking me.”

“And why, pray tell, would I do that?” she snapped. “You abandoned us, only to come back when your hand was forced, and you were a terrible father. Now that you have a son, you think that you need to act. Is that it?”

“Diana, you do not understand. I could afford to ruin the family name before. You were both going to marry, and then the family name would end. Now that it is to continue, however, everything must change. I must leave a good reputation to my heir. He must inherit a lineage that is respected.”

“His mother can handle that. Samantha and I needed you.”

“His mother is dying.”

“And our mother is dead. You never truly cared, did you? Why am I even asking? Of course, you did not—you killed her!”

“I did not mean to.”

“You did it all the same.”

“And you turned out perfectly well. You should thank me, but instead, all that you do is complain. I gave you far more than you deserved, you know.”

“And what is it that we deserved as innocent children? Why is it that this wonderful son of yours needs to be treated differently? What did he do to warrant all of this?”

“He is an heir, a chance for my family to do something brilliant. You are a daughter. You are a liability. Your only notable success was your sister, who has proven to be just as much of a disappointment as you. Is that what you wished to hear? Are you now content that I am being honest with you?”

“Yes. It is only the way you have made us feel all our lives, when you could force yourself to be near us that is, but at least now you are not a coward and can say it to me outright.”

“Then I may well continue, for you are still yet to thank me for all that I sacrificed for you.”

Diana thought that, if her father ever did tell her all of that, she would cry. She was unsure of why she would cry, but she thought that it would be the right thing to do. Instead, she laughed in his face.

“It is funny, Father,” she scoffed. “Throughout the planning of my wedding, Samantha and I have been terrified for you. Poor Father, I thought, how it must pain him to spend the rest of his life drunken and alone. I thought that I could find a way to make you happy, given how hard you have tried to fix things between us. I am glad to see now that it was all a lie.”

“You need not worry for me. I am a man. I will make my own way.”

“And I invite you to do so without the support of your daughters and the Duke.”

“The Duke will not allow you to cut me off.”

“It was the Duke’s idea for me to do so. You may call my bluff if you wish, but he will not be as courteous to you as I am being right now, so I warn you to be wise with what you choose to do now.”

“How many times must I say it before you understand? I do not need you. I have a son. He will do all of the things that you could not.”

“Ah, yes, the young man who will be forced into the role that you never wanted either. Truly, what an excellent father you can be when you try.”

“You are going to leave this house.”

“That day cannot come soon enough. I cannot wait to be the wife of the Duke, the Duchess, and have you sitting here alone, waiting for a son who will never arrive, because he hates you as much as I do. You mean nothing to me.”

No amount of cruelty seemed to upset him. It was the absolute proof that she needed that he did not care for her at all. He never had, and he never would, and that was precisely what she needed to know.

So she rose from her seat and began to walk away.

“You will leave tonight.”

“I will do no such thing. You can go to White’s, have those drinks that you so enjoy, and then you can decide whether or not you wish to return. Perhaps it would be better for all of us if you never did at all. The choice is yours.”

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She left him sitting there. Her only thought at that moment was the Duke and how much she wished to see him, to be comforted by him, but she soon thought of her sister and how she would give her the news.

All those years they had thought that it had been the two of them, but there was a third out there that they would never meet, and Samantha deserved to know.

The rest of the day passed with Samantha in tears, saying the same few things over and over into Diana's shoulder.

“Why didn't he tell us?”

“Can we find him?”

“Am I ever going to be enough for someone?”

And each time, Diana tried to soothe her, but it was futile. Diana had not, in truth, been too surprised by her father's revelation, and she was shocked that her sister seemed to have been.

“He is cruel,” Samantha whispered that night, “but I never thought that he could do that. I never would have imagined, even for a second, that he was capable of doing all of this.”

“You can come to stay with the Duke and me,” Diana reminded her.

“I shall give you your honeymoon, at least.” Samantha nodded. “It is to be a magical

time, I have heard. You deserve that after all of this.”

“If you are sure.”

“Di, why are you not upset about all of this? You have not shed a single tear.”

“Because it will not change matters. My priority right now is you, and ensuring that I am leaving you in the best possible conditions that I can. Otherwise, I do not know what I shall do when I am away.”

“I hope that you let the Duke care for you. I believe he wants to.”

“I believe I would like that very much, should he do so, although I cannot say that I can believe in such flights of fancy.”

“Are you really going to leave, as Father asked?”

“Of course, I am not. The wedding is in a week, and so he shall tolerate my presence from now until then. I do not care what he thinks of my being here—it is as I said to him, he is welcome to abandon us once more.”

“I wish that he would.”

Soon after, Diana left a sleeping Samantha and went to her own bedchambers. She wished that she could fall asleep as easily as her sister had, but she could not. There were so many thoughts in her mind, each one refusing to leave her be. There was no mention of a name; she could not find her brother herself, and she would simply have to hope that he came to find her.

If she even wished for him to find her, that was.

The sleepless nights continued until her wedding day. She had not seen her husband-to-be since he had told her about her father, which meant that she was incapable of telling him the truth of the matter. She couldn't help but consider it a good thing, as it may well have enraged him fully. Yet, in spite of how much she scolded herself for being so selfish, she wanted his support, his comfort. She needed kindness, and her helplessness was bringing her to her knees.

As Samantha buttoned her corset for her, she felt it. The butterflies. She knew that sensation, as well as the fluttering in her chest. It had been a feeling that she had when she thought of the Duke, and each time she had pushed such things aside, for they were not feelings she wanted to have. She was to marry her friend and nothing more. Everything had been difficult enough without such things to complicate matters further.

"Are you ready?" Samantha asked. "Because you certainly look the part. You are a vision, Sister."

"Thank you, Samantha, but no. I do not think I will ever be ready for this."

"Then it is just as well that we are going now, rather than later. We can have this part done with, and then the two of you can focus on each other. That will be easier, don't you agree?"

"I hope so because this has been an awful lot to handle."

"And I have not exactly helped matters."

"Sister, I could not have gotten through this without you. How could you have possibly not helped?"

"With my refusal to marry. I should have played the part I was supposed to, and then

you would not have had to concern yourself with me.”

“It is an honor to care for you. I do not care what that man says. You are a treasure, and I will never think any differently of you.”

“You will be such a wonderful duchess.”

“I hope to be. I may not be a loving wife to the Duke, but I hope to serve him well as a duchess.”

“He shall be content with that, I assure you. Now, we ought to leave for the altar.”

“The altar,” Diana echoed. “It truly is time, isn’t it?”

“It is, but the sooner we arrive, the sooner it shall be over and done with. You can do this.”

“I hope so.”

Hope was quite a fickle thing, Diana had found. It never paid to have hope in anything, in her experience, and it only ever left her with disappointment. However, seeing the Duke at the other end of the aisle, she felt the rising of her chest, the quickening of her heart rate.

He was there, and he was going to rescue her from the life she had so hated. He would rescue her sister too, and with any luck, they would find contentment, and that was something to hope for, even if Diana was quite sure that doing so would be futile.

There was his face once more, the one that lit up upon the sight of her. It seemed too good to be true, Diana thought to herself, because why would he be so happy to be ensnared in such a loveless marriage?

He was keeping up appearances, she decided, and nothing more. Even so, her heart pounded at the sight of him. He was wonderful, and within a few mere moments, he would be hers.

Throughout the ceremony, she could not hear a word, even the ones she said herself. Her mind was filled with her soon-to-be husband and how he looked and smiled and spoke.

Then her soon-to-be husband became her husband, and she was happier than she had expected to lose those three little words. She was a wife, a duchess, and as they boarded the carriage, waving to the few guests that attended, she felt a weight lift from her shoulders.

She would never have to see that house again, see that man again. She could start over completely, and be Diana Novak, the Duchess of Abaddon. There would be a house to tend to, events in their village to attend, and a sister to rescue, but she would know peace, and that was a precious gift that she had never expected to receive.

“How are you feeling, Your Grace?”

Her attention snapped to her husband, who was looking at her expectantly.

“I thought we were going to drop the formalities,” she replied with a smile.

“I would very much like to, but I thought you might like to hear it just once. You are a duchess now, after all, and so you ought to get used to the title.”

“You are right, I suppose.”

“But from now on, if it pleases you, I shall like to call you Diana.”

Her name sounded beautiful when he said it. She had never much liked it before, but when he spoke it, it was as though she was hearing it for the first time.

“I shall like that very much,” she said gently, “but only if I can call you...”

“Say it,” he teased.

“I cannot. It is too improper.”

“It is not in the least bit improper. You are my wife. Regardless, when have you ever cared for propriety?”

“I suppose you are right... Colin.”

“There. That was not too difficult, was it?”

“It was not at all. I believe I will adapt quite well to it.”

“Wonderful.”

She wanted to tell him about her father, and all that she had discovered, but she couldn't bring herself to. She did not wish to ruin the moment, and with the two of them in some sort of marital bliss, she wanted to hold onto it as much as she could.

“Is something troubling you?”

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“No,” she replied. “It is only that the day has been so long, and now the journey shall be long. It has been a lot.”

“And you have been wonderful with it. It is going to be easier soon enough, once you have had time to adapt.”

“I do hope so because I truly do think that I can do this. I want to be the duchess that your villagers deserve.”

“You are everything that they could ever want and more. All will be well, I assure you, and soon enough, your sister will visit us and you shall feel even more at home.”

“Home...”

It was a strange word. Diana did not know what it meant to be home, even though she had lived in the same place all of her life. She hoped that her life with the Duke would be different.

There was that word again. Hope. Would her life be any different now that she was a duchess? She could not be sure, but she wanted it to be, and when she looked at her husband, who was looking back at her as if she had never done anything wrong to anyone in her life, she thought that it might be possible.

A husband and a home. Had she been asked a few months before, she would have scoffed and sighed and sworn that she wanted anything but those two things. It was not what she had dreamed of, not for herself at least, and in the blink of an eye, she had both, and she did not know what to do with that.

But she wanted it. She wanted the life that Colin offered her, and she wanted the hope that she felt in her heart whenever she saw him. It wasn't love, but it was more than what she ever could have expected. That was a good start, at least.

"Would it be alright," he asked suddenly, "if I called you Duchess, just for a short while?"

"I can be amenable to that," she replied, not wanting to ask him why he had had such a sudden change of heart.

"Wonderful. In which case, I shall inform you that we shall be going for another few hours, and so you might wish to get some rest, my Duchess."

"Very well, my Duke." She giggled. "Should I find myself able to."

"You can do anything," he said softly. "You shall find a way to sleep in a carriage."

She hoped so, at least.

CHAPTER 15

Diana soon fell asleep, in spite of her apparent issues with doing so, and Colin watched her, terrified.

He had never planned to be a husband. It was not that he was overtly against it, so to speak, but he had never considered it a pathway that he wanted to follow. Not when he was the way he was.

Their entire situation was filled with complexities, but above all, the most peculiar part of it was his innate desire to protect her. It had been there from the moment he had seen her in the drawing room the morning after they had met, whether he wished

to admit it or not, and it had only grown from there. She needed him, as much as he wished she didn't, and he did not know what to do with that. He wanted to embrace that and to tell her to trust him and let him do what nobody else had ever done for her, but he knew that it would end terribly.

It always had done for him.

As the carriage finally arrived, he realized just how exhausted he was. He hadn't slept at all, far too preoccupied with how lovely his wife looked while she slept and constantly preparing himself for his terrible luck to rear its ugly head and needing to protect her from whatever was coming. Nothing had happened, however, and now he had to retire to his room.

"We are here," he said gently, and she stirred.

"Did I fall asleep?"

"Rather quickly, yes, which is exactly what I was hoping for. Now, it is quite dark, and so you shall not see the household very well for the moment, but we can do all of that in the morning once we are both rested."

"Alright." She nodded, still clearly in a sort of slumber.

He helped her out of the carriage, and there was no staff to greet the two of them as they entered the household. This had been Diana's request; she had not wanted them to go to such lengths for the two of them when they could just as easily do all of the formalities the following day. He had questioned her at the time, but now that he was in the state that he was in, he was simply grateful for her intuition. He could go to bed far sooner.

Perhaps, when his duchess was well rested, she might be in awe of the estate that she

would soon be expected to run, but at that moment, all she seemed to do was follow along behind him with a faint smile on her lips, lips that he had kissed just hours before and ones that he truly wished to kiss once more.

“Are we to have separate rooms, or are we to have an actual honeymoon?” Diana asked him.

He blinked, staring at her. A lady was not supposed to know about such matters.

“Diana, I do not know what you mean.”

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“Colin,” she said softly yet pointedly, “I am not a fool, and you shall not take me for one. I know what is expected of me tonight.”

“How?”

“I asked a maid. I know that you know what this night should entail, so I shall ask you again. Is this to be a real honeymoon?”

He bit his lip. He knew what he wanted to say, as any gentleman who had just married would, but he also knew that he respected her far too much to do anything of that nature. His friend. She was his friend and always would be, and they had been quite clear on the matter of children.

“I shall let you decide,” he uttered.

“But you are the husband.”

“And when has that ever made a difference to us?”

“I know, but the maid told me you might change your mind once you owned me.”

“Owned you?” he echoed. “I cannot believe what I am hearing. Are you overtired?”

“Possibly.” She laughed softly. “You are right, I am acting out of sorts. I shall stay in my room tonight, and then we shall discuss the matter in the morning, when you and I are in a better position to discuss it.”

He simply nodded. He did not know what had happened to her, but he did not like how willing she was to placate him should he ask. It was not her nature, and such a sudden change could only have meant that something had happened to her, something that she was not telling him, and such a prospect made him feel quite unwell.

“Very well then,” she replied. “Might you show me to my room?”

“Of course.”

Colin soon realized that such a situation would not be ideal. His father had arranged the bedchambers so that they were apart from one another. He was to stay in the east wing, and Diana on the other side of the house, with the nursery in the middle—not that it mattered of course.

“This is your room,” he explained, opening the door.

She stepped inside with wonder. “This is... Well, it is far larger than my bedchamber back home.”

“This is your home now,” he reminded her.

“Oh! Yes, I suppose it is, isn’t it?” She laughed softly. “Then I shall call the other place my father’s house. In any case, this room is far larger.”

“Then I can only hope that you are comfortable here. I would hate for you not to be.”

“It is perfect,” she assured him. “Now, where is your bedchamber, in case I need you?”

He shifted from one foot to the other. “It is on the first floor, on the other side of the house.”

“But this is the third floor, Colin.”

“I am aware.”

“So you shall be that far away?”

He nodded. He had hoped that she would like such an arrangement, even if he did not, but he immediately he saw how crestfallen she was at the prospect. He hoped that she would call it unfair and tell him that it did not suit her at all so that he did not need to push her, but she simply nodded sadly. Hewould have suggested otherwise, but she seemed so willing to do whatever he wanted that he did not dare. It had to be her choice, whatever happened.

“Goodnight, then,” he said suddenly. “I shall see you in the morning.”

“Yes, goodnight,” she mumbled, closing the door firmly the moment he stepped outside.

He felt as though he had committed a great grievance against her, but he did not know what to do. He had done it for her, had he not? It was for her own sake, even though he wished to spend the night with her.

And it was not even because he wanted anything from her. It was simply because they had hardly seen each other that day. It had all been about vows and their first dance and the festivities and showing all in attendance that they were the match of the Season, even if Colin was quite aware that the opinions of those in attendance would not be so easily swayed. Regardless, he had barely spoken a word to her in spite of the fact that they had been together all day and he missed her.

And it was quite ridiculous, he thought as he entered his own bedchamber, that he was her husband and she was his wife, and yet due to a decision his father had made

years ago, they had to be kept so far apart. It hardly made any sense. That was when he realized that his father was no longer the Duke, he was, and so he could make any decision that he wanted.

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He knew, of course, exactly what that was.

All in all, he managed an entire ten minutes before returning to his wife's room.

“Colin!” she gasped, still in her corset. “What are you doing here?”

“I do not wish to be alone tonight,” he said quietly.

“But you have been alone every night. What is so different?”

“It was hardly a choice before. Now it is, and I refuse to choose it.”

And, though he could not tell whether or not he was surprised by it, she did not argue any further and instead opened the door immediately.

“Is something wrong?” she asked.

“We have hardly spoken. I wanted to know how you are, now that we have arrived and you have had some time to think.”

“I am perfectly content,” she replied. “Your house, what I have seen of it, at least, is magnificent and I am sure that in time I shall feel quite at home too.”

“It is our house now.”

“Our house.” She nodded. “Yes, our house is lovely.”

He sighed, sitting on the edge of her bed, and she gingerly seated herself beside him.

“Something is troubling you, isn’t it?”

Yes, he wanted to say. Yes, I was supposed to live and die as a bachelor and now I have a wife who is beautiful and has sacrificed everything throughout her life and now she has to live out her days with a wretched man who cannot offer her anything that she needs no matter how much he wishes to.

“No, of course not.”

He did not wish to cause her any more concern than she clearly already had.

“I would prefer it if you told me when there was something amiss,” she said gently.

“If this is to work, then you and I must at least try to communicate with one another.”

“And I will when necessary. For now, I am far more concerned with you and how you are feeling.”

“Ah,” she said, almost smirking. “Well, I am being quite hypocritical if I am being honest. I will tell you, but not right now. It is not the time.”

“It is always the time,” he pressed. “There will never be a time where I do not want you to be honest with me. Whatever it is, we can fix it, I promise.”

“I know, or at least I believe I do. I only mean that I would rather discuss it when we have slept.”

“Very well, then. We shall sleep.”

He stood to leave, but she took his wrist in her hand. He looked at her hand, and then

looked at her face. She was as white as a sheet, her wide eyes not moving from her own hand.

“Do forgive me,” she said quickly, releasing him.

“Do you not wish for me to leave?”

“You can do what pleases you.”

“I wish to be the one to please you,” he whispered, stepping dangerously close to her,
“Tell me what to do, and I shall do just that, but I will only do it if you tell me to.”

“I—You are the husband.”

“I am your husband,” he corrected her. “So until you tell me to go or to stay, I will not do anything.”

“Then stay,” she pleaded at last.

She could not have said anything more beautiful in such few words.

“Is that what you want?”

“I do not want anything else. I do not know what you have in store for me tonight, but I want it. I want you. It is all that I want.”

And perhaps it was because she never truly had expressed what she wanted, but he nodded and lay down in the bed beside her. He told himself that that was the reason, at least. She was a friend, and his friend wanted company, and he could give her that. He ignored the way she looked with a single curl falling over her face as she fell asleep once more, and the fact that there was a delicate smile on her lips, and the way she was still wearing that dreadful corset and was somehow managing to sleep with it on. She was his friend, and a good one too, and he was going to protect her.

Yet, even though he was exhausted, it took a long time before he stopped watching her and closed his eyes.

The following morning was strange. Colin was quite convinced that Diana had moved into his arms during the night, but when he awoke, she was no longer there, so he assumed that it had been a dream. It had felt so real, though.

He had been married but a day and he was already convinced that he was becoming mad.

In fact, were it not for the fact that he was in the Duchess's room, he would have believed that he had dreamt the entire night up. Diana was gone, along with any trace that she had been there at all.

It had not been a dream, of course, and he found her in the drawing room, drinking tea with a lady's maid. He had found one for her, knowing perfectly well that her sister would need the one that they shared far more.

"You are finding your way already, I see," he said brightly.

"Good morning, Your Grace!" she said brightly, immediately going to pour his tea.

"Yes, I apologize for disappearing, but I simply had to look around."

"I do not blame you, although I was hoping that the housekeeper would take you for a tour herself."

"She did." Diana laughed softly. "It is the afternoon, you know."

As it turned out, Colin certainly had required sleep.

"Ah, well, in that case, I am glad that you know your way around."

"It shall take some time for me to remember it all, but yes. It was quite thorough, too, and so I shall have no excuses if I am dreadful."

"You will not be dreadful, I assure you."

"The Viscountess Livingston is truly dreadful, you know," the lady's maid said kindly to Diana. "That is where I am from. Believe me, you cannot run a household as terribly as she does. She runs through at least ten servants a week if you can believe it."

“Ten?” Diana echoed. “Very well, I am not sure whether that concerns me even more or if it soothes me. I am quite sure that even I will not be that terrible, at least.”

“You will not.” The lady’s maid smiled.

Colin was quite proud of himself that he had managed to find the perfect lady’s maid for his wife. They would be friends, he was sure of it.

“Emma,” he said gently, “might you give my wife and me a moment? I require a word with her.”

“Certainly, Your Grace.” Emma nodded, before giving a quick smile to Diana and leaving.

“She is wonderful.” Diana beamed. “Thank you for finding her for me.”

“There is no need to thank me. Now, last night, you told me that you needed to tell me something, as it is troubling you. I wish to know.”

Suddenly, she seemed completely uneasy around him. He did not like how uncomfortable she was, nor how quickly it came over her.

“If you are still not ready to tell me?—”

“No,” she said quickly. “No, it is quite alright. I will tell you now. I simply—Well, I do not know where to start.”

“Take all of the time that you need,” he said kindly, “I am here.”

She took a breath, leaning back into her seat. “It will be of no surprise to you, but it is about my father.”

CHAPTER 16

In spite of all his flaws, Diana knew that what her father had done was quite shocking indeed, and she was unsure how to tell the Duke.

Under normal circumstances, it would no longer be of any concern to them. She was married now, and therefore it did not matter what happened to her father’s title and land and estate. However, she had to concern herself with Samantha’s well-being, for nobody else would.

“It turns out that my father truly has been trying to better himself,” she began, not knowing how else to start.

“Well, that is a good thing, is it not?”

“It would be, had it been for a good reason. Then again, his reason seems perfectly good to him.”

“And what might said reason be? I had thought it was for the benefit of yourself and your sister, or at least to line his pockets a little more.”

“It is the latter, in some ways, but that is not the full story either. As it turns out, he has a son. I have a brother. A half-brother, that is.”

“That’s... Are we seeing it as good news or bad news?”

“I do not know. All I know is that my father has an heir, a legitimate one at that, as he married a lady in Scotland, and now he wishes to become the very best father in all of England, but only for his son.”

“I cannot stand that man.”

“Truthfully, nor can I, but regardless of his motives, it has been quite beneficial to Samantha, so I have not said anything about it. She is furious, however.”

“And that is equally understandable. After all, he should have done all of this years ago, not only now that he has a son.”

If anything, Diana thought, at least her husband would be a good father to a daughter should they ever have one.

“It is alright. It hardly changes anything, of course. But it is on my mind. That is why I am perhaps acting differently than usual.”

“Why you were seemingly determined to submit to me last night?”

“I suppose you could say that.” She laughed. “I know, it was not like me at all, but it has frightened me to learn about it, you know. I at least thought that my father would have told us when he found out. I thought that he would have been so excited that we would have had no choice but to hear of it over and over.”

“It is certainly odd that he never told the two of you, I am assuming until you asked.”

“Astute and correct as always,” she sighed. “And even then I had to force his hand. I do not understand. What is so wrong with Samantha and me? I know that I am not

particularly brilliant and beautiful and wonderful, and I never found a husband myself, but Samantha should have at least been worthy of something.”

“I am only going to tell you this once more,” Colin said firmly, leaning in closely. “The treatment that that man has given to you and your sister is no reflection of you. It has everything to do with him and how foolish he is. You are both brilliant ladies with good hearts.”

“Then why couldn’t we ever be enough to earn his love?” she whispered.

“Love is not earned. Love is given freely and fully and selflessly. If he can only give that to an heir, then it is not even love in that case, as it is given out of the knowledge that he gains something in return.”

Diana thought about his words. She had spent her whole life wondering if she would ever receive love, but she had failed to realize that she and her sister had always been so full of it for each other. It hardly even mattered whether her father came into it or not.

“I simply do not understand.”

“And perhaps you never will. Perhaps I never fully will. Why, when I was in the military, my commander could hardly ever give us a good word, and we were willing to put our lives at risk for him.”

“You... you were in the military?”

He froze, his smile fading.

“Colin?” she asked. “You have never told me that.”

“It is nothing,” he said quickly. “Forget that I said anything.”

“But it is clearly something that you are thinking about.”

“It is not. I do not wish to talk about it, and I would appreciate it if you could respect that.”

Diana did respect his wish, of course, but that did not make it any easier to pretend he had not revealed such information to her.

“Of course.” She nodded.

“Thank you. Now, if you are not completely worn out from your tour this morning, might you be interested in a second tour given by me? I can tell you some more personal aspects of the house, rather than the facts and figures that you were no doubt given before.”

“There was certainly a good amount of them, yes.” She grimaced. “And you mustn’t tell her, but I do not remember a good amount of them. I was far too tired for it to sink in properly.”

“My lips are sealed,” he promised. “In that case, it will be good for you to go around a second time.”

They finished their tea, and then she was quickly whisked away through the house once more. It was vast, though a little outdated in terms of style. Diana did not mind that at all, of course, as her last home had been much the same whilst also being very small, indeed.

There would be a lot for her to tend to each day, even with all of the help that was there. It was quite daunting, but having raised Samantha, she was quite sure that she could take on such a role. Then they passed by a door, and Colin did not open it.

“What is that one?” she asked, pausing by the door.

Her husband seemed uncomfortable at the mere sight of it.

“It is nothing. I believe it is for storage.”

But Diana was not simple. She knew that the expression on his face meant that there was something inside. She raised an eyebrow at him, and when he motioned for her to follow him, she refused, her feet planted firmly where they were.

“Come along,” Colin said firmly, but she remained still.

“If it is for storage, I ought to know what is inside,” she argued. “It is for me to tend to, is it not?”

“It is of no concern to you.”

“I thought this was my home in the same way that it is yours.”

“It is, but there are some things that are not for you to see.”

“Not in a home that is mine, there is not.”

“Diana—”

“Colin.”

“Can you please not argue with me on this?”

“I thought you did not want a wife that simpered and did as she was told?” she pointed out. “Besides, I told you what was troubling me. Then you refused to tell me the same for you, and now here you are, doing it again. This is unfair, and you know it is.”

“It is completely different.”

“How?”

“I do not need to explain myself to you.”

“Yes, you do. I am your wife.”

“And sometimes husbands know things that they cannot tell their wives.”

“So you are hiding something from me?”

“Please stop doing this.”

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“No. I have entered into this marriage with the belief that you trust me and wish to be a friend to me, not that you will lie to me and keep secrets from me.”

She reached for the handle, but it was locked.

“Why did you do that?” he snapped at her.

“Because this is my home.”

“Perhaps, but that room is of none of your concern. I told you to leave it be, now leave it be. Why must you make things so difficult? Do you do it deliberately?”

Diana felt a chill run down her spine, and tears pricked her eyes.

She had lived her life being seen as a burden, as difficult. All her life, she had told herself it was only her father who saw her that way, and that it was not the truth, but there it was, all of the proof that she had needed.

The Duke had thought the same of her, and it had taken a single dispute for his hatred to surface. She turned on her heel and began to walk away.

“Diana, wait,” Colin called after her, following her. “Diana, please, I did not mean it like that.”

“Do not insult me twice.” She laughed emptily, turning to look at him. “There is no other way that you could have meant it.”

He seemed to regret it, but that was of no matter to her.

“Please don’t walk away. We can talk about this.”

“If the only time you are willing to talk to me is after you have hurt me, then I do not wish to talk to you at all. I suppose that is further proof of my difficulty, yes?”

“Diana—”

“No. I asked you to talk to me, to explain, and you have refused. If that is the end of the matter, then that is that. I can handle that. What I cannot tolerate, and what I will not tolerate, is you promising me one thing and then doing the opposite. At least my father was predictable.”

“Do not compare me to that man.”

“Then do not act like him.”

“I am not?—”

But he seemed to catch himself and quietened.

With a nod, Diana turned back and walked away, and this time he did not call for her to come back.

She wondered what could have been so terrible about that room that he did not allow her to look inside, and then her mind went to the one place that it hadn’t been in a long time.

The rumors about him.

Surely, she thought, the Duke was not so foolish that even if he was guilty, he would leave evidence so brazenly easy to access? If there was anything to hide, it would not be in a room he shared with his wife, would it?

Regardless, she wished to see inside, and no matter what was inside, she felt as though she had a right to.

Unfortunately for the Duke, she was not easily dissuaded when she wanted something. It was a trait of hers that was only aided by the fact that she had already met the housekeeper.

“Miss Thornton,” she asked politely later that afternoon, seeing her alone, “I was wandering the halls when I found a room that you did not show me. The door was locked, and so I was hoping you might show me inside?”

“Ah, you mean... that room. The Duke does not allow that room to be opened.”

In spite of how much she wished not to think of the rumors about her husband, she couldn't help but let them cross her mind once more. Had he truly committed some grisly murder and hidden something in his home? Of course not, she told herself.

“The Duke has said I could look,” she lied. “He said that it is my home as much as it is his, and so I have a right to see.”

She surprised herself with how easily she lied. It was not something that she was any good at unless it was to protect someone else, but as it happened, she was discovering more about herself than she had once known.

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“Is that so?” Miss Thornton asked, an eyebrow raised. “Perhaps I should ask him.”

“There is no need,” Diana replied calmly. “He is taking care of a few things. I am the lady of this household, and so there is no requirement for the Duke to know about how it is run. That is correct, is it not?”

Miss Thornton eyed her carefully. “I suppose it is,” she said carefully. “Very well. Follow me.”

Diana was sure that she would eventually have her secret discovered, and it frightened her, but she needed to know. If there was to be some dark secret hidden within the walls of her home, she needed to know so that she could escape. It was a prospect that she was not fond of, having to return to her father, but if it was necessary, then she would do so. Not only that, but it would mean that she had saved her sister from a truly terrible fate, one far worse than simply marriage.

And if there was no secret, then she could grovel and hope he understood. After all, there was nothing he could do now that they were married.

She hated that she had thought that.

“Now,” Miss Thornton sighed as she put the key in the lock. “It may be in disrepair. It has not been opened in a long time. If it is not to your liking, then we can lock it once more and pretend we never saw it. That is likely preferable regardless.”

Miss Thornton clearly knew that Diana was not being honest with her, and was simply not going to argue with the lady of the house, but that only worked more in

Diana's favor. They could forget all about it once she had seen it inside. That was most favorable, indeed.

"Thank you." She nodded, placing her hand on the handle once more.

It was not too late. She could walk away, pretend it was all some joke and that she would never disobey her husband. She could find Colin and tell him she understood that he had his secrets and that she would not pry, but that was simply not her nature. She wanted to know. She needed to know.

And so she opened the door.

Whatever she was expecting to see, it certainly was not a pile of books on a desk. She looked around, and there were more books. There was a thick smell of old paper and dust but in a soothing way. It was homely, almost welcoming, but she felt as though she had walked in on something intimate. She was out of place.

She had betrayed her husband, expecting the worst of him, but rather than run to apologize to him, she thought of how wonderful the library was, and how much Samantha would like it.

It was as Miss Thornton said, they would walk away and nobody would need to know she had ever been inside.

It was better that way.

CHAPTER 17

All things considered, Colin had thought himself to be a forgiving husband.

He wanted his wife to be happy and had been willing to do anything to do that except

open one door, yet with how Diana had acted in response, it was as though he had plunged a knife into her chest. It was but a door leading to a library and no more, and he could not for the life of him understand why she was so desperate to have her own way.

Then he wondered if she was thinking the same of him.

It was only a room. It was only a library. And yet he couldn't understand why she had been so persistent. He had not given her any reason not to trust him, but that was exactly what had happened. His word should have been reason enough—he was her husband.

He shook his head. To her, he had overreacted, and he had to remember that. It did not matter that he had his reasons because he was not going to share them with her. All that mattered was that she was kind about it.

“Miss Thornton showed me the library,” she confessed at dinner that night.

“What?”

He did not use the more polite terms of ‘I beg your pardon,’ or simply ‘pardon,’ but ‘what.’ In all honesty, he had expected her to find a way to know what was behind the door, but he had not thought that she would have done so that quickly.

“Do not scold me,” she sighed. “I was unsure of whether or not to tell you at all, but I did not want to keep it from you. Besides, you would have found out about it, eventually.”

“Need I have words with Miss Thornton?”

“No, not at all. She did not even wish to show me. I told her that I had your

permission, and practically forced her hand. If anyone requires a scolding, it is me.”

“Why did you do it?” he sighed.

“If you are angry with me, I would prefer it if you raised your voice now and had it be done with rather than you exploding later.”

“I will not be raising my voice. I am not the sort of man to do that.”

“Even if I have angered you?”

“Even if you have, although if I am being honest, you have not.”

Diana blinked at him, but he held her gaze. It was the truth; he was not angry with her, not anymore at least.

“The thing is,” he continued, “I have spent a long time telling you that you can trust me, and that what is mine will be yours. It is nobody’s fault but my own that I have not kept to that and hidden something from you.”

“But I did something behind your back.”

“And you have told me a few mere hours after. I do not punish honesty. You did it, and you seem remorseful, so I suppose you will not do it again.”

“No, Colin,” she said gently, “I will not. I feel far too dreadful about this as it is.”

“Then what is there to be angry about? The matter is settled. Do not worry yourself so.”

“Then might I ask why you did not want me to see it?”

Colin froze. No secrets, he had promised her, and yet he couldn’t bring himself to be honest with her. He was not lying outright, but even so, it felt like a betrayal. He couldn’t do it. He couldn’t tell her.

“I do not wish to discuss it,” he said quietly. “It is from a painful time in my life. I cannot do it.”

He thought that she might argue, or that her temper might flare, but instead, she simply rested a hand on his arm, nodding.

“Very well. I will not pry. It is quite alright, I have seen what it was, and now that I know there is nothing sinister to it?—”

“Sinister?”

“What I mean to say is—well, it could have been anything, really.”

“Such as?”

He knew exactly what she meant from the way her face turned pale. She was not someone who believed the rumors, he hoped at least, but there would always be that small voice in the back of her mind tempting her with all sorts of questions, whether deliberate or not.

“We promised honesty,” she sighed. “It is no reflection of you, but when you were so quickly defensive about it, I wondered if it might have pertained to what people have been saying about you.”

“That I am a murderer, you mean.”

“Yes,” she whispered. “And I do not believe it, of course. I would not have willingly married a man if I thought him capable of such a horrific thing, but my imagination got the better of me.”

“And now you are simply glad that it is not sinister?”

“The more I learn about you,” she explained, “the more that my belief is justified. You are not the man that you are made out to be. You are so much better than even those that hold you in the highest esteem believe.”

“That is far too bold a statement.”

“Is it? Colin, you found me and my sister, and you welcomed us with open arms. Do you know the relief to Samantha that she can escape here at any time she needs to? Do you know how well she has been sleeping since you and I met? You have not only rescued me but the one person that has been a constant in my life. We shall never be able to repay you for that.”

Colin smiled at this, but he couldn't help but notice how she was not referring to herself. It was about how her sister felt once more. Frankly, he was unsure whether that was because she had only ever thought of her sister's feelings rather than her own or because she did not wish to share her own. If it was the latter, he wondered whether that was because she had little to none at all, or that they were not at all what he would like to hear. Either way, he did wish to know, but he would not pry, not when he had just asked for that same respect from her.

“I am glad that you and your sister are comfortable,” he decided to reply. “I had not thought that I would ever allow someone to feel such a way. It is rather nice, I must admit.”

“Why didn't you?”

“It is as you know, I never thought that I would marry. I certainly didn't think that I would have a sort of marriage where my wife liked me, at least. It is quite the surprise, but a welcome one.”

“Indeed, although sometimes I do feel... almost ashamed of myself.”

“You have nothing to feel shame about.”

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“But I do,” she sighed. “I was supposed to be Samantha’s protector. I was supposed to mentor her, teach her everything that was necessary for her to succeed in all of the ways that I did not, and now here I am as a duchess, and there she is with no desire to marry, in a small and unorganized house, with the drunkard that we are forced to call our father. It is not fair.”

Colin had been of the same opinion about her father, of course, but even so, he was quite surprised that she would speak of him that way. It was not the done thing to be so brutally honest about family. Then again, Diana had hardly ever cared for that sort of thing, from what he had seen.

“You must think me a horrible daughter,” she said, looking up at him.

“On the contrary. I think you have been more than that man has ever deserved. Who else would see their father in the state he got himself into each night and still go to the trouble of caring for him?”

“It is my duty.”

“It was mine, too, but had my father been anything like yours to me, he would have received cold water in his face to wake him up and stern instructions to go to his bed.”

“As if he were some petulant child.” She laughed softly.

“Precisely. I may not know everything about his treatment of you, nor all of the good you did for him in spite of it all, but I know that you have given him far too much. If

you wish to call him a drunkard, in the privacy of your own home and only to your husband, then you are welcome to do so. Be as cruel about him as you wish.”

“Do you truly mean that?”

“Of course I do. It might be good for you, too. Please just remember that I do not blame you at all for how you feel about your father. You were a child, and he thrust all of the responsibilities of a mother onto you so that he did not have to do it himself. No matter how he ends up, he has only himself to blame.”

“But—”

“Diana, you did enough,” he pressed. “You could not have done any more for him. This was his choice to make, and it is not your fault, nor Samantha’s, that he has chosen this.”

The inclusion of her sister seemed to be what she needed to hear to accept this.

They finished their meal in silence, but it was a far more comfortable one than he had been expecting when he went down that evening. He had expected some sort of dispute, or that she would have an attitude with him, but she had not. She had been more than willing to admit what she had done and then apologize, but it was not what he had truly wanted.

It was not Diana’s nature to lie down and accept something if she did not like it. He knew that simply from looking at her. Truth be told, it did not make sense to him that she would simply apologize instantly and accept that it had been her fault, because it had not given him space to defend himself. Now, he felt as though he had been cruel, and that she was the one that had been wronged and then made to apologize, and even if he knew that that was not how it was, that was how it felt.

To put it simply, he felt like a monster.

“I would like to go out tomorrow,” she said suddenly. “A picnic. It is to be a nice day, and I should like to make the most of my newfound freedom.”

“That sounds wonderful. Will it be just the two of us?”

“I would like that.” She nodded. “There has been so much happening around us recently. I would like a moment where the two of us can simply have a pleasurable time together and enjoy each other’s company. Would that be alright?”

“It would be brilliant. It will also be a good time for you to meet my people if you wish. Then again, if you are hoping for a day where you need not be a certain way?—”

“No!” she squeaked. “No, that sounds perfect. I cannot wait to see them. Do you think that they will like me?”

“They will adore you. I am quite sure of it.”

And it was true. They would love the beautiful and kind new duchess that they had. His concern, however, was how they would receive him. He had not been present in his role, and of course, there were several people who thought he was guilty of what he was thought to have done, and so it was entirely possible that they would not want him there.

Frankly, he did not wish to be there, but it was his duty, and Diana would be very much at home in a position of responsibility, and she would thrive and enjoy every moment, so he was more than willing to grin and bear it.

“Might we give the staff a day too?” Diana asked. “I know it is not the done thing,

but I cannot bear the thought of them working all day in the heat, especially when we are not even there.”

“I can suggest it to them. It is likely that they will not wish to fall behind and have to work twice as hard the day after.”

“Then tell them that they may work slowly through it afterwards. There is no need for them to break their backs for me, and I doubt that you feel any differently.”

It was very clear to Colin, even if she had not gone into detail about it, that Diana had worked incredibly hard her entire life. She knew what it meant to need time away from it, and she knew what it was to have to catch up afterwards.

He truly had been given the perfect duchess, one who would not be afraid of working hard, but also one who knew when to take some time to breathe and enjoy life, especially the kind that they were afforded.

“Of course.” He nodded. “Very well. I shall speak with them this evening and see what they say.”

“Perfect!” She smiled. “It shall be the most wonderful day, I am sure of it.”

It had been so easy to tell her that he would protect her, slightly more difficult to make her trust him, but now that she did, he did not know what to do. He was responsible for her now—her happiness and health depended on him, and it was no longer this lovely idea that had formed in his mind. It was real, now, and he did not know how to handle that.

However he did it, though, he would do it well. His wife deserved that much. At least, he thought, they had discussed the matter of the library, and now it would no longer be an issue. She would leave it be, and the matter would be settled.

Even as he thought it, though, he couldn’t help but disagree.

CHAPTER 18

The sun was warm, the staff had agreed to take some time off from their work for the day, and the Duke had forgiven her trespasses. Diana could not have been luckier.

She was aware that she had changed her mind about telling the Duke all too quickly, but she needed to do it. She did not want another relationship filled with dishonesty and going behind the back of another, as her father had done to her. She wanted honesty and goodness and kindness, and thus far she had found all of that with her husband.

As she placed a strawberry in her mouth, she realized just how fortunate she was to have had all of it happen to her.

“You must be the new duchess!” a young lady said to her, in an accent that she had never heard before.

“That would be me.” She nodded. “It is lovely to meet you.”

“And the same to you,” the lady said quickly, followed by a curtsy that she seemed to rush into, as though she had forgotten about it completely. “We did not think that the Duke would find a wife so quickly, but we are glad that he did.”

“And I could not be happier to be here. It is a lovely village, and everyone seems so content.”

“Well, we are. The Duke has been brilliant, just as his father was.”

Diana felt her husband bristle beside her, but he did not say anything.

“Will you come to the fayre?” the young lady asked. “We shall have many stalls, and there will be games, and?—”

“Helen!” an older woman snapped nearby. “You mustn’t accost the poor lady.”

“My apologies, Mother, but it is most exciting, is it not?”

The mother approached them, and the young lady (who appeared to be named Helen) introduced them.

“It is most exciting that we have a duchess, especially one that we do not know anything about.”

Diana liked that. It had been so painful in London, having everyone know who she was and not seeing her in a good light at all. Now she had a fresh start, a chance to be

known as Diana, the Duchess of Abaddon, rather than Diana, the poor girl who had a deceased mother and a drunkard father.

Whatever these people thought of her would be because of her own actions, and that brought such power but also responsibility. Then again, it was a responsibility that she wanted.

“Please,” Diana said kindly, gesturing beside her, “sit with us. I wish to know all about you.”

The mother seemed to hesitate, but Helen practically dove beside her.

“We do not mean to intrude, Your Grace,” the mother said to Colin, but he was laughing.

“It is perfectly alright. The Duchess wishes to learn all about our county, and far be it from me to prevent that. Take all the time you need, and feel free to help yourself to anything that we have brought. There is plenty to go around.”

That seemed to be all of the permission that Helen needed to snatch up a slice of cake.

“My name is Helen Swinton,” she said quickly. “I am seven and ten years old, and I live with my mother. I shall not tell you her age, of course.”

“Please excuse her... spritely nature,” the mother sighed. “She has always been a spirited girl. It is quite remarkable, really. I thought that when her father died, that spark might die out, but here she is.”

The Duke seemed to stiffen beside her. At that moment, all three ladies seemed to realize how he might have taken what she had said.

“I understand.” Diana nodded. “I lost my own mother when I was six years old.”

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“Oh!” Helen gasped. “I am so sorry! It was quite difficult when I lost my father. I cannot imagine how difficult it must have been to lose your mother. We ladies need our mothers.”

“It wasn’t all bad. It was difficult at times, of course, but I had my younger sister Samantha for company, and I was so busy caring for her that I tended to forget just how much I missed her.”

“Well, she would be very happy for you.” Helen nodded. “Did you have a title before?”

“Yes, my father is an earl, not that I ever truly realized just how fortunate that made me.”

“I think it would be wonderful to be in a position such as yours. I could attend balls, wear beautiful gowns, and meet gentlemen. It sounds so perfect.”

“She has always been a romantic,” her mother explained. “Us ladies are supposed to have a terrible time finding a match for their daughters, but my problem shall be that she will come of age and marry the first gentleman who woos her.”

“That is untrue! I want a love match and nothing less, just like the Duchess no doubt wanted.”

Diana paused for a moment. Was it better to lie and tell her that she had indeed found a love match with the Duke, right in front of him, or was it better to be honest and tell Helen that she did not need to find love to find her way in the world, while revealing

that she did not love her husband?

“Of course.” She nodded. “And you will find love, I am sure of it.”

“More than anything.” The mother laughed. “We shall need to find a man who can listen to you talk all day. A man with the patience of a saint, perhaps?”

“And then some, to be safe.” Helen laughed. “But if the Duchess believes that I shall succeed, then I will.”

Diana was not sure how to take that. Was she truly already being seen as intelligent and kind and in love with her husband? Was that who she truly was? To be sure, she was not dim, and she could be quite fun if she was relaxed, but could she continue to play such a role?

“You have found a wonderful wife, Your Grace?” the mother said gently.

“I truly have.” He nodded. “I knew from the moment that I saw her that she was the lady I needed. I am simply fortunate that she agreed to marry me, because she truly would have had her choice of men. Perhaps I ought to remember that whenever she asks me for something.”

The two of them laughed, but Diana couldn’t help but think. She had lied to Helen, to be sure, but only out of necessity. Colin, however, had crafted some sort of narrative about how they had met, some sort of love at first sight that had of course never happened.

Was this what it meant to keep up appearances? She had never truly done so with her father, as there was no point and it would have been seen through instantly. She had always on some level hated that, but at least she was able to live authentically that way.

A short while later, the two ladies left, and Diana sighed, leaning back and taking another strawberry.

“That was not too difficult, was it?” Colin asked. “I knew that you could do it.”

“Yes, it is quite easy to play a part.”

He looked at her for a moment but did not respond to what she had said. She was, in all honesty, grateful for that, because they could not have a dispute in such a public place.

“They liked you a lot. I could tell.”

“I liked them, too. Helen is a lot like Samantha, I think.”

“With the exception that Miss Swinton is looking to find love and romance, and Samantha is looking for anything but that.”

“It is not what they want, but how they feel about it. There is an assuredness to them. They both seem to think that, no matter what is against them, they will find what they are looking for and get it. I admire that.”

“It is certainly an admirable trait.”

“But it is more than that. I feel as though it is something that I have never been able to do.”

“Well, what do you want? We can get it for you.”

“That is the problem. I have never truly wanted anything. I wanted to find a husband for Samantha and leave that house.”

“And Samantha does not want a husband, and so you are quite alright there, and you have left the house. Unless you are forgetting that part.”

“No, of course, I am not, but I did not achieve that myself. I simply got lucky and married a duke.”

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“I shall enjoy the fact that you referred to marrying me as lucky a great deal.”

“Well, there are certainly worse gentlemen to marry.” She laughed. “Even so, I cannot help but almost mourn for the life that I missed by caring for others. I do not regret it, not at all, but sometimes I wonder what I might have been capable of if I had been selfish rather than doing what was expected of me.”

“That will not help you.”

“What do you mean?”

“Sitting there and wondering what might have been. It will not help you. You are far better off looking around you and being grateful.”

“I am grateful. Do not accuse me of being anything but that.”

“No, that is not what I’m saying,” he said quickly, then took a deep breath. “Do forgive me, I do not mean it like that. What I mean is that you have suffered. You have had a difficult life, one that I would not wish on anyone else, but your circumstances have changed now. You are a duchess, and there is no longer a man whom you must take care of but one who wishes to take care of you.”

“I know that, and I am glad about that.”

“Then you must trust that I will be there to take care of you, and instead of concerning yourself with what might have been, you need to look forward. We are going to have an incredible life together as friends, and it is time for you to want that

instead of the impossible.”

Diana knew that he was not trying to hurt her, but she felt that way regardless. It was painful knowing that he had done nothing to make her not trust him, but she simply could not do it. She had trusted her mother, and she was gone. She had trusted her aunt, but she left. She had trusted her father, and he had done anything but take care of her. It did not matter how much she wanted to believe the Duke’s promises, she couldn’t do it.

“You need not do it now,” he assured her. “I understand, I promise that I do, but I want you to try and do it in time.”

She nodded to him. It was not a promise, as far as she was concerned, that she would change, but that she was willing to try. She had so hoped that she would feel differently once they were married, but too many bad things happened to her when she thought she had found happiness for her to believe in any feeling but dread.

The rest of the afternoon was perfect. There were no scathing comments like there would have been in London, and the people were only kind and welcoming towards them. It was new, and for a moment Diana realized just how much she needed it.

As she retired to her bedchamber that night, Colin followed her just as he had done each night since they arrived. He came into the room with her, fell asleep beside her, and was gone by the time she awoke, although she swore that at some points in the night, she could feel his fingers intertwined with hers. She did not dare ask him, and if she were being honest with herself, she did not want to risk him no longer doing it.

It was like a silent affirmation that they liked each other if nothing more. She liked knowing that he was there, that someone was there, because no matter how much she had protested against the thought of it, she knew that she no longer wanted to be alone.

But when she awoke that morning, he was no longer there as usual, and breakfast was soon approaching. As she walked to the dining hall, she noticed for the first time that the house, whilst grand, was quite outdated. Not only that, but it was decorated by someone who no longer lived there, and so it should not have been too difficult to bring Colin around to the idea of redecoration.

“I was wondering,” she began as she took a piece of toast, “if we might make some changes to the house?”

“The staff will be more occupied than usual for the next few days,” he said thoughtfully, “but we should be able to accommodate it. Was there anything in particular that you want to change?”

“Everything,” she said slowly and carefully. “I think part of the reason why I have not felt completely at home here is that I do not belong. I did not have a say in this house, and so it feels more like I am holidaying here than truly living here. Is that foolish?”

“Not at all. I must admit, I have found myself thinking the same thing of late, but you seemed content with it, so I left it.”

“There is nothing wrong with it, so to speak,” she explained. “I was only thinking that it would be for the best if we made this our home, exactly the way we want it. I understand that you are busy, but I shall have plenty of time to handle the matter. If you tell me what you want, I can see to it that it is done.”

“Then the matter is settled.” He smiled. “You may do as you wish with it all. Whatever you wish to do, I shall like it.”

“Wonderful, because Samantha will so love having a library when she visits.”

His face fell.

She felt her blood turn cold. He never looked at her the way he did at that moment, as if he did not know who she was and he was wondering why she was in his home.

“We talked about this,” he said quietly.

“You said that I could redecorate the house. All of it.”

“With the belief that you are not a fool and know that I am not referring to that room.”

“So I am a fool now? Forgive me for thinking that a room in this house is a part of the house.”

“You will not touch that room,” he thundered. “You have done quite enough, and you know that. Leave it be.”

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“I thought this was my house too.”

“It is ours, and you need to respect me when I tell you no in the same way that I do for you.”

“So that is the end of it, is that what you are saying?”

“Yes. That is the end of the discussion, and frankly, I do not care whether you are happy with it or not.”

He left as soon as he said that.

She stared at the empty doorway, wondering if he would turn around and return and apologize for how he had spoken to her, but he did not. It did not make any sense. He had always been so kind to her and understood her needs, but at the mere mention of a room, he exploded. She knew that she should leave the matter alone and let it end calmly as she had done before, but she did not want to.

And so she would not.

CHAPTER 19

Whatever the Duke’s reason, Diana wanted to know why he was being so strange about the situation, and so she would do what was necessary to find out, even if it destroyed the friendship that they had built so far.

She had tried to push her thoughts about him away since they had met. The rumors

were ignored, the way he found her and Samantha was accepted, his proposal of a marriage of convenience was agreed to without too much question, and yet whenever she asked him about himself, he shut himself off to her completely, as if he did not trust her, the one thing that he had asked her to do for him.

In a way, Diana was thankful that he had been so unkind. He had proven her right, that he could not be trusted, and that she was not in the wrong for refusing to believe that he would take care of her. She would have been happy with herself if his attitude did not make her so miserable.

The household had changed immediately, as if the sun stopped at the front door and there was only thunder inside. The stormy Duke had not locked himself away, instead walking around the house with a book in his hand. Diana wanted to be mature. She wanted to give him space and speak with him afterwards, but she could not help herself.

“You know, Your Grace,” she called as she passed him, “books are typically read in libraries.”

“Then it is a shame that my house does not have one.”

Diana pretended not to care that their house had so quickly become only his.

“And why is that?” she snapped.

“Why is it a shame? Because now I have nowhere to read this book without being pestered. I do not take kindly to my day being interrupted, and you would know that if you ever listened to me. I enjoy quiet at times, and there is nothing wrong with that.”

“Then why is there no library if you wish to read quietly? There are plenty of rooms

that could be one.”

“That is none of your concern. You are only holidaying here, aren’t you?”

“I can ask you whatever I like, as I can trust you, can I not?”

But he kept walking, no longer acknowledging her.

“I shall take that as a no, then,” she called out.

“You may take it as you wish. I do not care to argue with you.”

Diana huffed, going outside to take some air.

It was as though he had changed in seconds, and a part of her wanted to understand why. She knew that he had asked her not to press the matter and that she had agreed not to, but that did not change the matter of his temper. He had begun to treat her as he did mothers in ballrooms or as the plague. He had been communicative about every problem that they had faced, but now...

Now she hardly knew him.

He passed by a while later, not acknowledging her, carrying a drink rather than his book.

“Have you finished reading?” she asked.

“Yes, it was quite pleasant.”

“Ah, then where might you be storing it, so that I might read it for myself?”

“It is on a shelf in the drawing room.”

He spoke to her as if he was utterly disinterested in anything at all that she could say. She hated it, and the more he did it, the more she wished to pester him. He would snap and speak to her properly eventually, she was sure of it.

“Ah, I see. I was rather confused, that is all, seeing as how books are typically stored in libraries.”

Her attempt at a reaction did not work. He did not even look at her and simply continued walking until he was out of sight. He did not come to lunch, which was not a surprise to her, and instead of eating, she simply pushed her food around with her fork in a most unladylike manner.

It didn't matter, she decided, because nobody was there to watch her do it anyway.

Then she left after a while, and as she turned the corner, she heard Colin walking towards the dining hall. She turned and watched him walk inside, having clearly waited for her to finish before arriving. He brightly told the staff that he had been held up by his work, apologizing for the wait.

At least he was still able to apologize to some, she thought.

Dinner passed in the same manner, and Diana decided to at least eat something, even if it was only some bread and some meat. Nothing else appealed to her, and more than anything, she was hoping to go to sleep and awaken to an apologetic husband who smiled and told her she could do anything she wanted.

“Will the Duke come?” she asked a servant, who exchanged looks with another.

“He has told us that he will be occupied this evening.”

Diana wondered if, by how secretive they were being, she already knew where he was.

“Very well. I am finished.”

She retired to the drawing room, and he was not there. With a sigh, she took a book from a shelf and sat with it. She had been looking forward to some time to read and have some form of quiet, but now there was no joy in it. She simply thumbed the pages and scanned the words, not truly taking any of it in. She slammed it closed with a sigh after what had felt like an eternity and walked to her bedchambers.

And that was when she realized, in spite of herself, just how nice it had been not having to go by herself.

The bed felt far colder when she woke up the next morning, and she did not know how to feel about it. It was lonely, but she was far happier to be alone than with a man who so desperately did not want anything to do with her. And yet, even though he had never woken up beside her, she found herself wanting to blink and see him there.

But he was not. He had promised her that he would always be there for her, and he had so quickly changed his mind. He had become someone that she did not recognize, and she did not like it at all. Fortunately, she heard something in his study, and so she went to find him.

“Am I permitted to enter?” she asked in the doorway.

“To be sure, so long as you do not provide any more distractions.”

“Ah, so I was a distraction to you. That is good to know.”

“You and I both know that I did not mean it that way.”

“I do not, for I am a fool and do not know anything, especially when it pertains to you and the things you do and the reasons behind them, or the lack thereof.”

“What do you want, Diana?”

“I want to know where you were last night.”

“I was walking.”

“Where?”

“What does it matter to you?”

“Well, I do not recall there being any gentlemen’s clubs here, but I do remember seeing a brothel.”

He dropped his papers and stared at her. “Tell me what you mean by that.”

“You are the Duke. You have all of the answers. You know exactly what I meant by that.”

“Do you truly think so low of me?”

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She did not respond, instead raising an eyebrow at him, satisfied that she had hurt him even a small amount.

“This,” he said coldly, gesturing to her, “is precisely why I had to leave last night. I needed time to myself, away from someone who cannot simply trust me.”

“And tell me why I should!”

“Because I am your husband. I said the vows, and I took them seriously.”

“Even the part about loving me?” she asked, and he looked away. “Exactly,” she scoffed. “They meant nothing to you, which was precisely what we had agreed upon. There is no shame in it, so you might as well simply confess.”

“That is what everyone wants me to do, isn’t it?” he snapped. “Confess to something that I did not do, simply because they would prefer it that way. There is more scandal in it, more interest, rather than the simple truth that I?—”

He cut himself off, and she eyed him carefully.

“That you what?”

“It does not matter. I was on a walk and nothing more last night, and I will ask that you do not insult my honor again.”

“So is this what our marriage is to be now?” she asked. “You tell me what is to happen, and I agree with a pleasing smile and never do anything for myself. Is that

it?”

“That sounds wonderful right now. Please nod and agree and then leave me to my work.”

“Then at least I can see the true marriage that you wanted—one of avoidance and resentment. I can handle that.”

“Is it truly what you want?”

“Is it what anyone wants? No, but at least there is no false hope to it, unlike what you have tried to give me over and over. I am simply grateful that you did not make me wait too long before you showed your true self to me.”

“God, Diana, you think that you are perfect, don’t you?”

She froze at his words. He had promised her not to raise his voice at her, yet he did. She had almost jumped when he did so, but upon thinking about what he had said to her, she felt anger more than fear.

“When have I ever said that?”

“You do not need to! You can see it in the way that you refuse to see things in anyone’s way but your own. Why is it that after so long of me showing you nothing but patience, the one time that I am angry, you think this is the real me?”

“Because it is.”

“How do you know that?”

“Because it is how you have always been. You have always refused to open up to me

and tell me how you feel. It has always been a glimpse and then no more, and you seem perfectly happy with that, so forgive me if I took that as you not wanting to truly get to know me in return.”

“When I told you how I felt about the library, this happened.”

“Because you will not tell me about it. How hard is it to tell your wife about a library?”

“You would not understand. You would not see the issue, and then you would act as though I had not said anything at all, as if my feelings do not matter. They never have with you. It has always been me trying to keep you happy, and you pretending I wasn’t doing anything at all. It is exhausting, Diana.”

“So tell me about it. You have no way of knowing that I will cast you aside. I have told you the darkest things about myself, left myself utterly exposed to you, yet you refuse to tell me anything at all. You simply expect me to ignore it until it goes away, or pretend it doesn’t exist at all.”

“That would be wonderful. Perhaps then you will not be breathing down my neck and demanding to know everything.”

“Not everything, just the library. Go on, tell me. Then you can prove yourself right, can you not?”

“Why are you so insistent?” he thundered. “It is a library. I have not looked at it in a long time. The books inside are not mine. I want the room closed. That is the end of it, no matter what you say. Why must you push me further about it?”

Diana did not know what to say to that. It was, as far as she was concerned, quite evident that she was his wife and therefore had a right to know why she could not go

wherever she pleased, but she knew that if she said it out loud, she would have sounded like a petulant child.

“There,” he said triumphantly. “Now, if you stay that way rather than forcing me to argue with you, the two of us may find ourselves much happier. Let us remain this way.”

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He did not send her away. Instead, he walked past her and down the hallway. Diana watched him go, not daring to talk to him anymore. It was not that she was afraid of what he might say, not completely at least, but because she was afraid of what she might say to him. She was angry, furious, and did not know what to do about it.

In spite of all that he had promised, he had taken his place as the husband, the one in charge, and forced her to be the wife who does not complain. It was the sort of wife that he had vehemently denied wanting, yet after a single argument, he had made her one. There was nothing that she could do—she was at his mercy, just as she had always been afraid of becoming.

Then again, there were things that she could do about it. She had not promised a single time to do as he had told her, after all. In all fairness, she was more than capable of doing whatever she wanted, as the only thing in her way was the Duke, and he clearly did not wish to speak to her.

Part of her missed him, missed having a friend that she could confide in without judgment, but another part of her knew that that was not his role for her now. He had expectations of her that she could not meet, not if she wanted to be who she truly was, and after so long of him wanting her to be herself, she decided that it was time to do so, whether he liked it or not. She would be a duchess in title only, just as they had discussed.

She was completely happy with that.

Samantha,

I do not know how to write this. I have never truly had to engage in correspondence before, as you know. I hope that your letter is at least better than mine. I also hope that you are well and that Father is not being too insufferable.

I am writing to you because I need you. I do not know if you have been expecting a lovely letter filled with many reasons why I am so happy and enjoying marital bliss, but that is not what this is. The truth is, I need to see you because I cannot stand this. It began well, but now... Well, I shall tell you when you arrive. Truly, it is not life or death or anything of the sort, but I miss my sister.

We shall have a carriage sent to you, so there is no need to barter with Father. Do not worry about leaving him alone during your stay. If he cannot take care of himself for a few days, then that is his own problem. Please come.

I shall see you soon,

Diana.

There was an urgency to her words, but Diana felt completely collected as she wrote them. She was calm, her quill scratching across the parchment before being gently placed beside it. Reading her own words, she wondered if her sister would panic at all upon reading it, but she chose to believe instead that Samantha would open it, roll her eyes at her older sister's dramatics, then prepare for her visit. She hoped that it would be like that, at least.

The letter was sent, and then she had to turn her attention to more pressing matters. Her sister would arrive in a week, meaning that she had a week to prepare everything.

Fortunately, her husband had truly taken to avoiding her completely and had left the

household early that morning. She did not know where he had gone, and she did not much care either. His life was his own, meaning she was granted the same power. She summoned a few maids, who came into the room seemingly concerned for her.

“Are we in trouble, Your Grace?” one asked.

“Not at all.” Diana smiled. “On the contrary, I require your help. The three of you, I have noticed, are the most detailed in your work. That is precisely what I shall need for the next few days if that is alright with you.”

“Of course, Your Grace.” The second one nodded. “We are happy to do anything for you.”

“In which case,” Diana said, searching around the desk for a list before finding it and holding it out to them, “I shall need the three of you to locate these items. You may take the entire day if you wish. I want only the best, and so money counts for naught. If there is anything missing, return with what you can find and tell me so that I know what will be missing at first.”

“What are you planning to do, Your Grace?”

“We shall be completely redecorating the house, from top to bottom. The Duke has told me I can, and at last, I believe it to be a perfect time.”

The three maids had wide eyes, and she raised an eyebrow at them.

“Is it strange that I wish to do this?” she asked.

“Not at all,” the first maid said quickly. “It is just that, well, it was the late Duke who chose all of this. It has been this way for years. It shall be quite the change, I must say.”

“Well, I think it is time for change. It is time to forget about the past, though I am more than happy to keep anything that yourselves or the late Duke and Duchess were particularly attached to. I only truly wish to make this a home that I live in, rather than one I am visiting.”

“Of course, Your Grace.”

They left with the list, and Diana set about her mission for the day. She would be cleaning out that dreaded library.

Part of her wanted to do it out of spite, but she had to admit that it would be nice to do something like that and have Colin see it and forget all about what had happened. He had said that it was not his library, but it was not going to belong to anyone else, so it was neither his or hers, and they deserved a nice place to keep their books.

She stepped gingerly inside, immediately having to brush a cobweb from her gown as she entered. The inside was dusty, and she was well aware that there were spiders among other insects, but she ignored that fact. She wanted to get in and get her job done before Colin returned, so she had to forget any fears she had.

Diana wondered if she was doing the right thing each and every time she heard someone downstairs and froze, thinking Colin had returned, only to continue when she was sure it was not him. She knew that, if he saw her there, he would be furious with her, but she did not care. She could not care. She had to have something for herself, and this was what it would be.

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By the afternoon, Diana was exhausted, but the room was clean. She had worked tirelessly all day, but now she could take a seat and read for a while. She closed the door, sliding the latch across in the event that the Duke opened the door to look for her, not that she thought he would. He had never opened the door, clearly, and so he would not do so just to find someone that he was actively avoiding.

“How was your day?” Colin asked her at dinner that night.

It was clearly an attempt at making peace, and as much as Diana wanted to continue until her point was proven, she had to admit that she had missed him being kind to her.

“It was nice enough,” she replied. “And yours?”

“I had a very enjoyable day. I spent it down in the village. I’ve been thinking about making a link with a farmer for pork, now that we are living here, and I met with one that has a steady enough supply that we can use him.”

“That sounds good.”

“I only wanted to run it by you before I do it.”

She wanted to make some sort of comment, but she bit her tongue. The amiability between them was forced, but it was safe, and she did not want to risk losing that.

“It would be a wonderful thing to do.” She nodded. “Not only for us, but the contract given to the farmer shall have him set for the year. Might we do the same for our milk

and cheese, do you think?”

“We can certainly look into it.”

The conversation ended there, with the two of them nodding about it, and dinner passed in silence. It was a nicer silence than the one that had descended upon the house since their dispute, but it was still not the sweet type that had been between them before. Diana did not want to, but she found herself missing it a great deal.

The following day, Colin disappeared before breakfast again, having not followed her to bed once more. She had wanted to ask him why, but she did not, as she already knew the reason. He was still angry with her, or at least he was not happy enough with her to stay in her room, which was perfectly fine by her.

She had found a room of her own to keep from him.

Now cleaned, the library was all set to be redecorated. Diana only made simple changes at first—a lamp, the candles, and the deer head on the wall. She had a maid hide it away so that the Duke would not see it and make the connection as to where it had come from.

“Miss Thornton,” she asked at lunch, “might you have the key to the library?”

“The library?” Miss Thornton echoed. “Goodness, has that room not caused enough trouble already?”

“That is precisely why I shall need the key,” Diana explained. “I am gathering them and handing them to the Duke this weekend. I do not wish to risk angering him again.”

“He is not angry with you,” Miss Thornton sighed. “He seemed upset more than

anything, but he does not blame you.”

“Has he spoken to you about it?”

“No, of course not, but I have known him since he was a boy. If he was angry, it would be for the first time. He does not have it in him to have any anger towards a person, it is simply not his nature.”

“I had thought the same thing.”

“Then you must go back to thinking that way. It may seem like this terrible, horrible thing now, but the two of you shall come to an agreement about all of it.”

“Well, as you know what has happened?—”

“Because I know everything.” Miss Thornton smirked, a glint in her eyes.

“Yes.” Diana nodded. “I want to know what you think about it.”

“I think you are both acting like children.” Miss Thornton laughed. “I do not mean it in a bad way, though. The two of you, you are young. This is to be expected, especially in the early days of a marriage, where the two of you hardly know each other at all.”

“But who is in the wrong? Is your not telling me your way of saying you think it is me? Because you can tell me if you do. I shall not have you fired if that is what you are worried about.”

“This is precisely what I mean. You are waiting for me to be cruel to you, even though you should not expect it, and if the Duke were here, he would think that I am trying to find out for myself why he refuses to use the blasted room. The two of you

need to look at yourselves and realize that the world is not out to get you. You asked me for my thoughts, and that is what I think.”

“I see.” Diana nodded. “I do apologize. I do not mean to sound like a child.”

“Your Grace, for all intents and purposes, you are still a child.”

“I am five and twenty!”

“And I am five and sixty, so you will do well to heed my advice. You will be fine, as will the Duke, but you must learn to listen. There is so much more out there than what you know, and so you must think of the experiences of others before you speak. If you do that, then the rest will become quite easy. You shall see.”

“I hope so, because I cannot continue like this.”

“You will not have to. All will be resolved in time, and you and the Duke shall be back to normal, I assure you. Now, here is the key to the library. Be sure to hand it to the Duke soon, or else he might think that you are doing something that you should not be.”

Miss Thornton handed her a key, but it felt like it was on fire in her hand. Diana felt her skin burning as she held it, and she wanted to throw it away so that nobody would know that she had done anything. Once again, she had gone against her husband's wishes only to feel incredible guilt afterwards, but this time she did not want to tell him. She wanted to go to her new sanctuary, where nobody would dare interrupt her, and read.

So that is what she did.

Before dinner, she went to her room and slid the key into a book to hide it. Her library could not be taken away from her a second time, not now that she had changed things to her own tastes.

“The house certainly feels different,” Colin said gently as they ate.

“Do you dislike it?”

“Not at all. It is about time that things changed here, even if it is only wallpaper and furnishings.”

“It is certainly fresher now, not that there was anything wrong with how it was.”

“Sometimes even if there is nothing wrong, it is still good to change things. For example, I took your advice and found a new supplier for our milk and cheese in the village. I told him that you asked specifically, so you can rest assured that the local opinion of you shall only be improving.”

“Oh,” she said breathily, her cheeks flaming. “Thank you. That is so kind of you, but there was no need to give me credit for it.”

“It was your idea. There is no pain in it for me to tell others that you have good ideas.”

“No, I suppose not. What else did you do today?”

“I took some time by the lake. I needed some time to myself with no other voices or the bustling of servants. A lot has happened of late, as you know.”

“I do. I did something similar. You know, I sat down this afternoon and did not think for an entire half an hour.”

“Good. It must have been good for you to stop thinking for a while. You certainly seem calmer.”

She was not, of course. She was sitting across from her husband, knowing that she was keeping a secret from him, one that would enrage him completely if he found out the truth, and all she could do was smile and talk and eat her dinner.

“I think it has all simply been too much of late,” she sighed. “I must also think on the matter of my brother. He must be arriving soon enough to meet my father, and I wonder whether or not it might be wise to meet him myself.”

“If you do not wish to, there is no need.”

“And what if he is simply some con artist? He might be pretending to be a part of our family to gain access to our estate.”

“Surely, and I mean this in the nicest possible way, if he were to attempt to steal away an estate, he would have chosen a larger one?”

“I suppose so. Not only that, but it was his mother who spoke with my father. Do you see? Everything happening has made it impossible to think of late.”

“That is perfectly fine. You and I will navigate all of this.”

“And I forgot to tell you. I have invited Samantha to stay for a while. I knew that she would not come unless I gave my express permission, and I miss her.”

“Wonderful. You shall both enjoy that.”

Their conversation continued for a while, and when they finished, Colin followed her to her room. It should have been a moment where her heart fluttered and made her excited at the prospect of him liking her once more.

Instead, the only thought in her mind was one of relief—the key was hidden.

CHAPTER 21

Colin had expected the reunion to be an excitable one, but he was wrong.

Samantha arrived, and when she seemed weary, he decided that it had been from the journey. He had felt the same, after all. Diana raced to her the second she saw her, and when the two embraced, he couldn't help but feel an ache in his chest.

“Has it truly been that terrible?” Diana asked.

“In and of itself, his behavior is the usual. What has made him insufferable is the incessant talk of our half-brother. You would think he was next in line for the throne, not the heir of an earl.”

“What has he said about him?”

“Only that he is the perfect man, and that he is going to save our estate, and that everything must be perfect in preparation for his arrival. He will be giving him your room, can you believe it?”

“Well, it is not as though there are many others to choose from, and I do not live there anymore.”

“But it is your room. That is the room where we have laughed and cried and talked all night. It is yours, not the room of someone who does not know us. I do not understand why Father is so sure that he will even come. I found the letter that the mother wrote to him, and with how against it she seems, I doubt that she would allow her son to come at all.”

“He is of age now,” Diana sighed. “He is free to do as he pleases.”

“Your Grace,” Samantha said firmly, “you are a man. If your mother had told you not to do something, would you have listened?”

“We would have discussed the matter, to be sure. I trusted her opinion more than anyone else’s.”

“Then perhaps he will not even come at all,” Samantha said hopefully.

“That is not the blessing that you think it might be,” Diana explained. “If there is no heir, then when Father dies, the estate will be handed to some distant family member, or to another family altogether. You will not be taken care of.”

“Not by the new head of the household, but by the two of you. That is what will happen, isn’t it?”

“Certainly,” Colin replied before Diana could say anything. “We wouldn’t leave you to fend for yourself.”

“Then all will be well.” Samantha smiled. “Now, I do apologize, but I am terribly weary. That journey is very long, isn’t it?”

“I slept during the journey.” Diana giggled. “And then when we arrived. My husband must have truly enjoyed the quiet.”

He had not, of course. He much preferred it when Diana talked to him, especially when it was something that she was passionate about, and it had begun to frighten him. He had found himself liking her too much for comfort, which he had never considered to be a possibility. He had wanted them to be friends, but when they argued, he realized that what he was mostly focused on was how soft her cheeks

looked, not even how red they were.

“Something seems wrong,” he said to Diana once Samantha had retired to her room.

“I thought so too,” she sighed. “I was hoping that I was overthinking it, or that she was simply tired because we never traveled, and so she is simply not used to it.”

“It may well be that.”

“No,” she said, shaking her head. “This is something else entirely. She is tired, certainly, but there is something more to it than not having slept. She seems like she has been doing something difficult for a while.”

“Perhaps your father has been drinking again?”

“I would say so, but it doesn’t make any sense. Father was not drinking because he was trying to fix his reputation so that there was something for his son to inherit that had any real worth. I doubt that he would slip now.”

“Then what do you think it might be?”

“I do not know, and it is not like Samantha to keep it from me. I do not know what to do.”

“Then we ought to leave her be for a while. She will tell you when she is ready, but until then, it is better to give her time so that she doesn’t feel pestered.”

“I suppose you know that feeling quite well.” She laughed gently.

He wanted to tell her that she did not pester him, but after the sheer force in his voice when he had told her otherwise, he did not see any use in it. It would only open old

wounds that he did not want to be reopened. He wanted them to heal.

“Might you give me a tour?” he asked instead of answering her. “You have made so many changes, and it feels as though you did them all at once.”

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“Well, I did not do it alone. I had the help of a few maids.”

“Even so, it is lovely, and you must have worked quickly with it.”

“If you must know,” she explained as she led him through the rooms she had redecorated, “we did it over the course of a few days. We simply changed small things each day, and you did not notice.”

“I suppose that I have been rather out of sorts of late.”

“Yes, something like that.”

He wanted to apologize to her. He had never meant to lose his temper, but the library had been a difficult thing to think about for years, and the more she tried to force the issue, the more anger he felt flooding back. It had been unfair on his part, and he knew that, but he simply could not bring himself to tell her that. He wondered if she might do the same thing eventually, and begin the apology, and then they would be able to move past it completely, but for the moment they were speaking once more, and that was enough for him.

“You have not been lonely of late, have you?” he asked, and she turned to him with wide eyes.

“What do you mean?”

“In my absence. I know that you said Samantha was coming because she wanted to, but I cannot help but feel as though you invited her because you and I were not

speaking.”

“It... It was partly that,” she admitted. “I will not make a secret of it, I have been lonely. I have always had Samantha, and then when I did not have her, I had you. It has been one of the most severe punishments that I have ever received.”

Colin’s heart pounded. He did not want to punish her. He had been upset with her, angry with her, but he had not wanted her to feel as though he had left her to her own devices specifically to make her miserable.

“I had not meant to do that to you,” he said gently.

“I had hoped not. Then again, I would have deserved it even if you did.”

“No, you would not have. That is not how we are supposed to be. We are supposed to communicate when these things happen. I do not want you to have that sort of life anymore.”

“Nor do I,” she said sadly, and then after a moment of silence, she laughed.

Colin could not help but join her.

“This has been such a long few weeks,” she sighed. “I do not know when it will end. Each time I feel as though we are getting to the end of it, something else happens.”

“Then it ends now,” he promised her. “From this moment on, there will be no more secrets, no more lies, and every time something happens, we deal with it together. It all stops now.”

“In which case,” she said slowly, “I need to tell you something. Oh, God, you will hate me.”

“What? I will not hate you. What has happened?”

“It is not what has happened, but what I have done.”

“Alright, so tell me what you have done. I will not hate you for it.”

“You might,” she said softly, walking to the stairs.

He followed after her, and as they walked into her room, she pulled a book from her shelf. He laughed, wondering if this great act that she had committed against him was simply taking a book of his.

Then she opened the book.

The moment the key slid out of the pages and into her palm, he knew what she had done. She handed it to him, and he turned and walked to the library, the key sliding into the lock and turning, and opened the door to reveal a library that looked nothing like the one he had seen all that time ago.

“Diana,” he said carefully, “what have you done?”

“I redecorated.”

“Why?”

“Because—because I—I do not know.”

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“Yes, you do. We all know why we do the things that we do, and you know exactly why you did it. Do not lie to me.”

“I simply wanted to do something nice for you.”

Silence fell over them for a moment, with Colin not believing her at all, and then she spoke again.

“That is not true,” she continued. “I wanted to spite you. I wanted a place that could be mine and mine alone, and I was angry with you, and I wanted to do something for myself, but I also wanted to prove to you that I would not bow to you.”

“I cannot speak to you for the moment,” he said gently. “I will be in my study. I will be ready to speak with you soon, and if not, then we can discuss the matter tomorrow, but right now I need to go and think.”

“Very well,” she replied, not even attempting to argue with him, “I will give you all of the time that you need.”

She walked away, and he was about to go to his study when he caught sight of a lamp. He had never seen it before—so it was an addition that Diana had made, but it once had a deer head on the wall above it. He had always hated it. It made him uncomfortable to the extent that he had not wanted to be in there at all, and now that it was gone, the room almost seemed inviting.

Then he saw the open book on the desk, the one that he had left there years before, and that was the last thing he needed before he could no longer hold back. He stepped

inside, feeling as though he was being watched, and seated himself and began to read the book. For some reason, Diana had not moved it, but he was glad that she had not. There was no need to find where he had stopped reading, as it was already there for him.

Samantha was not the only one that had grown weary, it appeared, as the next thing Colin knew, he was gently being nudged awake. It was Diana who had approached him gingerly and was looking at him with wide eyes.

“I understand that you do not wish to see me right now,” she whispered, “but you cannot sleep here. It is not good for you.”

“You are wrong,” he replied, still partly asleep.

“I am not,” she said, rather confused. “Everyone knows that sleeping at a desk is a bad idea. You would be far better off going to sleep in your bed.”

“No, I mean that you are wrong about me not wanting to see you. I do. I very much do.”

“But I have made you angry. That is why you wanted me to go.”

“I wanted you to go so that I could think. I was not angry, I was simply confused, and shocked. Now that I have looked at it, and sat here and read, I can see that this is truly a blessing. I always adored this room, you know.”

“You wouldn’t know from the way you have been acting about it.”

“No, and I ought to apologize for that. I did not mean to be standoffish, but it is the only way I know how to be about this room. It has been a source of pain for me for years now. I also want you to know that the way you have acted cannot happen again.

I do not want you acting out of spite if ever I cannot tell you something.”

“And I regret what I did, which is why I have told you rather than hoping you never opened the door, but you shutting yourself off is not something that I can tolerate, not when you do not tell me why.”

Colin laughed gently, and she stared at him for a moment before finally joining him.

“We are dreadful at this, aren’t we?” she asked.

“Most terrible indeed,” he sighed. “Although when one looks at the examples that have been set for us, it is no surprise. It is a miracle that we are trying to be different at all.”

“Perhaps that is the real reason why I never saw myself marrying. I couldn’t fathom a place where I could communicate when something was wrong, because I have never been allowed to, and now I do not know how.”

“Then perhaps we might learn together? We can learn to be patient with one another, and to respect each other, and to be more open. I truly think we could do it, so long as we both wish to.”

“And I most certainly do. It has been tormenting me that you have been... not angry but something like that with me.”

“And I do not wish to feel that way anymore. I also do not wish to put you in a position where you feel as though the only way to make me listen is to make it worse.”

“In which case—and you can tell me no if you wish and I shall respect it, but we also agreed to no more lies and no more secrets—why did you not want to tell me what

happened here?”

“In truth, it is because I do not need your pity.”

“Then I will not pity you,” she promised. “But you can tell me what happened whenever you are ready.”

She turned to leave, but he took her wrist gently so she would turn back.

“I am ready,” he said, before taking a deep breath. “My father... He was not the sort of man I told you he was.”

CHAPTER 22

It had not been the sort of confession that Diana had expected, but she gave Colin a moment to collect his thoughts before he continued.

“You told me he was a good man,” she said softly. “Everything that a duke needed to be.”

“That is how everyone saw him. Everyone but myself. That is how he wanted it to be.”

“That is why you will not tolerate a bully, isn’t it?”

He simply nodded. “When I learned of your father’s treatment of yourself and your sister, I felt personally attached to it. I shall never know what truly happened to you, but it was similar for me. You see, my father saw his children in the same way as yours. If they were not the heir, they were worthless, and I was not the heir. I was the spare, the extra son that could do his part should the time come.”

“But he was not loving to you?”

“Not at all. I suppose he might have been if he had thought for a moment that my brother would not become the Duke, but my brother was in perfect health all of his life, and so the issue never arose.”

“So what did you do? I do not know what the younger brothers of dukes are expected to do.”

“Go to war,” he sighed.

“But you are in the nobility. You are not some common soldier.”

“I was the son of a man in the nobility. Those are two vastly different things, and it meant that I had none of the responsibilities that another gentleman would. And so, from the age of four and ten, I was told that I would become a soldier, as it was the only way to bring any form of honor to my family.”

“But that could not be further from the truth.”

“My father did not think so. He decided that as I would not be head of the household, I needed to fulfill another role, and that would be on the frontline.”

“But you did not wish to, is that it?” she asked. “Because I certainly cannot see you as a soldier. It is not in your nature.”

He reached out to her, as if to take her hand, but he seemed to think better of it before he touched her.

“I never wanted to do anything of the sort,” he confessed. “It infuriated my father, but it simply is not something I care about. My interests, my passions, lay in academia. Ever since I was a boy, all I wished to do was read. I wished to learn everything about the world, everything that there was to know, and become a scholar. I could have devoted my entire life to it, and never become a duke at all, and been so endlessly happy.”

“But you were sent to war.”

“As is the expectation of a second-born son.”

“And your father was happy for you to go?” she gasped. “I understand that I am not a mother and that we may never have children, but I cannot imagine looking at a child that I raised and forcing them to risk their life.”

“Well, it is as I told you. My father was not a kind man to me. He disliked that I was passionate about learning, hated it even. He told me that a man’s worth was based on what he had done for king and country, not what he had read in a book.”

“He could not have been more wrong about that.”

“It is no matter regardless because he told me that I was to do military service as was expected of me, and when I said no, he...well, when he saw me in the library one night, he gave me this, and so I had no other choice.”

He lifted his shirt to show a scar that reached across his back.

“He—he beat you?” she whispered.

“He hit me with a whip,” he explained, his voice quiet. “It was the last time I ever set foot in this room.”

Suddenly, it all made sense. It had not simply been a room that he had not wanted to enter, it was a room that had caused him to be beaten so much that he had been left scarred.

“So it is as I said,” he sighed. “I had to go. There was no other choice.”

“No choice but to risk your life?”

“I was not the heir. I did not matter. It was better for everyone that I left, and so I did. I left everything and everyone I had ever known behind and went to war. It gave me

something to do, and I was able to travel at least.”

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“You need not see the good in something that was bad,” Diana sighed, but he simply shrugged.

“I try to see the best in situations, and when it comes to that one, well, there is not much good to say about it. I learned to hide the weakness in me, to turn people away with a sneer, and to stand up for myself, as I knew that nobody else ever would. Then when my father died, my brother got everything that he had always wanted, and I never went to the funeral.”

“Did you like your brother, at least?”

“I may have, under different circumstances, but in our position, it was not particularly the done thing to show any form of affection. He enjoyed being the favorite and the only one of any importance. It was all he had cared about, and so protecting me was not something that he ever did.”

“Then it is a good thing that you can do it for yourself now.”

“Do you not think me cruel for not attending my father’s funeral?”

“Why would I? I highly doubt that I shall attend my own father’s for much the same reason. You do not owe peace to someone who never allowed you to have any for yourself.”

“I suppose that I thought it was a cruel action, and in a way I liked it. After all, he had expected me to die in the war every bit as much as I had, but I did not, and he passed away shortly after my return. I thought that, at last, I could pursue studies of some

kind. That is where it all became murky.”

Diana blinked at him.

“When my brother took over the title and the estate, he went to London to settle a few matters. I went to stay with him, and that is where the accident happened. To this day, I do not know what happened. One moment, he was telling me about some lady he had ‘conquered,’ and the next thing that I knew he was tumbling down the staircase.”

Diana’s hand flew to her mouth. “So you mean that... that you saw it?”

“I had thought it some cruel joke at first. I thought that he would sit up, laughing at the shock on my face, and then I would appear to be the fool. I was laughing myself, trying to make him give up the joke and get the teasing over and done with, and that was when a maid saw us. She did not see it the way that I did. She rushed to him and began screaming for help. I followed after her, and when I realized that there had been an accident, there was nothing that could be done. He was already gone.”

“That sounds harrowing. I cannot believe that you went through such an ordeal without being driven mad.”

“In truth, it was the aftermath that was maddening. I should have been grieving, not only the loss of my brother but the sudden change in my life. Just as I thought I would be escaping the threat of war, I was thrust into another role that I did not want. Then, along with all of that, I had the entirety of the ton in the complete and utter belief that I had done it, that I had killed my own brother in order to take the dukedom for myself.”

“And I suppose that as a duke, it is unwise to tell people that you did not wish to be a duke in the first place.”

“No, although it was tempting. Instead, I played my part and attended gatherings and was an upstanding citizen physically, although I cannot say that I was a joy to be around.”

“You are certainly known for being... unwelcoming,” Diana said gently, thinking back to the whisperings that Samantha had heard about him.

“And now you know that is not who I am,” he sighed. “But I thought that was the best way to be—cold and uncaring and aloof. If people feared me, they would leave me alone, and I could do all of the things I wished to do. However, when I tried to go into that library, all that I could hear was my father.”

“What do you mean?”

“He used to hate that room. He would stand over me while I was in it, threatening to?—”

He stopped short. Diana looked up at him, but he seemed uneasy about what he had to say.

“He would threaten to burn it down.”

Diana had hated fires since the accident. It had taken her a long time to use candles and lamps, even when she was no longer a child, because she knew what could happen if one was not careful.

“Did he truly hate the idea of you learning that much?”

“He seemed to hate everything I did. I wanted more than anything to go in there and read and do all of the things that I had been denied for years, but something about that room and all of the things in it made it impossible, so I locked it and ensured that

staff did not enter it. I left that part of myself behind, promising myself that I would shut myself off and never allow anyone else to see that side of me. Then I met you.”

Diana did not know what to say. She did not know what she had done to change him, save for the fact that she had cleaned the room and he was now sitting in it.

“I saw you and Samantha,” he explained. “I saw that the two of you had so much love for each other, and how in spite of everything that you have been through, you cared for your sister, even trying to find a way to care for her if she would rather read and never take a husband. I thought about that often, and how I wished I could have had someone like you. Somewhere along the way, I suppose I became glad that I had you. Maybe—maybe one day I can stop feeling so guilty for wanting something for myself.”

With that, the man that Diana had come to know hunched over as if he were a boy. He was quiet and fragile, and she did not know what to do besides hold him and whisper to him that everything would be alright.

And so that is precisely what she did.

With tears in her eyes, she reached out to hold his cheek, stroking it with her thumb. She felt him crumble into her, letting out a breath that he must have been holding for a long time.

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“Listen to me, Colin,” she said firmly but gently, “I have had my fair share of times where I have seen my sister hunched over pages, reading them over and over, even if she can never become an academic, even if she might never change the world with what she is doing. That is not to say that I have ever once thought that she should stop. Do you know why that is?”

The Duke shook his head softly.

“It brings her joy. I want my sister to be happy, and I want the same for you. If all that your heart desires is to be locked away with your nose in a book for hours every day, then so be it. Learn everything that this world has to offer you, and I will be there with you throughout.”

“Why?”

Because the man that you truly are is the man that I am falling for.

She quickly shook the thought from her mind.

“Because the man that you truly are is the gentleman that I wish to spend my life with, not some shell of a man who does exactly what is required of him and nothing more.”

He leaned his head into her hand more, and as he did so, he tumbled closer to her so that they were mere centimeters from each other. This was not new to them, of course. They had kissed the same night that they met, but now was different. This was not some spark of rebellion, a chance to do everything that she was not allowed

to do.

This time, she wanted him, and it would ruin everything if he knew. Even so, she willed him to close the gap. She wanted him to do it, to place his lips on hers as he did before, and give her what she had been denying that she wanted. She was craving him, and the heat that she could feel from him only intensified her longing.

But then the heat was gone, and the night air from the open window was cold against her skin. She opened her eyes, and Colin had pulled away from her completely. He was not looking at her, instead looking past her to the doorway.

“It has been a long day,” he remarked.

“Yes,” she agreed. “Perhaps we should retire to bed?”

She meant her own room, of course, but Colin seemed to take it as permission to escape more than anything. He rushed into the hallway without so much as looking at her.

“Very well,” he said quickly. “Good night, Diana.”

She blinked, and he was gone. She did not know what to think, but one thing was for sure: she was not going to chase him. Instead, she dimmed the lamp and went to her room alone, having never been so confused in her life.

That was the reason she gave for her pounding heart, at least.

CHAPTER 23

Frankly, Diana was nothing short of terrified.

She had known precisely what sort of marriage she had entered into, and now she dared to want more, and her husband had made it perfectly clear that he wanted nothing of the sort. A hand flew to her cheek, and she could feel the heat emanating from it. She dared not look at her reflection, as she knew perfectly well that she was flushed at best.

What was she thinking? Had she truly thought that a man like that would have wanted anything from her other than an apology for her misdeeds? They were friends. That was what they had agreed upon, what Diana knew would be the easiest way to be, but she didn't want that anymore. She wanted... she did not know, but it was more than she could ever have, she knew that much.

The worst part was that Samantha, the one person that she had always been able to speak to about such matters, was sleeping. She was in the same house as her, yet it would not be fair of Diana to awaken her and ask her for advice, and so she did not. She tossed and turned in her bed, eventually drifting away, only to be awoken harshly by the sunlight.

"Ah, you are awake," Samantha said brightly, sitting beside her. "I have been waiting for hours."

"Hours?" Diana echoed. "For how long was I asleep?"

"I do not know, but you have missed lunch. Is everything alright?"

"Yes, of course." Diana nodded. "Why do you ask?"

"Well, it is not like you to sleep this late. Were you and the Duke enjoying yourselves last night?"

Diana felt that familiar unease grow inside her. "I suppose you might say that."

“You know, you need not lie to me.”

“I am not!”

“Di, any fool can see from your face how unhappy you are. It is quite alright. If something is amiss, you can tell me.”

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Diana knew that. She knew that all she needed to say was that she had been finding it difficult to adapt to married life and Samantha would help her, but she could not bring herself to. Her marriage, as far as Samantha was concerned, was her escape from the life that they had been living. It was a chance at a new life, and Diana knew that. She had been so incredibly fortunate, and she was destroying it by wanting more.

“Everything is fine,” she said gently. “Marriage is not completely easy, and there have been trials to be sure, but it is nothing that I cannot navigate.”

“Of course, for you are the most capable person that I know.”

“And you and I both know that you do not know many people.”

“Be that as it may.” Samantha laughed. “That is not to say that you are not brilliant. You are, and I know it, and the Duke knows it, and soon enough, the county will know it. How is that going, by the way?”

“Now that is something that I am extremely happy with. Would you like to take a tour with me?”

Her sister’s eyes sparkled. “Oh, can I? Will the Duke be accompanying us?”

“I do not think so,” Diana mumbled. “He... He has a lot of work to do at the moment.”

“Oh... Well, you can always ask, can’t you?”

She could, of course. Colin would not be angry with her for asking him to join them in the village, but she could not bring herself to do it. He had sent her away the night before, and it was unlikely that it would be any different simply because Samantha was there.

Then again, he did feel a great deal of empathy and sympathy for Samantha, given her situation. Perhaps, given the fact that she would only be there a while, he would pity them and join them?

That was what Diana hoped as she approached his study, with Samantha on her heels. She knocked, and then she heard him invite her in.

“Good morning,” she said politely.

“Good afternoon,” he replied, and Diana remembered that she had, indeed, slept for far too long.

“My sister and I are going into the village,” she explained. “And we were wondering if you might join us.”

“As much as I would love to, I cannot.”

“Very well.”

Diana saw how Samantha glanced between the two of them, the confusion evident in her eyes.

“That is a shame, Your Grace,” Samantha sighed. “My sister tells me that you have a lot to do, and I understand, but I have missed having a brother of late.”

He seemed to soften at her words.

“Perhaps tomorrow?” he offered, and Samantha lit up once more.

“That would be brilliant.”

Diana hoped that her confusion and subsequent excitement were simply due to the fact that Colin had always allowed her to have her own way, and she liked it and was thus confused at not having it, but the second they boarded the carriage, the younger sister’s face fell once more.

“Now that we are completely alone,” Samantha sighed, “and as you will not tell me of your own accord, I shall have to ask you myself. What is wrong?”

“Nothing,” Diana lied once more. “There is nothing wrong at all. The Duke perhaps has less time for me whilst he is otherwise occupied, but other than that, he and I could not be happier.”

“Then why did you speak to each other like that?”

“Like what?”

“Good afternoon, might you accompany my sister and me?” Samantha repeated, almost in a mocking tone. “I am not simply your sister to him. I am Samantha, or at least Lady Samantha. I am practically his sister by now.”

“Is that what this is about? Because I can always refer to you as Samantha rather than my sister if that pleases you.”

“You know exactly what this is about,” Samantha huffed. “Something has changed between the two of you, and I want you to tell me what it is.”

“I have already told you.”

“Have you? Because the simple fact that he has work to do does not signify that you speak to each other as though you are strangers. It was odd, as though you do not know each other at all. I had not expected to come to see you only to have that in front of me. I did not like it. I do not like it.”

“And do you think that I do?” Diana snapped.

She expected Samantha’s face to fall, but instead, it was almost one of triumph.

“There, now was that so hard?” Samantha sighed, exasperated. “Now, as you have started, you might as well continue. What has happened?”

Diana did not wish to tell her.

“Diana, do you remember the letter that you wrote to me at all?”

Suddenly, it all began to make much more sense. In truth, she had scribbled it down without much thought and sent it away. She had simply wanted her sister there, and that was all that she had considered important. Now that she was thinking about it, however, she remembered just how blatantly she had discussed her difficulties, and how she could no longer cope with them.

“Ah...”

“Yes, and I have been trying to put it out of my mind, hoping that whatever had

happened was not too terrible and you were simply being a hypochondriac, but having seen the two of you this morning, I know that it is far worse.”

“It is not too bad!”

“I do not care how bad you believe it to be, I have seen with my own eyes just how different the two of you are towards each other. I do not like it, and I expect you to tell me what has happened, given that that is why I am here to begin with.”

“Well, if you must know, I have made some mistakes.”

“You have not fallen for another, have you?”

Diana’s eyes narrowed. “No, I have not. The issue is that I—did you truly believe I would?”

“No, of course not,” Samantha replied, almost laughing. “But so long as that is not the issue, then the two of you can work through this.”

Diana found herself hoping that her sister was right.

“I have not fallen for someone else, although it may well be seen as a better option than what has truly happened. I have fallen for the Duke.”

“That is brilliant!”

“No, it is not. It is anything but.”

“How is it not wonderful that the two of you have fallen for each other? That is the best thing for a married couple, is it not?”

“It is, and it would be if the Duke returned my feelings, but he does not, and he never will, and so now... Now I have to accept that I have ruined everything.”

“Has the Duke told you that he feels that way? In so many words?”

“He has said it with his actions,” Diana explained, trying to push the memory of him not kissing her the night before from her mind.

“Diana, any fool can see that he fell for you long ago. You might have missed it because you simply cannot meet his eye, but I have seen it. I can see it. If there has been no betrayal, then all is well.”

“It is not that simple. Even if the Duke did harbor some sort of affection towards me, I have no doubt destroyed it. All that I seem to be able to do is pester him. Besides, you say that I have not betrayed him, but I have.”

“How?”

“There was a room,” Diana began, looking at her hands, which she had folded and placed in her lap. “And he told me not to go near it, but I did so twice, even going so far as to renovate it. I cannot tell you what happened to him in there, but you must know that he had his reasons and I did not care. I did as I pleased, and it has ruined everything.”

“And were you aware of what happened?”

“No, but I should have listened all the same.”

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“That does not make any sense at all. He should have communicated that to you. Thus, it was a miscommunication, not a betrayal. You shall be fine, I am sure of it.”

“Be that as it may, life has not been the easy thing that I expected, and now I do not know what to do.”

“You could leave.”

Diana, at last, looked up at her sister. She seemed determined, almost, even though what she had said was so utterly preposterous.

“What do you mean?”

“You could be granted an annulment and leave.”

“Whyever would I do that?”

“If you are not happy, and you are making the Duke miserable, and you do not wish to do that anymore, it is the perfect solution.”

And it was. Diana knew that her sister was making perfect sense, and that if she truly did want to, then she could. The Duke would likely even agree to it if he felt the same, but all the same, she knew that she did not want that. She shook her head.

“As tempting as it is, and as easy as you make it seem, I cannot do that.”

“Then you are not as miserable as you claim to be. Therefore, you have no choice but

to give your marriage a chance.”

Diana nodded slowly, looking out the window. It had been a clever trick of her to play—making her realize that no matter how bad she thought it was, it was not so terrible that she would rather leave.

“Then where do I go from here?” she sighed.

“You try. It is as I said, we all know how happy you make each other, truly. It is simply a case of the two of you realizing that you would rather be with each other than alone if it is truly the case.”

“And if it is not?”

“Then we shall navigate it together,” Samantha promised, taking Diana’s hand in hers. “I know that you shall always see me as your younger sister, and a baby, no matter how old I am, but you need to know that you do not need to do this alone. I will always be here to help you find a way.”

“Samantha, you have your own life to navigate. As much as you do not wish for it, you shall eventually have to marry. Perhaps you would be wise to find a match of your own.”

“That is the least of my concerns, even if it means destroying my reputation completely. I do not wish to marry, and so I will not.”

“Love will find you.” Diana smirked. “I am sure of it.”

“Well, as it has already clearly found you, I suppose it shall come for me, eventually.”

“Love has not come to me yet. I do not believe that it ever shall, and that is fine by me.”

One look from Samantha made her no longer wish to protest. Diana did not wish to call what she felt for the Duke love, not at all. There was affection there, to be sure, and she liked him a great deal, but love? She had yet to see it between any married couple, and one that was formed out of convenience would not bloom into that.

Not when her husband couldn't even look at her.

“Well, if it does not,” Samantha said, “you and I shall make our own way, just as we always have.”

“Samantha, whether you like it or not, the world will be worse off if you do not marry and you instead stay locked away forever.”

“The world would be at its best if I were allowed to contribute to it academically, but nobody is interested in what a lady has to say, and so I shall have to find my place elsewhere. However, that place will never be as the wife of a man who can do anything that he wishes. I want to be the one that can do as they please.”

“I am sure that there is someone out there that will allow you that freedom.”

“Well, we thought that the Duke would be that for you, and now look at the two of you. If it is as you say, then you had the best possible chance, and even that is not enough. If you ask me, the whole thing about needing a man is utterly overrated, and I do not wish to partake in such a facade.”

“Very well.” Diana laughed softly. “Given what has happened to me, I would have to agree with you. It truly might not be worth the hassle at all.”

Samantha seemed to brighten for a moment before her face fell once more.

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“So you were saying that you enjoy being a duchess.” She nodded. “Aside from your duke, that is.”

“I do. It truly does feel as though I am important. I am quite popular in the village, which was my main concern to begin with, and according to Colin, I have some good ideas about how to make it flourish. It is all rather exciting, although I am sure that with time, it shall become quite difficult.”

“Tiresome?” Samantha suggested.

“Possibly. After all, when have you seen a duke that is happy to be one?”

“I have met but one duke, and I have never known quite what to make of him.”

As the carriage came to a stop, having arrived in the village, Diana couldn't help but think the same thing.

CHAPTER 24

Diana had quickly become attached to the village, and given the look on Samantha's face, it was quite easy to see why.

Everyone there smiled. It seemed like such a small thing to notice, but when all those in London rarely smiled save for the false ones in front of others, a real smile was something that was very welcome indeed.

“Your Grace!” a gentleman said brightly as they stepped out. “I must thank you

personally for what you have done.”

Diana noted the milk in his hands and knew at once who he was.

“It is a pleasure, Sir,” she said politely. “The Duke and I are happy that you are able to provide for us, as I am sure that your workload shall be much greater now.”

“With the deal that he and I made, I have enough to have a gentleman aid me, and so in totality, it shall be even easier than it was before. It has been a blessing, truly.”

“Oh, Di,” Samantha sighed wistfully when he left. “You truly are doing great work here.”

“It is only a deal with a farmer.” Diana smiled. “Although I do hope to do more with my time here. I was thinking of hosting a party of some kind, although I shall have to discuss it with the Duke.”

“It sounds like a marvelous idea. Perhaps you might host it in winter? That way, you could almost treat it like Christmas. You could ghost it on Saint Thomas’ Day!”

“What a splendid idea! Then again, it is not as though we have ever truly celebrated Christmas.”

Their father had never made any sort of effort to have any form of festivities, but Diana had always given her sister a card, and Samantha had given her some biscuits that she would prepare in the kitchens when nobody was looking. It had been a pleasant enough day, but to truly celebrate it would be another thing entirely.

“You should come too,” Diana said quickly, but she saw how her sister looked at her.

“Perhaps our half-brother shall be there,” she sighed. “It would be better to spend it

with him, otherwise he may spend it alone.”

“I am sure that Father will find it in him to celebrate it this year, should he be there.”

“A part of me hopes that he does not. I know that he only cares for the gentleman because he is to be the heir, but even so, it shall be too painful to watch. I do not wish to see our father cavort around with his son as if all of his troubles are over, as if his being there magically means that nothing bad has ever happened. I refuse to see it. I cannot.”

“Then that is all the more reason for you to visit,” Diana suggested, to which her sister nodded.

“Then we can discuss it with the Duke,” Samantha said carefully. “I don’t suppose he will object to it.”

“Of course not. You are family, after all. Regardless of how the Duke and I are towards each other at the moment, you are every bit as much his sister as you are mine, he has said so himself.”

Samantha seemed to sit straighter at that.

“I hope so, because I simply cannot see myself calling this other man my brother. It is not his fault, not at all, but I cannot do it. He is not real to me, not yet at least.”

“I know how you feel, but we may well be surprised! He might be a good man, and we must give him the chance to show us that.”

“Your Grace!” a bright voice came.

“Helen!” Diana smiled. “It is so good to see you.”

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This was in part because she liked Helen a lot, but also because Diana knew completely and utterly that Samantha would adore her. They were so similar that it was impossible for it to be otherwise.

“And this is my sister Samantha,” she added, to which Samantha curtsayed. “She is visiting for a while.”

“That is so lovely,” Helen sighed. “It is lovely to meet you. Are you married?”

“Heavens, no.” Samantha laughed. “I wouldn’t dream of it.”

“Oh! Then what do you do with your time?”

“I like to learn all that I can without ever setting foot in any institute of education,” she sighed. “As for yourself? Are you married?”

“No, although I would very much like to be. My mama says that my time will come, but I simply cannot wait! I shall be twentysoon, and then what will come of me? I shall be a spinster by then.”

“Well, my sister did not marry until she was five and twenty, so who is to say that you will not make an advantageous match? It seems to not matter whether or not you are a debutante.”

“I hope so. Do you truly not plan to marry?”

“No, and frankly, it is tiring having that always be the first question that people ask

me.”

“My apologies.” Helen nodded. “In that case, might you prefer to tell me what it is that you are currently reading?”

“Now that I would be glad to discuss.” Samantha smiled. “It is a book about plants, and their names and uses. I was never one to fully grasp botany, but this one is brilliant for simple explanations, and I hope that with time, I shall be able to understand the more complicated parts.”

“I cannot say that I understand botany myself, but I do so love flowers. Might you know the language of them?”

“Of course! Every young lady should, as should every gentleman wishing to please one. That is part of the reason why I wished to learn more about plants, and then it all sort of continued.”

“That sounds brilliant. May we all be so lucky that we might be able to learn.”

“It is a gift, to be sure. I simply wish that I could attend university.”

Diana laughed. “If you attended university, I would never see you again. You would simply finish one course and then begin another, repeating the cycle until you are old and gray.”

“And I would be so incredibly content with that.”

“I would be content with embroidering flowers,” Helen pointed out. “Rather than baking bread with my mother every day.”

“You know how to bake?” Samantha asked.

“Of course! My family owns the bakery. It is not exactly the sort of thing I like to do, but it keeps my family afloat, and I shall do anything to make that continue.”

“I would so love to work.”

“Believe me, you would not. It is hard.”

“But at the end of the day, you can look around yourself and feel a sense of accomplishment. I, meanwhile, can only look at the pianoforte I have been playing or the socks that I have darned. I feel more like some exotic bird.”

“Then perhaps we could trade places one day?” Helen joked. “Then we can both live the lives we have always dreamed of.”

“Should it ever come to that point, I shall agree to that.”

“Yes.” Diana nodded. “Except for the fact that thetonwould know something was amiss instantly.”

“Theton,” Samantha pointed out, “has seen us perhaps thrice in total. They shall not notice a difference, and it is not as though Father would care.”

Diana wanted to argue that he would, but she was not one to lie.

“In which case.” Helen smiled. “I shall await your sudden invitation. It will be most joyful, I am sure.”

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Helen then curtsayed and said her goodbyes before continuing on her way. Diana wondered just how happy she truly was, and if she had taken her good fortunes for granted, even if she knew she had not been dealt the best hand in terms of her upbringing.

“Oh, how I envy her,” Samantha said wistfully. “That is a lady who can make her own way, with or without a husband. Should I not find one, I would simply wither away.”

“You are not a flower, Sister, although it is nice to know that you are learning about them.”

“I am a flower, only beautiful for a short while, and dies off when picked. Should I be left to my own devices, I shall only grow and thrive, but that would not be me serving my purpose. Tell me, what is the difference between myself and that daisy over there?”

She pointed to the flower, and then walked to it and plucked it from the earth.

“For a start,” Diana replied, laughing, “you are far taller. Not only that, but you cannot make a chain out of Samanthas. Daisies, on the other hand...”

Diana seated herself on the ground and began to pick the flowers, making a small hole in each stem and threading a second through. She continued until she had made one that was fairly long, and then closed it off. Nearby, there was a small girl playing near her parents, and so she walked towards her.

“Good afternoon, Your Grace!” she said brightly.

“Good afternoon,” Diana replied. “This is for you.”

She placed the chain on the little girl’s head as if it were a crown, and the child jumped up and down, thanking her profusely, before racing to her mother and father, proclaiming that she was a princess.

“You truly are the perfect duchess,” Samantha said quietly. “Far better than I would have been, at least.”

“You would have been perfectly fine, although I must admit that I do not regret rescuing you from a marriage you wanted no part in.”

“And what of yourself? Do you regret entering into it yourself?”

“I did what needed to be done.”

“That was not my question. Our family was already as close to ruin as one could be, and so your refusing a proposal from a duke could not have done much further damage. You did not need to marry him, for my sake or otherwise, so I have to ask you whether or not you regret it.”

Diana was unsure of how to answer.

There had been wonderful moments, of course, mostly her time in the village and enjoying her role as a duchess, but there had been times when she felt as though she were not ready, or even right for the role at all.

“Your silence suggests that you do,” Samantha said quietly.

“Nothing is ever easy,” Diana replied carefully, “but do I regret the choice I made to protect you? No, and I never will. But...”

“Yes?”

“Well, I will not lie to you. Sometimes I do find myself wishing that there was another way out. A way that would have saved our family without changing everything completely. I know that I shall see you often, but I will miss you endlessly, and whilst I am glad to be out of that house, I have had to leave you behind. I regret it, and I always will, and so if that is what you are asking me, then there is my answer.”

Samantha was quiet for a moment. Diana wondered just how she was feeling.

“So the only reason you are glad to have done it is that you helped me. Is that what you are saying?”

“It was certainly important to me, yes. You know that I would give anything to make you happy.”

“Anything?” Samantha pressed.

“Of course. What is this about?”

“It is nothing,” she replied, shaking her head. “I only wished to ask you—never mind.”

“Samantha, if something is amiss, you must tell me.”

“It is nothing. I only wish to thank you for all that you have done for me. I know that I complain an awful lot, and it may seem as though I am ungrateful, but I assure you

that I am not. I could not have gotten this far without you, and I hope you know that.”

Diana knew that perfectly well, of course. Had she not taught Samantha everything she knew, the young lady would have never learned a thing. They had nobody else, and it was not as though their father could have, or even would have, done much to aid her. Their aunt had tried, but Samantha had only ever wanted Diana. That was how it had always been, and now Diana had abandoned her.

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It did not matter that there was an open invitation for visits. Diana had taken her sister, who had loved her more than anything in the world, and left her behind while she ran away to be a duchess. She had not been fair, and she knew that, but she had done what she had thought best. Was that such a crime?

“You are brilliant, Sister,” Diana promised. “You could be anything you set your mind to, go anywhere in the world, and I shall always love you just the same. If you do not wish to marry, then you need not concern yourself with my feelings on the matter. I will not think you ungrateful, rather I will find comfort in the knowledge that I taught you to be the person you truly are.”

It was quite strange because although Samantha seemed to be comforted by that knowledge, she also seemed more troubled by it. Diana was unsure of why that was, and as she sat in silence throughout the carriage ride home, it only made things worse.

The Duke did not come to dinner that night, which did not surprise Diana. She did not wish to face him, she could not face him. Not after what he had done. Then, as she left for her bedchambers, Samantha embraced her much tighter than she had in the past.

“You will do well, Sister,” Samantha promised. “I know that this all seems terribly impossible now, but you will find a way. I expect nothing less from you.”

“It certainly seems difficult right now,” Diana sighed into her sister’s ribbons. “But you are right. We shall find a way through this, together as always, yes?”

Samantha seemed to mumble an agreement, but it did not seem completely sincere.

When Diana awoke that morning, neither the Duke nor her sister came to breakfast. It was an odd thing to happen—not the Duke’s absence, that much was to be expected, but Samantha’s. She was not the sort to not come to see her. She wondered if she had struggled to fall asleep the night before, and so went to her bedchambers.

She knocked, but there was no response, so she entered, hoping that she would not be chastised for it.

Samantha was not there. In her place, perched on her pillow, there was a letter, with Diana’s name scribbled on it. Diana needed only a quick glance at the words before dropping it then and there and running out of the house.

She had to find Samantha, and fast.

CHAPTER 25

Colin found that he had never been more at a loss than he had been with his wife.

He had thought himself intelligent. He had thought that, above all else, he would always know what to do, because he had so much knowledge, to begin with, but that counted for naught when her lips were so tantalizingly close to his, and yet he knew that he could do nothing about it.

Diana was so many things. His wife, his duchess, his friend. It was the title of friend that had made him behave so gentlemanly, in spite of the fact that he deeply and truly did not wish to. His honor crumbled a little more each and every time he looked upon her, and he knew that there was only so much he could take before it at last fell to pieces.

And so he began to avoid her once more.

It was not her fault, not at all, but he could not ruin her. It was not the right thing to do, nor the fair thing. Not for a woman like her. Thus, it was easier and better for everyone if he simply left her to have some time with her sister and escaped for a short while. Fortunately, he was a well-liked patron at the bar.

“If burnt toast and raw egg do not teach you the consequences of your actions, nothing will.”

Unfortunately, alcohol was not exactly a good friend of his.

“Charles?” he mumbled. “What are you?—”

“I found you in the streets last night. You were shouting something about your wife, and how you wanted her gone, and so I thought it might be wise to bring you here before you made people talk.”

“Oh, God,” he groaned, and only in part because of the sunlight hitting his eyes. “Please say that nobody heard me.”

“I believe all is well. Nobody was around, and you would think that they would have been if they heard you.”

“Then at least I have that to be grateful for.”

“You can also be grateful for the fact that I am going to give you one hour to gather yourself before I ask you what all of that was.”

Colin groaned once more, eating his raw egg and blackened bread with a most sour expression.

“Have I not been punished enough with that?” he asked. “Truly, that was foul.”

“As was saying you wanted your duchess gone,” Charles pointed out. “And so you might be best to explain that to me now, rather than later.”

“Frankly, I do not know why I was saying that. I do not want to be rid of her, not in the way that I made it seem, at least.”

“But you do want her gone, is that it?”

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“It is not like that!” Colin snapped before sighing. “Forgive me, I am not feeling my best.”

“You may take all of the time that you need. You have never been one to like his drink, and so I can tell something has happened.”

“She has happened,” he confessed. “You would love her. She is bright and intelligent, and she has this acerbic wit to her, and she goes after what she wants with everything that she has, and I-I am me.”

“A duke. What more can a lady want?”

“Someone who does not run. Someone who can look at his duchess, who is making her county endlessly happy even after such a short time, who has a sister that she wishes to care for in spite of the distance between them, and thank the stars for giving her to him. Instead, she has this blundering idiot that has fallen for her in spite of the fact that beyond the title, he cannot give her what she deserves.”

“Then, if that is true, why did you marry her? It was to save her, was it not?”

“It was in the beginning, but somewhere along the way, I found it impossible to keep from her. She draws me in, and I cannot, I do not, want to lose that, but I am not what she needs. I am this terrible beast, and I have condemned her to a life without love. Plainly put, I am a villain.”

“You are quite the miserable bastard, I shall give you that.” Charles laughed. “But you are not a villain. Perhaps there are some remnants of drink in you that are

continuing to do the talking.”

“I wish for so much more for her,” Colin sighed, ignoring his friend’s comments. “I want her to go out into the world and experience every good thing that it can give her. I want her to share her brightness with everyone she meets. I want her to be able to go out and do exactly what she wants, because I know for a fact that she never once has. Everything that she has done has been for her sister, even marrying me, and now everything that she does is for me, and it is not fair.”

“And so your solution was to run away?”

“What other option do I have? I have already made her my prisoner, and whilst her cage is a fine one, it is a prison nonetheless. The only good thing that I can do for her now is to leave her be so that she might at least enjoy time with her sister after everything that she has sacrificed for her.”

“Do you wish to know what you could do instead?”

“There is nothing else.”

“There is always something else. You can stay here for a while until you get hold of yourself, and then you are to go home to your wife and you are to promise that you will change, that you will be the man that she needs you to be.”

“But I do not know that I can. I have always been like this. Who is to say that, even with the best will in the world, I can be anything else?”

“Who is to say that you cannot? Besides, I have known you for years. You and I both know that you were not always this way. It was that man that you have the misfortune to call your father that can be thanked for that.”

Colin thought back to another time, one when he was a young man and excited about what his future held, with no responsibilities and endless opportunities to do exactly as he pleased. It was no wonder that he had changed since then.

“Do you suppose that it will work?”

“Who is to say? All that I know is that the village adores her, and it is quite evident that you do too. If you let her slip away from you simply because you are too stubborn to see that things can be different, then you are not the man that I thought you were.”

“I can try,” he sighed. “You are right, I shall have to. If my being different makes her happy, then what other choice do I have?”

“That is far better.” Charles nodded. “Now, you look terrible. Go to sleep for a while.”

“And what about you?” Colin asked suddenly. “Are you to marry soon?”

“It has been a thought of mine, not that I would have the time for it. I, unfortunately, have to pay my own way, and as it stands, I could not give my wife the life that she would deserve.”

“Ah, so there is someone in your sights?”

“There shall always be a lady or two that I hold a candle for.” Charles smirked. “But as of right now I have no title to bring honor to and no reputation to scandalize by behaving in a most unruly manner, and so I shall like to keep it that way.”

“You say that as if you do anything ungentlemanly at all.”

“Who is to say that I do not?”

“Me.” Colin laughed, immediately putting a hand to his head as a sharp pain spread through it. “In any case, it is not as though you are a rake. Surely you would be willing to marry if the right lady came along?”

“Marriages are difficult.” Charles shrugged. “Frankly, as of right now, I do not receive much, and I do not give much, and I am happy enough. Running a household takes enough time as it is. A marriage would be a stressor in my life, not to mention children, and then think of all of the work I would have to do to afford it all. I do not think it is the sort of life that I want for myself.”

“And yet you give such good and trustworthy advice about it all.”

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“Of course. I have no feelings on the matter, thus my personal beliefs do not affect what I tell you to do. In any case, if I ever felt for a lady the way you feel for your wife, I would not be nursing an ailment at a friend’s when I could be at home being tended to there. I would not have even drunk in the first place.”

“I have made a terrible mistake, haven’t I?”

“Yes, but not one that cannot be fixed. Now, rest well, and when you are ready to return home and speak with your wife, do so. The two of you could have the most beautiful thing, so long as you stop letting your pride get in the way.”

Colin, at last, gave in to his condition and slept a while longer. Charles was not there when he awoke, and he was glad for that because it gave him time to think.

He had truly made a mistake. Diana had her flaws, to be sure, but he was realizing all too late that he was falling for her and he was too far gone to do anything to stop it. He had always liked her well enough, to be sure, but love? It had never been in question—that had been the point of their marriage, to begin with. Now that he thought of her, though, and the way she might have given up on him after he had rejected her, he was paralyzed.

He had to go to her.

He left some coins on Charles’ table, to thank him for his hospitality and his advice, and rushed out the door. He was partly glad that his friend had been absent, as he had never accepted payment from him.

The house was quiet when he returned. At first, he thought nothing of it; her sister was visiting, and there was plenty to do in the village, so it made sense that they would be making the most of their time together. Then he saw how the servants avoided his gaze. Something was amiss, and he knew it, but nobody seemed brave enough to tell him.

“Miss Thornton,” he called, chasing after the housekeeper, who seemed startled to see him. “What is going on?”

“It is the ladies, Your Grace,” she explained, a pained expression on her face. “You see, they are not here, and they have not told us where they are.”

“Is that all? They are likely merely in the village.”

“We had thought the same until—well, this was found in Lady Samantha’s room on the floor. It was addressed to the Duchess, and... It is better that you read it for yourself.”

Colin looked at the opened letter in Miss Thornton’s hands. He had returned home to fix what had happened with his wife, not to read something that was addressed to her. It was an invasion of privacy, one that he was shocked to discover his staff had committed, but he saw the concern on his housekeeper’s face, so he had no choice. He gritted his teeth and looked down at the paper.

Di,

I have written this letter a hundred different ways, and each time I have thrown it into the fireplace. I have been trying to tell you for a while now, ever since your wedding in fact. Now that I have seen your life, however, I finally feel ready to tell you no matter how I do it.

I am leaving. Father has been trying to find a match for me since you left, and I cannot bear it any longer. He does not care to whom I am betrothed, simply that I am not there when his son arrives. I do not even know if he knows of our existence. I do not mean to be a burden, nor to cause you any pain, but I cannot do it anymore.

And so, I have decided to run away to a monastery. You may think me a villain for leaving without a goodbye, or a coward, but that is something that I shall have to live with. Failing that, you could come with me. If you are truly unhappy, then do something about it and leave. We could do just as we have always wanted and stay just the two of us, never needing a man to handle our affairs for us.

If you wish to come with me, ask one of the footmen. They know where I am, and I have given them the last of my pin money to ensure their silence. If you are happy, and you do not wish to follow me and instead wish to work on your marriage, then that is perfectly fine. I wish you all the best, but this will be goodbye.

I shall adore you forever, Sister.

Best regards,

Samantha.

Colin's hands were shaking. He could not believe a single word that he had read. It was enough to know that Samantha was gone and he had hardly spoken to her at all. She was a sister to him, and he had been so determined to hide away that he had missed her completely.

Then he realized that Diana was not at home, which could only mean one thing.

Their marriage had not been perfect thus far, but had it been beyond repair for her? Had it truly been so taxing on her that she wished to run away from him? Just before,

she had wanted them to be closer, that much was clear, and now she was gone. Perhaps his rejection had been the last proof she needed to know that he did not love her, and at last, he realized, standing in that room with the letter pinned between his fingers, that that could not have been further from the truth.

He had pushed her too far away, and now she was gone, and he had never given himself the chance to tell her that he needed her.

He loved her.

CHAPTER 26

“Where is she?” Diana ordered as she stormed towards the footmen.

“We do not know what you mean, Your Grace,” one of them replied, though he seemed quite afraid of her.

“You know exactly what I mean. Now, I have been good enough not to tell the Duke of this, but if you wish for me to tell him of the bribery that you have willingly engaged in, then I can certainly arrange that.”

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“No—no! That will not be necessary,” a second one said quickly. “The Duke need not know about this.”

“I should think not, for I would hate for you to be out of work, as given the Duke’s opinion of all of this, I can assure you that you would never find employment elsewhere. Now, I will not ask a third time, and so this is your final chance. Where is my sister?”

The footmen glanced towards one another before one of them stepped away.

“I shall take you, Your Grace. It shall be a few days’ travel, but we are aware of inns to stay in.”

“We will go until we no longer can,” Diana instructed as she boarded a carriage. “We must find her at once. Do you understand?”

“Yes, of course.”

“And if any harm has come to her, it shall be your necks,” she thundered, turning to the others.

“Yes, Your Grace.” They nodded in unison.

And with that, the carriage lurched into action. Now that she had gotten what she wanted as far as leaving for her sister, she felt herself relax the smallest amount and instantly felt for the man driving her there. She had only meant to frighten him into telling her what she wanted to know, not threaten him.

She knocked on the wall to get his attention.

“Yes, Your Grace?” he asked.

“I only wish to apologize,” she explained. “I know that this was her fault and that she can be quite persuasive. I did not mean to say those things. I only wish to find her.”

“Of course, Your Grace. I understand, I would do the same for my own sister if required. You need not apologize.”

She was supposed to be the brilliant and kind duchess that the village had needed, and she had thought that she had succeeded, but sitting in the carriage, being driven by the man she had spoken to so unkindly, made her wonder if that were the case.

Perhaps that was why she was following after her sister.

She could not picture Samantha as a nun. She had all of the virtues of one, to be sure, but it simply did not seem to be the correct way for her to live. Diana wondered if that was what she truly desired. Samantha was an intelligent girl, and she was not one to make such a snap decision like that without having a good reason for it, and now here she was on the run.

The journey continued for hours. The sun dipped in the sky, painting it orange, and then eventually the driver knocked for her once more.

“Yes?” she asked.

“I am afraid we shall have to stop soon. The horse requires rest.”

“Of course,” she sighed. “Very well.”

Diana did not wish to stop. She wanted to continue until they reached the monastery so that she could find Samantha and at least listen to her, but she understood that that was impossible. She had to find it in her to be more understanding than she had been of late, as it might have helped her marriage to have been so.

“Your Grace!” the driver called suddenly.

“Is there a problem?” she replied.

“No, but it is urgent. Look!”

The carriage came to a stop, and when Diana looked out the window, she saw another carriage with the Abaddon crest. She dove out of the carriage, knowing all too well what that had to mean. She went directly into the inn and saw an older woman.

“Evening,” the old woman said brightly. “What can I do for you?”

“My sister,” Diana stammered, “she is here. She must have arrived recently.”

“Ah, the young lady? I thought you looked familiar. Yes, she is here. Right this way.”

Already, Diana could feel relief washing over her. Samantha was here, and she was safe, and she was not in some monastery alone.

Samantha seemed equally relieved to see her.

“Di!” she exclaimed, pulling Diana into an embrace.

Yet, regardless of how happy Diana was to know that her sister was not in any danger, she could not help but feel irritated with her. Samantha had caused such trouble, and for what? Because their father had tried to marry her off?

“Di?” Samantha repeated.

“Yes.” Diana nodded. “Yes, it is good to know that you are here.”

“How did you find me here?”

“I must have given my footman the same instruction as you did.”

“To continue driving until absolutely necessary?” Samantha giggled. “Well, I suppose I could have been nicer about it.”

“You could have refrained from giving them the last of your pin money,” Diana sighed. “Truly, Samantha, what were you thinking?”

“I was thinking that it is time to take my future into my own hands. I am so tired of it, Diana. I cannot simply sit there and be pretty anymore. I must do more. I must be more.”

“You have always done and been more,” Diana pointed out. “You have always been able to do everything that a lady is capable of.”

“As far as Society is concerned. Diana, I want more than that.”

“And should you marry correctly, then you shall be able to. This is not the way to do this.”

Samantha fell silent for a moment. Diana hoped that she was listening to her, but given the disappointment on her sister’s face, it was quite clear that her hopes were in vain.

“So you are not here to join me?” Samantha asked finally.

Diana could not help but look at her incredulously. “No, of course not!” she gasped. “Why on earth would you think that I would?”

“So that I am not alone, of course. You have always told me that you would be there for me, and now I shall need you more than ever.”

“What you need is to go home and accept that you are a lady and you shall need to marry,” Diana snapped. “It bewilders me that you truly thought I would leave my husband behind to follow you into this harebrained scheme simply because you have to take your place in Society.”

“Is that truly what you believe this to be about?” Samantha laughed, exasperated. “You know perfectly well that I do not belong in Society. You know all too much about my struggles, and how I know I will never find happiness among theton. I do not want it, and so I will not put myself through it.”

“And you expect me to do the same simply because you say so, is that it?”

“You are not happy!”

“I would not be happy as a nun.”

“But you would be free,” Samantha sighed. “Di, I am not doing this to make your life difficult. I am doing this because we have no other choice. We deserve so much more than to merely simmer and nod when a man tells us to.”

Diana, tired of arguing, took her sister’s wrist.

“Diana, what are you doing?”

“We are going home. We are going right now.”

“You cannot. The horses?—”

“Will be fine. You are going to stay in Abaddon Manor with us until this ridiculous and spiteful idea of yours has left your mind.”

“What is so ridiculous about it?” Samantha demanded, shaking herself free. “Is it because you did not think of it? Let me remind you that you are the one who married a man whom you did not know simply because he wanted to marry me. If you wish to talk about spite, perhaps look inwards.”

“Yes, how cruel of me to save you from a marriage that you wanted no part in. Truly, I am the most terrible sister that one could have.”

“That is not fair.”

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“It never is when you do not benefit from it. Now, come along.”

“Why do you expect me to always do as you say?”

“Because I am not the one that storms off whenever I do not get my own way.”

“Do you not? Would the Duke agree with that, do you think?”

“That is completely different, and you know it.”

“Is it?”

Diana could not think of a retort. Samantha was right after all, and they had both been running from each other.

“The point is,” Diana said instead, “is that whether it is a perfect marriage or not, I am indeed married. That means that I have responsibilities now, and cannot simply leave everything behind each and every time you have a foolish idea such as this and I am needed to bring you back.”

“And who asked you to do that?” Samantha asked. “I told you I was perfectly content for that letter to be our goodbye.”

“Would you truly have been?”

“Yes.” Samantha nodded, though she averted her gaze. “It may be good for you, regardless, to learn who you are.”

“What is that supposed to mean? Of course, I know who I am!”

“Do you?”

Diana thought she did, but each time she tried to argue her case, she realized that she did not.

She had lived her life for Samantha, and their father to some extent. She had spent her entire life preparing Samantha for marriage, something that her sister did not even want after all of it, and now...

Now all of her work was for nothing.

“And who are you?” Diana scoffed. “You are a young lady of twenty, and now you seem to think that you can run away because the life you were given was not enough for you. You could find a sensible enough husband, one who would allow you to continue your studies, but you seem to think yourself above that, don’t you?”

“Is that why you are angry with me? Is it truly because you are trapped in a loveless marriage and I am not?”

“My marriage is not loveless!”

Diana froze. Samantha froze. Diana wondered if she had simply said that to make her sister stop, but the more that she thought about it, the more she realized that it was not necessarily incorrect.

“There is no love in your marriage,” Samantha sighed. “You have made that perfectly clear.”

“One argument does not mean there is no care for one another. I care a great deal

about you, for example, even though I do so wish to throw you into a carriage and drive you to Bedlam right now.”

“And why do you care about me? It is not as though anyone else does.”

“Because you are my sister. I have given my life to give you the best opportunities, without so much as a thank you.”

“And when did I ask you to do that?”

“A sister should not have to ask.”

“And what happened when I explicitly told you I had no interest in marrying? You ignored me completely, hoping that I would mature, or at least what you consider maturing, and bend. I have not bent, and you cannot stand that, can you?”

“No, you are right. You did not bend. Instead, it appears that you have broken, and there is nothing that I can do about that.”

“Then leave me here.”

“Is that what you want?”

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“Since when has it mattered what I have wanted? You talk about how much you sacrificed to give me a better life, yet you never once asked if it was what I wanted, and you certainly never listened when I told you that it wasn’t. Frankly, what you did was for yourself so that you could feel accomplished in something, and you would do far better if you simply admitted that to yourself.”

Diana stepped away from her sister.

“I have only ever done what I thought was right,” she whispered. “I have given my all to make sure that somehow you were given more chances than I ever was. You can call that what you wish, but it was not simply so that I could claim your triumphs as my own, and it was not so that I could feel accomplished. It was out of love for you, and hope that you would at least have the life that I never saw for myself. If you want to see that as this great, horrible, selfish thing, then so be it.”

They looked at each other for a moment. This had been their first argument in all of their lives, and Diana hated it, but she also could not help but wonder just how long Samantha had been feeling this way.

“I am a terrible sister, aren’t I?” Samantha whispered suddenly, and it was as though she was a little girl once more. “You saved me from a marriage that I did not want, gave your life to help me, and now I am calling you selfish. I am evil.”

“You are not evil, you are simply confused,” Diana replied, laughing shakily. “I do not like having this dispute with you any more than you do, you know.”

“Then we should stop.” Samantha nodded. “Because this is awful. I am not even

angry with you, just angry that—that for all of my supposed intellect, I do not know what to do with myself.”

“Flee to a monastery, it appears.”

Samantha laughed and then sighed, sinking into a chair.

“It has not been my brightest moment, I must admit. It is only that men have ruined my life, thus far, and so I thought that atleast in a nunnery, I would be with women and be able to not see a man again.”

“That is not exactly how that works.” Diana laughed. “Regardless, I may not agree with it, but if you wish to do this and you truly believe that you have no other choice, then I shall simply have to live with it. It is your life, and so it is time that you make your own decisions.”

Samantha was silent for a moment, and then she began to laugh, truly and heartedly.

“Do you know, it is only now that you have said that that I realize that I do not want this at all, I simply wanted to do something that nobody else would like.”

“Well, I certainly do not like it.”

“Nor do I. You are right, it is time for me to make my own decisions, but I cannot do that alone. I cannot act based on my emotions and nothing more, not when it means I might lose you.”

“Even with everything that you feel about me?”

“None of that is your fault.”

“We were not given much of a chance, were we?”

“No, but it could always be worse.”

“Yes, we could be the man that is soon to arrive with our father under the belief that he has some grand inheritance or other.”

Both sisters laughed, and then Samantha jumped up and embraced Diana tightly.

“I love you, Diana,” she whispered. “Please do not ever let that be put into question.”

“It never shall,” Diana promised. “Now, we ought to rest so that we can return home tomorrow.”

“Yes, that would be for the best. I do hope that the Duke is not concerned about our disappearance.”

“Believe me,” a voice said from the shadows, “he shan’t be.”

CHAPTER 27

Diana thought she knew what it was like to be frightened.

She had tried in vain since the fire all those years ago to forget how she had felt, but it had never been possible. She thought that, with time, that may prove to be a good thing, as she would know how to act the next time something caused her to feel afraid. She was wrong.

“Di!” Samantha yelled.

As Diana turned to her sister, she saw her being dragged away. Samantha clung to the

door frame, but she was no match for whoever had grabbed her. She was gone before Diana had time to move.

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“Samantha,” she called out, running to the door, but she felt a sharp grip on her wrist that pulled her back, and then her arms were pinned behind her.

“Why are you in such a rush?” came a whisper. “We only wish to have some fun, that is all.”

Diana recognized his voice. How she wished that she did not; it would have been easier to accept such actions from a stranger than someone she had trusted.

“I do not call this fun,” she scoffed. “You work for me, remember?”

“I work for your husband,” he snarled into her ear. “And I have done all my life, as did my father for the Duke’s father, and my grandfather for the Duke before him. It is cyclical, you see, the life of a servant.”

“That is not my fault,” she whispered.

She had always felt guilty about that, of course, but it was not the time to point that out. The footman was tall and broad, and she did not stand a chance against him. She couldn’t fight him off, and so she had to appease him.

“What do you want from me?” she asked. “If you release my sister and me, I can speak with my husband, have you given a higher rank. None of this needs to be known by anyone. We can simply go home and have all of this be done with.”

“And we can continue working for you until the day we die, is that it? That is if you even keep such a promise, which we both know you would not.”

“I would. Of course, I would.”

She would not have, and she knew that. Frankly, she could not live in the same house as them, and so she would inevitably tell her husband about it, and no matter how they were as man and wife, he would have sent them to Bedlam without a second thought. That was his nature—bullies were not tolerated.

“I can tell him that it was the two of you that rescued my sister and me. You have my word?—”

“Forgive me for not caring for the word of a lady who possesses more fortune than the entirety of my bloodline.”

“I do not have that much money.”

“Your sister certainly does, and she is not even married. Do you know how much she gave to my friend? Four hundred pounds. She gave him four hundred pounds for a mere carriage ride.”

Diana could hear Samantha screaming in the next room. She willed someone to come, and to rescue them, but the only one that they had seen was the elderly woman who had welcomed them, and she would be of little help at all.

Nobody was coming.

“Four hundred pounds should be enough, surely?” Diana spluttered. “Besides, you shall not get anything more from her. That was all that she had.”

“Then I am fortunate to have taken the Duchess. You owe me, Your Grace.”

“My husband pays you handsomely!”

“And gives us so little dignity, too. Truly, I must thank you so endlessly for all that you do. How fortunate I am to be at your beck and call. You are both incompetent and spoiled, just like that wretched sister of yours.”

Diana kicked him.

It was a terrible idea, and she knew that, but she could not stand the way he was speaking about Samantha, as if she had been a petulant child demanding to have her own way and had always been like that. It was one thing for two sisters to squabble, but for a stranger to say such dreadful things about her...

“I thought you might at least have more intelligence than that.” He smirked. “No matter. I planned for this regardless.”

He pulled her to the ground, dragging her towards her bed frame and then tying her down with some rope in his pocket. It was rough, and Diana wondered if her wrists might bleed as they had been tied so tightly, but she tried not to focus on that. Instead, she focused her attention on the man that was rooting through the room.

“I came with nothing,” she pleaded. “You know that. You accompanied me. You know perfectly well that you shall not find a thing.”

“Very well.” He laughed darkly, crouching down in front of her and tracing a finger along her collarbone. “But, my, isn’t this a pretty necklace?”

“Do not touch me.”

“I shall do as I please. You know, we servants talk, and it would appear that you and your wonderful husband are yet to consummate this sham marriage of yours. Now, that would mean that you are still a lady, and I do prefer my ladies to be of a particular sort.”

Diana did not know what he meant by that, not at all, but from the way his face darkened as he said it, she knew that she did not wish to.

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His fingers were still at the base of her neck. She felt unclean from his touch, she wanted him gone, but he was not going anywhere.

“Please,” she whispered, “do not go any further. We can forget about all of this, I promise we can, and we can give you whatever you want later.”

“I want this necklace,” he growled.

She thought he might pull it sharply from her neck, breaking it, but instead, he looped a second hand gently around the back, unclasping it and peeling it away from her. Somehow, that was far worse.

“There,” he said gently, slipping it into his pocket. “Now, was that so difficult?”

Diana wanted to scream at him. She wanted to pull herself free and fight, even if she knew it was a losing battle. She wanted him to suffer, even the smallest amount, but she knew what was better for her. She had to find a way out to get to Samantha.

“No,” she whispered obediently.

“Right. Now, as you are going to be staying put here for a while, I ought to go and help my man with your sister. I assume she is more difficult.”

“Then perhaps you may need my aid?” she offered hopefully.

“Ah, yes. Why don’t I untie you and give you the chance to do something about it?”

That had, of course, been her true intention. Diana had simply hoped that he would not catch onto it.

Her footman, now attacker, walked away, but only reached the doorway before he was met by the other.

“She is subdued,” said the second. “She fainted the second I began to tie her up. She is lying in her bed now.”

Diana’s blood froze. Samantha was, for all she knew, lying unconscious in the other room, and nobody was there to care for her, and she was stuck in place with two men who clearly wanted something from her.

“Why are you doing this?” she asked once more, now that both men were nearby. “Surely you have not been simply waiting to attack?”

“Of course not, not with a duke residing there, at least.” One smirked.

“But when the darling younger sister of the Duchess demanded to leave, well, we could hardly say no to a face as sweet as that, could we?”

“Especially knowing that her protective older sister was far more likely to come to her aid than the absent Duke. Why have one when you can have two, as they say?”

“And if the Duke does come for us?” Diana asked. “What will you do then?”

“We shall never find out,” the first snarled. “You cannot honestly tell me that you believe that he cares that much for you. Look at you, you are tied to a bedpost, unable to do anything more than pester the two of us instead of simply letting us do what needs to be done.”

“None of this needs to be done!” she exclaimed. “You could have simply left us alone, taken what you wanted whilst we slept, and we would have been none the wiser. In all honesty, this has been quite foolish of the two of you.”

“Terribly bold, isn’t she?” Samantha’s captor sighed.

“Yes, and it is quite a shame, as she might have been pretty without the scowl.”

“How can I do anything but scowl in a situation such as this?”

“By doing as you’re told,” Samantha’s captor said gently, crouching down in front of her. “Go on, Your Grace, smile for us.”

“No.”

“I thought you wanted to have this over without having to do anything other than what is needed. I need you to smile before we leave you.”

“You need to go now before someone comes to find us.”

“Nobody is coming for you,” her captor sighed. “When will you realize that? We are not stupid, and as I told you, servants talk. We know all about your father, who could not care less about you, and we know that the Duke cannot stand you. Simply put, nobody cares about the fate of two useless, little ladies who do not know their place.”

“Diana!” Samantha exclaimed, running into the room.

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“Dear God,” Diana’s footman huffed. “I thought you said she fainted.”

“She did, I thought.”

“As if you truly fell for that.” Samantha laughed. “Let her go. The Duke might not care enough to come after me, but she is the village’s Duchess. They will want her back. You know as well as I do that she is beloved by them. He will come for her.”

“He will not.” Her captor smirked. “Very well, we can have a family reunion here so that I do not fall for any of your tricks again.”

The two men took Samantha and roughly tied her to the bedpost next to Diana’s. Diana wanted to scream and cry, but to her surprise, her sister put her head against the post and began to laugh raucously.

“Very well,” Samantha sighed, “I ought to know my place, as you say.”

The two men nodded before stepping outside, no doubt to plan their next steps.

“Ransom, do you suppose?” Samantha asked.

“Why are you not taking this seriously?” Diana hissed. “You were free! You could have escaped.”

“And angered them so much that they might have done something awful to you in my absence? Certainly not. If one of us has to be here, then both of us do. We do all of these horrid things together, you know that.”

Diana wanted to ask her sister why she thought that was, as it had been her younger sister running away that had gotten them there in the first place, but she held her tongue. They had already discussed the matter before all of this, and so there was no need to continue it any further.

“For what it is worth,” Samantha sighed, “I am sorry. I hadn’t expected any of this to happen.”

“No, of course, you did not.” Diana laughed sadly. “Neither of us could have ever predicted this. The only sign I truly should have picked up on was the eagerness of the second footman to bring me here.”

“The duplicity of man, as they say.”

Both sisters giggled, but it was not real for either of them. It was completely empty, partly out of despair.

“So,” Samantha continued, “do you believe we might be held for ransom?”

“They would be fools to do that. The Duke knows who they are—they could hardly get away with it. Besides, they are quite convinced that the Duke does not care enough about either of us to come to our aid. Part of me is inclined to agree.”

“Then that part of you, as well as those two monsters, is wrong. The Duke cares deeply for you, and I know that you reciprocate such feelings. Should we be so fortunate as to make it out of here, you must tell him.”

“I cannot do that.”

“So you would be content if you were to die in this very room tonight and never have told him?”

“Samantha, we are not going to die.”

“Perhaps not tonight, but in another fifty years or so. What is the difference? Either way, you would have gone your entire life having not told your own husband how you felt, and that is not like you.”

“And suppose I do tell him, and he does not feel the same way, and then I must live another fifty years in that house with a man who doesn’t love me. What then?”

“You complain to your loving younger sister about it, of course.”

“I suppose. You’ll always be there, won’t you?”

“Like a thorn in your side, whether you like it or not.”

“Very well, should we get out of this situation, I shall find a way to tell him.”

“Wonderful. Now to... get out of this situation.”

“I feel quite safe in my promise.”

Suddenly, there was a noise outside their room. It was not the sound of the two men enjoying themselves in any way. It was something far more sinister than that. Then there was an almighty crash, and then another, and then...

“Diana?” came a man’s voice. “Is that you?”

“Your Grace!” Samantha called back. “We are here, come quickly!”

CHAPTER 28

Colin had expected a few things when he went to find Diana.

A long journey, that was the first. He had not bothered to burden his footmen with such a journey; there were certain things that were better done alone, and chasing down one’s wife on the way to a monastery was one of them. Besides, he enjoyed horse riding a great deal, and there had to be something enjoyable about the entire ordeal.

He had also expected a sleepless night. He would have to arrive at an inn, of course, and then he would have to wrestle with himself to force himself to rest. He did not know how he would do it, as all that he could think about was Diana and how much she must have hated him to run away. To be sure, their marriage was not perfect, and he had hardly been the ideal husband, but he never would have thought that she would run away from him entirely. Then again, it was her sister who had asked her to, and she was not one to say no to her sister.

“Please,” he begged as he rode there. “Please just come home.”

He was prepared, in all honesty, to grovel and beg forgiveness. It was not the done thing for a duke to act in such a manner with his wife, but he no longer cared. He wanted her to come home, and he was prepared to do anything to make that happen.

What he was not prepared for, however, was to see two carriages at the same inn he had arrived at with his family crest on them. Part of him was relieved, of course, as it meant he could find them sooner rather than later, but another part of him felt uneasy about it all. Colin did not quite know what was unsettling him so, but something was not right.

His suspicions were confirmed the second he entered the inn.

“Oh, thank goodness you are here, Sir!” an elderly woman exclaimed the moment she saw him. “You must go quickly and send for help!”

“What is it?”

“There are two ladies here, and two men are—well, I do not know what they plan to do.”

Colin did not blame the woman for not doing anything, of course, as she would have been in no fit state to do a thing. Instead, he blamed himself entirely and ran for the stairs.

Diana, Diana, Diana, Diana. Be alright, please just be alright.

Once more, he was surprised by something he had found. At the top of the stairs were his own footmen, who turned pale upon seeing him.

“Your Grace!” one exclaimed. “Thank goodness you are here!”

“Yes—the two girls—ladies, they have tried to run away from home.”

“Indeed, and the two of us followed after them. We have tried our best to convince them to return, but?—”

“Do not lie to me,” he thundered. “What have you done to them?”

“We have done what was necessary,” the first argued. “They are like wild animals, Your Grace. Utterly unhinged.”

“If you speak of my family like that once more, I will bury you beneath this inn. Do you understand me?”

The two footmen glanced at each other before nodding quietly.

“Now, I will not ask a third time. Where are they?”

The second footman raised his hand, pointing in the direction of a room. Colin went to go inside, but then one of them—he could not be sure which—laughed.

Helaughed.

“Might you tell me what that was about?” he asked, turning back.

He could smell alcohol on the man, and he wondered just how much that had affected his behavior and how much was pure insanity.

“Just that I heard a rumor about you that you are a murderer, and then you threaten to murder us. It does not bode well for your reputation, is all.”

The second man then laughed with him.

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“To hell with my reputation. I should like to know why you think yourself so above me when you have done unspeakable things to my wife.”

“All I did was take her necklace,” he slurred, removing a necklace from his pocket and waving it haphazardly. “She had such a pretty neck, too. I believe I might have been the first man to ever touch it, you know, but we all miss what we don’t take, and oh, I am glad to have taken it.”

Colin was quite certain that he broke the man’s nose.

Had he not then seen the two most important ladies in his life tied to a bed, he might have taken pity on the second footman, but he did not, and so the other had to go too. Once he was finished with them, he was quite sure that they would not awaken for a good while.

“Diana?” he called. “Is that you?”

“Your Grace!” Samantha called back. “We are here, come quickly!”

He wasted no time in rushing to their aid, even as he spoke.

“Untie her first,” Samantha instructed. “She has been in this state for longer than I have.”

Colin set Diana free, and she collapsed into his arms, clinging to him.

“Colin,” she sighed into his neck, “I cannot believe you are here.”

“Of course I am,” he replied gently. “But I ought to free Samantha now.”

“It is quite alright.” She smiled next to them. “You know, it becomes rather comfortable once you become used to it.”

But Diana released him, and he freed Samantha, and the two ladies fell into each other. Colin lifted each one onto a bed and ensured that they were lying correctly before going down to the elderly lady. Upon his return to the room, having sent for help, Diana was once more beside her sister.

“It was foolish of me to separate the two of you, I suppose.” He chuckled.

“She seems to be asleep,” Diana whispered before turning over to him. “How did you find us?”

“It was purely coincidental. I would like to say I used some sort of intelligent deduction, but I simply began riding until I knew the horse had to stop. Perhaps that was their mistake in the first place?”

“Do you suppose they planned all of this?”

“They couldn’t have planned for your sister to run away, but they certainly took advantage of it. Oh, God, Diana, I am so sorry. Had I known I had employed two men as evil as that?—”

“You couldn’t have known,” Diana assured him. “Had the idea even crossed your mind, you would have rid us of them long ago. I know that.”

He simply nodded in response.

“What I did not know,” she continued, “was whether or not you would come to us. I

would not have blamed you if you did not.”

“Why would I not have? I found the letter, and as soon as I read it, I knew that I had to come and find you, if anything else to say that I?—”

He paused.

“That you what?”

He wanted to tell her, but she had been through quite enough that evening without him adding any more difficulty. It was not the right time, and he knew that.

“That I would prefer it if you were at home, where you belong,” he said instead. “The village needs their Duchess, after all. I need my Duchess.”

“Ah, yes, of course.”

Colin wondered, hoped even, if her reaction meant that she had wanted him to say something else.

“How do you suppose she is?” he asked gently, gesturing towards Samantha.

“She blames herself entirely,” Diana sighed. “And it is not exactly as though I can assure her otherwise. She was foolish for running away, but she couldn’t have known what would happen. After all, she had to bribe them to take her away in the first place. Four hundred pounds, can you believe that?”

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“Where on earth did she find that much money?”

“She likely stole it from our father, but I shan’t blame her if she did. He owes us far more than that.”

“To be sure. Oh, Diana, I am simply glad that the two of you are safe.”

“As am I, strangely enough.” She almost laughed. “But what will happen now?”

“We can navigate that in the morning, when we are not exhausted from everything that has happened.”

“Will you be angry with me then?” she asked. “When you are no longer relieved that we are safe, will you feel safe enough to be furious?”

“Had I felt capable of blaming you for any of this, perhaps, but I cannot bring myself to. You did only what you thought was best, and so who am I to hold that against you?”

“You would be a sensible man,” she whispered.

“That does not signify, for I have never been a sensible man where you are concerned.” He laughed, and then Samantha stirred.

Diana watched Samantha, clearly worried that they would wake her, and then she turned back to him.

“We can go to the other room,” he offered, “if it means she will be more comfortable.”

“That might be for the best.” Diana nodded. “Though I dare say that I will not be able to leave her whilst they are here.”

“Well, for one, they shall not be in any fit state to do any more harm to either of you,” he explained. “And what’s more is that someone is coming to take them away. I may have to pay the poor woman to have her inn cleaned after what I did, but that is neither here nor there at this point. Nobody touches my family.”

She seemed to soften at the reminder that she and Samantha were his family.

“Very well.” She nodded. “We can leave when they have been taken away.”

Colin did not know how long that would take. He had found a gentleman outside that had promised to find someone, but that could have taken a good while if he had been successful at all. For the moment, he was simply glad that while Diana knew he was there to watch over the two of them, she was content to relax.

In spite of everything, he brought her comfort, and there was no greater feeling than that.

Fortunately, the gentleman had been successful, and eventually, two Bow Street Runners arrived to cart the footmen away. Colinaided them in loading the two madmen into the carriage and returned to the two ladies. Samantha was asleep still, but Diana was out of bed and pacing.

“What is it?” he asked. “They are gone. It is alright.”

“I know. I simply have quite a lot of energy after all that has happened, and I do not

know what to do with it. I shall need to pace for a while.”

“Then pace,” he explained. “Do what you feel you must.”

“Are they truly gone?”

“Completely, well and truly.”

“And I shall not ask what you did to them, but you shall not face any consequences for it, will you?”

“Of course not, not when they kidnapped my wife and held her hostage, that is. I doubt the county would approve of them having taken their Duchess away, even for one night.”

“But they did not kidnap me, not really. I came with them of my own free will.”

“Nobody would believe that for a second. Besides, the moment that they would not let you leave, that is them having kidnapped you. They shall not be able to show their faces again, even if they are released.”

“I blame myself.”

“You should not.”

It was then that she noticed his hand. At that moment, he also noticed his hand, and at last he felt a sharp pain in it.

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“Oh!” he exclaimed softly. “I wonder how long that has been there for.”

“You are bleeding,” she gasped. “Surely you were aware of that.”

“Truly, I was not. Had I been, I would not have allowed it to drip on the bed. It appears that we will be sending the poor innkeeper quite the sum to fix all of this.”

“She is quite deserving of it, to be sure,” she sighed. “Now, we ought to do something about this hand of yours. Come, I know what to do.”

“What about Samantha?”

“She can have my room, and we can take hers. I doubt that she will mind. I simply do not wish to wake her.”

“Very well.”

The innkeeper, upon seeing the Duke’s hand, was all too quick to give him some supplies to bandage it.

“This will sting,” Diana said softly.

“I do know that.” He laughed. “I have been in my fair share of scrapes, you know.”

And yet, one could never fully prepare for the sharp pain given by ointment. He inhaled sharply the second it touched his wound, and Diana couldn’t help but giggle at him.

“It appears that you have not been in this situation for a good while now, though.”

“Well, I try not to make a habit of knocking people unconscious.”

“It is not the best habit to have, I will admit.” She nodded, beginning to bandage him.
“But the pain is only temporary.”

“How do you know how to do all of that?”

“Have you met my father? It was almost a weekly occurrence that he would find himself in a fight. It is only by some miracle that he has not yet found himself on the business end of a pistol.”

“Yes, including my own.”

“There,” she said as she finished bandaging his hand. “I hope it stays put, at least.”

“It certainly feels secure.” He nodded. “You have most definitely had ample practice.”

“What can I say? I come from a certain type of family.”

“As do I, so you need not feel judgment there.”

“I do not.” She smiled. “I dare say that I never have, not from you at least.”

“Good.” He grinned. “Now, it is terribly late, and it appears that I shall have to make quite the journey tomorrow, so we really ought to go to bed.”

She looked at him carefully, then nodded and followed him to the stairs.

“I wish to say goodnight to my sister, first,” she said as they reached her door.

“Of course. I shall be here.”

But when Diana tried the handle, the door did not open. She looked at it, puzzled, before trying once more. Again, there was nothing.

“Allow me,” he offered, but when he tried, the door still did not open.

Then, they heard giggling from the other side of the door.

“Samantha?” Diana called. “What are you doing?”

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“My room is next to this one,” Samantha called back. “I shall see you in the morning.”

“Were you truly pretending to sleep just so that we would leave?”

“Of course! The door was locked the second you left. Now, good night to the both of you.”

Colin could not help but laugh. Diana knew that her sister was intelligent, as did he, but still they could not help but forget that from time to time.

“I shall have her head tomorrow,” Diana whispered, though she was laughing.

However, upon turning around, her laughter died down. Diana, it appeared, had been given the larger room with two beds big enough for one person.

Samantha’s room only had one bed that was big enough for two.

CHAPTER 29

“I can go and tell Samantha to let me in,” Diana said instantly.

It was an instinct of hers. She had been such a burden on the Duke already, and she did not wish to make it worse. Samantha had seen her room, having been taken there already, and so she had known precisely what she was doing, but it was not the correct thing to do.

The Duke was a good man, and Diana could not have asked for a better husband in spite of his flaws. After all, he had been so willing to overlook hers. Then again, they had not yet reconciled after all that had happened between them, and it was all too much, far too soon.

“Stay,” he whispered.

“What did you say?”

“Stay,” he repeated. “You need not go. Samantha clearly wishes to be alone, and I have no objections to you being here with me, not if you want to, that is.”

Diana blinked. Was this an invitation?

“I do not wish to intrude. You have already done so much for me.”

“I am still your husband. That is my duty, is it not?”

“I-I suppose it is, yes.”

“Then stay. We can pretend that we are at home, and that none of this has happened and we are simply going to bed in another one of the sixty-something rooms in our house.”

“Very well,” she whispered, climbing onto the bed.

Colin lay next to her, and he seemed to fall asleep quite quickly, but Diana did not have such a luxury. She had made the mistake of wearing her corset too tightly that day, and with Samantha refusing to open the door to her, and no lady’s maid to aid her, she was left feeling even more uncomfortable than she already would have been.

With a sigh, she tried to place her hands behind her back and pull at the ribbons. Her arms were already quite sore, and at one point she felt like she was back at the bedpost, tied there, and she froze. She pulled her hands back in front of her and tried once more to ignore it, but it was too tight, and her body was too stiff.

She wondered if that was truly the problem, or if she was instead frustrated by everything else that had happened and thought it was easier to blame a corset than her own reckless behavior. Either way, she could not sleep, and so she tried once more. Once again, however, she could not do it. With a sigh, she threw herself back onto the bed.

“If you need help, you need only ask.” Colin laughed into the darkness.

“I do not need help.”

“It certainly sounds as though you do,” he replied, then mocking her sigh.

“Surely I do not sound like that.”

“You do, but it is quite alright. Now, did you require any assistance?”

“No, of course not. All ladies know how to remove their own corset.”

“Ah, that is just as well, for I have never had to do so on myself.”

“Then what luck you have.”

“I could always help you, though.”

“I do not need you to take it off for me.”

“I could loosen it for you, though,” he offered. “That is not so bad of a blow to your ego, is it?”

“My ego is perfectly intact, I can assure you.”

“Then allow me to help you,” he pushed. “There is no shame in it. You can either lie here in discomfort, thus making it impossible for me to sleep too, or you can undergo a few mere moments of accepting someone’s aid.”

“Fine,” she huffed, “but do it quickly.”

It was strange, because even though it was dark, when she turned her back to him, he seemed to know exactly what to do. His touch was not rough or wanting, but soft and deft. As he moved, she felt her breathing become easier and easier, and soon enough she felt as though the fabric may fall away from her completely.

“There,” he said gently. “It is loosened, and you have managed through the suffering. How brave you are.”

“Do not stop,” she said quickly.

“What?” Colin asked. “Is it still too tight?”

“No!” she gasped. “No, it is perfectly fine. I simply—oh, for heaven’s sake, I want you to keep going.”

She could not believe that she had said that. Had she not asked enough of him? He was exhausted, he had said so himself, and after refusing initially to allow him to help her, now she was begging for more. She was impossible, and she knew that he was likely exasperated with her, possibly even hated her, but?—

He continued without any further discussion. She had missed the feel of his hands on her in the few mere moments that he had pulled away, and she wished for the first time in her life that her corset was longer, so that he might be able to continue.

“Do you want me to pull it off you, too?” he asked. “Or would you rather do it yourself?”

Diana thought about it for a moment, but only a moment.

“You,” she replied, “please.”

Again, he obliged with no argument, and at last she felt like she could sleep. Rather, she might have been had she not felt a strange burning sensation rush through her. The room was completely dark, save for the glow of the moonlight, but she was sure that with all of the heat rising within her, she was lighting the entire room.

“Thank you,” she whispered, “for everything.”

“You need not thank me, it is my duty.”

“I give my thanks all the same. I know that I have not been easy as a wife.”

“Nor have I been easy as a husband, but I cannot tell you how fortunate I am that you have stayed with me this long.”

“You say that as though I plan to leave.”

“Do you—do you not?”

Diana sat up in bed. Colin joined her, sitting behind her with his lips dangerously close to her now bare neck.

“When have I ever even suggested doing so?” she asked, her brow furrowed. “Our marriage may not be perfect, but we are only husband and wife as of a short time. We can learn, we can get by. Why would you expect me to do otherwise? Would you rather that I did?”

“Of course not,” he sighed. “Do you know, I have been beside myself for the longest time now, trying to find a way to change so that we can make this work. I want this to be good, and I want to learn how to be the man you need me to be.”

“You already are,” she protested. “You are willing to try, and that is all that I need from you. It is all that I shall ever need from you.”

“Then why did you leave?”

The words echoed in her mind.

“I did not leave,” she replied, puzzled.

“You did. I saw the letter Samantha left you, telling you to join her at the monastery. I was going to take the both of you there in the morning.”

“Why would you do that?”

“Because it is clearly what you want. That is why you are here, is it not?”

“Goodness, no!” she gasped. “No, the thought did not even cross my mind, not for a second.”

“Then why?—”

“I had to talk some sense into my sister.”

In the moonlight, she swore she could see Colin start to understand, but she couldn’t risk him not fully grasping her motives.

“She did not know what to do,” she continued. “She told me that our father is now insufferable, and he is pushing her to marry so that she will be out of the way for our wonderful and perfect half-brother’s arrival, and so she did not know how else to be.”

“Frightened out of her wits, I can imagine,” he said gently. “I believe that your father would have gladly handed her to the first willing gentleman no matter who it was.”

“That was precisely the issue, but most of all, Samantha does not want to get married.

She would have preferred to be a nun, of all things, and—oh, there is something I must confess to you.”

“Of course. You may tell me anything. I will not be angry, what has happened has happened.”

“I invited Samantha to stay with us because I thought that you hated me and that our marriage was doomed. I should have spoken with you, I know, but I could not bring myself to, and then Samantha disappeared before I could tell you, and I had to find her and bring her back, even if she was kicking and screaming.”

“She does not appear to be doing so now.” He chuckled. “I understand why you did what you did. I should have made sure that you had the space to talk to me without being afraid. It is no matter now, we can simply make sure that it never happens again.”

“I would like that very much,” she whispered.

“Now, am I to take your sister to the monastery tomorrow, or were you successful?”

“Well, she does not truly wish to become a nun, I know that much,” Diana sighed.

“I feel as though you are about to say something contrary to that.”

“It is only that she does not know what else to do. I have promised her that I will find another way out for her, but what can I do? It is not exactly unfair for our father to want to marry her off—plenty of fathers do that—and in spite of everything, I believe that she would be a good wife should the right gentleman come along.”

“But you do not want her to marry now?”

“I want her to marry for the right reasons. Not simply because our father says so.”

“I understand completely. Leave it with me, I shall have the matter settled tomorrow, and we shall find a way through this.”

“Are you certain of that?” she asked. “I do not mean to doubt you, only that there is no clear way to handle this matter. My father is not exactly the easiest man to make see sense.”

“Well, if he knows what is good for his precious son, he will.”

“Are you going to threaten my father?”

“Would it be so terrible if I did?”

Diana laughed softly. “No, I do not suppose it would be.”

“Then I shall bear in mind that it is not an impossibility.”

“And then what about us?” she asked gently, leaning back into his chest. “When all of this is over with, what will we do about you and me?”

“Well, there shall no doubt be a grave scandal that the Duke of Abaddon’s footmen were scoundrels, so we shall have to deal with that matter. Then again, it may be a good thing to have that be the main story for once, rather than it being my murderous tendencies. Or it could well add to the rumors. What do you suppose will happen?”

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“I do not mean that, and you know it.” She laughed. “I mean our marriage. What will we do about that?”

“We will go home, and we will start again, completely anew if you wish. We can pretend none of this ever happened, and that we are newly married and very happy, indeed.”

Diana shifted awkwardly. “I do not want that,” she whispered. “It might be easier, to be sure, but it is not what I want.”

“Whyever not?”

“Because,” she said steadily, taking a deep breath, “to start anew and pretend that none of this ever happened would mean pretending that you and I have never had a history, and in such a short time we have done so much, overcome so much, and I cannot, I do not want to, pretend that none of it ever happened. To ignore the bad means I have to ignore all of the good, all of the support, all of the love?—”

She stopped herself, but she had already said too much. The Duke bristled behind her, tensing up.

“I apologize,” she said quickly, about to pull away from him, but he held her gently in place.

“No,” he said quickly, turning her to face him. “It is I who must apologize to you for not saying this sooner. I have known for a long time, but I could never find the words to say it. Diana, when you left to find Samantha, you took a part of me with you. I

have spent so long trying to bury my feelings, hoping that they would subside so that I could give you your freedom, and when I thought I had lost you, I tried to tell myself that it was for the best and that I had to let you go, because that is what one must do when one loves another, and I love you, Diana.”

Colin seemed just as surprised to have said those words as Diana had been.

“What I mean to say,” he continued, trying to collect himself, “is that I did not want to lose you, but I wanted you to do what you needed, and if that was without me, then I thought I could live with that. When I lost you, though, I realized that I cannot, and there is nothing on Earth that could change that. I need you, Diana, and though you may never feel the same, I want you to know that I will give my life to make you happy. That is all I want.”

“And this is all I want,” she whispered, before closing the gap between them entirely by placing her lips on his.

She froze for a second, just a second, because the last time she had wanted this, he had rejected her, but this time he pulled her even closer, and just for a moment, she forgot about every bad thing that had ever happened to her.

When they eventually pulled apart, she was dizzy and breathless and fell into his arms. It was as though she were still wearing a tight corset, although she knew that her husband had already helped her out of that situation.

“What happens now?” he asked.

“We sleep,” she replied, “and then, tomorrow, we will figure out what happens next, but I know that we can do that because you love me, and I love you.”

CHAPTER 30

“The two of you seem well rested.” Samantha beamed as they went down for breakfast that morning.

“On the contrary,” Diana whispered to her, “we hardly slept at all.”

“Well, regardless of what the two of you were doing last night, you seem a lot happier.”

Dian could not help but agree. As she ate, Colin and Samantha began a discussion about science that she did not completely understand, but she did not feel a need to. She hardly even listened; she was simply happy that they were there and they were safe and they were happy.

“Now,” Colin said suddenly, “I hate to dampen things, but I must know, Samantha, what you want me to do.”

“What do you mean?”

“I will speak with your father, and I need to know what you want so that I can have it happen.”

“I do not wish to marry,” she said quietly. “Anything else is up to you.”

“Then it shall be done, I promise you.”

“You are welcome to stay with us, of course,” Diana offered once again.

“That is too kind, Sister. I must stay with Father, at least until our half-brother appears, and then I shall see, but for now I must stay there.”

“Your loyalty to that man shall forever puzzle me.”

“It shall do the same to me, but it is not in question. He has always needed us far more than we have needed him, after all.”

The two ladies laughed gently and then finished their breakfasts before they boarded one of the carriages and returned to the manor house.

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“I shall send someone to fetch the other,” Colin explained to them. “We shall stay at the house for a short while so that I can get some affairs in order, and then we shall go. Is that alright with the two of you?”

“Of course.” Samantha nodded.

“You can stay with us a while longer, if you wish,” Diana suggested. “You need not leave immediately.”

“It is quite alright, Di,” Samantha promised. “I know that you worry for me, but it is perfectly fine. Besides, it would seem that your husband wishes to have some time with you, just the two of you.”

“That can wait. I have missed you.”

“Well, you shall simply have to learn not to.” Samantha laughed. “I am supposed to depend on you, not the other way around. I will be here if you need me, but you are married now. You have a family to care for, and that must be your priority now.”

“But I?—”

“You need not do everything for me now,” she continued. “I know that all of this time, it has been your duty to take care of me, but I am not a child anymore. I can handle myself now without the need to have any outbursts, having seen the outcome. I will be perfectly fine. Now, you must learn to live without me here all the time as I must do with you.”

Diana sighed. All of her life, it had been her and Samantha. Their aunt had been a part of that for a good while, of course, but other than that, it had been the two of them and nobody else, and it had become a habit. Diana knew that Samantha would be fine without her; she was intelligent and beautiful and sociable, but she didn't know how well she would do without Samantha, without someone to put all of her energy into.

Then again, she would have a husband to take care of, and he seemed all too happy for her to do so. It would be an adjustment, but she could do it. She would have to, of course, as it was not as though she had any other choice, but at least it would not be awful.

Colin disappeared into Abaddon Manor as soon as they arrived, whisking Miss Thornton away.

"What do you suppose they are talking about?" Samantha asked as they made their way inside.

"Most likely what transpired yesterday, and that we shall need new footmen to make up for the two that we have lost. I suppose he will also want a word with the others, to ensure there are no others who will attempt that sort of thing again."

"It was truly frightening, wasn't it?"

"Yes, but it is over now. We are safe, and that is what matters."

"Of course. I simply hope that there are some good footmen left here, else the Duke shall have to take me home, and he has already done quite enough."

Fortunately, after a lengthy discussion with the remaining footmen, Colin seemed to trust that there were only two conspiring against them, and so they could soon

continue their journey.

It took a while, but soon enough, they returned home.

“Before we go inside,” Samantha said quickly, “I ought to confess something to you both.”

“What is it?” Colin asked.

“More to the point,” Diana interjected, “why did you not tell us sooner?”

“I may or may not have neglected to tell Father I was leaving,” Samantha admitted, laughing nervously. “And I did not tell you because I had forgotten until around five minutes ago.”

“That is fine.” Colin nodded. “At least we know now. Are you ready to do battle?”

“I couldn’t be more prepared, if that is what you mean, even if I do not feel ready at all.”

“It will not be awful, not for long at least,” he promised, and then the three of them were on their way to the front door.

It swung open before they even knocked. There stood the Earl, his face an ugly shade of red, and Samantha took a step back.

“Where have you been?” he thundered. “You know perfectly well that my heir is to arrive soon, and he is expecting to see you. Could you imagine if he arrived during your absence? How, pray tell, was I supposed to explain that? I cannot simply tell him that you are an imbecile that does not know any better, can I? You had better have a good explanation, and you had better tell me it right this instant.”

“And you had better refrain from speaking to her in that manner,” Colin said calmly. “You are right, you cannot say that she is an imbecile because you know it to be untrue. Now, we can do this here and now, or we can discuss it like gentlemen inside. The choice is yours, but I think it might be best if you do not speak in such a manner when you might be overheard. It would be unwise for you to tarnish your reputation further, would it not?”

The Earl’s face seemed to fall immediately, and he stepped to one side and allowed the three of them to enter.

“I do not know what makes you think you have the right to come to my home and speak to me in such a manner,” he grumbled. “But it will not be tolerated.”

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“That is where you are wrong, My Lord.” Colin smiled politely. “My presence shall always be tolerated, for I am a duke, and your son-in-law. It is therefore your duty to do as I ask, lest you appear to be unwelcoming to those above you, and we both know that you cannot have that.”

“What do you want?”

“You are going to be a wonderful father from this moment on,” Colin continued, his smile unwavering. “You will cater to Samantha’s every whim until the day she is married, which will be when and only when she deems the time to be right.”

“Do you not understand that it is her job to be married to whomever I choose?”

“In some families, yes, that may be the case, but not this one. You will be a good father who allows her to make her own choices. I believe that sounds reasonable, does it not?”

“Not when she is as willful as?—”

“It is reasonable, is it not?” Colin repeated. “Again, I would truly hate to think that you would disagree with a duke.”

“You listen here. You will not come into my home raving about your title as if it means anything at all. I do not care who you are, you will not tell me how to raise my daughters.”

“You have not raised your daughters,” Colin snapped. “You have not done a damn

thing for them all their lives, and that is why you are so angry that I am here, isn't it? You cannot stand that there is someone that has seen your treatment of them. Well, I hate to be the bearer of such terrible news, but the ton has all seen it."

"What have they seen, exactly? A poor man who lost his wife tragically and has had to care for his children alone, with no heir? They pity me for it."

"They hate you for it. They may be fools, but they do see things. They all talk about it—how you neglected them all this time, and how you are the worst father in London. I have been kind to you, for your daughters' sake, by not telling them all that it is the truth, but I will not extend such a kindness to your son."

"And then where will Samantha be? You wouldn't dare compromise her."

"Ah, yes, the lady that wishes not to marry would be unable to marry. Truly, what an unspeakable fate that she does not want at all."

Samantha laughed at that, and Diana could not help but join her.

"You will not disrespect me in my own home," the Earl roared. "I will not stand for it, and I will have you out immediately."

"Very well, and word of your mistreatment of your children will also be out, and then where will your son be? I guarantee that he will not wish to be a part of such a scandal."

Diana looked at her father, the man who had tried to make her feel fear all of her life, and almost pitied him. Had he been anyone else, she might have, but he was the man who had done everything in his power to make her miserable, and she could not forgive him for that, so even though it made her a truly awful daughter, she had to admit that she delighted in it, only the smallest amount.

“You will be good to her,” Colin repeated. “And should I hear anything otherwise from her, I shall ruin you. Diana is my wife, so she shall be protected from it, and Samantha is happy to be ruined, so it will not reflect badly on her in any way that matters. The choice is yours, My Lord.”

He did not wait for an answer, instead turning to leave.

“And what about your reputation?” the Earl called out with a smirk, causing the Duke to turn around. “What makes you think that anyone would listen to a murderer?”

It was then that Diana remembered what she thought of her husband. It was impossible that anyone truly believed it, of course, and even if they did, he was still a duke, so it would be foolish for someone to go against him, but it was a blow to her confidence.

It did not appear, however, to have any effect on Colin.

“They do not need to listen to a murderer,” he replied, grinning as he walked towards him. “I am sure you would try to refute any claims I made, but then again, a man cannot speak ill of another if he is dead and buried. Might we leave it there?”

At last, the Earl seemed to lose all of his words. He was simply an older man cowering before a younger one, and once more Diana realized that she should feel pity for him, but she did not. She only wished to laugh; Colin would not harm him, but it appeared that her father did not have the intellect to know that.

“Good.” Colin nodded. “Now, I am going to leave with my wife, and Samantha will stay with you. She shall have anything her heart desires, and I will not hear news of otherwise. I do hope that is clear.”

This time, he did not wait for a rebuttal. He simply nodded to Samantha, who

curtseyed to him, and then he took Diana's hand and led her outside.

Stepping into the sunshine, Diana could not help but laugh. She had felt so tense throughout the confrontation, and now that she was outside, she felt free to release it all, and it came out all at once.

"That," she gasped, "was brilliant."

"I did not frighten you too terribly, did I?"

"Certainly not. You were perfect."

“I threatened your father!”

“Well, perhaps he needed to be threatened. If it is what will make him a better father, then I am all for it. Besides, he chose to speak to my husband in a rude manner, and I am not the sort to excuse that, not when such treatment is directed to the man I love.”

“I do not believe that I shall ever tire of hearing you say that,” he sighed with a smile. “Come, we ought to return home.”

“A terribly long journey,” she sighed.

“Well, it is not as though we are welcome to stay here, is it?”

“No, I suppose not.” She smirked. “Then again, you do have your old bachelor lodgings here, do you not?”

Colin brightened up immediately. “I do, indeed!” he replied, before mock panic flashed across his face. “Ah, but there is only one room to sleep in. Fear not, I will take the sofa!”

“You will do no such thing.” Diana giggled. “I do not care what is proper and improper. No more separate bedrooms, no more separate beds. I will not stand for it.”

“Well, if the Duchess insists.”

“I do, and what is more...”

“Yes?” He grinned playfully.

“I would like to treat this as our honeymoon,” she said carefully. “I know it is not strictly the done thing, so to speak, but we never truly had one, and so I think now is the perfect time if my husband is willing, of course.”

“Oh, he is willing.” He nodded. “He most certainly is.”

They went to Colin’s London lodgings, not caring if anyone saw them or said a word about them, because they were truly content with what they had with each other, and so nothing else mattered at all. There were no servants there, given that they had not been given any notice, of course, but Diana simply laughed and prepared dinner for the two of them, as she had had to do for herself and Samantha in the past, and then the two of them ate and then retired to their bed chambers.

And then nobody saw them for several weeks.

EPILOGUE

In spite of the event being Diana’s idea, she had to admit that she was now rather nervous, indeed.

For a good while, she had wanted to find her aunt in order to properly thank her for all that she had done, but she did not know the first thing about finding a family member, especially one who lived far away and whose only connection was someone that they could not ask for a favor. That was the case for Diana, for even though Samantha had assured them that she was being treated better now, the Earl would not likely be willing to aid Diana in her search for his sister.

Now that Diana had made a discovery, however, it felt like the time was right.

Their honeymoon (or rather, their second one) had lasted for three months, and it had been wholly blissful. Now that they had returned to Abaddon Manor, they were ready to take on their duties as Duke and Duchess, and Diana had discovered that they would be filling one of their roles sooner than expected. This also meant, however, that she would have to tell Colin, and although she was certain that he would be overjoyed, she did not know how to tell him.

“I have had a breakthrough,” he said brightly, appearing in the drawing room as if on cue. “You shall like to know what I do.”

“As shall you.” Diana smiled. “But do go ahead and tell me.”

“I have found her!” he exclaimed. “Rather, Miss Thornton has found her. She has managed to locate your aunt and has written her address for you, so you may write to her whenever you wish. She is welcome to come and stay any time. You might also like to invite Samantha, unless the situation with your father is too precarious.”

“Would it be selfish of me if I only invited my aunt?” she asked, shifting in her seat. “It is not that I do not want Samantha here, of course, but it has been so long, and I do not want to have to share my time between the two of them, although I would so love to arrange a time for the two of them to see each other too.”

“Then that is what we shall do. Samantha will understand, she always does.”

“You seem rather excitable.” Diana smiled. “What is on your mind?”

“Only that I have a beautiful wife, and that I have solved a mystery, of course. It is always quite satisfactory to do so.”

“I can see that.” She giggled.

“It will be nice to have company,” Colin continued, still abuzz. “Although I must admit, I do so love it when it is only the two of us. I cannot imagine our life being any different, can you?”

Diana stiffened. “Do you... prefer it being just the two of us?”

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“Of course! It is the perfect life, you must admit. We have no responsibilities outside of the dukedom, and only each other to concern ourselves with, aside from if Samantha should ever require assistance. What more could one want?”

Diana nodded, forcing her smile to stay in place. “I couldn’t agree more,” she said politely.

“Wonderful, now I was thinking a week from tomorrow for your aunt’s visit. It might be a little soon, given she will undoubtedly be surprised by your letter, but what do you think? Oh! I am terribly sorry, what is it that you wished to tell me?”

Diana did not know what to say. He seemed so happy, in his element even, planning the visit from her aunt, and he had said himself that he so enjoyed it being the two of them. She had to admit that she had enjoyed it too.

It appeared that they had enjoyed themselves rather too much, as she was now with child.

She was not foolish; she had already gone through all of her doubts in the three weeks that she had thought about her condition, and she knew that it was not the sort of news that everyone would want to hear, and Colin seemed so content that she almost wished that he could stay that way.

“It is nothing.” She laughed shakily. “Only that I was hoping my aunt could visit as soon as possible, rather than in a week’s time. We could leave the decision to her, and offer her an open invitation so that she can inform us more precisely.”

“You,” he said thoughtfully, “are brilliant. Do not ever forget that.”

He kissed her forehead before racing off, presumably to his study.

Colin had settled into their new routine, but Diana had felt a change in him. He was happier, more in control of himself of late, and it showed. He was reading and studying again, and truly enjoying it. He would even leave it behind to visit Diana simply to tell her something interesting that he thought she might wish to know, which she always did. Diana wondered if, given all of his progress, the time was even right to have a child, but there was no point in that now.

The baby was coming, whether they were prepared or not.

“Here is some parchment, a quill, and some ink,” he said brightly, bursting into the room once more. “I shall have it sent the moment that it is ready, and the address is already written, so have no worries there.”

Upon reading it, Diana realized that her aunt lived incredibly close by, less than a day’s journey, which lifted her spirits. She would have family nearby, at least. She scribbled a letter quickly, apologizing for the surprise and the lack of correspondence, but that she was now a duchess and she had found her and wished to invite her to stay with them, then she had Colin sign it in case her aunt thought that she had been driven mad.

And then she waited. She wondered if her aunt would come at all, or if she no longer cared for the two girls, but she only needed to wait a mere two days before there was an arrival at the door, and there she was.

“Aunt Roberta!” she exclaimed upon seeing her, rushing to greet her.

It had been years since she had last seen her, but her aunt seemed exactly the

same—tall, beautiful and kind.

Roberta embraced her just as tightly, sighing gently. “Oh, Diana,” she said quietly. “I knew that you would go far, but this is something else entirely. Look at you!”

“I am just as surprised as you.”

“Now, now, I never said that I was surprised, only that you have come so far. Now, where is this husband of yours?”

“That would be me.” Colin nodded, and Roberta curtsied.

“It is a pleasure to meet you, Your Grace. I trust that you have taken excellent care of my niece?”

“I wouldn’t dream of treating her any other way. I am so glad that we were able to find you.”

“As am I, as I am quite certain that my brother has never made the effort to tell you where I was.”

“He most certainly has not.” Diana laughed. “Come, let us have tea. I have so much to tell you!”

“Splendid.” Roberta nodded. “Will you be joining us, Your Grace?”

“I am afraid I have some business to attend to, but I shall be home this evening.”

This suited Diana perfectly fine, as although she had wanted her aunt to meet her husband as soon as possible, she needed advice even sooner than that.

Diana had never truly stopped to think about how bizarre her courtship with Colin had been until she recounted it to her aunt, who gawked at her from beginning to end.

“That is so wonderful,” Roberta sighed wistfully. “It makes me almost wish that I had married. Almost! And how is Samantha now?”

“She is doing well,” Diana said carefully. “She still seems to struggle with accepting that she will one day marry, but at least Father does not make her miserable about it now.”

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“Well, she does not need to marry. I did not, and I am perfectly happy.”

“Of course, but part of me thinks that she wants to but does not want it to be on anyone’s terms but her own.”

“Which is also perfectly fine. There is no need to force someone into a position that they do not wish to be in.”

“Which is something I must discuss with you,” Diana said quietly. “Now, you mustn’t say anything, not yet at least, but I... I am with child.”

“Oh, Diana, congratulations! What wonderful news!”

“It certainly would be, if the Duke wanted children.”

Roberta tilted her head to one side. “Does the Duke not want children? What sort of man of his rank does not want an heir?”

“It is not that he doesn’t want one at all. The day I sent you the letter, he told me he likes our life as it is—the two of us and nothing more. Now I need to ruin it all and tell him that he is to be a father, and I know he is terrified by the prospect. I do not know what to do.”

“What you are going to do is let him have some time when he returns home tonight, and then once he has settled from today’s work, you will tell him. However he feels, you must allow him to feel that way. Diana, this is a wonderful gift. He will see it, I assure you.”

Diana wanted to believe her, but as strong as she had always thought her aunt to be, she could not predict the reaction of a man who had so hated his own father that he did not have a strong desire to be one.

In any case, she knew that her aunt was right, and so when Colin returned that evening, she watched an hour go by on the grandfather clock and then turned to him, even though he was deep in conversation with her aunt.

“I do apologize for interrupting, dear, but might I speak with you in the garden?”

“Yes, once your aunt has finished her story,” he joked.

“Oh, I was about finished.” Roberta smiled. “You two may take all the time that you need. I will be in quite good company with all of these biscuits.”

“Is everything alright?” he asked once they were outside. “You have never been one to interrupt a conversation.”

“I am fine, yes. Well, I was. I still am, of course, but—well?—”

“Breathe, dear.”

Diana looked into his eyes, steadying herself. She was about to change his life, and one of them had to be strong about it, so she wanted to take that burden upon herself.

“This will come as a surprise to you, and perhaps not one that you want to hear, but it is important that you know.”

“Is your aunt to marry? That would be excellent news, although I cannot imagine why you would have to tell me in secret.”

“No, and she will never marry, either. No, what I need to tell you is that we are not

going to be a family of two anymore. I know that you want it to be the two of us always, and I hate to ruin that for you, but?—”

“Your aunt is welcome to stay as long as she wishes!”

“This is not about my aunt!” Diana sighed, exasperated. “Colin, I am with child.”

Colin looked at her, expressionless, then he appeared quite confused, then frightened for only a second, and then a smile spread across his face.

“Do you mean—I am to be a father?”

“Yes, and I know it isn’t what you wished to happen, but I only discovered this three weeks ago, so we still have time to spend with just the two of us.”

“Di, when I said that I prefer being just us, I mean our family.” He laughed. “I’ve told you for a long time now that you are my family, and now—and now it is going to be even bigger. Perhaps I should have been clearer. I apologize for not making you feel comfortable enough to tell me, but no, this is the greatest thing that you could have possibly told me!”

He embraced her tightly, and every fear that she had had over the previous few days dissipated.

They had found her aunt, and now they were to have a baby.

The End?