



The Wrong Duke

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Category: Romance, Adult, Historical

Description: "My lady, you've chosen the wrong man to disobey..."

To save her sister, Amelia has no choice but to seduce a man she barely knows. Yet in her desperation she makes a grave mistake: she kisses the wrong Duke...

After witnessing his whole family perish, Duke Evan has only his friend left to protect. So when he realizes Amelia's plan, he vows to stop her. The problem? Her lips are haunting his every thought... To make matters worse, they have to spend the next two weeks together. And now that he has tasted her, he must ruin her for anyone else...

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

Total Pages (Source): 75

CHAPTERONE

“We have to talk. Now!” Miss Martha Forbes came at Amelia like a bullet from a gun. Her face was covered by the Bauta mask she was wearing, but beneath it, her green eyes were ablaze with panic.

“What are you — woah!” Martha grabbed Amelia by the hands and pulled her away from the table of drinks that she had been lurking beside. It was a prime spot for doing such a thing, running along the far side of the Grand Hall, a perfect location for viewing the festivities without fear of calling attention to oneself... while also, providing a chance to sneak a drink when her father wasn’t looking. “Martha! What has gotten in to you!”

“Not here!” her friend hissed as she dragged Amelia through the crowd of eager debutants and excitable lords, passed the dance floor which was just now starting to sway from the bodies waltzing across its floor, and toward the back of the Grand Hall to a small alcove that was as out of the way as it was out of sight.

“Is everything, all right?” Amelia tried again, worried now by the panic that had taken her best friend. “What has happ —”

“Not here!” she hissed again, flashing her eyes over her shoulder as she continued to lead.

Amelia rolled her eyes at her friend’s theatrics but chose to say nothing more. Knowing her friend, it was gossip that had led her to behave this way. A lord she had her eye on was Amelia’s guess. It was the first ball of the Season, a veritable who’s

who of eligible bachelors that ladies such as she and Martha should have been in the throes of being courted by — that was the entire point of these balls, after all.

And indeed, when Amelia had last seen her friend not five minutes ago, that was what she had gone to do. Amelia had been happy to leave her to it, feeling no desire to join her because Amelia knew that such flights of fancy didn't apply to her. She might have liked them too. She might have loved the idea of falling for a handsome viscount or a charming marquess, but that simply wasn't her lot in life because her father would never allow it.

In fact, her father had already hinted strongly at the man to whom he intended to see her married. Not that she had ever met the man. Not that he cared. It was simply her lot in life, and as was the world that Amelia lived in, there was nothing she could do about it.

“Here!” her friend announced, pulling her into the alcove. “This should be safe enough.”

“Safe from what?” Amelia sighed. “Honestly, Martha, you're acting like a cat with its tail caught on fire.”

“And for good reason!” She had a petite frame, standing no taller than Amelia's shoulders. A pretty face too with curly brown hair and emerald green eyes, sharp features that were matched by a sharper tongue. A ball of energy was how Amelia always thought of her, far more than what was reasonable for one so small. And right now, she was shaking from it. “I was walking through the ball just now.”

“Yes?”

“And I saw your father and my father talking.”

“All right.”

“I thought to ask my father if he had found any suitors for me — you know, save me having to do all the work myself.”

“A fine plan,” Amelia chided. “Is that what this is about? You don’t like the man whom your father has selected?” She then added bitterly, “At least your father will likely listen if you protest.”

“What? No.” She took Amelia by the hands and met her eyes through the mask. “It’s your father, Amelia! He didn’t see me — I am sure of it. But he and your father were talking.” She blinked. “About you.”

Amelia pulled back. “About me?”

“Yes!” Martha glanced about, careful that they weren’t being overheard. There was no need to worry though as the ball was in full swing, the laughter and merriment beyond the alcove was loud and abrasive, and for someone to hear, they’d have to walk right up and insert themselves between the two ladies. “I didn’t hear why he means to do it or when, but he was certain of the fact. So certain that he told my father that by the end of the Season, it would be done!”

“What would be?!” She already knew the answer. Oh, how she knew.

“You would be wed! You know that he has his eyes on Lord Malnor for you already. And that —”

“It’s not a sure thing,” Amelia corrected. “He has mentioned it, but beyond that... well, you know how my father is.”

“Be that as it may, he’s not taking any chances,” Martha hissed. “I didn’t hear him

mention any names specifically, but he said that if his latest efforts don't work the way he hopes that... that..." She swallowed. "That he will take matters into his own hands."

"Meaning?"

"The way he spoke..." Martha's expression was aghast. "He plans on treating your hand like an auction, selling you to the highest bidder."

Amelia snatched her hand back. "He wouldn't!"

"That was the gist. You're the daughter of a viscount, Amelia. He knows what that's worth. And from the sounds of it, it's not station that he cares for. Nor is it renown." She looked right at Amelia, her meaning clear. "He wants money. He told my father as such. And you..." Her face dropped and beneath the mask, Amelia could see the pain in her friend's eyes. "You're his ticket."

Amelia felt sick, such that she was glad for the small alcove her friend had pulled her into because it was spinning now, and if she had been among the party goers, all that noise and all those colors, she might have loosened her bowels before she could control herself. Rather, she simply held her stomach and doubled over, reaching for her friend who gave her a hand and stroked her back in comfort.

Why was she even surprised? That was the real question. Her father was a cruel man, a bully. A man who took pleasure in asserting his power over the weak and helpless because it made him feel more important. Paired to that a horrible gambling problem, one which she knew had seen him fall into mountains of debt, and it was no wonder he was using one of his only two daughters as a way out. The way his mind worked, he would have seen it as his right!

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To fall in love? To meet the man of her dreams? To be truly happy in a way that so few were afforded? The idea had always been a folly, and if Amelia had allowed herself to imagine a situation where that might occur... what was even the point?

“And Bridget?” Amelia asked of her younger sister. “Did you hear anything?”

Martha grimaced. “The way he spoke, it’s you or she, Amelia. He has two prize hens, and he means to parcel them as soon as he can. He seemed rather happy with himself.”

“He can’t...” she choked.

“He can,” Martha said rightly. “You know it as well as I.”

Her sister? Amelia’s blood ran cold, and her stomach twisted as she considered the implications. Just seventeen years of age, still a baby in Amelia’s eyes, yet her father would happily use her the same as he would Amelia because to him, they weren’t his daughters but objects. Amelia was strong enough that she could handle what her father threw at her. But Bridget... no, she was far too young and innocent.

“You know my father! He mentioned Lord Malnor in passing, but he didn’t tell me specifically that I should...” She swallowed at the thought. Lord Malnor, a man she had never even met! What did her father even expect of her? “And you know how impatient he is. He’s as likely to get cold feet and decide it’s not worth waiting for. And my sister! Oh, Martha, she’s seventeen, far too young for such things. What is she to — Why are you smiling?”

Indeed, her best friend wore a smile that split her face in two. Devilish was how Amelia would describe it, not at all appropriate for the news she'd just brought. "About that. I have a most wicked idea."

* * *

"That's him," Martha said, pointing across the room. "The one in the golden mask ____"

"Martha!" Amelia grabbed her friend's hand and pushed it down. "Don't be so obvious."

"I'm just making sure you know who I'm talking about," Martha sighed. "I wouldn't want you seducing the wrong man." She wore a coy smile, clearly enjoying herself a little too much.

"This isn't funny."

"Oh, it's a little funny," she giggled, only to catch the derisive glare Amelia fixed her with. "I don't see what other option you have, seeing as your father is likely to tell you to talk to him later tonight, anyhow. This just..." She winked. "Seals the deal."

Amelia grimaced at the thought. It was one thing to be told who to court, to have to pretend and act as if she was taken by a man whom she didn't even know. But what Martha was suggesting...

"By all accounts, he's charming, friendly, not at all arrogant like some of the other lords my father has forced me to meet," Martha added positively. "Oh, and he's quite easy on the eyes too."

"That's not really the point..." Amelia's stomach twisted.

“It’s either this or you take your chances with your father. And we all know how that’s likely going to turn out.”

“But what if it doesn’t work? What if he... if he rejects me?” Amelia watched Lord Malnor, currently standing among a small group of men, chuckling at something one of the other lords wearing a black mask was saying. It was hard to tell anything about him from this far away, impossible to see what he looked like beneath that mask. But she had heard of the Marquess in passing, and everything that Martha said was apparently accurate. Even still...

“It will work,” Martha said with a firm nod. “You just have to be forceful. And maybe a little... inappropriate,” she teased.

Amelia’s stomach twisted further. A large part of her wanted to say no to this plan, to slap it away like a buzzing fly because it was ghastly and horrid and so very wrong. If it didn’t work, her reputation would be ruined! And even if it did, there was a chance for much the same. But then she cast her gaze wider, caught sight of her father speaking with a fat lord who was at least twice her age, and this strengthened her resolve in a way that was very much needed.

Thoughts of her sister flittered through her mind. What would she say if she knew what their father might be planning? What could she even do? Nothing was the answer. Besides, technically, this was what he wanted anyhow. Right? All she was doing was making sure it didn’t fail.

“All right.” A firm nod, and she stood a little taller. “I’ll do it.”

“Amazing,” Martha purred. “Trust me. By the time tonight is through, your father will have no choice but to accept Lord Malnor as a suitor. Young. Handsome. Rich. You could do a lot worse.”

“I could do a lot better,” she muttered under her breath.

Martha took her hand and gave it a squeeze. “There, he’s leaving the pack. After him.” She waved her hand in the direction that Lord Malnor was going. “It’s now or never, Amelia.”

“And never isn’t an option?”

Her friend eyed her warningly, and Amelia forced a smile. Then, with no other option because the alternative was even worse than what she was about to do, she sighed and spun about, starting through the crowd and toward Lord Malnor, courage pushed to the fore because she was going to be needing as much of it as she could muster.

She still couldn’t believe that she was considering this. But under the circumstances, she had no choice. Amelia’s father had essentially given her two options. One was to marry a lord of theton, a rich one, one who would alleviate the massive debt he was in. He had suggested that Lord Malnor might be an option in this but was yet to confirm.

Or two: leave it up to chance, likely find out that Lord Malnor wasn’t interested in her, and then see herself and her sister auctioned off like freshly broken thoroughbreds because her father was sick of waiting and needed the money sooner rather than later.

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In the end, it wasn't much of a choice at all. Amelia had no other option than to seduce and win over Lord Malnor.

How did she mean to do this? Simple. She was going to corner Lord Malnor. She was going to flirt and charm him as best she could. And then, when she saw her chance, she would kiss him.

It was a reprehensible action to take. And truly, she felt ill just thinking of it. But she knew this too well enough to know that if rumor of their kiss was to spread, and if Lord Malnor was the type of man whom she suspected him of being, that kiss alone would be enough to announce them as an item for all and sundry to hear, forcing her father, and those he might approach to sell her off to, to reconsider and likely leave her alone, lest they find themselves on the wrong side of a marquess' wrath.

Once, not so long ago, all Amelia had wanted was to meet a man whom she might fall for. A man who she had things in common with, who understood her and liked her for the woman she was, not what society wanted her to be. To fall in love and have that love returned was a dream she clung to because a small part of her thought it might transpire. But now... desperate times and this was what she'd been reduced to.

Her mind raced as she moved through the ball, dodging happy couples, ducking eager lords with hungry eyes, careful not to get pulled into conversation from which she wouldn't be able to escape. And it was because her mind was so busy that when she focused again and looked for Lord Malnor... she realized that she'd lost him.

"Oh." She came to a sudden stop and looked about the ball, worried now because she

may have missed her chance. “Where is...”

It was a cacophony of bright colors and loud music. A masquerade ball and every face was covered, making them harder to separate. Dresses twirled as women danced. Men moved in groups, drinks flowing freely, laughter growing the drunker they became. She stood on the spot, trying to look through the throng, searching for the golden mask that she had seen Lord Malnor wearing earlier...

She caught it out the corner of her eye, ducking from the ball and heading into the back garden. This, she realized, was perfect. Almost fate, for the dark corners of the garden would give her cover to perform even darker deeds. Hiking up her dress, Amelia powered through the ball, avoiding eye contact, keeping her head down, taking a deep breath as the cool night air washed over her the moment that she crossed the threshold into the garden.

And there he was. Lord Malnor stood alone toward the back of the garden, away from the crowds, clearly needing a break from the surge of partygoers. He was taller than he had looked inside with broader shoulders and a powerful stance that was not at all unappealing. The mask he wore made it impossible to make out his features, but his hair was dark, and from what Martha had told her, he was more than easy on the eyes.

For a moment, Amelia wondered again if this was the right move. Because once she acted, there would be no going back...

Then she took a deep breath, reminded herself what was at stake, and charged across the garden before the Lord had a chance to collect himself and rejoin the party.

“Lord Malnor,” she called out softly. “A moment?”

He didn’t react when she called his name, his attention focused on the forest that surrounded the property. He was so in his own world that it wasn’t until she was

practically right on top of him that he noticed her presence at all.

“Oh!” he started from surprise. “What are you doing?” Lord Malnor snapped in a way she hadn’t expected.

“I — I’m sorry,” she stammered, taken aback by his abrasiveness. “I did not mean to startle you.”

“It’s fine,” he said, massaging his forehead as if the conversation was paining him. “I was just getting some fresh air. I find these balls a little stifling.”

“Oh, me too. So many people. It’s going to be a busy Season by the looks of it.”

“Yes, I would say so.”

He didn’t elaborate, nor did he attempt to parlay the conversation into something more interesting. Rather, he looked surprised by Amelia’s sudden appearance and a little annoyed. Standing back from her as if on purpose, lips pressed together, his eyes flicked about, past her and back toward the ball. No doubt he was wondering what she was doing and whether or not it was appropriate to be alone with a young lady like this.

She almost laughed at that as this was nothing compared with what was to come.

“Are you having fun, My Lord?” she asked, smiling for him, so he’d know that she was genuinely interested. “I hope you’re not bored already.”

“As much as I can.” He eyed her curiously; he had blue eyes, Amelia noticed, as clear as pools, near crystal in the way they seemed to shine in the darkness. “I’m sorry, but have we met?”

“No, I don’t think we have.” She laughed and held out a hand for him to take. “My name is Miss Baker.”

He eyed the hand for a moment too long before taking it and giving the back a kiss. “Baker? You are Lord Lindstone’s daughter?”

“That’s right.”

“I know your father,” he said as he dropped her hand with a little more haste than she’d expected. “Does he know you’re here?” There was something in his voice... a suggestion that her father wouldn’t approve of the two talking.

“Oh...” She flashed her eyes. “...what my father doesn’t know what hurt him. Surely, that’s not a problem?” She wished that she didn’t have this mask on. It would be so much easier to flirt and be suggestive without it.

He leaned back slightly. “I don’t know about that. In fact...” He looked past her again. “...I think it’s better if we —”

“Wait!” She reached out and grabbed him by the arm. He eyed it, but she didn’t let go. “I was hoping we might talk a moment?”

“And what will we be talking about?”

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“Oh, anything really,” she giggled. “The truth is, and this is a little embarrassing, but I’ve heard about you — My best friend, Miss Forbes told me all about you. And from what she has said, you sound very much like someone who I’d like to get to know.” She squeezed his arm and met his eyes, taking a step closer because he was standing purposefully back, and that simply would not do.

He tilted his head, a wry smile crossing his lips. “Is that right? And what did your friend say?”

“Many things,” she said airily. “That you’re intelligent. Brave. Kind. The type of man whom a lady like myself would be lucky to meet. That’s not to mention...” She shied away a moment, took a deep breath, and then forced herself to meet his eyes. “...someone whom she might like to be courted by.”

He chuckled to himself. “Somehow, I doubt your father would agree to that.”

“As I said.” She stepped in closer, hand still gripping his arm, holding his stare and refusing to let go. “My father doesn’t have to know everything. In fact, the less he knows, the better. Don’t you think?”

It was now or never. They stood chest to chest. Waist to waist. So close that she could feel his heart beating inside his chest; it was hurried, the nerves of the situation playing havoc with his confidence. But he didn’t step away. Nor did he try and run. He held her eyes, looking past the mask, as curious about her words as he was interested in them.

She had no choice.

She had no other option.

She had but one chance, and she prayed that it was the right one.

Lord Malnor opened his mouth to speak. Thick lips parting just, an intake of breath, a moment of hesitation in whatever he was going to say, and Amelia took her shot. She stepped in closer, rose on the tips of her toes, and before Lord Malnor could do or say anything else, her lips met his, and in that moment, she knew... maybe this wasn't such a bad idea after all?

CHAPTERTWO

His Grace, Evan, Duke of Northrade froze. Caught completely by surprise, as Miss Baker's lips connected with his own, he stood rigid, paralyzed, and unable to so much as breathe because he really had no idea what to do or think or how to respond.

Who was this woman? Her lips were still pressed tightly against his, and while he knew that the right thing to do was lurch back and recuse himself from the situation, even offer an apology because surely this was some sort of mistake, he couldn't help but feel himself swept up in the kiss that was as unforbidden as it was unexpected. Soft lips... moist and supple... light breathing... a sharp intake of breath that may have been hers or his, but he could not tell.

The surprise lasted only an instant, and Evan allowed the kiss to take him. Without thinking, his hand moved to her waist and gripped it. His body pressed in tightly to hers and held it there. His lips worked her mouth open, and his tongue slid inside, lapping at hers in a way that she clearly hadn't expected. Strange as she was the one to initiate the kiss, but considering the circumstances, considering how bored Evan was with this evening, he really didn't mind.

But just as suddenly as the kiss had begun, it ended. Miss Baker pulled her lips free,

and Evan came back into himself.

“I’m so sorry,” Miss Baker gasped apologetically, the playful smile on her lips suggesting otherwise. “That was... I don’t know what came over me.”

“Is that right?” Evan frowned at the woman, the taste of her still on his lips. “You seemed to know a moment ago.”

“A moment of weakness,” she assured him. “I can’t describe it, but something came over me. Something that I... Surely, you feel it too?”

“Honestly, I have no idea what you’re talking about,” Evan said simply. He hadn’t minded the kiss as surprising as it was. What he did mind was this young woman playing the fool as if, somehow, he was the cause of it.

“Are you sure about that?” she giggled and looked away shyly.

“What? Yes.”

“Did you not enjoy it?”

“That hardly seems relevant.” He eyed Miss Baker, trying to see through the mask to the woman beneath. Evan had little experience with women, mostly because he didn’t bother with such things. A fling here and there, maybe, but nothing like this. And now, with the way Miss Baker was behaving, he was reminded of why.

“I think it’s very relevant. I didn’t see you trying to stop it.” She giggled again, but it sounded strange, as if she was forcing it, as if even she didn’t believe what she was saying.

“I was...” Evan scowled. “...caught by surprise.”

“You could have fooled me.”

Was she being serious? Evan attempted to collect himself, eyeing the young lady now in a new light to the one he'd used when she had first approached. He had thought that she was just being friendly. That for whatever reason, she had decided to approach him and introduce herself — it wouldn't be the first time a lady of the ton had tried to catch his attention in an effort to be courted. But this was something else entirely!

The mask she wore was red and gold in color, a classic Colombina that covered the face and brow while leaving the mouth exposed. Despite the mask, he could tell that she was attractive. Dark blue eyes that had a mischief about them, thick lips with a small mole on the right side, and slender frame while not being overtly skinny, a sort of curvature that her dress exaggerated in the way it clung to her waist and bosom. Whether she was attractive or not, however, was beside the point.

Miss Baker... he knew the name but not the lady. Her father was the reason why, a true scion of the ton, a gambler who owed debts all over London, who resented those above him while spurning those he thought of as inferior. Evan and her father had no love for one another which, now that he thought about it, might have been the true reason she had sought him out so fastidiously.

He was feeling angry now, as if he was the butt of a joke that he didn't understand. “I'm not sure what you thought in seeking me out like this,” Evan said rightly, straightening himself up and collecting his manner. “But I can assure you that the last thing I wish is to be caught up in a scandal. This...” He shook his head. “This was most inappropriate. So, if you don't mind...” He offered her a curt smile and made to turn around.

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“Wait!” She reached out and took him by the arm. “Please don’t... I didn’t mean to... It’s not what you think.”

“Is that right?” he scoffed. “What is it then?”

She bowed her head as if in shame. “The truth is, I have heard about you, My Lord. My friend, she was telling me earlier, and well, I wanted to meet you. That’s all this was.” She kicked lamely at the ground. “I saw you out here, and thought the timing to be perfect, but then we spoke, and when I saw you up close...” Her dark blue eyes flicked up to him and looked away. “I confess, I was more taken with you than I expected.”

“Really?”

She nodded eagerly, reaching out and resting a hand on his arm again. Evan eyed the hand, feeling his heart beating in his chest, knowing he should remove it but unable to take the action. “Really. I don’t want a scandal. And I thank the heavens that nobody saw us. I know the riot it would cause if a marquess such as yourself was thought to be taking advantage of a young lady like me.”

“A marquess...” Evan trailed off as the realization struck him.

The mask he was wearing wasn’t his own. Earlier, catching his reflection in the mirror, he’d noticed a scratch down the side which had irked him terribly. The imperfection, the way it marred his ensemble was... was not important. What was important was that the mask he wore now belonged to his best friend, David, the Marquess of Malnor, and she had come out here assuming it was him who she was

speaking to. No, not speaking. Seducing.

Anger boiled inside of Evan such that he had a hard time controlling it. Not because he was hurt. Not because he was feeling betrayed. But because suddenly, he was seeing past the supposed innocent words that Miss Baker was using to spin her web around him. A mistake or no, he no longer believed for a second that their kiss was an accident. What this was, and knowing who her father was and the type of man he was purported as being, was a moment of opportunity. An attempt to seduce his friend because everyone in the town knew how romantically inclined David was, and something as simple as a stolen kiss was a sure-fire way to trap him in a courtship that he'd mistake as true love.

A year ago, when David had come to him a broken man, Evan had made a promise to protect him from such flights of fancy. And now that he knew what this was, that's exactly what he meant to do.

"Let's start again." Miss Baker was still talking. "Perhaps a stroll around the garden? Even a dance if you were so inclined?" She smiled and held her arm out for him to take.

"No, I don't think that's such a good idea," Evan said coldly.

"Wh — what?"

He stepped into her, expecting her to retreat, but she held her ground so that their bodies were pressed together. He could feel her heart fluttering inside her chest, her could feel her breathing drifting along his neck. His mind flashed back to that kiss... her lips on his... and it was all Evan could do to ignore it.

"The truth is, Miss Baker, that I don't believe a word that you're saying."

“You don’t?” She couldn’t have sounded more surprised. “But it’s the truth! I swear it. I never meant to —”

“What you meant or not is irrelevant, and I suggest in the future, if you mean to introduce yourself to someone, that you resist the urge to throw yourself at them. It is lucky that nobody saw us, it truly is. And it is for that reason alone that I am willing to forget this ever happened.”

“But what if I don’t want to forget it?” She met his eyes, determination flooding them.

“Then I feel sorry for you because I assure you that the next time I see you coming, I’ll walk the other way.”

Her expression hardened. “Is that right?”

“You don’t believe me?” He cocked a smirk, held her petulant stare a moment longer... and then he turned and walked away without another word said.

Evan could feel her eyes on him as he crossed the garden, heading back toward the Grand Hall. Such was the way they burned into the back of his neck, he had to fight the urge to turn around, and... he wasn’t sure. To chastise her once more, letting her know that this was folly and the end of a dalliance that should have never been? Or to give in to the urges that swirled inside of him and — no. Even if he had wanted to, he had to remind himself that she didn’t even know who it was that she had kissed.

As far as Miss Baker was concerned, it was David who had warned her off pursuing him, and that was the way it needed to stay. Better that David never heard about this. Better that this right here was never spoken about again.

* * *

“Where in the devil have you been?” David asked Evan as he sidled in beside his best friend. “I was beginning to think that you’d left.”

“I wish that I had,” Evan sighed.

David frowned. “And why is that?”

“No matter,” Evan waved him away and forced a smile. “Just one of those nights.”

“Ah, I see.” David grinned knowingly. “Let me guess, a young strumpet has her eyes set on you, and you’ve spent the evening avoiding her. Ha!”

“That’s not —”

“It must be hard being a duke,” he continued jokingly. “Having your pick of the damn litter.” A forlorn sigh as he cast his gaze about the ball. “Meanwhile, I’m left with a drink in one hand and...” He looked at his empty hand and frowned. “Oh, never mind. I might have introduced you to the new apple of my eye, but alas, she’d yet to fall from the tree.”

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“I don’t think that’s what that expression means.”

His friend was mostly joking, even if he hit a little closer to the mark than he might have intended. As a duke, Evan was all too familiar with finding himself on the receiving end of a young lady’s affections. Almost always, too, it was his station that they chased, rather than him as a person. Not that it would have mattered either way as Evan was an anomaly in the ton, for he felt no real desire to court or be courted. And as for falling in love? That was laughable.

“Oh, you know what I’m saying.” David gave his head a disgruntled shake. “It’s been a year, Evan. A full year and I’m yet to meet anyone who holds so much as a candle to Miss Wilkins. The truth is, I don’t think I want to. It’s like using the flame from a match to warm oneself when a hearth roars in the adjoining room. Door locked. Barred. Knowing that no matter how much I pound on it, I won’t be let in. And meanwhile the flame on the match withers until —”

“Are you just about done with this metaphor?” Evan grinned. “It’s becoming nearly as tiresome as this evening is long.”

David chuckled. “You’re lucky I enjoy your company; otherwise, this here drink —” He indicated to the glass in his hand. “— would be down your front, and I’d be talking with someone who appreciates me.”

“Not a young lady though.” Evan’s grin widened. “We all know that such a creature doesn’t exist on this side of the pond.”

David’s face dropped, and Evan slapped his best friend on the back.

It was all in good fun. What was more, despite David's moaning, he knew that his friend had come leaps and bounds this past year. Yes, there were days and even weeks where he thought his friend was lost to the throes of a broken heart, where he truly worried that this might be one love lost that David wouldn't recover from, but those days were well in the past, and he was very much back to his old self. That being, desperate to fall in love again.

This, as much as anything, hardened Evan in his recent decision to warn-off Miss Baker. She was not a real prospect. She was not a love match. A stolen kiss in the garden? One that she probably would have liked others to witness? It had scandal written all over it and Evan said a silent prayer in thanks that he was wearing his friend's mask at the time.

Speaking of which...

"I suppose you ought to have this back" He took his mask off and handed it to David.

David frowned at it. "Are you sure? When you saw the scratch across your own..." He chuckled. "...I thought you were going to have a heart attack."

"It's fine." It wasn't, but he handed back the mask anyway. "Seeing as you're the one desperate to meet a young lady tonight, we can't have you looking like you spent the night sleeping in the stables."

"A tad hyperbolic..." David peeled his mask off and handed it back to Evan. "...but I see your point. I do hope that you don't pitch a fit — maybe avoid reflective surfaces," he joked.

Evan rolled his eyes as he took back his mask. Where David's was golden in color, his was pure black — the ghastly scratch came up as silver and was impossible to not notice. But his outfit tonight — an all-black ensemble with a smattering of red on the

vest and cummerbund — was chosen specifically to go with the mask and where the scratch was a problem, wearing an outfit that did not match was even worse.

“There,” Evan said as he put the mask back on. “How does it look?”

“Marred,” David grinned. “But lucky for you, it doesn’t much matter anymore.”

“And why is that?”

“Masks off, old boy.” He whipped his mask off. “It’s that time.”

Evan glanced about, feeling a sense of relief to see the other partygoers removing their masks as was custom at these masquerade balls. He was quick to take off his own, happy that the scratch would no longer be a problem.

Although, and most unfortunately, his relief was short lived.

He saw her almost immediately. Even with the mask removed, he recognized her as sure as he would know himself. The tight dress she wore, canary yellow in color, hugging her bodice and exemplifying her curves in a way that was in no way unpleasant, was not what had him staring. Her light brown hair was worn up and pinned by a floral ribbon to match her dress. He could see the mole above her lip; even across the room he recognized it and remembered its feel on his chin. And then there were her eyes... dark blue, playful, and conniving, unmistakable to look at.

Evan met those eyes. Held them. She did the same, frowning to herself as they stared at one another across the hall. She had no idea who he was or why he watched her so, and while Evan would have liked to have kept it that way, he realized, frustratingly, that wouldn’t be possible.

“What are you looking at?” David was on him. “Who are you — oh, hello. She’s

cute.”

“She’s not.”

“Is that why you’re eyeing her like a mosquito eyeing a horse’s rearend?”

“I’m not,” he snapped a little too angrily. David frowned... and smiled to himself. And Evan groaned and forced himself to look away. “We were speaking earlier is all.”

“Oh.” His eyes flashed. “So, that’s where you were?”

Evan might have liked to dissuade his friend of the implication that David was so ready to pounce on. To tell him that it was nothing, and that he’d do well to avoid her also. Maybe even lead David away and change the subject entirely? But the reason that Evan had noticed Miss Baker in the first place was because she and her father were very noticeably heading in their direction. And what was more, he didn’t think that it was he who they were coming to speak with.

Evan had suspected that Miss Baker’s father had something to do with her actions earlier. He knew the man well enough. Knew the type he was. Knew what his values were and what he was willing to do to get what he wanted. And this here was proof! Miss Baker had failed in her earlier seduction, so now, he was going to try again. Honestly, the man had no decency!

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There was only one thing that Evan could do. He didn't want to. Oh, how he didn't. But if he didn't intervene, and quickly, Miss Baker would be introduced to his best friend, she would play the same tricks on him as she had outside, and that would be the end of David as he knew it.

As such, there was but one option, so he took it.

"Lord Lindstone!" Evan called, parting from his friend and intercepting Miss Baker and her father before they were too near. "Lovely to see you again."

"Your Grace..." Lord Lindstone's nose curled, but he forced a smile, nonetheless. "How is your evening?"

"All the better for seeing you." He flashed a smile that he knew would grate on the repugnant lord. "And this?" He turned to Miss Baker. "This resplendent creature must be your daughter?"

"I —" Lord Lindstone balked. "Ye — yes. This is Miss Baker."

"I hesitate to be too forward but..." He reached out and took Miss Baker's hand. She frowned as she offered it, eyeing Evan in a way that suggested she knew who he was but wasn't quite sure. "Would it be too bold of me to ask for a dance?"

"Wh — what?" he stammered disbelievingly.

"A dance. That is if Miss Baker doesn't mind?"

There were some advantages to being a duke. Namely, that few were willing to deny him much of anything. Lord Lindstone did not like Evan, and Evan did not like Lord Lindstone. But with the request made, with the ton watching on, with reputations at stake, there was little he could do but nod and grumble a disapproving yes.

Or at least Evan assumed he did. Before even Miss Baker or Lord Lindstone were able to say much of anything, he was pulling the young lady through the crowd and toward the dance floor.

Honestly, the things he did for his best friend... Evan hoped that one day. David might appreciate it.

CHAPTER THREE

“What is it that you think you’re doing?” Evan whispered in Miss Baker’s ear the moment they were together on the dance floor.

“Excuse me?”

“You heard me.” He rested a hand on her waist and pulled her in closely. A brief flash ran through his mind, memories of their bodies pressed together outside earlier, but he dispelled them.

“I don’t know what you mean.”

Evan smiled at her. “Whatever you say.”

He might have pressed the conversation further, but before he got the chance, the music started, and he was forced to concentrate as he began to lead Miss Baker in their waltz. It was orchestral music playing, the musicians set up in the corner and out of the way, the acoustics of the Grand Hall designed specifically to amplify the

stringed instruments melody without it being overbearing. A gentle pace was set, Evan holding Miss Baker by the hand while his other hand guided her by the waist.

They weren't alone on the dance floor with another dozen couples moving to and fro between and around them, all in perfect synchronicity. A mirage of colors swirled about, laughter and merriment on the faces of those around them, cheerful banter and eyes watching from the edges of the floor. Evan was only too aware of the fact that he and Miss Baker were being watched closely, and so he had to be careful about what he said and how she might react.

"I suppose I shouldn't be too surprised," Evan continued, wearing a false smile so that anyone watching would think they were engaged in the most pleasant of conversations. "You don't exactly strike me as the type of follow rules."

She eyed him curiously... and confusedly. "Your Grace, forgive me, but I have no idea what you're talking about. It was you who asked me to dance."

"And for good reason," he continued as they moved to their right, their feet ably stepping between their legs, not a beat missed because they were of the ton and dancing was very much a part of their education. "If you thought I was going to stand by and watch as you threw yourself at my friend, then you were mistaken."

Her brow creased, and she met his eyes. Studied them. Looked through them until her own widened with realization. For a moment, it felt as if she might pull away, such was her shock. But to her credit, she stayed composed... well enough.

"That was you!" she gasped, missing a step, but Evan held her tight and lifted her gently so that nobody would notice. "You were the one who —"

"Who you forced yourself on earlier, yes."

“That was not... I didn’t... what happened —”

“What’s the matter?” Evan chided, feeling a little too proud of how easily he had disarmed her. “Cat got your tongue? Perhaps that’s for the best — save you using it in a way that I know you’re likely accustomed to.”

Her eyes narrowed. “That’s not funny.”

“It wasn’t meant to be,” he said shortly. “You ambushed me earlier, thinking me to be Lord Malnor — don’t deny it. I know what you intended.”

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“I don’t deny it,” she said coldly as she gained composure. “And believe me, if I had known that it was you who I was speaking with, I would have never —”

“Embarrassed yourself? Too late for that.”

“Bothered with so much as a curtsy,” she said, her words like ice on her tongue. “His Grace, the Duke of Northrade. Ha! Everyone knows what a cold fish you are. In fact, better that you were a cold fish. It might have been a better kiss.”

Evan’s anger flared, and he had to remind himself where he was and what he was doing. Nostrils flaring. Eyes flashing. He forced a friendly smile to his lips and even offered a chortle and a shake of the head, but his tone was like acid. “That’s not funny.”

“Who said I was trying to be?”

“The fact is, you tried to take advantage of my friend, and it stops here. Understand? I won’t tell you again.”

“Is that a fact, is it? I wasn’t aware that you were Lord Malnor’s keeper. Does he know?” She cocked an eyebrow at him.

“I am his best friend. Even if I wasn’t, I’d tell you the same. He doesn’t deserve what you’re trying to do to him. And if you think I’m going to just stand by and let you use him for reasons that I don’t have to try very hard to imagine...” He looked down his nose at her. “...think again.”

“And what reasons might those be?”

“You know very well what I mean.”

The music picked up its pace, and Evan and Miss Baker sped up their waltz, moving to their right in time with the other dancers, forced to press their bodies even closer lest they lose balance. To anybody watching, it might have looked as if they were having the most pleasant of conversations, and it irked Evan beyond comprehension that come tomorrow, half the town would be talking of the two as if they were a pair.

“The kiss that I shared with you was a mistake,” Miss Baker agreed. “And believe me, it is not one that I relish in.”

“If that’s the case, you ought to be more careful of who you kiss. Or is this a common occurrence for you?”

“But the insinuation that I am trying to... to trick or take advantage of Lord Malnor like some harlot could not be further from the truth. And quite honestly Your Grace, I am insulted that you would suggest as much.”

Evan blinked. “Do you really expect me to believe that?”

“I don’t care what you believe.” She fluttered her eyelashes at him, and her smile widened. “The simple fact is that what I told you earlier is the truth. I have heard a great many things about Lord Malnor, and he sounds like a true gentleman.” She smirked. “A shame the same can’t be said of you.”

“How dare you.”

“And when I sought him outside, my intents were pure. I simply wished to chat and meet the man. Surely, you can’t hold that against me?”

“And the kiss?” Evan hissed. “How do you explain that?”

“A mistake,” she said simply. “I lost sense of my inhibitions. Not my finest hour, I admit. But I assure you that it was not a nefarious plot aimed against your friend. And to be perfectly honest with you, Your Grace, the fact that you would besmirch me like this...” She clicked her tongue. “...it really says more about you than it does about me.”

Evan couldn't believe what he was hearing. Was this woman serious? It certainly sounded as if she was. The conviction in her voice, the way she twisted his words to make it seem as if he was in the wrong... Why, he almost thought to apologize.

As they danced, he looked at her — really looked at her. She was pretty, he decided. Far too pretty. An elegant face with small features, eyes that were as mischievous as her tongue was untamed, one whom he knew David would fall for the moment he laid eyes on her. And she was clever also, of that he had no doubt. Clever enough that she knew what to say and how to say it. Clever enough that were Evan not so distrustful, had he not met her type before, he might have believed her.

“Nice try,” he said with a cocky smile, “but I'm afraid you'll have to do better than that.”

She scoffed. “I'm not trying to do anything.”

“And you won't, either. Now, I have been perfectly fair to you, Miss Baker. But I must warn you, if you continue in your pursuit of my friend, I'll have no choice but to tell him what transgressed between us. Understand?”

Her eyes widened. “You wouldn't.”

“I would. I don't want to. I would hate to put your reputation at stake but... such is

my concern for his well-being.” The music suddenly began to slow, and Evan made sure to beam as he and Miss Baker came to a gentle stop. He then took a step back and bowed deeply, holding eye contact, ensuring she saw the warning in his eyes.

And she held that stare, her expression cold. Oh, she had heard him all right, but whether or not she would believe him... somehow, he doubted it.

“Is that all?” she said with a feigned smile and a curtsy.

“I really do hope so,” he responded coolly.

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Miss Baker was quick to leave the dance floor after that, darting through the crowd and in the opposite direction of where her father stood waiting. Evan breathed a sigh of relief when he saw it, convinced for a moment that his warning would be headed and this would be the last time he would hear Miss Baker's name.

But then he remembered that look in her eyes. That smirk on her lips. The attitude that she wore like a winter's cloak — like badge of honor. Oh, he might have liked to think that this was the end of it, but deep down, he knew better. Deep down he knew that from now on, for this Season at least, he'd have to keep his eye on Miss Baker whether she liked it or not.

CHAPTERFOUR

“Amelia?” Amelia's father, Lord Lindstone, started from the end of the table, frustration coloring his tone. “Amelia, are you listening?”

She was not. Not that she was aware of it. Her mind was a million miles away, fixed on the previous night, running over the events that transpired again and again and again... one event in particular. It was silly of her to behave so disconnected when breaking her fast with her family as she knew that her father was likely to demand her attention and quiz her on the night before. But it wasn't on purpose, and it wasn't as if she wished it on herself. Sometimes, it was just the way that things were.

“Amelia!” her father barked, snapping her back to attention. “I am speaking to you.”

“Hmm?” She looked up, saw her father's angered glare, and tried for an apologetic smile. “Sorry, Father. I was... I'm still waking up, I'm afraid.”

“You’re daydreaming,” he snapped at her. “What have I told you about letting your mind wander like that?”

“That I shouldn’t allow it,” she sighed.

He nodded. “When the time comes for you to be wed, what man will have you? A wife whose mind wanders like an unbridled horse the moment she isn’t being lavished with attention. They will think you lame.”

“Sorry, Father,” she said meekly, bowing her head to show that she had heard his rebuke and was properly chastised by it.

Out the corner of her eye, she caught her younger sister, Bridget, rolling her eyes sarcastically so that only Amelia would notice. This had Amelia suppressing a grin; a quick glance at her father who was snapping his fingers at one of the servants, and she stuck her tongue out playfully.

“Speaking of which...” Her father exhaled and pushed his plate away to signal that he was finished eating. “...we must talk about last night.”

Amelia’s eyes went wide. Last night? Where her head was at that moment, she immediately assumed he had somehow found out about her stolen kiss and who it was with. That he had heard her conversation with the Duke. That he knew about what she had been thinking of all morning and was readying to punish her the only way he knew how.

“Wh — what of it?” she choked, reaching for a glass of water and taking a quick sip to cover her stutter.

“What do you think?” He looked right at her, one eyebrow raised. “Lord Malnor, of course. Who else?”

“Oh, isn’t he lovely,” Amelia’s mother crooned. She was sitting at the other end of the table, picking at her plate like a bird might pick at seeds. She was a lithe thing, Lady Lindstone, all elbows and a willowy frame, sharp features, also, which Amelia’s younger sister had inherited. “A real gentleman.”

“I wasn’t aware you were so familiar with him,” her father said coldly.

Her mother’s eyes went wide, and she was quick to focus her attention back on her plate. “I’m not, dear. I’ve just heard that he’s a lovely sort, that is all. Perfect for our Amelia.”

“Yes.” Her father eyed her mother a moment more, that glare warning as if there was some chance that his wife was infatuated with another man so he best warn her off it right now. “That is my thought exactly.”

Amelia was careful not to meet her father’s gaze or to do or say anything that might upset him. It was early in the morning, barely past sunrise, and when he got this way, she knew from personal experience that there was little that could change it. Best to be agreeable and apologetic. It was best to simply say yes to whatever he wanted and wait until she was excused — a moment that could not come soon enough.

Oh, how she hated her father. A terrible thing to say, but in this instance, she felt that it was warranted. The way he treated her mother. The way he treated her and her younger sister. There was no love there, and there never had been. She, as well as Bridget, were merely objects to be used at his beck and call, pieces on a chess board that he moved in any way that he saw fit.

“Before we discuss the Marquess, however...” He paused, long enough that Amelia was forced to look up because she could feel his cold stare demanding that she do so. “...what on earth were you doing last night with His Grace?”

Amelia flinched. “I — I don’t know what you —”

“I told you,” he barked. “Nay, I commanded. It was Lord Malnor who you were meant to dance with. Who you were meant to seek out. But for reasons that I cannot fathom, there you were, dancing with His Grace — infatuated by him! Or that was how it looked.”

“I —”

“And in front of the entire tontoo,” he snarled. “How do you think that looks? What do you think people are going to say?” His chubby cheeks flared red, his beady eyes glazed much the same.

“I had no choice!” Amelia cried. “Father, you were there. He asked me to dance with him. He is a duke. I couldn’t well deny him.”

“Really?” her mother intervened curiously, almost sounding excited. “Well, that’s interesting.”

“It’s not,” her father snapped at her mother. “It’s a darn nuisance is what it is. His Grace...” The words dripped from his tongue like poison. “I’ve never met a man so arrogant. The way he struts around — lauds his position over everyone.” A shake of the head. “He’s an embarrassment to his station.”

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“I think he’s cute,” Bridget giggled. Her father’s eyes widened at her, and she shrunk back. “Just saying...”

“What did the two of you talk about?” he demanded.

“Nothing!” Amelia said quickly. “Nothing, I promise. He just wanted...” She thought quickly, cursing herself for not coming up with a lie sooner. “He just wanted to know what my intentions were with Lord Malnor, that is all. I think he means to put in a good word for me.”

Her father narrowed his eyes at her, and she held them, determined that he believed the lie. “It’s none of his business.”

“That’s what I told him.”

That, surprisingly, resulted in a smile from her father. “Did you now?”

“Oh yes, Father,” she nodded. “I told him that you meant for me to be courted by Lord Malnor, but beyond that, it wasn’t his concern.”

He tilted his head and studied his daughter, almost looking proud of her. Then he exhaled and gave his head a shake. “Well, it’s done now. But so long as he got the message, I suppose the night wasn’t a complete waste.”

What a debacle Amelia had found herself in. She had thought she was doing the right thing. The smart thing. Knowing her father had his eye on Lord Malnor, Amelia had thought to take the initiative and seduce the Marquess before there was a chance that

he might deny her. Better that than the alternative, which she was certain would involve her father selling her off to one of his drunken gambling buddies for the highest price available.

Little did she realize that the man whom she had seduced wasn't Lord Malnor at all but the very duke who her father despised with a passion she couldn't have predicted. Worse that the Duke and Lord Malnor were friends which meant there was a very good chance he might tell Lord Malnor what she had done...

Amelia's only hope was that the Duke knew how to keep his mouth shut, and that the next time she spoke with Lord Malnor, she made sure it was him who she was actually speaking with.

"His Grace is no concern," her father huffed. "And I don't want his name mentioned again, understood?" He looked warningly at Amelia, who nodded her head, and then at her sister, who also nodded. "Good. It is Lord Malnor whom we must concentrate on. He is the one whom I intend to see you wed. Understand?"

"Yes, Father," she said meekly.

"What was that?"

"Yes, Father," she said with more conviction.

"Good. Last night would have been a perfect chance, too. And if it wasn't for that duke..." He clicked his tongue. "The man is a menace!"

She'd had no idea until this morning how much her father hated His Grace. Strange that his abhorrence for the man whom she had kissed had the complete opposite effect on her. Yes, the man was arrogant and nosy and just plain rude. But he was more than that ...

Since she'd returned home the previous evening, despite how hard she had tried, her mind had continued to drift back to that kiss. A quick thing, mere seconds at most, but in her mind's eye, it seemed to last an age. The feel of his lips on her own. The warmth of his breath. The way his heart fluttered at her touch. And that wasn't to mention the way he had taken hold of her, his strong hands gripping her waist and... No. She didn't want to think about it. She didn't want to pine for it. But whenever she found herself remembering that fleeting kiss, her cheeks flushed bright red, and she became somewhat... confused.

"Amelia!" her father barked again. "I said pay attention."

"Wh — sorry, Father," she stammered, cursing herself silently for drifting off again.

"Honestly, girl. I thought you were past this. Remind me, do I have to treat you as a toddler again? I do not wish it but..." He glared at her in a way that made her blood turn cold as she remembered the way he used to treat her when she was younger; the slightest accident made, and he would punish her as if she was one of his horses that had stepped out of line.

"It won't happen again," she said softly, unable to meet his eyes because when she did, her arm throbbed from memories of the times he would grab her, drag her to her room, and toss her inside like a ragdoll.

"I do have good news," her father continued, his tone as cold as his glare. "Tomorrow night, we have been invited to a dinner at Lord Brundel's manor."

"Oh," Bridget said. "I hate him. He always stares at me."

"He is a viscount," her father snapped, "and you will treat him with respect!" A raised eyebrow in warning, and her sister went back to her plate, muttering under her breath. "The point is we have been invited to sup, and it is my understanding that

Lord Malnor will be there also.”

“Oh?” Amelia said. She almost asked if the Duke would be there too but was smart enough to keep that thought to herself.

“You failed me last night, Amelia,” he said with a click of his tongue. “You knew what you had to do, and you didn’t do it. It is as simple as that.” He held a hand up to silence her, even though she didn’t move to speak. “But tomorrow night, you will make up for it, understand?”

“Yes, Father. I will do my best.”

“You’ll do better than that. I think you know the consequences if you don’t. I have many friends who would literally kill to find themselves wedded to a daughter of mine, and while most are beneath our station, it is better that than raise a spinster.”

How could he be so cold? How could he be so callous? And most importantly, how could he be so uncaring to those he was meant to love? Amelia knew of what he spoke. Bridget too. Her father had made no secret of the fact that he would have preferred to have sons, but in light of that, he was making do with daughters the only way he knew how. Money was what he wanted, money made from a good match. If Amelia didn’t marry the Marquess, if she failed him, then it would be up to Bridget to succeed where she could not. And at seventeen years of age, Amelia very much doubted that he’d be willing to wait much longer.

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The Duke... that kiss... she could not stop thinking about it. But she met her sister's eyes down the table, she saw the fear in them, the knowing that if Amelia failed, she would be the one put up for marriage. And it was unlikely that the man their father chose for her would be anything close to Lord Malnor. One of his friends as he put it. Gamblers. Rakes. Rich but without any worth. True detestables and not worthy of her sister's hand.

"I look forward to it," Amelia said suddenly, a little too loudly. Her father balked, surprised by the assertion, but then he smiled and nodded his approval.

"Good," he said with a final warning glare that spoke to how seriously he was taking this request. Not one to be ignored, that was for sure. "I hope that you do."

CHAPTERFIVE

"You really didn't have to come," David reminded Evan as their carriage approached Lord Brundel's estate. He was looking out the window, eyeing the modern-styled manor with a sense of foreboding. "I know how much you hate these dinners."

"I don't hate them," Evan said, unable to muster any amount of conviction in his voice. It must have been obvious too, for David leaned back from the window and cocked a disbelieving eyebrow at him. "I don't!"

"You do," David said simply. "I never understood why — it's half the reason for your reputation, you know."

"What reputation?"

David rolled his eyes. “Superiority. A sense that you think you’re better than everyone else.”

“Oh, you know I don’t think that.”

“I do, but try telling anybody else that.”

“Maybe that’s why I’ve chosen to come tonight, then? To dissuade such notions and remind thet on that I’m one of them.” He couldn’t stop himself from grinning. “Pompous. Arrogant. Unable to remove the stick from my rearend because of how far up it has been wedged.”

David chuckled and shook his head at the joke, but he smiled also, fixing Evan with a grateful look. “I am glad you decided to join me. Truly. I think it will be good for you. Holed up in your manor every other day. Reading and avoiding people. It can’t be good for you.”

“I’m glad too,” Evan agreed, returning the smile. “Couldn’t be happier, in fact.”

That was a bald-faced lie of the highest order. If Evan had his way, he’d be home right now, doing exactly as David had suggested. Reading. Sharing a drink with himself. Avoiding his contemporaries because there were few who he could stand to be around, and whenever he found himself in situations that required such, he became crabby and discontented, remembering almost immediately why it was he chose to avoid these people in the first place.

Unfortunately, for tonight at least, that simply wasn’t an option. It was just this morning that David had stopped by to see Evan, a social visit in which he let slip that he’d been invited to a dinner tonight at Lord and Lady Brundel’s home. It was said that a who’s who of dignitaries would be attending, and it only took a few carefully asked questions to learn that one such dignitary would be none other than Lord

Lindstone.

The Season had begun just last week which meant that every lord and lady in England would be flooding through London with the sole aim of shopping their daughters and sons about in the hopes of pairing them with a partner worthy of their station. Balls. Promenades. Dinners. These were but some of the events hosted specifically to achieve such goals. And seeing as Lord Lindstone was attending a dinner known to feature a bevy of viscounts and counts and marquesses, plus their offspring, it was reasonable to think that Miss Baker would be there also.

Evan didn't think for a moment that the warning he'd given the young lady might have worked. Especially if her father was behind it all. And if she was there tonight, let loose on David without Evan's watchful eye... well, there was no telling what might happen.

Not that Evan needed to guess!

And so, he sucked up his pride and asked David if he might join him at the dinner. He wasn't invited, but one advantage of being a duke was that there were few who might dare to turn him away from their door if he was to try and walk through it. It might be awkward. It might be a long evening. But as things stood, he didn't have a choice.

Indeed, the shock present on Lord Brundel's face when Evan climbed from the carriage was impossible to miss and almost made the entire evening worth the effort.

"Yo — Your Grace!" he blustered, those three chins of his wobbling, those great big jowls jiggling. He looked like a frog who had accidentally sat on a burner. "I had no idea you were — Lord Malnor didn't inform me that — if I had known —"

"I hope it's not too much of an inconvenience," Evan said with a friendly smile as he approached the bumbling lord and his wife. He reached them both and offered a low

bow. “But when Lord Malnor told me of this evening, I knew I must attend. At the very least, a chance to feast my eyes on your lovely wife. Lady Brundel...” He reached out and took Lady Brundel’s hand, giving it a kiss.

“Oh my...” she fawned.

“And your home,” Evan continued, going a little overboard. “I’ve heard whispers of how magnificent it is, but as usual, whispers hardly do it justice. May I...?” He indicated past them and toward the manor.

“Of course!” Lord Brundel hurried. “Please — Mr. White!” he then shouted for a manservant. “If you would, show His Grace and Lord Malnor to the dining area.”

The manservant was quick to lead the two inside. As he did, Evan caught sight of David shaking his head at him — no need to say what he thought of Evan’s theatrics.

It was because of Evan that the two were late, and it was because of Evan that when they were led into the dining room, a small reshuffling was required. There were fourteen people seated at the large dining table, most of whom Evan knew or knew of. Greetings were given, apologies were made, and a chair was added at the end for Evan to squeeze in to.

“Your Grace,” Lord Weatherstone began once he and David were seated, “we didn’t expect to see you tonight.”

“Oh, I had no intention of coming originally,” Evan said with a friendly smile for the room. “But when Lord Malnor told me of his plans, I thought I’d impose myself. I hope nobody minds.”

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“Not at all,” Lord Wexley chortled, holding his large belly as he did. “The more the merrier, I always say.”

“It will do you well, Wexley,” Lord Chalmers joked. “Less chance of a third helping of desert finding itself on your plate.”

“How dare you!” Lord Wexley pretended to be upset. “I’ll have you know, I’ve lost five pounds this year alone.”

“Lost them where, exactly?” Lord Chalmers parried. “From where I’m sitting, they are easy enough to spot!” The room burst into laughter with even Lord Wexley chuckled along.

The dining table was set in the usual fashion as indeed was the room. Candelabras positioned along the center for lighting. Silverware placed before each diner — Evan’s were crooked, but he was quick to straighten them — along with the finest crystal to drink from. Baked vegetables and various meats and breads lain out before the guests with servants wandering the sides of the room, ready to help serve each plate when commanded. And in the corner, a solo violinist strumming a slow melody to which the atmosphere of the room was set.

Once the unexpected arrival of Evan and David had been acknowledged and dealt with, the guests fell back into the rhythms that had been established earlier; small talk being had between two to three guests at a time, nothing too bawdy or uncouth, pleasantries and light exchanges because the dinner table wasn’t the place to get political.

Sitting at the end of the table, Evan was able to ignore the chatter happening around him, happy to sit back and listen and watch. He avoided imposing himself because he didn't want the guests to think that he was having the most splendid of times and thus risk being invited to further dinners this Season.

As expected, Miss Baker was there with her father and mother. They sat at the other end of the table, blessedly too far from David to pull him into conversation, but Evan made sure to catch Miss Baker's eyes almost the moment he sat down — that was once she chose to give them as she seemed to purposefully be avoiding him — throwing her a warning glare that she returned with a polite smile and a smirk that suggested she wasn't at all put out by his presence.

He'd thought about Miss Baker a lot these past two days. Too much for his own liking, truth be told. And while it was easy to tell himself the reason for these constant thoughts was worry, a sense of knowing that he needed to be on his guard where David was concerned, he'd be remiss if he didn't admit to himself that it was more than that.

Their kiss... it flittered through his mind's eye more than he liked to acknowledge. If it was just a kiss, he might have been able to ignore it. But it was paired with the woman, the tongue on her — and not in a literal sense. The way she had spoken to him on the dance floor, the fire in her belly, and the attitude she seemed to carry in spades. She was different to many of the ladies that Evan had met. Different in a way that he couldn't decide if he liked or loathed.

“Your Grace...” A voice spoke from Evan's right. “Your Grace?”

“Hmm?” He pulled his eyes from Miss Baker — she was looking at her plate but was wearing a frustrating smirk the whole while — and looked to see who was talking. “Oh. David — Lord Malnor,” Evan hurried to correct.

David eyed him curiously. “Miss Forbes here was just telling me that she saw you dancing the other night. And her words were that he moved like a — what was it?” He turned to his right and raised an eyebrow at Miss Forbes.

“A man possessed,” she giggled. “Quite the dancer.”

“Ah, yes, that’s it,” he chuckled. “A man possessed. I better be careful where I invite you from now on, Your Grace.” The term of address was proper but always sounded strange coming from his friend. “Stealing all the attention like that.”

Evan eyed him with a complete and utter lack of amusement, aware that he was being made fun of. “I’ve seen you dancing, Lord Malnor, and short of being in a stables, I’m afraid that you’re always going to be outmatched.”

“Oh, he is funny,” Miss Forbes giggled.

“Not really,” Lord Malnor sighed. “And don’t encourage him!”

Now, there was a match that Evan supported. Miss Forbes was the daughter of Lord Chalmers, a lovely little thing who seemed the perfect type for his friend. But she was also good friends with Miss Baker, he was sure, and likely knew of her friend’s desire toward the lord. Likely, she was just being friendly.

The two continued to talk among themselves, and Evan glanced back down the table, catching sight of Miss Baker eyeing the pair with a sense of frustration. This had him smiling to himself, and he couldn’t help but catch Miss Baker’s eyes again, waggling his eyebrows and smirking so that she understood what he was suggesting. She offered him a cold glare in response and went back to her food.

Oh yes, she had her sights set on Lord Malnor tonight. But dinner wasn’t where she would make her move. That would be saved for after, once the guests made their way

to the drawing room for drinks and deeper discussions. And as was his very reason for being here tonight, Evan would be sure to be on guard.

* * *

Blast! Evan could not believe his eyes. And his own foolishness for that matter. He'd excused himself to attend the washroom for less than five minutes, and in that time, Miss Baker had struck.

The guests had moved to the drawing room, spreading throughout it as they separated into small groups of three to five apiece. Brandy was flowing. Cigars were being passed among the men. The light chatter from dinner had turned far more raucous and bawdy, and with the low lighting that flickered from the chandelier which dangled from the room's ceiling, it was the perfect time for those who were single to excuse themselves and begin the dance of seduction.

From the looks of things, Miss Baker wasn't taking any chances. Why, from the looks of things, she was an expert!

She had David all to herself, tucked away in the corner, his back to the room as she stroked his arm softly, stared into his eyes wantonly, and laughed gaily at every little thing said. If it had been anyone else, Evan would have left it. After all, this here was the main reason that Lord Brundel had hosted his dinner in the first place — and indeed, across the room, Lord Lindstone eyed his daughter with a look on his face that suggested he was more than happy to leave her alone, so she might weave her seductive web over his friend.

Good luck! Evan set his eyes on the two as he charged across the room, ignoring the drink offered by a manservant, moving with such haste that he very nearly knocked them over.

“I hope I’m not interrupting,” he said with a friendly chuckle as he stepped in beside his friend, forcing Miss Baker to drop her arm.

“Oh, not at all,” David cheered as he registered Evan. Miss Baker showed no such enthusiasm. “We were just talking of tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow?”

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“A promenade,” David explained. “Most from tonight will be meeting early tomorrow for a walk of Hyde Park, and Miss Baker here was just making sure that I wasn’t going to drink myself into such a stupor that I wouldn’t be attending.”

“I said no such thing,” she chided playfully, fluttering her eyelashes at him and then throwing a quick glare at Evan.

“It was implied, Miss.”

She rolled her eyes at him, keeping that smile. “I was simply making sure you would attend and confirming now, while I can, that you might share a walk with me.”

“I’m afraid that Lord Malnor isn’t much of a walker,” Evan interrupted. “He had a nasty fall from a horse a few years ago, and it’s played havoc with his back ever since.”

“Urgh, don’t remind me,” David groaned and touched gingerly at his back. “It comes and goes. In winter, on some mornings, I find it nearly impossible to rise from my bed.”

“So, Miss Baker,” Evan interjected, keeping his tone a little too friendly, “I’m afraid that Lord Malnor will have to deny your request —”

“Oh, it should be fine,” David waved him down. “The summer months are when it’s at its best. And seeing as I’ve been requested...” He winked at Miss Baker. “Unless my back breaks in the night, I’m sure I’ll be there.”

“Me too,” Evan said a little too quickly. “Seeing as everyone else is attending, I think I’d very much like a walk. Hyde Park is supposed to be lovely this time of year.”

Miss Baker widened her eyes at Evan, unseen by David as he was fixing his friend with a very curious look — one that suggested he didn’t recognize Evan at all and wanted to know who this imposter was.

“Lord Malnor...” Evan touched David on the arm. “I came over to let you know that Lord Wexley was asking after you.”

“Oh. He was?” He looked behind them in search.

“Who knows why, but you know how that old sod gets when he’s forced to wait.”

A roll of the eyes. “I better not keep him waiting then. Miss Baker...” David stepped back and offered a short bow. “Tomorrow then?”

“I look forward to it,” she purred and offered a curtsy in response.

David finished with a smile, a shake of his head at his friend, and then hurried across the room in search of Lord Wexley. Evan and Miss Baker watched him go, ensuring he was out of earshot before they turned on one another.

“What is wrong with you?” she hissed at him.

“Me?!” Evan balked. “It is I who should be asking that of you!”

“And here I am, starting to wonder what this obsession is that you’re forcing upon me. You seem like a nice sort, Your Grace, but I should tell you now that I am not interested.” She couldn’t have looked more pleased with herself. “But I hope we can still be friends.”

He eyed her coldly. “Do not test me.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it.”

“Then I advise you to remember what I said. If you continue to pursue my friend, then I’ll have no choice but to tell everyone about your transgression the other night. See what Lord Malnor thinks of a woman who throws herself at men when she thinks them drunk.”

Surprisingly, Miss Baker’s smile grew. “You know what, I think you should.”

“Wh — what?”

“Do it,” she said with a shrug. “But if you do, I’ll make sure that everyone and sundry hears my side of the story. That being of the rakish duke who forced himself upon me.” A cocked eyebrow. “And considering your reputation... I wonder who they will believe.”

“Do you now?” he chuckled. “You forget your station, Miss Baker. Yes, people might say all sorts of horrid things about me, but as you kindly pointed out, I’m used to it. I welcome it, in fact. But as to what they will say about you...” He clicked his tongue. “I don’t have to imagine because I know.”

“You really are beginning to bother me,” she hissed. “All I have done —”

“You don’t need to tell me,” he smirked. “I was there.”

“An accident!” she cried a little too loudly. A quick glance about the room to confirm that nobody was listening, and she leaned in. “Are you so cold that you would deny your friend a chance at love simply because nobody is willing to offer you the same.”

Evan reared back at that, struck in a way he hadn't expected. But a quick shake of the head, and he came into himself again. "Why Lord Malnor? Of all the eligible bachelors of the ton, why is he the one who you've chosen to... to ruin."

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“I told you,” she hissed under her breath, glancing quickly past them to make sure that nobody was watching or listening, “I wish to do nothing of the sort. I have found myself growing fond of Lord Malnor, just as I expected that I would. That is all this is! I have no desire to ruin him or his reputation. And quite honestly, I’m insulted that you keep suggesting as much.”

Evan snorted. “Please, if you think I’m going to buy that... I know who your father is. I know that this is all a game. But it stops now.”

“Or else what?” She stepped into him, looking up and meeting his stare with a pair of dark blue eyes that spoke of a stubborn nature, like a bull refusing to back down from a charge.

“I know you’re lying,” Evan responded, holding that stare, stepping in that little bit closer so their bodies were right up against one another. For an instant, a flash of a second, the noise from the room seemed to quiet, the movement around the vanished, it was just them alone, so close that the kiss they shared the other night was but one quick decision away.

“I’m not.”

Evan exhaled and took a step back, feeling the room come back to him. “So be it. If you insist on pursuing Lord Malnor, then I will dedicate myself to unmasking the true you and your true intentions.”

“Fine, waste your time,” she shrugged and stepped past him. “It seems you have nothing better to do.”

“I —” he moved to respond, something scathing that was sure to leave a scar, but Miss Baker didn’t wait for it, continuing through the room, back facing him, walking away as if he didn’t exist.

And Evan was left fuming. Pride stung. Anger piqued. Certain that never in his entire life had he met someone so rude. She wanted to play games? She wanted to see what he was capable of? Oh, then see she would. And where he might feel sorry for her because this could only end badly where she was concerned, he couldn’t find it in himself to bother with such empathy.

Miss Baker had brought this on herself, and tomorrow she would rue it.

CHAPTER SIX

“What are you doing?” Amelia’s father hissed in her ear.

“What? Nothing!” Amelia started, caught completely by surprise, worried for a moment that her father was able to see inside her head and read her thoughts — that he knew what she was thinking about. “I —”

“Exactly!” He grabbed her by the arm. To an onlooker, it might have looked like father and daughter walking pleasantly beside one another through the park, but the strength of his grip, the bruise it was sure to leave, it couldn’t have been further from such a thing. “Why, Amelia, are you over here when Lord Malnor walks alone!”

“But he isn’t alone, Father. That’s why —”

“Then get him alone.” He leaned in closer, spittle flinging from his lips and striking her on the side of the face. “I’ve warned you, Amelia. I’ve told you what will happen if you fail me. Why, it’s almost as if you want to fail.”

“Of course, I don’t!”

“Then prove it.” He gave her a gentle shove. “I don’t know how I can make myself any clearer. You know what will happen if you don’t succeed in this.”

Amelia went to argue, to point out the reason for her failure, to say anything at all in defense of herself, but she caught sight of the fury in her father’s eyes, the warning that they held, and she knew there would be no point. Nothing short of success was acceptable to him, regardless of how she achieved it.

“Yes, Father,” she said meekly.

“Go.” He waved her away. “And when I look back, you best be hanging from his arm as if your life depends on it.”

Aptly chosen words from her father because in a way, they were all but true. Maybe not in a literal sense but the result would still be the same. If she didn’t get Lord Malnor alone and soon, her father would take her love life into his own hands, and the result of such an action would be even worse than what she imagined. And seeing how vivid Amelia’s imagination was... that just spoke to how serious his threat was.

She had no choice. No other options. Head bowed, fear settling firmly on her shoulders, Amelia did what she had to do. She searched through the park, spied Lord Malnor ahead, and started toward him. Her stomach twisted as she made the approach, guilt enveloping her such that she thought she might be sick, but again, there was little choice left for her. And so, she did what was needed.

“Lord Malnor...” she called softly. “A moment!”

Amelia had been awake for much of last night, tossing and turning as if her bed was filled with needles, impossible to find comfort in, not that she felt she deserved such a

luxury. And the few times she felt herself about to drift off to sleep finally, her mind would suddenly find itself back on what it was that had her so discomforted in the first place, and the process would start again.

She didn't want to do this. Not anymore. Not ever, truth be told. To pursue a man whom she had no real interest in, just because her father said that she must, was an abhorrent action to take, and the more she thought about it, the more she pondered on what she would need to do if she was to win over Lord Malnor's affections, the worse she felt. Sickened by a circumstance of her own making.

And it didn't help that His Grace suspected what she was up to. That he was so ruthless in his never-ending quest to save his friend from her clutches. He had found her out. He had discovered her wanting. And he was determined to stop her at all costs.

To save face, she lied to him. Again and again and again. She dug her hole that little bit deeper, committed herself to the lies that consumed her, was forced now to fake how she felt and what her intentions were because to admit otherwise wouldn't just bring her shame and embarrassment unlike anything she had ever known but would force the wrath of her father upon her in a way she knew only too well.

The truth was, when the sun rose this morning, she very nearly decided to tell her father that she was through playing his games. Such was how bad she felt that she was nearly willing to accept whomever he forced her to marry, to take that loss and commit to a life of servitude to a man who she could never love or even like. But then she ran into her sister and that all changed.

"Good luck, today," Bridget had said sincerely. "Truly, I hope Lord Malnor appreciates you."

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“I —” she had started, unable to tell her sister that she was considering turning him away. “I’m sure he will,” she choked instead.

Her sister beamed. “So, it’s going well?” she asked hopefully.

“Very well,” she had lied. “I am sure that by this afternoon, he will be announcing to thetonhis intent to court me.”

“Thank God,” her sister had breathed a sigh of relief. “Last night, after you returned from Lord Brundel’s, I heard father talking to mother. He was drunk and...” She looked about to make sure they were alone. “...it turns out his debts are worse than we thought, Amelia. Lord Malnor is rich enough to cover them, he said. But if not him...” she trailed off, no need to say anything more.

“And Mother?” Amelia asked. “What did she have to say?”

Bridget’s lip curled. “What do you think?”

Amelia wasn’t doing this for herself. She was doing it for her sister. So that her sister might have a chance to marry a man whom she truly desired and not one of her father’s drunken gambling buddies. For her, Amelia would do anything she had to... and so, she did.

“Oh, Miss Baker!” Lord Malnor turned when he heard Amelia call for him. “I was wondering where you had gotten yourself off to.”

“Here the whole time, I’m afraid,” she chuckled. “You can’t get rid of me that

easily.”

“Who would want to!”

“Do you mind if I...” She indicated for her to join him in his walk.

“Please...” With a sweep gesture, he stepped across to allow her to step in beside him.

“So long as you don’t mind the company.”

“Not at all.”

“I think he was referring to me,” His Grace then added with a knowing smirk.

Oh yes, His Grace was there also, having arrived at Hyde Park with Lord Malnor and then having stuck to his side as if glued to the man. From the second they stepped out of their carriage, he’d made sure to follow Lord Malnor about like a petulant pup, ignoring every other person who had come to the park this morning for a walk, happy to be mistaken as rude and a little arrogant rather than risk leaving his friend alone for even one moment.

Miss Baker eyed His Grace ruefully but then turned it into a smile for Lord Malnor. She walked on Lord Malnor’s left, while His Grace occupied the right. “Well, you did promise me a walk, if you remember?”

“I —”

“And that’s exactly what we’re doing,” His Grace said quickly. “And I’ve always said, the more the merrier.”

“Don’t mind him,” Lord Malnor chuckled. “He’s in a strange mood.”

“Just happy to be outdoors,” His Grace said and looked about the park as if to take in the day. “It is a glorious morning, isn’t it, Miss Baker? I’d be a fool to miss it.”

“You’re a fool no matter what you do,” she said under her breath but then spoke up, directing her attention on Lord Malnor. “I see your back isn’t hurting you this morning?”

“Thank God for that.”

“Unless it is still, but you dragged yourself from bed anyway,” she laughed lightly and slapped playfully at his arm. “So desperate to see me. I hope I don’t disappoint.”

Lord Malnor grinned. “Caught out! I was hoping you wouldn’t —”

“Lucky it’s summer,” His Grace interrupted. “I know from experience that the hand of God would be needed to raise him if his back truly was hurting him.” He elbowed Lord Malnor who frowned at the gesture. “But Miss Baker,” His Grace then continued, “I must say, you look lovely today.”

The sarcasm was present in his tone, and she didn’t for a moment think that he was trying to compliment her. If anything, he seemed to be enjoying himself, taking pleasure in creating an awkward tension between them, a clear attempt to ward off her advances.

“I wish I could say the same about you,” she shot back before she could help herself.

Lord Malnor frowned at the abrupt comment, but His Grace simply laughed. “Careful now, Miss Baker. Don’t want to risk saying anything you might regret.”

She narrowed her eyes at him, cursing under her breath for letting her tongue run away with her. That was, after all, what His Grace was trying to do. Frustrate her into

saying something that would get her in trouble and turn Lord Malnor off her.

“Just jesting, Your Grace,” she said with a smile. “And thank you for the compliment. Although really, we should be saving such things about Lord Malnor.” She touched his arm and stroked it. “He is by far the more dashing of the two of you.”

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“Hard to argue with that,” Lord Malnor chuckled.

“Indeed,” His Grace said simply.

It was a shame that His Grace was so set to ruining the morning because the day was a lovely one, perfect for a stroll through the park. Summer was in full swing, and the ton was out to enjoy it; dozens, if not scores of lords and ladies wandered along the path, strolled across the grass, and sat under trees and in the shade where they settled in for the day ahead. Brightly colored birds fluttered through the treetops. Butterflies congregated over flowerbeds. It was a day that one could get lost in... although she wished that His Grace would take that advice and find himself lost.

The three continued in their walk, following the stone-laid path as it wound its way slowly through the park. All about them were the same guests from the previous night, paired off and enjoying one another's company, none paying Miss Baker, Lord Malnor, or His Grace any attention which should have made the walk a perfect one for finishing what she was yet to start.

She still could not believe how persistent His Grace was, made all the worse by the faux-charm that he embodied so effortlessly. He was a strikingly good-looking man, she decided as she spared him a quick glance. Tall. Strong. Sharp features and hard lines. And those eyes... she had thought about them more than once, looked at them more than that, and hated how perfect they were.

And that wasn't to say that Lord Malnor was bad to look at either. Just as tall as His Grace but a little skinnier, a little longer in the face. More boyish, too, but still handsome. Times were that he would have made a perfect match, but the more she

thought of it, the less likely Amelia found the possibility of winning him over. She needed to get him alone, somehow.

A glance over her shoulder, and she caught her father watching them. His glare was fixed on her with the odd glance at His Grace's back, but he widened his eyes and mouthed something that she couldn't understand, even if she knew what he was trying to say.

In that moment, Amelia had an idea. Not one she was proud of. Not one that she particularly wanted to do. But with her father watching her, with His Grace refusing to yield, it was all that was left. A most dishonest action, but she was out of options.

"Oh!" Amelia yelped suddenly, throwing herself to the side and wrapping her arms around Lord Malnor.

"Miss Baker!" Lord Malnor lifted her. "What —"

"My ankle." She let him take her weight entirely, hanging from the Lord's arms like a piece of wet laundry. "I think I've twisted it."

"Are you sure?"

"Let me just..." She feigned trying to stand up, letting her legs fall out from her again. "Owe! Yes, definitely twisted."

"Oh no." Lord Malnor hung onto her, his strong arms holding her up effortlessly. It might have been romantic; it might have conjured feelings inside of her that she was yet to feel toward the Lord she was set to seduce. Only... there was nothing. "Can you make it back to the entrance?"

"I'm not sure..."

“Here, let me.” Before she or Lord Malnor could do anything, His Grace was behind her, lifting her up as if she weighed nothing, cradling her in his arms like she was a newborn babe. “David, fetch a horse, will you? I’ll keep an eye on her.”

Lord Malnor blinked. “Ah... what do you —”

“Quickly, man!” he barked. “I’ll set her down by a tree in the shade and keep an eye on her. She can’t possibly walk all the way back like this, and while I could likely carry her, I think a horse is more appropriate. Don’t you?”

Lord Malnor hesitated... tilted his head as he took in the scene... smiled to himself as if realizing something and then nodded his understanding. “You’ll be all right until I come back?”

Amelia opened her mouth to protest. “It really isn’t —”

“We will be fine,” His Grace spoke over her. “Go! Be quick about it.”

It happened faster than Amelia could imagine. Lord Malnor nodded his head in understanding, spun on his heel, and hurried back down the path. On the way, he caught her father by the arm, exchanged a few quick words, and then pulled him along as if it would take two of them to gather a horse. And all the while, His Grace carried her, already off the path and hurrying across the grass toward a tall oak tree that sat behind some hedges.

“You can put me down now,” Amelia said bitterly as he carried her.

“Nonsense,” he said seriously. “Your ankle, Miss I’d hate for you to damage it further.”

She was about to snap at him, to tell him that her ankle was fine and he was acting a

fool, but then she realized that this is what His Grace wanted — for her to reveal her trickery so that he would be vindicated in his accusations. So, rather than that, she said, “I hope Lord Malnor will be back soon. I miss him already.”

It didn’t escape her notice how effortlessly His Grace carried her. His powerful arms lifted her as if she weighed nothing, his strong chest pressed against her side, his breathing as steady as his heartbeat. She felt safe in his arms, even if she didn’t mean to. A sense of security that wasn’t there when Lord Malnor had held her. And while she worried for a moment what her father might say if he was to see them together... she also wished that he would. Something told her that His Grace would more than hold his own against the bully that was Lord Lindstone.

But she pushed those thoughts away, determined not to think of His Grace like that. Not even for a moment!

“This will do,” His Grace said as they reached the oak tree. He stepped around its girth so that they were blocked from sight, and there, he was gentle about kneeling as he lay her down on the grass in the shade. “I hope your ankle is feeling all right.”

She eyed him with an unamused expression. “It’s fine.”

“A stroke of bad luck,” he continued, smirking to himself, “that you twisted your ankle. Before that, I thought the walk was going rather well.”

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While she was sitting on her backside, he was still kneeling before her. Close to her... far too close. Their eyes were level as were their lips, and while it would be appropriate for the Duke to stand or move back, for reasons that she didn't dare consider, she didn't want him to.

"You know it wasn't," she snapped in an effort to shift the mood. "And you, Your Grace, are acting like a child."

"Is that right?" he chuckled.

"Why can't you leave me and Lord Malnor alone? Surely, by now, you see that I was telling you the truth. And the fact that you're so persistent..." She couldn't help but smirk, cocking an eyebrow at the same time. "I think it says more about your desires than my own."

He leaned back. "Meaning?"

"Oh, come now." She rolled her eyes. "Don't act as if you don't know to what I speak. As if this is all just some effort to save your friend —"

"It is!"

"Really?" She looked at him dismissively. "Following me around. Refusing to leave my side. I admit, the kiss we shared was nice and everything, but... well, I'm afraid that I'm not interested."

His expression darkened. "You know that's not —"

“I know no such thing.” She crossed her arms, relishing the anger that was present in his eyes. The passion. “And if I didn’t know any better, why...” She looked about them. “This location. Hidden behind the tree.”

“Wh — what are you implying?”

“Thinking of stealing another kiss, are we? I’d be flattered if I wasn’t trying to court your best friend. But alas, I am. Because...” She met his eyes and held his stare, and her tone turned serious. “...that’s what I am doing. That’s all I’ve been doing. You’re the one acting like a lovesick puppy.”

“If I wanted to kiss you, Miss Baker, you would know it.”

“Is that right?” she scoffed. “Could have fooled me.”

For a moment, she thought he was going to snap at her. She could see the flare behind his eyes, that desire to prove her wrong and slap her down as a means to defend his honor. For a moment, she thought she’d crossed a line.

“You don’t care about my friend,” he said, seeming to shift closer to her. Or maybe that was her imagination.

“I do.”

“You never have.”

“That’s all I’ve done.”

“Given the chance, if something better came along, you’d happily jump ship. Admit it.”

“I’ll do no such thing.” She kept her arms crossed, eyes meeting his, non-blinking as the two looked at one another as if daring the other to back down.

“That’s it then? You refuse to admit it?”

“I never will.”

She could feel the tension growing between them. A sort of energy that if pushed a little further might set the tree alight behind them. The sun burned overhead. The grass sizzled beneath where they sat. Sparks seemed to fly, an energy that she mistook for anger... until she didn’t.

“Have it your way,” His Grace said, only to lean forward suddenly, pucker his lips, and kiss her with such passion and fire and intensity that despite the shock of the moment, all Amelia could think to do was kiss him back.

And so, she did.

CHAPTERSEVEN

The kiss went for longer than Amelia was expecting. Not that she was expecting the kiss in the first place, but once it began, once His Grace’s lips pressed against her own, once she registered it, accepted it, realized what was happening... it simply didn’t stop.

It wasn’t like the first time the two kissed. Not even close.

Their lips caught fire in a way that Amelia couldn’t have predicted. So hot that she nearly pulled back as if it burned her. But then she grew used to it, found herself craving it, let that fire build as she pressed her lips harder against the Duke’s.

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Their lips opened, and the Duke's tongue found its way inside her mouth. This might have startled her was it not for his hand now resting on her knee —and then her thigh! He gripped it tight as if to hold her there. He squeezed it firmly as if warning her from pulling away. Not that she had any intention. She had tried to forget their kiss from the other night. She had tried to ignore how it had made her feel. But now that she was in the throes of another that made the last seem like an innocent peck on the lips... it was all she could do to stop herself from moaning.

How long did they kiss? She had no idea. It wasn't until the Duke pulled away that she finally came back into herself, for a fleeting second wondering if maybe he had felt the same as she, and for once, the Duke wasn't trying to trick her.

But then she opened her eyes and saw the triumphant smirk on his lips, and her heart sank.

"I told you," he said simply, not looking the least bit ashamed.

"Wh — what? What was —"

"You don't care about Lord Malnor at all, do you?"

"I —" she froze, the realization of his question suddenly dawning on her. In an instant, all the heat and fire and temptation that she had felt from that kiss fizzled and faded like a flame caught in a storm. "How dare you!"

"Me?" he frowned.

“Yes, you! You... you should be ashamed!”

“That’s big talk, seeing as you did the same to me just a few nights ago.”

“This is different!” she blustered, cheeks growing red, anger flaring because she was starting to feel like a fool. “You know it is!”

“How so?”

“Mine was an accident! Yours was... was a dirty trick!”

His head tilted, but that smile remained. “You didn’t seem to mind.”

Her eyes widened in anger. “I was caught off guard!”

“Clearly.”

“I would never... if I wasn’t caught by such... that was not — you know that doesn’t mean anything!” Why was she still pretending? Why did she even care? The Duke knew how she really felt about Lord Malnor. He was prepared to do anything to prove it so. It would have been so easy to admit it... to tell him the truth... to see if that kiss was as inspired for him as it had been for her.

But no. Whether it be stubbornness or fear, Amelia knew that wasn’t an option. And with the smug look on the Duke’s face, how darn proud he appeared to be of himself, it was clear that the kiss was just a chance to catch her in the lie.

“Oh, just admit it,” he sighed. “This is getting ridiculous.”

“The only thing that is ridiculous...” She hoisted up her skirt and stood quickly. “...is you!”

“I thought you twisted your ankle?”

“It looks like I was mistaken.” She threw him a rueful glare, warning him off following her, and then she stormed from behind the tree and back toward the path.

Oh, she was angry. The embarrassment was gone, given way to a white-hot fury that might have had the grass burning beneath her feet. Who did he think he was? And did he think it justified? A feigned excuse of trying to protect his friend, and he dared to kiss her like that? It was reprehensible! It was repugnant! It was... it was a kiss that still lingered on her lips and burrowed deep into the back of her mind. But that just made her angrier!

So angry was Amelia, so lost in her own head, that she was halfway back along the path, storming away from the Duke, determined to put as much distance between she and him as possible, that she didn't even notice her father or Lord Malnor until they were right on top of her. Quite literally.

“Woah!” Lord Malnor pulled up his horse to avoid knocking her down.

“Amelia!” her father cried as he brought his horse to a stop. “Where are you going? I thought you twisted your ankle?”

Amelia balked at her father and Lord Malnor on horseback. She had completely forgotten that they'd gone to fetch a horse because her ankle was supposed to have been twisted.

“Ah...” she said stupidly.

“Are you all right?” Lord Malnor jumped down from his horse and went to her.

“Amelia!” Martha cried suddenly. She was riding the same horse that Lord Malnor

had been, and she, too, climbed down. “What happened? They said you fell?”

“Ah...” she said again. “It’s fine.”

“How is that possible?” Lord Malnor knelt beside her to check the ankle. “Are you sure?”

“What is going on?” her father demanded, still atop his horse. “Lord Malnor said you twisted your ankle. But now you’re walking alone. And where is His Grace?!”

“I thought I had.” Amelia gave her head a shake, forcing herself to concentrate. “But it was not as bad as it seemed. And His Grace... he ran into someone he knew, so I left him.”

“Really?” Lord Malnor frowned.

“Really?” Martha’s eyes flashed over the Marquess’ shoulder.

“What are you doing here, Martha?” Amelia accused. “I thought you were with your father.”

“I was,” she shrugged. “But I bumped into Lord Malnor, and he told me what had happened. So, I thought I’d come along for the ride, so to speak.” She winked, and Amelia frowned, no idea what she meant by that.

“I’m sorry to cause such a fuss,” Amelia said. She was very aware of her father watching her, and so, even though she didn’t want to, she committed herself back to the ruse. “And I’m sorry to cut our walk so short.”

“It’s fine, really.” Lord Malnor stood. “I’m just glad you’re all right.”

“But if you would like...” Her words caught in her throat, guilt over what had just happened, what she knew to be true in her heart, how terrible a person she was... “We can continue now? There’s no reason that —”

“I’m afraid that won’t be possible,” Lord Malnor grimaced. “I promised to give Miss Forbes a ride home. Her father made me swear it.”

“Oh, he did not!” Martha cried.

He chuckled. “Either way, it is the right thing to do. So, we’re going to have to take that walk another time.”

Any chance of feeling positively overwhelmed with joy at the prospect of not having to commit herself to trying to seduce Lord Malnor today was impossible to express because her father glared down at her like he meant to climb from the horse and demand that Lord Malnor finish their walk. And Amelia shuddered to think of the conversation they’d be having when they arrived home, how she was to blame for all of this, how she wasn’t taking it seriously, how her very livelihood depended on her seducing the poor man.

But then her father spoke, and everything changed.

“It’s perfectly fine, Lord Malnor. I’m sure there will be ample time to accompany my daughter for a walk this weekend.”

“Ah, yes. Good point.”

“This weekend?” Amelia looked confusedly at her father.

Her father grinned. "It was Lord Malnor's idea, in fact. What, with the Season being in full swing and everything, he suggested that we throw a party. Or that somebody should. Not a ball, for those are a trifling thing to organize, but a weekend among friends and contemporaries. Dinners. Drinks. Perhaps some hunting if we find the time."

"I do hope so," Lord Malnor agreed. "It's been a while since my last hunt."

"You hunt?" Martha giggled. "I don't believe it."

"How dare you!" He pretended to act insulted. "I will have you know that I am an exquisite hunter. And now that I have a point to prove..." He raised both eyebrows warningly at Martha.

Lord Lindstone glared at the riposte and cleared his throat. "Be that as it may, we'll be seeing you this weekend, Lord Malnor?"

"I'm already looking forward to it," he agreed. "And Madam..." He turned back to Amelia and held his hand out for her, to which she gave her own. "It was a pleasure seeing you today, and I'm already looking forward to this weekend." A kiss on the back of the hand.

"As am I, My Lord." She curtsied and did her best to produce a sincere smile.

"I'll see you then also," Martha announced as she moved to Lord Malnor's horse. "Fare thee well!" she exclaimed with exaggeration as she climbed atop the horse and waved her goodbyes.

Lord Malnor grinned as he joined her, gave a shake of the head, and then fixed Amelia and her father with a friendly smile before kicking his feet into his mount and steering it back down the path.

A brief moment passed as Amelia and her father watched him go. Just long enough to ensure that Lord Malnor was out of ear shot...

“This is your last chance, Amelia.”

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“What?” she spun around, not at all surprised to find her father glaring at her.

“You had a single job to do, one that for reasons I can’t fathom, you’ve failed at every turn.”

“Father, that isn’t fair —”

“But it’s no matter,” he powered over her. “Perhaps it’s my fault, trusting a task this great to you. I should have known better.” He clicked his tongue. “Lord Malnor will be at our home for the entirety of this weekend, and by the time it is done, I fully expect him to be announcing to the entiretonhis eternal and undying love for you. Is that understood?”

She matched his glare with her own. “Yes, Father.”

His lip curled. “Again, this is your last chance. Do not embarrass me.” And with that, he turned his horse about and kicked his heels into its side, spurring it down the path and out of sight. Happy to leave Amelia to make the walk back by herself, likely as a form of punishment.

And while Amelia wanted to be angry with him. While she wanted to be nervous about what this weekend might mean. While she wanted to scream and shout and tell the world that she was through playing these games... she didn’t do any of that. Rather, she trudged through the park, back in the direction of the entrance, all the while her mind fixated on that kiss.

CHAPTEREIGHT

“What do you think the chances are?” Evan began as he indicated for a server to fill his glass.

“Chances of what?” David asked as he too indicated for his glass to be filled; it was a dark red wine that was on offer tonight although Evan wasn’t familiar with the vintage.

“Of the Viscount having me killed before the weekend is through.”

“Oh, don’t be ridiculous.”

“Am I though?” Evan took a sip of his wine, a little sweet for his taste, but he assumed it was chosen to be paired with the meal they’d soon be eating. “You saw the look on his face when he realized I’d be joining you this weekend. You would think he’d just found out that someone had shot his favorite hound.”

“He was perfectly congenial,” David dismissed. “And Lady Lindstone couldn’t have looked happier.”

“Lady Lindstone, sure,” Evan agreed. He put his glass down but then realized it wasn’t centered properly. A moment taken to position it evenly beside the cutlery, just to the right of the forks so it was within reach, and he continued, “But Lord Lindstone? If it wasn’t for the scene that it would have caused, I have no doubt he would have asked me to leave.”

“Don’t sound so happy about it,” David chuckled.

“I’m just saying, if you stumble upon my corpse at some point during the weekend, don’t be surprised. And also, feel free to avenge me. It’s the least you could do.”

“I’ll do no such thing David said as if he was serious, nose pointed in the air while he

sipped at his glass of wine. “I’m a guest here, and the last thing I want to do is cause a scene. That’s really more of a ‘you’ thing.”

“Well, it was nice knowing you,” Evan sighed.

“I wish I could say the same,” David grinned.

Besides the servers that stood about the edges of the dining room, it was just Evan and David at the moment which was why Evan felt so comfortable joking about their host’s clear dislike, even hatred, toward him. Not that it was much of a secret — so much so that Lord Lindstone probably thought Evan to be the last person he’d see climbing out of David’s carriage when they had arrived not five minutes ago. It was one thing to turn up uninvited to a dinner event, sure, but a weekend-long soiree? One to be spent in its entirety in Lord Lindstone’s manor and on his grounds? Even someone as arrogant as the Duke wouldn’t dare such a thing...

Dare he did. When David had heard about the festivities planned exclusively by Lord Lindstone, he had no doubt what their true purpose was. And while he knew it would be awkward, while he knew it would be arduous and tiresome, and while he knew that he was really testing the limits of what a duke could get away with among his peers, he also knew he had no choice.

This was the last time, he told himself. By the time this weekend was done with, Miss Baker would either give up or unmask herself, revealing to David who she truly was and thus alienating his affections from her so that Evan wouldn’t be needed anymore.

Honestly, the things he did for his best friend...

“So,” David started, turning himself to look at Evan, a small, almost knowing smile working its way up his lips, “what do you think about Miss Baker?”

Evan suppressed a groan; clearly, Miss Baker's persistence was having the desired effect on David, meaning that simply keeping them apart wasn't going to be enough. "I think... I think she is trouble."

"Is that right?" David chuckled softly. "Trouble how?"

He fixed his friend with a no-nonsense eye. "I just don't believe that she is as she seems. There is something about her that seems dishonest — and you know I wouldn't say such things on a whim, but it's just a feeling that I get."

"Oh, wouldn't you now?" David's eyes flashed. "Need I remind you of Miss Harper? Or Miss Thorn? As I seem to recall, you had similar opinions about them also."

"And as I seem to recall," Evan countered, "Miss Harper was only using you for your title. And as to Miss Thorn..." He trailed off, cocking an eyebrow at David which told the story without having to say it out loud.

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David grimaced. “Yes, yes, I’ll admit that Miss Thorn was...” He clicked his tongue.

“A sheep in wolves clothing?”

“Tempestuous?” David offered and then chuckled and shook his head. “Oh, but we were younger back then. What were we? Eighteen? That’s what being eighteen is for.”

“Being taken advantage of?”

“Figuring out the follies and pitfalls of love, Evan. Honestly, man...” He rested a hand on Evan’s shoulder and gave it a squeeze. “I know that you’re just being careful, but sometimes, you have to take a chance if you’re ever going to find someone or something worth fighting for. Love is hard, there is no denying it. But it’s also the most wonderful experience a man can... well, experience.”

“And you think Miss Baker is worth said experience?”

To this, David grinned. “I don’t know. You tell me.”

Evan frowned, not entirely sure what his friend meant by the comment. Was David already so taken by Miss Baker that he was willing to suffer heartache for a mere chance to see if she was worth it?

A small part of him wanted to admit that he couldn’t entirely blame his friend. Miss Baker... she was different. A flame trapped in ice. Even putting their fiery conversations aside, the kiss that they had shared just a few days ago was one that

Evan had thought of more often than he would have liked. The goal had been to break her, but the more he remembered her wet lips... her soft tongue... the way she shuddered under his grip... Was it possible that she had broken him?

He reached for his glass of wine and drank deeply, fretting now because he was beginning to realize that he was going to have to work overtime to nip this in the bud before it had a chance to sprout. Images of his best friend appearing on his doorstep just a year ago, broken and irreparable like a shattered vase, flashed through his mind, hardening his determination to see it through. No matter what the cost.

David opened his mouth to continue, likely to wax lyrical about Miss Baker some more, but then the doors to the dining room flew open, and the other guests finally began to arrive.

There were fifteen of them altogether. Mostly, they were the same who had feasted at Lord Brundel's estate just a few nights earlier: Lord and Lady Wexley and their son, the Honorable James Knight; Lord and Lady Chalmers and their daughter, Miss Martha Forbes; Lord and Lady Brundel, of course, although they had no child to speak of; and Lord and Lady Winstead, their son, Simon, Earl Bassar, and their daughter, Lady Kate Bridges. All from London, all people whom Evan knew well enough, all members of the ton with children who were searching for a life partner that would see them climb the social ladder.

The others in attendance, Evan wasn't sure of but guessed them to be from out of London, here for the Season to mingle and introduce their children to lord and lady who might suit their hand. As was proper, Evan rose when the guests began to enter, bowing and introducing himself, doing what he could to stay on the right side of Lord Lindstone whose lip curled obviously whenever one of his guests fawned over Evan.

"Your Grace..." A red-headed woman with a very large nose gasped when she saw him. "I had no idea — Lisa!" She grabbed at her daughter, also red of hair, also with

a nose that defied convention. “Come and introduce yourself.”

“Your Grace, it is an honor,” she curtsied.

“Tell him your name,” her mother snapped.

“M — Miss Partridge,” the young girl who couldn’t have been older than twenty stammered as Evan took her hand and gave the back of it a kiss. This had her blushing furiously, and out the corner of his eye, he caught David smirking.

The whole charade took some time, close to fifteen minutes before they were all seated around the table. As David had been the one to suggest the event in the first place, his seat was at the head of the table, to Lord Lindstone’s immediate right, which also happened to be directly across from Miss Baker. Evan saw it coming, however, and was quick to sit himself down beside David so that he’d be in a prime position to intervene and keep an eye on things.

No need to say that Lord Lindstone looked furious with this placing... but was wise enough to say nothing.

“Doesn’t my daughter look striking tonight?” Lord Lindstone asked of David, once the dinner was underway. General chatter flowed down the table as plates were served and wine was poured.

“She does indeed,” David agreed with a charming smile. He looked across the table at Miss Baker and bowed his head. “That dress, it is stunning.”

“Oh, thank you,” she responded with a soft smile, meeting his eyes and then looking away. “It is my favorite color. I don’t know why, but yellow seems to match my complexion best.” She fluttered her eyelashes. “And you too, of course, Lord Malnor. Very handsome...” A sly smile and again she looked away.

“Your daughter is quite the charmer,” David chuckled at Lord Lindstone. “Surely, she doesn’t get that from you.”

“It must skip a generation!” Lord Lindstone cried in jest and slapped David on the arm. “But indeed, she is. Among many things...” A raised eyebrow, his meaning not clear but still very suggestive.

“How is your ankle?” Evan interrupted loudly, focusing the conversation onto himself.

“Excuse me?” Miss Baker frowned.

“Your ankle,” Evan repeated. “You twisted it the other day. Unless you’ve forgotten?”

Her eyes widened. “Oh! Yes, well, as it turns out, it wasn’t as bad as it seemed.”

“That’s lucky — isn’t it, Lord Malnor.” He elbowed his friend. “At the time, the way it tripped her, I might have guessed she’d broken it. Threw herself at you if you remember? But I suppose it can be hard to tell these things.”

Miss Baker was glaring at him but then seemed to realize what she was doing and softened her features. “It must have been the heat. Sometimes, it overwhelms me.”

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“I know what you mean,” David chuckled. “Sometimes, I envy the lower classes, truth be told. Why, I saw one gentleman just yesterday walking about in nothing more than breeches and a —”

“Careful now,” Evan interrupted his friend. “None of that bawdy talk. Not in front of a lady.” He grinned at Miss Baker who scowled quickly. “I apologize, Lord Lindstone. Sometimes we forget that we’re in mixed company.”

“It’s quite all right...” He couldn’t have looked angrier with the way Evan was behaving.

“Truth be told, I find that times are changing,” Evan continued jovially as he took a sip of wine. “Why, just last week — Miss Baker, you might find this story amusing. Scandalous, but a good example of just how risqué times are. At the ball, I was wandering through the garden, and you will never guess what I saw?” He waited for someone to ask the obvious question.

“What did you see?” Miss Forbes asked from beside David. She was leaning in, appearing transfixed by the banter.

“A lord and lady entwined about one another like vines running up a tree.”

“You are joking!” Miss Forbes giggled, and Evan caught her eyeing her friend across the table as if trying to share a silent conversation.

“I assure you, I am not! Of course, they were wearing masks but...” He clicked his tongue. “I didn’t get a good look at them, unfortunately. Lucky for them.” He looked

right at Miss Baker who matched it. “The scandal such an act would cause.”

“You didn’t tell me this,” David queried.

“I didn’t want to frighten you, Lord Malnor,” Evan explained, winking at Miss Baker. “You and I, we’re getting on in years —”

“Speak for yourself.”

“— but these younger women... Another click of his tongue as he ignored the rueful glare Lord Lindstone had him in. “They behave as if they are on a sheep farm, I tell you.”

“That really is dreadful,” Miss Baker agreed with a friendly smile that didn’t at all speak to the fire behind her eyes. “I can’t imagine what might possess someone to behave in such a way.”

“Oh, I’m sure you can.”

Her eyes widened, but she was quick to subdue them. “Well, you know what they say. The quickest way to avert guilt is to pass the blame on to somebody else. Are you sure of what you saw, Your Grace? And from what angle did you see it?”

“Ha!” David threw back his head and chuckled gaily. “Oh, she got you there. Yes, she did.” He picked up his glass of wine and shook his head to himself. “Very clever.”

“I can assure you —”

“I was only jesting, Your Grace,” she hurried to interrupt, that sly smile just for him. “Only jesting.”

“Yes, well...” Evan grumbled and took a deep sip of his wine. “The point still stands.”

“Oh, there was a point in there somewhere?” she shot back. “I thought you were just trying to sound interesting.”

“Amelia!” Lord Lindstone hissed.

“Gosh, this is fun,” David laughed to himself.

“Sorry, Father.” Amelia touched softly at her forehead. “It must be the wine.”

“And the heat,” Evan offered. “Feeling a bit overwhelmed perhaps. It’s lucky you’re sitting. If you were to fall, I doubt I’d be quick enough to catch you this time.”

“I’d rather fall.”

“Amelia!”

Evan suppressed a smile as his plate of food was placed in front of him. His plan had been a simple one — to goad Miss Baker into dropping the shy, withdrawn facade that she seemed so eager to promulgate as her true personality. Whenever she spoke with David, she was the epitome of class, careful not to say anything offensive, eager to come across as subservient and proper — a true lady of the ton.

But Evan knew better. He thought back to the few times he’d had her alone, remembering how fiery she behaved, how sharp her tongue was, how quick she was to draw blood because to him, that was her true nature. So, when he interrupted and prodded and poked her as he just had, it was that version which he hoped to rear its ugly head and breathe fire.

Technically, it was a success. She'd taken the bait and said some not very nice things to which her father still glared a warning. Not happy with his daughter, she was likely to spend the rest of the night acting withdrawn and meek so as to avert any suspicions. Only... had it worked how Evan had hoped?

Beside him, David chuckled into his glass of wine, his eyes flicking between Evan and Miss Baker, apparently delighted by the riposte. He was, after all, Evan's best friend with a sense of humor to match and likely not as put out by her behavior as Evan had hoped. Dammit, if it wasn't for Lord Lindstone's reaction, the entire conversation might have been written off as one big jest.

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No... Evan realized then and there that if he was going to put an end to things this weekend, he'd need a new strategy. It wouldn't be enough to have her behaving in an unseemly manner. He'd need her to drop her guard entirely and transform into the woman he'd met that night in the garden. And not just a kiss either. Something more. Something that would force her to finally admit to who she was and leave his friend alone.

Only what that might be... it was lucky that Evan had an entire weekend to figure it out.

CHAPTERNINE

"There you are." Amelia spied her sister sitting in the back corner of the library, curled up on a plush couch, the single candle standing on the table beside her providing the only light in the entire room. "I've been looking for you."

Bridget glanced up from her book. "Not too hard, I am sure."

"And what does that mean?" She swept across the room until she was standing right in front of where her sister was reading.

"Oh, I think you know."

Amelia's expression was flat. "Are you going to tell me? Or do I need to start guessing? Although I ask that you give me a clue, otherwise we might be here all night."

Bridget rolled her eyes and closed her book. “I was going to look for you after dinner, but... but I thought you might have been busy.”

“Busy how?”

“Oh, I think you —”

“Bridget,” Amelia groaned and rubbed her forehead as if in pain, “why do you insist on frustrating me. Do you enjoy it? Do these books not provide enough entertainment?” She gestured to the library: a smallish room, crammed full of hundreds of texts.

“They do, but I find frustrating you infinitely more appealing. And rather easy to be fair. I have it down to a fine art by now.”

Amelia looked flatly at her sister. “I thought you might have joined us in the drawing room after supper?”

“Father denied me,” she sighed. “He said it wasn’t a place for one as young as me.” She scoffed. “He’s perfectly willing to sell me off like a prized horse to a man twice my age, but heaven forbid, I find myself in a room with him and his drunk friends.”

“If only they were his friends,” Amelia said bitterly. “The irony is, if they were, he might have insisted that you be there.”

“If that had been the case, I would have simply claimed I had food poisoning and warned our father that if he was so insistent on my presence that he better be prepared to explain to his friends why his youngest daughter just emptied her stomach all over them.”

Amelia snorted. “That’s one way to avoid a marriage.”

“Oh, don’t worry about that, I have others. These books aren’t just to help me pass the time, you know?” Her smile was sly and knowing, the sense being that she was only half joking about what she said.

As amusing as the image was of Bridget vomiting all over her father’s gambling buddies, Amelia couldn’t find it within herself to laugh. She eyed her sister curled up on the couch, feeling a deep-seated pain as she thought about the life that might become her if things didn’t go as planned. Just seventeen years of age, puppy fat filling her cheeks, a softer body because she still had an inch or two to grow, dark eyes that were smart but wholly inexperienced as they should be for one so young.

Feeling overcome, Amelia indicated for her sister to uncurl her legs, and then she fell in beside her, forcing herself onto the same couch while pulling her sister up, so she was just about sitting on her lap. If their mother was the type of woman capable of standing up to their father, she would be here right now, giving her youngest daughter comfort. But that simply wasn’t the case, and so, it fell on Amelia’s shoulders.

“That won’t happen,” she insisted as she stroked her sister’s hair. “I promise.”

“You can’t promise that.”

“I can.”

“And Father?” Bridget pressed, her voice cracking with worry. “You know how he is — you know how much debt he is in. He’ll never admit it, but everyone knows. It’s lucky we still have a roof over our head.”

Gambling was their father’s greatest weakness. Or perhaps the nasty habit he had of losing when he gambled. That was why he was in such huge debt, and that was why he was so insistent on marrying Amelia to Lord Malnor. Lord Malnor was beyond wealthy, the sort of opulence that would more than cover his debts and then some.

And although there were many lords of the tonto to choose from, for reasons that Amelia didn't understand, her father had chosen Lord Malnor. It could be worse, she supposed. And to find herself attached to his arm would solve all their problems in one fell swoop, meaning that when it came time for Bridget to marry, she might be afforded the rare gift of falling in love first, rather than being shepherded into a loveless marriage for the sake of survival.

They both knew what would happen if Amelia was to fail. Their father had many a rich friend who wasn't a member of the ton: no lord, certainly not a gentleman. But wealth and desperation made strange bedfellows, and if his hand was forced, both women knew he would not hesitate to sell his youngest daughter for the sake of peace of mind... and the chance to fall back into debt as he was wont to do.

"Let me worry about father," Amelia said. "Hopefully, once this weekend is finished, all this will be a bad memory and nothing more."

Her sister giggled. "Yes, well, I saw you at supper. Well done, by the way. That was quite the performance."

"Urgh," Amelia groaned. "Don't remind me. But it's a necessity. Father is insistent that I marry Lord Malnor, so if I have to —"

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“What? No, I wasn’t talking about Lord Malnor, Amelia.”

“You weren’t?” Amelia leaned back and eyed her sister. “Then who are you talking about?”

Bridget’s eyes flashed mischief. “His Grace, of course. The way the two of you bickered —”

“Hold your tongue!”

“I will not,” she giggled again. “As I said, there is a reason I was happy to scurry myself away to the library after supper. I didn’t want to get in the way.”

Amelia felt her cheeks blushing as if a fire had been held against them. Try as she might, the kiss she and the Duke had shared had haunted her like a stubborn specter, more than once finding its way into her dreams in a way that had made sleeping somewhat challenging of late. But it was nothing, she told herself. Just the whims of boredom and a wandering mind that she’d always had trouble keeping on track. Surely, most definitely, she wasn’t attracted to the Duke...

“There is nothing... His Grace and I weren’t... You don’t know what you’re talking about,” she stammered.

“Whatever you say.”

“I do say it,” she snapped. “And you better not.” She eyed her sister warningly, who responded with a smug grin. “His Grace is a nuisance and nothing more. For reasons

that... that aren't important, he doesn't want me courting Lord Malnor, so he's insisting on interfering every chance he gets. That's all it is."

"And you?"

"What about me? I'm doing what I can to ignore him, but..." She sucked through her teeth as she felt her anger spike. "But he brings out the worst in me."

"He brings out something in you."

"Bridget!"

"And he is handsome, too," she continued. "And rich, I am sure. If you and he were to wish to wed, I can't imagine father stopping it. And the result would be much the same."

"The point is moot," Amelia said, her tone severe now, a warning for her sister to drop it. "It is Lord Malnor who our father wishes upon me, and thus it is he who I am to pursue. His Grace is... irrelevant."

"Whatever you say, sister."

She narrowed her eyes at Bridget, and Bridget, as she so often did, giggled to herself and widened her eyes as if daring Amelia to push the point. Amelia's response was to roll her eyes and then pull her sister into a tight hug to which Bridget was happy to accede and snuggle in to. And there they remained, tucked into the back of the dark library, the sounds of the guests filtering softly from beyond the walls, dull and far off, drifting listlessly through the manor as they slowly retired to bed.

Bridget didn't know what she was talking about. That was all it was. Amelia considered her sister's words, deciding that they were simply the whims and

misunderstandings of a young girl who didn't know the first thing about men.

Amelia had meant what she said. The Duke was nothing more than a nuisance. A darn pain is what he was. And the way he had goaded her tonight, luring her with sharp words and suggestive comments, trying to trick her into saying something that might tarnish her before the Marquess' eyes — it was infuriating!

Worse, she couldn't help but be goaded. Whenever he opened his mouth, even just to breathe, she felt herself tensing and bracing for a comment or a snide remark. And while it would have been so easy and right to ignore... Amelia simply couldn't help herself.

Bridget was snoring beside her, and Amelia tittered to herself as she thought back to their duel over supper. It was funny in a way that if he wasn't so determined to unmask her, the two might have gotten along. They had similar temperaments. The same sense of humor and pertinacity to make fun while others might shy away. If it wasn't for the way he treated her, the distrust he held, the two might even be friends.

And in that, Amelia had an idea.

Snuggled in beside her sister, eyes drifting and body turning heavy, what she realized in the moment was the mistake she had been making. She was letting the Duke get to her. She was allowing him to frustrate her. She was playing right into his hands like a puppet on the end of a string. But what if she was to change tact and no longer rise to the bait? What if she were to treat him as a friend and lure him with honey rather than vinegar?

Not seduce the Duke, heavens no. Rather, give him a reason to stop attacking her at every turn. He thought she was a vicious harpy trying to lure his friend to his doom? Let him see her as a congenial puppy eager to please and happy to acquiesce so that he would have no choice but to kowtow to her and Lord Malnor's romantic desires.

Yes... Amelia felt herself fading, a smile on her face as she imagined how she would behave the next time she and the Duke were alone. Pleasant conversation. Friendly banter. And then, finally, he might leave her alone.

* * *

Amelia saw His Grace walking alone through the gardens. It was just sunrise, the manor still sat in a state of deathly silence as the alcohol which flowed freely last night trapped the guests in a deep sleep from which they might not break for several more hours, and with her plan now decided upon, Amelia realize this here was the perfect chance to act.

She had just finished bathing and dressing herself. As it was still early morning, she was in morning dress: a maroon Spencer jacket over a white muslin gown, her hair worn in curls but her make-up so light one would be forgiven for thinking she had nothing on at all. Ordinarily, she would have broken her fast before daring to speak with anyone as on an empty stomach, Amelia had a tendency to act brash and behave in a shortsighted manner. But she'd spied the Duke from her window, saw that he was alone, and knew that this was the perfect time to act.

Through the manor, she hurried, careful to keep her feet light so as not to wake anyone; even the serving staff were slow to rise, and she dodged their eyes because she didn't want gossip to spread. Then she slipped out the front door, rounded the manor, and as expected, found the Duke wandering idly along the path which led toward the back gardens.

She started when she saw him. In the light of the morning — soft light oranges and dark pinks — he cut a bold figure. Dressed plainly in breeches and a white shirt, barefoot of all things — if she had any decency, she'd turn around and leave him be. Clearly, he wasn't expecting company.

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“Your Grace...” she called softly as she started down the stone path.

The Duke jumped on the spot and spun about, eyes wide with panic when he saw her coming for him. “Miss Baker!” He looked about them as if to check that they were alone. “What are you — I didn’t expect to see anybody this earlier of a morning.”

“Clearly.” Her eyes flicked to his bare feet, and she smirked. “Or I hope not, anyhow.”

He grimaced. “I could not sleep — I’ve been up for hours, truth be told. Don’t tell your father, but the bed he’s put me in is about as comfortable as a sack filled with stones.”

“Oh, I suspect he knows,” she chuckled. “In fact, you might want to double check the stuffing when you retire tonight. I wouldn’t be at all surprised if you were to find half a quarry in there.”

He laughed at that, a genuine chuckle that was so deep that Amelia felt it in her sternum. “I was saying to Lord Malnor just last night, I suspect I’ve ruined your father’s weekend by being here.”

“Undoubtedly,” she grinned. “And I confess, a small part of me is glad that you did.”

“Oh?” He frowned and tilted his head.

“Well, it was either that, or I would ruin it, and quite frankly, it’s a relief that you’ve taken the burden on yourself. After all, I’m the one that has to live with him.”

His smile was broad, his teeth perfectly white and glimmering in the morning sun. “You’re welcome, then.”

A moment of silence fell between them, and the laughter faded. With the initial shock of her sudden appearance having been dealt with, Amelia could feel His Grace sizing her up as he decided how to proceed. They were alone. He could do or say anything he wished. And if past examples were anything to go by, he would fall back into his old habit of warning her off his friend while insinuating that she was some sort of Siren.

It was for that reason that Amelia acted quickly. Seizing on the moment of surprising pleasantness that had passed between them, the plan she had formed now sitting firmly in her mind, she couldn’t risk letting the Duke start on her again. If he did... well, she only had so much self-control.

“I was going to ask...” she started softly, taking a step toward him, careful to keep her smile friendly. “I usually take a walk in the morning through the grounds. I find it’s when the gardens are at their most lovely.”

“Yes...” He looked about. “They are rather splendid, aren’t they.”

“And seeing as you’re already here...” She trailed off a moment, letting her meaning slowly sink in. “...I was wondering if you might care to join me?”

The Duke balked and leaned back. “Really?”

She tittered. “I don’t bite. And yes, I know that we’ve had our... differences.”

“That’s one way of saying it.”

“But I could use the company.” A smirk and her eyes flicked to his feet. “Even if that

company is barefoot.”

The Duke snorted, and it was a wholly natural reaction. “I really should put on some shoes, shouldn’t I?”

“I insist that you don’t.” She walked up to him and propped out her elbow for him to link. He eyed it with some skepticism, and she cocked an eyebrow.

“Well... seeing as I’m already here,” he conceded and linked his arm through hers.

She smiled, a genuine, friendly effort to disarm him and suggest that what was to follow wasn’t going to be hostile. And most shockingly, but not at all disappointingly, he smiled back, appearing almost relieved at the turn this morning had taken.

It was but the early stages, and already, Amelia could sense her plan was working. Now, all she had to do was not mess everything up. But surely, that shouldn’t be so hard? Surely, nothing untoward might happen...

CHAPTERTEN

“Gosh, have I been speaking this entire time?” Miss Baker chuckled gaily. “Sorry, sometimes I have a nasty habit of getting carried away.”

“It’s fine,” Evan laughed sincerely. “I was enjoying it.”

“I bet you were.” She side-eyed him. “But now it’s your turn.”

“You want me to talk as much as you have been? I don’t think that’s possible. We’d be here for the rest of the day, otherwise.”

“Oh, ha ha.”

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Evan grinned. “Besides, my life isn’t nearly as interesting.”

“I doubt that.” She slapped playfully at his arm. “A duke with a secret past. One that nobody, no matter whom I ask, seems to know of or want to speak about. Sounds thrilling.”

“It’s really not...” Evan said awkwardly as he sensed where the conversation was going.

“Don’t make me beg.”

“It’s not that.” He felt the mood shift slightly, mostly his doing, as he hated speaking about his past and usually did anything he could to avoid it. “It’s just... I don’t usually... It’s not something I’m fond of discussing.”

Miss Baker’s eyes widened with embarrassment. “I didn’t mean to push.”

“It’s fine.”

“Really, I had no idea it was such a sore subject. If you prefer, I can keep going? I didn’t tell you about my great grandfather yet, who ran off with his maid for five years only to come back one day pretending that nothing had happened.”

“I think you’ve done quite enough talking for the day, Miss Baker.”

She grinned. “Don’t pretend that you weren’t enjoying it.”

When Evan had left the manor this morning, it was to stretch his legs and prepare himself for the long day ahead, one that he was sure to be filled with bickering and arguing all so his friend might not make a mistake that was sure to ruin his life. He'd had no doubt that Miss Baker was going to continue her pursuit of David, just as he had no doubt that he'd do anything he needed to stop it.

But then she surprised him by appearing in the garden. And then she surprised him further by behaving in a way that was so unlike her he almost asked on more than one occasion who she was and what she had done with Miss Baker.

There was no fighting to be had. No snarling or snapping or quarrels the likes of which the two had engaged in time and time again. And whenever it felt as if the conversation might drift back to this most predictable happenstance, she would be quick to pivot and set them on a more friendly path.

And dammit if Evan wasn't enjoying himself.

He hated that he was. And he felt guilty whenever he felt a smile touch his lips or a laugh build in his belly. But he couldn't help it. He'd known Miss Baker to have a sharp tongue, and he'd known her to be quick witted and just a little mischievous, but what he hadn't known was how much he'd relish her company when they weren't breathing fire at one another.

It was such a pleasant experience that the morning was getting away from them, and neither seemed ready to admit it. They had walked several laps of the garden, about the hedges, around the flowerbeds, between the trees, marveling at its beauty, partaking in its serenity, enjoying the setting as much as they were one another's company. Which was a lot.

"I suppose I owe you something though, don't I?" Evan sighed, acting as if he was forcing the matter.

“I think you do. But only if you want to. Again...” She looked at him as they walked. “...you don’t have to say anything you don’t wish.”

Walking along the garden path, a left turn would have seen them head back toward the manor, signaling the end of their walk. But the automatic right, no questions asked, no surprise given, implied they were both of the same mind.

“No... it’s fine,” Evan conceded, feeling a tightening in his chest. “I’ll tell you, but you have to promise not to judge.”

“Me?” Her eyes flashed. “Never.”

He looked at her dryly. “Or use it against me.”

“Again... me?” She winked. “Never.”

He couldn’t stop himself from smiling. For reasons he couldn’t begin to describe, Evan was feeling more comfortable around Miss Baker than he had with anyone in as long as he could remember. Comfortable enough that he was willing to tell her about a part of his life that he kept hidden specifically because bringing it up caused him more pain than he could bear. The sort of pain that was responsible for who he was today: cut off emotionally, refusing to open up because that only led to hurt.

Strange that today, right now, Evan welcomed it. Why that was? If only he could guess.

And so, he told Miss Baker the last thing he thought he’d ever tell her. That being, the tragedy that had befallen him and his family. A father who was as romantically inclined as David. A stepmother who was as opportunistic as Lord Lindstone — and willing to take advantage of the fact in a way that even Lord Lindstone might blanch at. She bled his fortune dry, funneling the money away from him slowly so that when

she was ready to leave him, it was ensured she'd be rich beyond her wildest dreams. And, of course, a younger brother who had found out what she was doing, tried to stop it because he knew their father would not, and was murdered as a result...

"...I miss him every day," Evan explained, voice filled with sorrow in a way he couldn't have expected.

"That's awful," Miss Baker said with full sincerity as she stroked his arm softly. The gesture was one of concern, but it felt... more comforting than it should have. "I can't even imagine."

"It's fine," Evan dismissed.

"No, it's not. And don't ever say that." She looked at him, the sincerity in her voice breaking through in her smile. "Feeling pain, admitting to it, isn't a weakness. Especially something as tragic as... as what's happened to you. If anything, it takes a certain kind of bravery to accept it, to be honest about it. And anybody who says differently, doesn't know what they're talking about."

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Evan couldn't help but smile. "You would have liked him. He certainly would have liked you."

Miss Baker snorted. "I doubt it. Even you don't like me."

"Yes, but he liked everyone."

"Oh, wow. That is so kind of you to say," she drawled.

"Just joking," Evan chuckled. "Well, I'm not. Not really. My brother... he was even worse than I was."

"Meaning?"

"He was a real pain in the rear — mine especially." He grinned to show Miss Baker that he was only mostly kidding, and she rolled her eyes in response. "The fights we used to get in to..." He clicked his tongue at the memory. "But you know how it is with siblings? Fighting one minute, making up the next."

"I know exactly what you mean."

"Oh, I suspect that you do," Evan said cryptically. She eyed him, and he winked. "The fighting part, I mean."

Her face dropped. "And you're one to talk."

"What can I say, I miss my brother. So please, whenever you and I start going at it,

think of it as an homage to him. Yes, we fight, but we make up eventually.”

“I’m still waiting for the making-up bit.”

“After this weekend, maybe.” He winked at her, and she narrowed her eyes playfully. “But let’s not get ahead of ourselves.”

“I don’t know why I bother...” Miss Baker muttered under her breath, loud enough so Evan would hear. This had him chuckling to himself which saw her smile, which resulted in them taking a right turn at the end of the garden rather than a left.

It didn’t sound as if Miss Baker was feigning interest or pretending to be concerned. It didn’t appear as if she was trying to trick him. Her sincerity felt real, and that, Evan was forced to admit, was a problem.

As they walked through the garden, arms still linked, there was a fight raging inside of Evan. On the one hand, he wanted to keep things civil because Miss Baker was seemingly trying her best. But on the other hand, he remembered his friend, what had happened between her and Evan, and most importantly, her father.

Maybe Miss Baker was being sincere? Maybe her desires toward his friend were honest? But he knew her father, and for that reason alone, Evan couldn’t trust her. It pained him to say so. And he hated what he was about to do to prove her lies, but in the end, he had no choice.

For his brother if nothing else...

“Speaking of my brother,” Evan began conversationally as he led Miss Baker toward the back of the garden, his eyes set on a large elm tree that hung over the back corner like an awning. “What happened to him has had quite the effect on my life. One that you might find interest in.”

“Oh?”

“That’s right,” he continued jovially. “I told you what happened with my stepmother and how her actions led to his death. But what I didn’t tell you was what I vowed because of it.”

“I’d love to hear it.”

They reached the tree, and Evan gently slipped his arm free. Then he indicated for her to sit beneath its shade, and she smiled and did just that, lifting her gown and sitting softly with Evan crouching right beside her. It might have even been romantic if not for what Evan had in mind.

“I loved my stepmother, I truly did. I loved her because she made my father happy. Of course, she was just using him — playing with him as a snake might play with a mouse before devouring it.” His tone turned dark, and a shadow fell across his face. “And her actions reminded me that regardless of how sincere a person might be, of how honest, that even the prettiest flower can still stick you with a hidden thorn you did not know was there until too late.”

Miss Baker swallowed but forced herself to keep smiling. “I’m afraid I don’t quite know what you —”

“I admit, Miss Baker, that you are... you are more than what I originally thought. And were the circumstances different, then perhaps I could look past what it is you’re trying to do. But I learned a long time ago not to trust people just because they have a nice smile. And you, Miss Baker, have a very nice smile indeed.”

Her face dropped as the realization struck. “Oh.”

“I’m sorry, but that’s just how it is.”

“You know, you’re being ridiculous,” she huffed, temperament shifting.

“Am I? I would have thought I was being a good friend.”

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“By keeping your best friend from falling in love?” She blew through her lips. “Yes, you really are the most wonderful —”

“Love?” Evan scoffed. “You don’t love Lord Malnor, so don’t pretend that you do. All you want is his money.”

“That’s what my father wants,” she said, surprising Evan in her honesty. “But do not act like that is so scandalous — every day a marriage is made for the same reason. You are aware of the world in which we exist, aren’t you?”

“So, you admit it then? Everything you’ve said is a lie.”

“I admit that my father wants me to marry Lord Malnor, but that is all I admit. I am still very much interested in Lord Malnor. I still wish to be courted by him — to have a chance to fall in love!” she snapped. “One that doesn’t see you nipping at our heels like a lovesick puppy.”

“Oh please, not this again.”

“You speak of love, but it’s clear to me that you’ve never experienced such a thing. How could you?! You’re so darn distrusting that even if a woman was interested, you wouldn’t let her in. You’d rather die alone than take a chance.”

“Don’t try and make this about me,” Evan growled as Miss Baker struck at a sore point that hurt a little more than he liked to admit.

“But it is about you.” She sat up, her eyes coming level with his.

“And what about you?” Evan shot back, face turning red as he struggled to keep his anger at bay... well, his anger and something else. A fire inside of him that sizzled when he met her dark blue eyes and felt the warmth of her breath on his lips. “Have you ever fallen in love?”

“What?” She leaned back. “No but —”

“So, you don’t know what you’re talking about either. You confuse love with lust, Madam. Stolen kisses at parties instead of meeting someone and falling for them — truly falling for them. You don’t want to fall in love. All you want is...” He smirked to himself as a most wicked comment came to mind. “Someone to set your loins on fire because you know that you’re never going to fall for Lord Malnor, so the chance for amorous pleasure in lieu of real feelings is about as good as you can hope for. Why love when you can lust?”

Her face contorted into what might have been anger. Might have been shock. Might have been something that Evan couldn’t quite figure out. “How dare you!”

“You forget, you’ve kissed me twice now, so I speak from experience.” He could see her getting worked up, back to her old self. “I know where your heart truly lies...” His eyes flicked down her body and up again.

Her lips curled. “You don’t... you know nothing... I told you already, that kiss was a mistake.”

“Both of them?”

Her eyes narrowed. “The second was you, Your Grace. Forced on me if you care to remember?”

“Oh, I remember it.” A little too well, truth be told. “But something tells me you

remember it too. In fact..." He grinned to himself, sensing her anger pique, knowing that she was becoming flustered and unruly, that just a little further and finally, he would have her. "I would warrant to say that you remember it often."

"Don't flatter yourself." She looked away, but Evan caught it. A slight discoloration in her cheeks. The smallest of smiles... cheeky and mischievous and daring.

It was now that Evan had a decision to make.

The last time he had tried to force Miss Baker to admit what she was doing, he'd kissed her, thinking that would be enough. But what was a kiss to a woman like Miss Baker? Nothing. She had, after all, done the same to him. And she would do it again and think nothing of it. Why, the way that she had kissed him last time, he dared to say that she even enjoyed it.

If Evan wanted to force her hand, to really have her admitting that her pursuit of his friend was nothing but an attempt to take advantage of the man — to prove once and for all that love wasn't a concept she understood, let alone yearned for — he'd have to do something that she did not expect.

An amorous energy sizzled between them; he could feel it cracking like bolts of lightning. The way she matched his stare as she sat up and tried to meet his height. The fire that built between them. Her chest stuck out, her lips twisted into a daring snarl as if asking him to try it. Yes, it would work. Yes, she would succumb. And yes, Evan would take the risk.

And all the while he told himself this was for David, not him. That, in its own way, made it a little easier to bear. And a heck of a lot easier for him to convince himself that he didn't want to do what he was about to.

"Is that the line you're going to stick with?" Evan moved quickly, pouncing on Miss

Baker, pushing himself up so his face was inches from hers.

Expectedly, Ameila didn't back down. If anything, she moved closer, her face less than an inch from his own, eyes locked onto him because she knew what was coming next... or she thought he did. "It's the truth. I haven't thought of it once."

"And I suppose if I was to try again," he growled, "seeing as you desire after Lord Malnor, you would slap me across the face and storm back to the manor?"

"I wouldn't hesitate for a second."

Evan grinned and leaned forward, to which Amelia did the same, puckering her lips because he could read her like a book and knew that if he wanted it, she would happily kiss him. But that wasn't what he wanted.

His hand moved quickly, wrapping under her right knee. Her eyes went wide but before she could react, his other hand had her other knee, pulling her toward him with such force that she fell onto her back. She opened her mouth to object, but he was on her before she had a chance, mounting her like a predator in the wild.

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“You’ve done nothing but lie to me since the moment I met you,” Evan breathed deeply, a growl escaping his lips as he pressed his body against hers. He could feel her heart racing, her breathing roaring, her body shuddering.

“You don’t know a thing about me,” she said, her voice flinty and throaty, her legs wrapping around his waist.

“No?”

“No.”

Another grin, his eyes flashing as he held her determined stare. And as he did, his hand moved down her legs to her ankles. He gripped the hem of her shift, held it a moment, and looked into her eyes, so she’d know what he meant to do. She didn’t fight him. She didn’t say anything. Rather, she raised an eyebrow as if to say, ‘Only if you dare.’

By now, all sense of reason was gone. Any excuse that Evan made would be just that, an excuse. Trying to trick her. Trying to get her to admit to something that Evan couldn’t even conceive with the way he was feeling. Blood rushed his body. Fire lit his soul. He felt himself engorge in a way he didn’t know was possible, and before he could stop to think, to tell himself how foolish this was, he lifted Miss Baker’s skirt and dove between her legs.

“Oh —!” Miss Baker half-cried out as his lips found those between her thighs. “What are you... no... don’t... don’t stop,” she breathed as her thighs tightened around his head.

Evan's tongue plunged inside of her. Softly at first, he licked up and down her lips, around the edges, relishing the way she stiffened and spasmed with each touch. Her hands grabbed the top of his head outside her dress, holding him there, refusing to let him yield. His mouth then opened, wrapped around her, started sucking gently, letting saliva drip from his lips as he moved his tongue to the rhythm of her breathing.

"Your Grace..." she moaned, body writhing. "This is... I don't... We mustn't — Your Grace!" she cried.

Evan wrenched his head free, pulled the skirt from his face and met her eyes. They were wide and wild and hungry; insatiable was how he read them.

"Why did you stop?" she breathed.

"Don't call me Your Grace," he growled as one hand slowly stroked up her thigh. She spasmed.

"Wh — what should I call you?" she somehow managed.

"Call me Evan."

A small smile; that hunger reaching her lips. "All right, Evan. Don't you dare stop."

And so, he didn't.

The sun had well and truly risen now, spreading its soft yellow light over the manor, waking those inside, letting them know the day was set to begin. Birds chirped in the trees. Servants called to one another from the kitchen as a morning feast was prepared. No doubt, Lord Lindstone wondered where his daughter had gotten, not knowing that if he listened closely, he might just hear her.

In the back corner of the garden, sheltered by the elm tree, hidden by the shrubberies and garden beds, Evan committed himself to an act that's reason was lost to him. It had a purpose once, he was sure, but now... now, all he cared for was the taste of Miss Baker, the feel of her on his lips, and the way her body moved the closer and closer she came to exploding in his mouth.

He had unmasked her, he knew. But in that, he had also unmasked himself.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

“Amelia, are you listening?” Amelia's mother, Lady Lindstone snapped.

“Hmm?” Amelia looked up, almost surprised to find her mother staring at her.

“She wasn't listening — what did I tell you?” Her mother gave a derisive look to the seamstress. “She hasn't heard a word I've said.”

“Maybe she's just a little overwhelmed, M'Lady? One can hardly blame her.”

“Yes, maybe.” Amelia's mother clicked her tongue and turned back to Amelia. “You're lucky your father isn't here. What's he always telling you about daydreaming?”

“That I shouldn't do it,” Amelia offered vaguely, still not paying her mother any attention.

“That it is unseemly. A lady shouldn't let her mind wander like that. Especially when in company.” She indicated with a smile across the store.

“Oh, it's quite all right, Lady Lindstone,” Lord Malnor chuckled. “I confess, I'm feeling a little overwhelmed myself. I had no idea that this business would be so...

confronting.”

“I think you mean confusing,” Martha giggled.

“Yes, well, that too. How does one know what to buy? What to pick? How it’s going to look when it all comes together.”

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“Oh, it’s not that hard,” Martha waved him down with a sigh. “Honestly, you men. You want to rule the world but try and pick out a nice dress, and you become as simple as a baby dropped on its head at birth.”

“Miss Forbes...” Lady Lindstone chastised. “That is really not appropriate.”

“Oh, I agree,” Lord Malnor chuckled. “It’s lucky your father isn’t here, Miss Forbes. I’d hate to think what he would say if he heard you speaking like that.”

“My father wouldn’t set foot in a dress shop if you paid him all the money in England,” Martha joked. “So, I think we’re going to be all right.”

“Lucky for you,” Lord Malnor laughed.

Lady Lindstone eyed the pair with a warning glare that might not have told them directly that she wished for them to behave but was suggestive enough that they both chose that moment to stop their joking and close their mouths. A nod of the head next, satisfied with the result, and she was back on her daughter.

“Now, Amelia — Amelia!” she snapped.

“Hmm?” Amelia looked up again. “Oh, sorry, Mother. What were you saying.”

Her mother looked ready to bark at her like a rabid dog, but she seemed to realize that she was in mixed company, some of whom might not appreciate a mother chastising her adult daughter so openly. So rather than that, she pursed her lips together and widened her eyes at Amelia in warning to which Amelia forced an apologetic smile.

“As I was saying,” her mother then continued, “what do you think of this one?”

Finally, Amelia had the sense of mind to pay attention. She looked at the material that her mother was holding before her, a ghastly maroon color made from a thick cotton weave that she knew would look horrid on her: no shape, frumpy, not dissimilar to a potato sack. Her nose curled and she opened her mouth to dismiss the choice outright —

“Oh, it’s not that bad,” her mother cut her off before she could say anything.

“She’s right,” the seamstress stepped in and lifted the material from Lady Lindstone, letting it flow through her fingers. “And once I get my hands on it, the dress it will make...” She uttered an excited squeal. “It will be like a dream. You see, M’Lord,” she then addressed Lord Malnor, “it’s not so much about picking a dress as it is the material and color. Once that is selected, I step in and weave my magic. She will look like a princess, I assure you.”

“Ah, I see.”

“And I see that look on your face,” the seamstress chuckled at Amelia. “But your mother has a good eye, and I promise that come next week, once you try the dress on, you won’t want to take it off.”

“If you say so,” Amelia accepted lamely.

Her mother eyed her still, again caught between calling out Amelia’s vagueness this morning but knowing that now wasn’t the time. She’d gotten Amelia to the tailor, after all, and had now managed to pick out a coloring that she seemed to think would suit her daughter. And all while, Lord Malnor tagged along, playing the part of suitor, even if he wasn’t technically designated as such.

Really, the morning should have been counted as a huge success. It was arguably the first time that Lord Malnor had been able to speak with Amelia without every other word being interrupted by the Duke. And with her mother and Martha there also, it took away some of the pressure and perceived awkwardness that might have reared its ugly head because Amelia had never been very good at flirting, even worse when the man she was flirting with was one whom she had no desires for.

But Amelia couldn't find it within herself to care. And she certainly couldn't find it within herself to play the role that her father was expecting. As to the reason for this? Well, that reason was with them also, standing toward the back of the tailor, watching but saying nothing, nearly invisible with the way he'd been acting all morning.

"What do you think, Your Grace?" Lord Malnor chuckled as he strode across the small store to where his best friend was lurking. "Do you understand any of this?"

"Hmm?" His Grace looked up, apparently having not heard the question.

"I said, do you understand any of this? Although that look on your face is answer enough," Lord Malnor chortled. "I told you earlier, man, there's no need for you to be here. Truly, I'm not even sure what I'm doing here."

"We wanted a man's eye is why," Amelia's mother was quick to interject. She strode to Lord Malnor and gripped him around the bicep. "It's all well and good for us women to dress as we must, but it is you dear gentleman we're aiming to impress." A soft titter. "So, I ask you again, what do you think?"

"I think it's a lovely choice," Lord Malnor said pleasantly. "Your Grace?"

"Hmm?"

Lord Malnor frowned with a sense of worry. "The material Lady Lindstone has

picked out for Miss Baker. What are your thoughts?”

“Oh, yes, lovely,” he said vaguely, not even looking at the selection. “A fine choice.”

As daft as Amelia had been behaving all morning, it was nothing compared to the Duke. When her mother had announced their intentions for the day, that being heading into town to shop for a dress for next week’s ball, she had insisted that Lord Malnor join. Typically, the Duke had then intervened and said he would also be eager to tag along. It wasn’t a surprise in the least, and while Lady Lindstone couldn’t refuse his request, it was clear she was not happy about it. Not one little bit.

But Amelia’s mother needn’t have worried because from the moment they had climbed in the carriage and started the journey into London, His Grace had barely spoken a word.

Amelia watched the Duke as subtly as she could, careful that he not see her doing so. Although to be fair, she could have walked right up to the man and put herself within an inch of where he was standing, and he might still not have noticed. All morning, His Grace had ignored Amelia as if she did not exist.

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As to how Amelia felt about this seemingly purposeful shunning? She wasn't quite sure.

She couldn't stop thinking about what had happened earlier this morning. That was the reason that she was behaving in such an obtuse manner. Her mind refused to leave that garden, trapped underneath that elm tree, focused on and refusing to yield from the Duke's tongue and lips and how it had made her body shake and shudder and explode in ways that she hadn't known it could.

How had it even happened? Why had it happened? And what did she think of it? All good questions, none for which she had answers to. It was like a dream from which she could not wake. An impossible situation that she half thought she might have imagined — she must have! To kiss the Duke accidentally was one thing. To be kissed by him again was another. But this... this was something else entirely.

"I can't wait for it," Martha was saying excitedly to Lord Malnor. "The Galentine Ball is always the best of the Season — Last year's was splendid."

"I hear Lord Galentine is importing real live lions this year," Lord Malnor said. "He'll have them in cages around the hall."

"No!" Martha cried and held a hand to her mouth.

"You didn't hear it from me," Lord Malnor chuckled.

It might have been one of the more exciting pieces of gossip that Amelia had heard all week, but she barely acknowledged it, barely heard it, barely cared to pretend.

It was the Duke's lips that captured her interest. The feel of them between her thighs as she squeezed and moaned and begged for him to not stop. She could feel her cheeks flushing red and tried to escape such thoughts — now was not the time. But she was but human, and there was little she could do.

She dared a glance at the Duke, noting his refusal to look at her. But what did that mean? Did he regret it? Was he embarrassed? Had Amelia done something wrong? Or was this all part of his plan to unmask her? Although how that might be, she had no idea.

“Well, that was easy,” Amelia's mother said suddenly, sounding rather satisfied with herself. “Much more than I had dared hope. Miss Forbes, will you be making a selection?”

“No,” Martha grumbled. “Mother has my dress selected already.”

“I'm sure it's lovely,” Lord Malnor chided.

Martha glared at him. “You know it's not.”

“Wonderful,” Amelia's mother agreed. “If that's the case, we best be off.” She turned back to the seamstress. “When can we expect it to be ready?”

“The ball is in three days?”

“That's correct.”

“I'll have it for you tomorrow then” the seamstress assured her. “That will give you enough time to try it on. And if any adjustments are needed, I will be at your beck and call.”

“Perfect.” Her mother clapped her hands together. “Well, come on then, no use standing about now. The lady has work to do.”

Amelia was glad to be going. What she needed was to be back in her room, the door firmly closed, possibly even locked so as to ensure no disturbances. And then she would have a long and hard think about what had happened earlier and what she was going to do about it. If anything.

A nod of the head and she started toward the door... only for her eye to catch a glimpse of a transcendent yellow silk hanging from one of the hooks. It was just gorgeous: a darker yellow with wisps of canary trailing through its seam, hints of red about the hems, lightly woven, almost gossamer it was so delicate. Despite herself, Amelia found her hand running through it, and for the first time all morning, the Duke and his wicked tongue wasn't the only thing on her mind.

“Amelia?” Her mother clicked her tongue. “What are you doing?”

“I —” She turned back to find her mother, Martha, and Lord Malnor all watching her. “This material. It's rather fetching, don't you think?”

Her mother pushed her lips together, paying it a fraction of a glance. “It's fine. Now, come on, dear, let us —”

“It's more than fine. It's lovely.” She pulled the material out further, holding it against her skin. “Mother, might I request that I have a dress fashioned from this instead?”

“What? Why?”

“Well...” Amelia blinked. “Is that not why we're here, so I might choose a —”

“Which we have done.” She turned to the seamstress. “Ignore her. She’s been acting strangely all morning.” Then, back to her daughter, “You might have thought to bring this up earlier, dear. But it’s too late now. We really must be going.”

If it had been another day, Amelia might have argued. If her mind hadn’t been fractured into a dozen different pieces, she certainly would have stood her ground. But she wasn’t in a place right now to argue with her mother, and thoughts of the ball next week and how she may or may not look felt about as important as discussing with the kitchen staff what they would be supping on later.

Also... she caught the Duke watching her out of the corner of her eye which had her cheeks flushing red hot, her tummy doing all sorts of things that she didn’t want to think of, and her legs shaking in ways that made her want to move them lest she collapse on the spot.

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“I suppose so,” she accepted softly, letting go of the yellow material, sparing it a final longing glance, and then putting her head down as she hurried from the store. She passed the Duke on the way but didn’t dare acknowledge him.

“Sometimes...” Her mother clicked her tongue. “...I wonder why I even bother. Lord Malnor, are you...” She smiled at Lord Malnor who bowed his head.

“After you.”

“After me, you mean,” Martha said rightly, stepping in front of the Marquess and hurrying from the store.

“And Your Grace?” her mother asked coldly. “Will you be joining us?”

“Um... no, I don’t think so.”

Amelia was halfway through the door when she heard it, and she very nearly turned back around to see what was happening. Her stomach twisted, and she stumbled.

“Oh?” her mother queried.

“I think I’ll remain in London for a few hours longer,” the Duke said, “but I’ll be back at the manor later this evening, I promise.”

“If you say so,” her mother said quickly, delight coloring her tone. “Take your time.” And with that, she was quick to shuffle from the store as if lingering might see the Duke change his mind.

From the street, Amelia could see the Duke still inside the tailor. He didn't meet her eyes, purposefully avoiding them as he glanced about the store, and although she did not wish it so, she felt her heart crack just that little bit. What had happened this morning between them... she had no idea what to think of it. Clearly, the Duke was not of the same mind.

It was but another attempt made to unmask her before the Marquess, and this time, it had worked. More than ever, she wished that her father wasn't forcing Lord Malnor on her. And although she dared not admit it to herself, refusing to even think it, deep down a small part of her wondered at what her sister had said the previous evening. What if it was His Grace instead...

* * *

"Sir, is there something I can help you with?" the seamstress asked.

Evan wasn't paying attention. But then again, that was the theme of his life of late. At least as far as this morning was concerned, anyhow. All morning, his mind had been elsewhere as he'd been forced to reckon with the possible consequences of what he'd done.

And it wasn't fear of being found out that worried him. It wasn't his reputation that he was concerned about. Nor was it what Lord Malnor might say or think if he knew — technically, Evan should have welcomed such an event, for that would have put a stop to the courtship that he was unknowingly in the middle of.

Instead of all that, Evan was left to ponder on one unassailable truth that nipped at his heels like a hungry puppy, no matter how many times he shooed it away. He didn't want to admit it. He refused to accept it for fact just yet. But based on what had happened between himself and Miss Baker, and in the face of a deep yearning that seemed to grow whenever she came to mind, it was becoming harder and harder to

deny that he was developing feelings for the young lady.

As frustrating and abhorrent as that might be.

“Sir?” the seamstress tried again.

“What — oh, yes.” Evan pulled himself back into the store, giving his head a shake so as to dispel the path his mind had been wandering all morning. “Sorry, I’m afraid I became distracted.”

“That is quite all right, Your Grace.” She gave a small curtsy. “But is there something I can help you with? A suit for the ball, perhaps?”

Truthfully, the reason that Evan had remained behind had nothing to do with his desire to continue shopping. To put it simply, he wanted to be as far from Miss Baker as was possible for fear that her presence alone might stir something within himself that he wasn’t willing to admit to just yet. Even electing to come along today had been a foolish notion, more of a reflex than anything, because he told himself still that his chief concern was Lord Malnor’s wellbeing.

Lord Malnor’s wellbeing. He chuckled coldly to himself as he considered what this meant. If he really did care so much for his friend, what he ought to do was tell him what had happened this morning. But the thought of revealing this to anyone, most of all David, had Evan’s stomach twisting itself into knots.

He was embarrassed. That was the sensation that besieged him. And not embarrassed by what he had done but how it made him feel. Ordinarily an embodiment of self-control and cool detachment, never in his life had he cared about what others thought. This went double where women were concerned. But this was different, and despite his refusal to admit it, he knew exactly why.

“I’m fine, thank you,” Evan said to the seamstress. “In fact, I should be going.”

“If you say so, Your Grace. But if there is anything you need...”

Evan went to leave the store. A drink was what he needed. A chance to clear his head and consider everything that had happened and how he meant to deal with it.

But it was as he started from the store that he caught sight of that same yellow material that Miss Baker had been eyeing earlier, the one she had asked her mother for but had been refused. He stopped suddenly and stared at the yellow of the material, remembering Miss Baker saying that yellow was her color. As he studied it, his mind couldn’t help but picture just how lovely she would look if she was to wear it, rather than the hideous choice her mother had made for her.

He couldn’t say why he did it. Even though he knew the answer, to admit such a thing might just undo him. But before he could stop to think, he was pointing out the material to the seamstress and ordering a dress.

“I’ll require the measurements, of course,” the seamstress said as she pulled the light silk free from the hook.

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“It is for Miss Baker,” he explained. “The same design as the one she just commissioned.”

“Oh?” The seamstress blinked. “And Lady Lindstone...”

“Doesn’t need to know.” He looked down his nose, making sure the seamstress got the message. “It is to be delivered on the same day along with the first. But my name isn’t to be mentioned, understood?”

“Ah, I see.” Her eyes sparkled with the romanticism of it. “Yes, I understand perfectly.”

“And if Lady Lindstone is to ask?” He cocked an eyebrow.

“A mistake was made, and I must have misheard her,” she responded with a coy wink. “Consider it done, Your Grace.”

Evan was quick to leave the store after that, feeling an utter fool for what he’d just done. It was all well and good to tell himself he didn’t care for Miss Baker, but pulling a stunt like that spoke to the contrary. Again, what he needed was a drink and some time to think. To consider what he was going to do and how he would do it. Surely, this was all just fleeting desire and arousal brought on by a morning of heightened passion that had gotten a little out of hand. He could still taste Miss Baker on his lips. He could still feel her thighs wrapped around his head. The way it lingered in his mind... it was no wonder he was such a mess!

Drinking would fix that. By the time he’d had a few glasses of whiskey, his mind

would be clear, and he'd be more willing to admit that his actions this morning were borne from necessity and nothing more. It was David whom he cared for, and it really was that simple.

Even so, as Evan wandered through the streets of London, he couldn't help but picture how wonderful Miss Baker was likely going to look in said dress, and whenever he did, he couldn't stop himself from smiling.

CHAPTERTWELVE

It should have been a perfect situation. And indeed, had this been just the previous evening, Amelia would have counted herself as lucky and been glad for it. Her father most certainly was as she caught him watching her time and time again, a satisfied smile on his lips and an approved nodding of his head whenever their eyes met.

This, however, wasn't the previous evening, and as such, Amelia couldn't find it within herself to feel excited. Guilt was what she felt. Shame, also. And that nagging sensation that she was doing something wrong, even though she knew that she wasn't. She played her part well, and for those watching, it appeared as if she was having the most splendid time. But deep down, hidden from all but her own psyche, Amelia wished that she was anywhere else.

"I think you're cheating," Lord Malnor chuckled and shook his head as if he were upset. "That's the only possible answer I can think of."

"How dare you," Amelia gasped and held a hand to her mouth.

"Dare I do."

"It seems to me that you're choosing to ignore the obvious." She raised an eyebrow at him, and he indicated for her to explain. "That I'm just a lot better at this than you

are.”

Lord Malnor blew through his lips. “I’ll never admit to such a thing — Lord Lindstone!” Lord Malnor looked over his shoulder. “Are you aware that your daughter is hustling me?”

“Now, now, Lord Malnor, there’s no need for that sort of talk,” Amelia’s father chuckled from the corner of the drawing room. “And in this instance, I’m inclined to agree with my daughter.”

“Nepotism!”

“Reality,” Amelia chided as she laid her cards down on the table. “Flush. That’s four points to me.”

Lord Malnor’s face dropped. “Do I need to check your sleeves, Miss Baker? Or under that cushion that you’re sitting on. Surely, you have cards hidden away that you’re using to —”

“I would never!” She widened her eyes at him in warning. “Now, are you going to show me your cards? Or are you at that point where admitting defeat and giving up is the easier option? Surely, it will save us all time?”

Lord Malnor looked at her flatly, sighed to himself, and then laid his cards on the table. “A pair. Two points.”

“Oh, good for you,” she mocked as she moved her peg on the board up four spaces. “Look at that...” She moved Lord Malnor’s up two spaces; it was still some distance behind her own. “You’re catching up.”

“Hardly.”

“Yes, well, I was being nice.”

It might have sounded mocking. It might have even sounded rude and unbecoming of a lady such as Amelia was, but it was all in good fun, and Lord Malnor knew it. He rolled his eyes and took a sip of his brandy, pretending to be upset while unable to hide his grin beneath the lip of his glass. And Amelia, aware that her father was watching, knowing the role she was meant to play, giggled to herself and suppressed a small smile which she made sure Lord Malnor could see her doing.

Again, the situation should have been perfect. Finally, after a week of trying, she had Lord Malnor to herself. The drawing room that they were in might have been home to another ten people of the moment, but they were inconsequential and hardly worth noting. Right now, it was just Amelia and Lord Malnor, sitting by the fire, playing cribbage together because it was a two-person game so just perfect for the task at hand.

As to that task? Seducing Lord Malnor, of course.

And it was working too. At least it felt as if it was. All night in fact, Amelia and Lord Malnor had been left to speak with one another, rarely having to worry about the company present around them because as far as they were concerned, it did not exist. As they supped at the end of the table, sitting across from one another, they spoke like old friends, sharing a joke here and there and laughing at things that Amelia could not remember. And after supper, when drinks were had, Lord Lindstone was careful to section them off and then keep guard so that they were not to be disturbed. And now that the night was drawing toward its end, it was just the two of them, playing cards and sharing in one another's company, finally getting to know the other as should have happened over a week ago.

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“How many points does that make it?” Lord Malnor sighed as if annoyed.

“Me?” Amelia smiled innocently. “Ninety-two.”

“And me?” he asked glumly.

“Sixty-four. But you’re well overdue for a comeback.”

“It’s going to be hard if you keep on cheating,” he mumbled.

“Now really, Lord Malnor, I will remind you that you’re the one who asked to play. I had no idea you’d be such a sore loser.”

“And I had no idea you’d be such a gracious winner,” he joked.

“Well, I haven’t won yet...” She cocked an eyebrow at him and grinned. “But that will come soon enough.”

“Ha!”

Oh yes, things were finally starting to go her way. Or her father’s way, for that matter. Another quick glance across the room confirmed how pleased he looked with the situation such that Amelia might have allowed herself to breathe a sigh of relief. This here was what he wanted. This here was the purpose of this entire weekend. And if things continued in this way, stretching across tomorrow and the next evening, she had no doubt her father would feel confident enough to approach Lord Malnor and ask if he might be interested in courting her officially.

If only things were as simple as that.

As said, they weren't the only ones in the drawing room. Of the fifteen guests spending the weekend at the manor, there were eight left, the others having retired to their quarters already. Most of them were engaged in other card games or conversation, paying Amelia and Lord Malnor little mind. But among them, there was one whom Amelia couldn't help but notice, one whom her eyes strayed toward time and time again. He sat alone in the back, drinking a glass of brandy, staring sullenly at the wall as if in the midst of an existential crisis.

The Duke hadn't been the same since this morning.

From the moment the two left the garden together, throughout the day and the evening, and right up until this moment, he'd been a far cry from his usually verbose, bawdy, persistently arrogant self. He hadn't said a word to Amelia since their tryst in the garden. He had barely even looked at her. All day and all evening he'd remained withdrawn, avoiding conversations with anyone who tried, glowering and simmering alone because as far as she could tell, he was angry.

What he was so angry about, she had no idea. If anything, Amelia was the one who should have been angry. He had, after all, purposefully seduced her. He was, after all, trying to block her from engaging with Lord Malnor. And he would, most likely, tell the Marquess what had transpired between the two sooner, rather than later. Or at least, she suspected he might.

The events of this morning still sat with her. Her heart still raced whenever she remembered it. Her face still flushed whenever she thought of it. And her loins still tingled when she dared to shut her eyes and return to that sensation which was unlike anything she had ever experienced before.

In a way, she supposed it was lucky that it was the Duke who had dared to act as

such. For a brief moment, she had wondered if maybe there was more to the man than the feelings of antipathy that he leveled at her whenever they spoke. For a short while there, when she was engaging him in a friendly manner rather than rising to the bait, they had gotten along better than she could have expected, and pairing that with what had happened after, a small part of her dared to imagine that he might have wanted more from her than what he claimed. That this whole charade of his was just a chance to get closer to her.

That idea was laughable now. The Duke, she had decided, was a cold and calculating character. Devoid of emotional depth. Sequestered and secluded and unable to love or care for anyone but himself. The way he had been behaving all day was proof enough of that. And for that reason, she decided that she was done worrying about the Duke and what he felt or what he thought. This morning was a mistake, a minor misstep, and thus not worth her time.

“So, Miss Baker, will you be hunting with us tomorrow?” Lord Malnor asked as he dealt her the next hand of cards.

“Oh yes,” she said seriously. “I’m quite the shot, you know?”

“Is that right?” he laughed.

“Terribly good,” she continued in jest. “In fact, based on tonight’s performance, and seeing how poor of a loser you are, tomorrow, after you fail miserably in the hunt —”

“Careful...” he grinned.

She winked. “I might be willing to pretend that my takings were in fact your own. After all, it isn’t proper for a lady to go hunting in the first place, so you might as well take credit for it.”

“How very gracious.”

“I can be.”

“So much that I’m even willing to let you win tonight,” he said with a sly wink. “Which, by the way, is what I’ve been doing this whole time.”

“Ah, of course,” she responded dryly. “That explains it.”

She and Lord Malnor got on perfectly well. Better than that, in fact. He was funny, affable, charming in his own right. He was also attractive and dashing and everything a lord should be. So much so that, Amelia knew that she should have been glad for what was transpiring and relieved that the man her father had set for her was one whom she could very well see herself marrying and living a happy life with.

And yet... and yet deep down, she just couldn’t excite herself toward the notion. And while she tried her best not to, her mind went back to the garden, to His Grace and that wicked tongue and those devilish lips. She tried her best to picture Lord Malnor in the Duke’s place, but it just wasn’t the same. There was no fire there. No heat. No passion.

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Needless to say, the whole situation was as confusing as it was frustrating.

She and Lord Malnor continued in their game of cribbage, another ten minutes worth until she beat him soundly and a little too easily.

“Cribbage,” she said with a triumphant smile as she moved the peg on the board to the finish. “And you, Lord Malnor, are the... what’s the term? Forgive me, but I forget.”

His expression was unamused. “The skunk.”

“That’s it!” she laughed. “You’ve been skunked.”

Lord Malnor burst into laughter, a little louder than she had expected. And when he did, movement out the corner of Amelia’s eye caught her attention, and she glanced over just in time to see His Grace stumbling from the room. His footsteps were heavy and rushed; they sounded almost angry. If she didn’t know any better, she might have said he was jealous.

Although likely, he was just annoyed because his plan to stop her and Lord Malnor was failing spectacularly. She might have felt rather pleased with herself if that was what she wanted. But again, and despite the circumstance, Amelia had no choice but to admit that it wasn’t Lord Malnor who she desired.

That prized role was now reserved for another.

CHAPTERTHIRTEEN

What was wrong with him?

Evan stood by the basin in the washroom, staring at his reflection, a sense of repulsion roiling through his body because he truly felt that disgusted with himself. Not to mention ashamed.

He'd spent the entire day pondering how he felt about what had happened between him and Amelia. He'd spent hours alone, doing what he could to convince himself that this was all part of the plan and that the feelings which besieged him, those which harangued him, didn't really mean what he knew them to mean.

He was here because of his friend, he chastised at his reflection. His only goal was to stop his friend from making a terrible mistake — from being tricked in to one. Everything he had done so far was for him, and everything he felt was a mere extension of that. It wasn't jealousy he was feeling. It wasn't lust or want. It was anger, rage, and a deep seeded sense of frustration because he was so very clearly failing his best friend.

But it was more than that, and no matter how hard he tried to deny it, no matter what he told himself, the lies he forced down his own throat, he knew better. Not that this made things less troublesome.

Miss Baker well may have been a liar and a sneak. She might have been trying to seduce his friend under false pretenses. And if he allowed it to continue, then Lord Malnor would surely have his heart broken as it had been so many times before. Only right now... Evan didn't care as much about that as he should have. And while he hated the fact, he hated even more that his own selfish desires were what drove him.

"Get a hold of yourself, Evan," he seethed at his reflection. "This isn't about you!" he snarled.

He was beginning to have desires toward Miss Baker.

On the surface, it was lust that drove these impulses which might have been a relief because lust he could understand. Lust he could control. Lust was but a base desire which could be avoided if he wanted it. What happened between them this morning was perhaps the most passionate, heated, damn erotic moment of his life. He felt himself harden as he remembered the taste of Miss Baker on his lips. He felt his pulse quicken as he let his mind drift back to the feel of her thighs squeezing his head while his tongue worked its magic.

He had mistaken their bickering for antipathy. He had misconstrued their arguing for animosity. But the more he thought about it, the more he remembered what was said and how they had said it, the more he came to realize that there was more between them than pure animus.

It was their conversation before he had taken her that continued to wage war with his emotions and reason. The first time that they had spoken without fighting and they'd had perhaps the most honest conversation he'd had with anyone for as long as he could remember. He'd felt comfortable with her. He'd felt heard. He had been so disarmed by her agreeable nature that he'd opened up to her in a way he never had with anyone, and what was more, she had listened and understood and accepted him.

He didn't hate Miss Baker as much as he wished that he did. Dammit, he wanted her! And tonight, being forced to watch his friend flirt with her the way he was, and she with him, he'd felt sick to the stomach. More than once, he'd considered barging in and disrupting as he had done time and time again, but for the first time, he stopped himself because, and this was truly pathetic, he didn't want to embarrass himself or upset her.

"Evan, what have you become..." He met his eyes in the reflection, looking through them to the man who he'd kept hidden for so long. Emotionally unavailable.

Romantically reserved. Happy to live and die alone because he couldn't bring himself to trust another. That version of himself seemed a far-off thing, trapped behind a curtain being held up by Miss Baker because she had dared to bring out a new side that he didn't even know to exist.

A shake of the head and Evan forced himself back from the basin, tearing his eyes from the reflection. Another shake and he stumbled toward the door.

There was nothing else to it. He was going to have to avoid being alone with Miss Baker from now on. If he didn't, there was no telling what he might do or say.

As to how he was going to do this and keep David from falling for her? Perhaps it was time he had a conversation with his friend? Perhaps it was time he told him everything. He would take the blame, he decided. He would do what he must to spare Miss Baker shame. But it was the only way he could think of to save David... even if deep down he knew that was only half the reason he wanted to keep them apart.

“What are you doing?”

The voice spoke from down the hall. So soft at first that Evan almost missed it. Still in his own head, he couldn't even remember leaving the washroom, figuring that his feet might do the honorable thing for once and lead him back to his quarters where he could sleep this day off and pray for a better one come sunrise.

“Miss Baker?” Evan gasped as he steadied, catching sight of Miss Baker down the end of the hall. She was alone, standing beside a torch that burned a deep orange against the wall; it set her porcelain skin alight, making it appear as if she was on fire. “Wh — what are you doing?”

“I hardly think that is your business,” she said rightly. “This is my home, remember?”

There it was, that sharp tongue that he loved so much. The moment she spoke, Evan opened his mouth to respond. A sarcastic comment came to mind, something that was sure to ignite her. But before he let it out, he was quick to catch his tongue and force the comment back, careful not to say something that might start their bickering again. He could not afford to let that happen.

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“I am sorry,” he said instead, bowing his head. “And you’re right, it is not my place to question you.” Evan kept his head down, committed now to walking right past her and saying nothing.

“Is everything all right?” Miss Baker asked, just as he was about to pass her.

He allowed himself to stop for a moment. Dared a glance at her; concern was etched across her face. “Of course, Miss Baker. Now, if you don’t mind, I think I might retire for the evening.” He moved to step past her.

“I do mind.” She stepped in front of him. “You’ve been behaving strangely all day, Your Grace, and I think...” A moment of hesitation. “I think we should talk about it.”

“There is nothing to talk about.”

“Well, we both know that isn’t true.”

His head snapped up before he could stop it. The orange light of the candle still lit the side of her face, making her dark blue eyes appear as if they were ablaze. It made her look angry, fearsome, and ready to attack him. But there was something else there. Was it worry? A sense of concern? Or perhaps, and Evan prayed it wasn’t the case, desire?

“I don’t know what you mean,” Evan replied as calmly as he could.

She licked her lips as she considered what to say. “About what happened this morning —”

“Please.” He held up a hand to silence her. “That was... that was a mistake.”

“It — it was?” she reared back as if he’d struck her.

“Wasn’t it?” His heart skipped a beat.

“Well, yes, of course, it was,” she hurried. “It should never have happened. It was a moment of weakness and nothing more.”

“I could not agree more,” Evan forced himself to say. “In my desire to unmask you — Lord Malnor’s wellbeing my only concern — I fear that I might have taken things a little too far. And for that, I apologize.”

Miss Baker tilted her head and smirked. “An apology? From you? I never thought I’d see the day.”

He grimaced, wanting nothing more than to respond with a scathing reply. He could feel red hot blood beginning to pump through his body, his excitement rousing as his inner senses urged him to take the bait and fall back into old ways. But somehow, he resisted and uttered instead, “I’m full of surprises.” A soft smile and he bowed his head. “Now, if you don’t mind —”

“There is one more thing...” she cut him off again, shooting her hand out. It struck him on the chest, and he very nearly seized it. “...about what you intend.”

“I don’t intend anything.”

She looked at him flatly. “Concerning myself and Lord Malnor. About what...” It was subtle, but there was a slight flush in her cheeks. “...what happened between us, I am hoping that you aren’t going to say anything.”

“Say anything?” Evan repeated, only half-hearing what she had said. He was still eyeing the color in her cheeks, pairing it with the way she refused to look him in the eye. And as she spoke, she licked those soft lips and took a small step back, her disposition shifting from determined to nervous.

“About what we...” Her cheeks grew more flushed. “...what we did.”

They were alone in the hallway; the chatter of the other guests barely a murmur. The orange flame from the candle lit them in the darkness as if they were cut off from the world. Standing a little too close. Voices dropped to a whisper so that nobody might hear them. Eyes looking everywhere but at one another because of how sensitive the topic had become. Evan knew it was wrong. He knew he should have just agreed and walked away. He knew not to rise to the bait that he was so desperate to take, but under the circumstances, he just couldn’t help himself.

“What we did?” he asked innocently, a slight smirk working its way up his lips as he felt an amorous sensation building between them. “What did we do?”

Her eyes flashed anger but she held her temper. “You know perfectly well to what I speak.”

“I’m afraid you’re going to have to remind me.” He took a step closer to her, heart beating that little bit faster when she didn’t step back. The reason and good sense he’d spent all day trying to cultivate was dashed against the stone wall and smashed into a million little pieces, gone as if it had never been.

“In the garden...” she said, licking her lips, looking away. A quick glance at him, and then she was on her feet. “Under the elm tree when you... when you...”

“When I what?” he breathed.

Her eyes flicked up and locked on his. They were filled with a fiery intensity, raw passion mixed with rage mixed with memories of what she was about to say. “When you kissed me...” A beat. “...between my thighs.”

“That wasn’t a kiss,” he smirked. “I thought you of all people would know the difference.”

Her cheeks were bright pink now. “Be that as it may...”

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“Should I not have done so?” He took another step toward her, but she backed off, pressed up against the wall as if trying to avoid him. And Evan, burning now with the same lust that had been haunting him all day, pressed himself against her. Self-control be damned!

“N — no, you shouldn’t have,” she stammered, her voice a throaty whisper. She refused to look at him, but in doing so bared her neck. “You know it was wrong.”

“But you’ve been thinking about it, haven’t you...” He was so close to her now, he was just about on top of her, his lips grazing her neck such that he could taste her again.

“That isn’t... that’s not the point.”

“Isn’t it? What is it you want exactly?” He breathed on her neck, delighting in the way her skin erupted with goose bumps.

“It can’t happen again,” she said, keeping her neck exposed as if she was willing him to bite into it. “I told you, it is Lord Malnor who I —”

“Who you what? Desire?”

“No — I mean, yes. I mean —”

“Tell me what you want.” His hand moved to her waist as if on its own accord, gripping it. Her body stiffened, but she didn’t push him away.

“I want... I want... Your Grace, I want —”

“That wasn’t what you called me earlier,” he chuckled softly. “Say my name.”

“What?” She snapped her head down and met his eyes, and that was when he knew that she wanted this as much as he. She might have denied it. She might have fought it. But there could be no doubt.

“Say my name.” He squeezed her waist harder.

Her body shuddered. “Evan...”

The shattering of glass broke their trance. It came from a distant room, followed by someone crying out. “You drunken fool!” followed by an eruption of laughter.

Evan snapped his head around, heart leaping through his chest for fear that someone might come around the corner. And in that instant, less than a second, Miss Baker managed to find some semblance of self-control. She pushed his hand away and stumbled down the hall.

“I have to go,” she stammered without looking back.

“Miss Baker —!” Evan called after her, thinking to chase her, but before he could take so much as a step, she was gone.

This left Evan standing alone in the hallway. His blood was running hot, surging through his veins, sending his heart to a point near bursting. Breathing spiked. Body shaking. Mind clouded with thoughts of what had just happened and what he was willing to do — what if would have done was it not for the interruption.

He was a damned fool! A fool for putting himself in a position like that. A fool for

allowing things to go this far. And mostly, a fool for thinking he could control himself. There was no point denying it any further. He wanted Miss Baker like the sun wanted the sky. He desired her more than he'd desired any woman in his life. And what was more, if he was reading Miss Baker correctly, she wanted him just as much.

CHAPTERFOURTEEN

"It's a shame about the weather," Lord Basser, the son of Lord Winstead called back as he stalked ahead of the hunting party, purposefully separating himself from the group so that he'd be the first to spot their quarry. "I can't see a blasted thing with all these clouds about."

"Whatever he needs to tell himself," Evan muttered to David who snickered under his breath.

Lord Basser was twenty years of age, in good shape, and attractive enough that it added to his confidence more than was necessary for the son of a marquess. He had been overly eager about starting the hunt this morning, carrying on for the entirety of the previous evening about how skilled he was with a hunting rifle, how sharp his senses were, and how deft his aim. The way he spoke about his abilities, one might think that he had been raised in an African tribe where they were said to hunt lions with nothing more than a spear.

"Don't go too far ahead!" Lord Winstead cried out. He walked with his rifle tucked under his arm and probably not even loaded if Evan knew the fat lord as well as he thought he did.

"It's fine, Father!" Lord Basser cried without looking back.

"If the storm comes in —"

“It’s fine!” he snapped, turning back just long enough to glare daggers at his father, before positioning his rifle in front of him again, eyes trained through the sight, taking long and purposeful steps through the forest as he aimed it among the treetops in search.

“He’s eager,” Lord Lindstone chuckled and elbowed Lord Winstead.

“Oh, he just gets excited,” Lord Winstead agreed. “We haven’t been hunting in months, and he’s been at me to take him. Thank you again for this. It’s just what we needed.”

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“Think nothing of it,” Lord Lindstone said proudly. “Truth be told, I’ve been wanting to get out myself. Times were, I used to go every week. Nothing like a good hunt to clear the mind.”

“Same here. This is what summer is all about!”

The two lords walked ahead of where Evan and David were strolling. Both overweight, both already out of breath, the way they stumbled and tripped through the shrubbery made it appear as if they were walking on stilts. And as to how they held their rifles, suggestive that they didn’t know one end from the other, somehow Evan doubted that either of them could be classed as able hunters. Or even serviceable, for that matter.

“What do you think?” Evan nudged David and indicated to the fat lords’ rearends. “Should we take the easy shot? I dare say there’s enough meat there to feed the rest of us well into the winter months.”

David suppressed a chuckle. “Too easy, Evan. Far too easy.”

“For me, maybe. But you have always been a terrible shot.”

“I meant the joke,” he corrected. “What’s that expression about swatting at low hanging fruit?”

“That it’s a sin to waste?” David grinned as Evan propped up his rifle and pretended to take aim at Lord Winstead’s wide buttocks. “Speaking of fruit, these rumps would pair lovely with a fresh serving —”

“Stop it!” David was quick to push the rifle back down, doing what he could to feign seriousness but unable to keep himself from laughing. “You’re going to get someone shot.”

“Me?” Evan cocked an eyebrow at the two lords walking before him. “Let us be honest here, David. If anyone is going to misfire their rifle and shoot someone...” He indicated with a nod of his head. “Although seeing as Lord Basser has decided to wander so far ahead, maybe it will be a blessing, and he’ll be taken out? Do us all a favor.”

David shook his head and gave a derisive roll of his eyes. “Behave,” he then commanded jokingly.

Evan grinned but knew to keep his mouth shut. Even if it was all in good fun, he didn’t want to risk being overheard or for Lord Lindstone or one of the others to see him playing about with his rifle. They were deadly weapons, after all, and it only took one second of not paying attention for somebody to get hurt. And even Evan wasn’t so callous that he wished for that to happen.

So, rather than offering a retort or scathing reply, he hung his rifle by his side and fell back in beside his friend, happy to walk in silence for a while as the rest of their party became swept up in the thrill of hunting. Evan never was much for hunting, even if he’d always had a knack for it. He supposed that was because, at the end of the day, hunting wasn’t really about tracking one’s prey, outsmarting it, and then putting a bullet between its eyes so that they might sup on its dressed and roasted carcass rather than going hungry. It had nothing to do with that at all.

Hunting was a social engagement and nothing more. Worse than that, it was a social engagement exclusive to the gentry, for they were the only ones who could afford to do it. One needed to own land, so they might hunt on it which meant that only the rich and privileged could partake. And although it didn’t need to be said, it applied

exclusively to men.

There were nine of them stalking the forest in total. Two groups: one of four and one of five. The other group, comprising Lord Wexley, his son the Honorable James Knight, Lord Brundel, and Lord Chalmers, were headed east through the forest while the group Evan found himself lucky to be a part of was headed west.

“The truth is, I thought you might have preferred to stay indoors today,” David mused as the two men walked.

“And why is that?” Evan asked.

A sly smile spread up the side of his friend’s face. “Oh, I just assumed you might have found the company there more interesting. More to your taste,” he chuckled.

Evan frowned at the comment, not entirely sure what his friend meant. Was he just joking about, or was there a hidden meaning? Surely, he wasn’t referring to Miss Baker? Evan was certain he’d been careful enough to avoid any chances the two of them might be seen as more than enemies.

“I don’t know what you’re —”

“Lord Malnor!” Lord Lindstone cut him off as he spun about, caring nothing for the rifle tucked to his side — the muzzle pointed directly at Evan who had to duck out of the way in case it fired. “What are you doing back there?”

“Keeping an eye out,” David said cheerfully, “in case one of these pheasants decides to stampede us from the rear.”

“We’re perfectly fine,” Lord Lindstone waved him down, missing the joke entirely. “You’ll see nothing back there. Here is where the action is.” He indicated for David

to join him.

“If you say so.” David winked at Evan and then hurried through the brush so that he was walking beside Lord Lindstone.

Once he was beside Lord Lindstone, the two began speaking in hushed tones, broken by bouts of laughter from Lord Lindstone who slapped David on the back as if he’d said something highly amusing.

Evan eyed the exchange with a sense of wary frustration. When the hunting parties were being organized earlier this morning, a part of him had wondered if it was even worth going. Two groups of four were much cleaner, and the last thing Evan wanted was to spend the day trudging through dense forest in search of pheasants that he was certain knew better than to flutter in front of a group of noisy, trigger-happy hunters. And with the weather turning sour, a day spent indoors felt like an infinitely better option.

Alas, it was an option that he could not take. It was just as the discussion began that Miss Baker wandered into the drawing room, double checking with her father that they had everything they’d need for the day. At the sight of the luscious young woman, memories from the previous evening flooded through Evan. Them alone in the hallway... pressed against the wall... his mouth at her neck and his hand around her waist. And the way her body shuddered at his touch...

It was all too much. Miss Baker seemed to be purposefully not looking at Evan, but he stared obviously as his arousal peaked. And then, suddenly realizing what he was doing, he very nearly fled the room, only to stop himself because he knew how odd that would look.

When David asked Evan if he was coming along, he told him that he wouldn’t miss it. On the surface, his excuse was the same that he’d been using all weekend — to

keep an eye on his friend. Now that David and Miss Baker were seen to be getting along, he couldn't very well leave David and Lord Lindstone alone all day. Who knew what they would speak of. Likely, the repugnant lord would use the time alone to press his daughter on David and all but confirm the pending courtship. No, Evan had to join them.

But if he was to dig a little deeper, to really consider, Evan knew that to stay home while the other men were out would only leave him open to being alone again with Miss Baker. After what had happened last night, how little self-control he possessed, that was too dangerous a situation to risk putting himself in.

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“Simon!’ Lord Winstead cried out. “Simon! Where have you —!” He cut himself off with a silent curse and looked apologetically at Lord Lindstone. “That boy, I swear.”

“I’m sure he’s fine.”

“The storm.” Lord Winstead indicated to the darkening clouds in the sky; they were heavy and grey, swirling together like whirlpools which threatened to burst at any moment. “I don’t want him getting caught in it.”

“Go,” Lord Lindstone suggested. “we’ll be right behind you.”

Lord Winstead groaned and started ahead, picking up pace as he pushed through the brush and disappeared from sight. “Simon!” his voice cried out. “Slow down!”

“Maybe we should be heading back?” David suggested and looked at the cloud covered sky. “The storm can’t be far.”

“I think you’re right. When Lord Winstead returns. In fact...” Lord Lindstone came to a slow stop. “...I think here is as good a spot as any to wait.”

“Agreed.” David looked up and caught Evan lurking a few feet back. “Don’t you dare.”

“Dare what?” Evan asked, confused for a moment.

“Shoot us while we’re stationary. It would hardly be fair.”

Evan grinned as he approached the two lords. “I prefer a moving target. Although for you, I might make an exception.” To that joke, David chortled and shook his head. Lord Lindstone, however, glared at Evan as if he was being serious.

“I’m sorry the hunt came up so short,” Lord Lindstone apologized to David, purposefully ignoring Evan. “Usually, this forest is full of pheasants. I’ve even killed a boar or two in my time.”

“Is that right?” David said, sounding impressed.

“I thought I saw a boar earlier,” Evan interjected, winking at David and then inclining his head slightly toward Lord Lindstone. “Two of them, in fact.”

David widened his eyes in warning.

“I doubt it,” Lord Lindstone said dryly. “There hasn’t been one spotted in here for years.”

“I must have been seeing things,” Evan agreed jovially. “Two great big things as it was.”

“Lord Lindstone,” David hurried to cut Evan off before his meaning became clear, “I’ve been meaning to say — we both have...” He eyed Evan warningly. “...thank you for this weekend. It really has been a treat.”

“Think nothing of it. I was glad that you were able to make it.” Lord Lindstone turned so that Evan was cut off from the conversation. “It has been wonderful having you here. I know my daughter, Amelia, was most pleased with your being here.”

“It was lovely to get to know her better,” David nodded.

“She would say the same,” Lord Lindstone hurried to agree. “She was most insistent that I invite you. She checked and double checked with me that you would be coming.”

“Is that so?” David frowned as if he couldn’t believe it. “I’m glad to hear it.”

“Of course,” Lord Lindstone nodded, eyes flashing. Evan watched him closely, noting the way the Lord licked his lips, reading his mind before he got a chance to speak. “In fact, seeing as we are speaking of my daughter —”

“I don’t mean to interrupt,” Evan spoke quickly, “but do you think we should check on Lord Winstead and his son? The way Lord Winstead was carrying his rifle earlier, I’m worried he might have accidentally shot him.”

“I’m sure he is fine,” Lord Lindstone snapped. “Lord Winstead is a perfectly capable hunter.”

“It takes one to know one, I suppose.”

“Your meaning?” Lord Lindstone spun to face Evan, finally catching up to the fact that he was being mocked. And again, as he did, the rifle tucked under his arm pointed itself right at Evan’s head.

“If you don’t mind?” Evan ducked out of the way. “I’d rather not be mistaken for a boar. Real or imaginary.”

“How dare —”

What sounded like the crack of a rifle firing echoed suddenly through the forest. It shook the trees about them, sending the birds in the canopy to flight. As one, all three men spun in the direction of where Lord Winstead and his son had disappeared, and

Evan was forced to hold his tongue, lest he say something that, now, had gone beyond a mere joke.

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“Lord Winstead?!” Lord Lindstone cried and was about to rush forth, only for another loud crack to erupt. This time, however, it was clearer where the noise had come from.

“The storm.” David pointed through the canopy where the dark clouds were swirling and crashing into one another. The moment he spoke, the rumble of thunder rocked the heavens and the forest about them. “It will be on us any minute.”

“I think it already is,” Evan noted.

“Lord Winstead...” Lord Lindstone looked through the trees. “Where has he gotten off to?”

“I suppose leaving them is out of the question?” Evan asked, half-jokingly.

“Of course, we’re not leaving them!” Lord Lindstone snapped. “They should be back any moment.”

“The hunter that Lord Basser is, I’m surprised he couldn’t feel the storm on him,” Evan said and winked at David who looked at him flatly. “And you, Lord Lindstone. It’s said that true hunters can read the weather patterns simply by the feel of the wind. I suppose you’re having an off day.”

He shouldn’t have poked the bear so readily. Not to mention obviously. But he was feeling more chastised than he ought to have, watching Lord Lindstone serve his daughter up on a platter to David the way he was while treating Evan with such clear disdain. Wasn’t it obvious that David wasn’t interested? Wasn’t it clear that his

daughter clearly wasn't either? Or most likely, did Lord Lindstone just not care?

As predicted, Lord Lindstone didn't take kindly to Evan's sarcasm. His pudgy face turned bright red, and his body shook, a tomato that was being squeezed to a point of explosion. Before he got the chance to unleash on the Duke, a cry called from behind them.

"We're here! We're here!" Lord Winstead stumbled through the forest, his son right behind him.

"And not a moment too soon," David was quick to pick up. "We were just about to come looking for you. The storm..."

"We heard it. It's going to be a terror!"

And indeed, it was. The five men were quick to make their way back through the forest and toward the manor. In a way, it was lucky that two members of the party were so out of shape and out of practice as they'd hardly made it a mile from the forest's edges. It was just as they breached the tree line — the green pastures that surrounded the manor opening before them — that the clouds above finally surrendered to the lashes of lightning and the beatings of thunder and opened themselves upon the world.

It rained. Hard and heavy. Thick and wet. Strong winds gusted and bellowed and lashed. The sky shook and flashed bright white. The ground itself seemed to crumble beneath the party's feet as they hurried for shelter. It was one of those storms where the men held one another by the arm as they fled, as if to let go might see them swept up, never to be found again.

And when they finally did make it inside the manor, throwing the front doors open and stumbling into the foyer as the wind and rain swept behind them, there was such

a feeling of relief that even Evan couldn't find it in himself to make a joke.

Unfortunately, the relief was short lived.

“Augustus!” Lady Lindstone cried from the top of the stairwell. “The storm —”

“Yes, we know,” he grumbled. Body soaked through, he removed his coat and dropped it to the ground in a wet heap. “We barely survived it.”

“No, the storm!” Lady Lindstone cried again as she hurried down the stairs. “It's Amelia. She is... she is... she —”

“Out with it woman!”

Her face was drained of blood, and her eyes were set wide in a state of horror. “She left not twenty minutes ago. Told me she was going for a short walk to clear her head. But she hasn't returned, Augustus! And she's not on the grounds — the staff has checked!”

As one, the five members of the hunting party turned back to the open doors. Beyond, the tempest howled as if the end of the world had arrived, as if the seas had risen and swept across the continent, as if God was trying to drown mankind for their sins and this here was the beginning. Lightning struck and cracked Evan's ears. Thunder rumbled and shook the manor to its foundations. The doors slammed and struck and rattled while the hinges moaned.

“She's... she's out in that?” Lord Lindstone said softly, as if he could not believe such a thing.

“Yes!”

“Good God...”

CHAPTERFIFTEEN

“Well done, Amelia. Well done.” She stood by the open doorway — there was no door to speak of, just some rusted hinges where a door had once hung — and watched the storm thrash and beat at the forest as if it had a personal vendetta against the woodland. “You’ve really done it this time. Bravo.”

Amelia knew that what she should have been feeling was gratitude. And relief. Blessed was what, for she had managed to find shelter in a storm that may very well have killed her if she hadn’t been so lucky. The odds that she had stumbled upon this cabin in the middle of the forest, just as the first signs of rain began to appear, were nothing short of a miracle and despite how annoyed she was at herself, there was a small part of her that couldn’t help but be grateful.

It was more embarrassment than anything that had Amelia feeling the way that she was. All she had wanted to do was go for a short walk and clear her head, getting her thoughts back in order because they’d been muddled all day, and she theorized that some fresh air was just what she needed. Free from the confines of the manor, away from the memories that it sparked, a good walk outside with nobody about to distract her, and she was certain that by the time she was done, she’d know why she was feeling the way she did and what she was going to do about it.

But then rain began to patter on her shoulders. Then lightning cracked through the sky, and the earth shook at her feet. Then she became a little flustered and realized that she’d walked a lot further through the forest than she had intended. And then... the storm began.

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As to the cabin? It was a decrepit old thing, even older than her father was — she had vague memories of him mentioning it once or twice in passing — having been built by his father when they'd first bought this land. It seemed to grow from the earth as if it had sprouted there, entwined by vines and shrubs, melding into the trees in a way that made it look as if it was a natural part of the forest. The inside was even worse than the outside: no furniture, a few old rugs that had become a part of the wooden flooring, spiderwebs covering the entire ceiling, bugs, and other infestations that she didn't want to think about. And with no shutters to cover the windows or even a plank where the doorway was, the protection it provided was middling at best.

In a way, she supposed, it was an apt metaphor for her life. The way the storm shook and rattled the fragile walls of the cabin. The way it groaned as if it might collapse at any moment. How isolated it was, alone in this world, forgotten entirely, used only because times were desperate, and there was nothing else to fall back on.

Amelia had to laugh because in times like this, that was all there was to do. She had wanted some time to think to herself, and now, she had plenty of it.

Was there any need to say what she was thinking? Was there any need to voice who she was thinking of? Not who she wanted to, mind you. But who she had to. He who she had wanted nothing to do with. He who she was desperate to forget at all costs. He who, to speak bluntly, made this storm seem like a mere spring rain when compared to how wet she became when she allowed her mind to wander to him unencumbered.

What Amelia needed was a sign. She had tried to do the right thing. That was all she did! But the universe was a fickle beast that enjoyed tempting her in ways that she

didn't understand. Should she give in to temptation once and for all and admit how she really felt? Or should she keep fighting for the sake of her father and most of all, her sister?

Wind poured through the open door, but Amelia remained standing in it, taking its brunt as she looked to the heavens for answers. A crash of lightning suddenly erupted right above her, striking a tree which crashed through the forest not twenty feet from the cabin. She gasped in fright, thought for a moment to retreat deeper into the cabin... only to watch where that tree had just fallen... to see something that she couldn't quite make out... something that she was certain to be imagining.

"Miss Baker!" she heard the voice cry through the howls of wind. "Miss Baker!"

It couldn't be. Who would be crazy enough to go out in this? But she heard the calls again, focused through the forest toward the cries, saw now that she wasn't imagining it at all. She had asked for a sign, and the universe had chosen to answer.

"Miss Baker!" It was His Grace, stumbling through the forest, drenched from head to foot, caring not for the danger he was in because the look on his face, a determined scowl that suggested he might move the heavens if that's what it took, told her all she needed to know. "Miss Baker!"

"Your Grace!" Amelia called, nearly charging through the storm toward him. "Over here! Your Grace!" she tried again, her voice cut off by another crack of lightning. "Evan!"

His head snapped about as he heard his name. He came to a sudden stop, looking through the forest and right at her, unable to believe what he was seeing, as if a ghost had appeared before him. But then a smile spread up the side of his face, relief such that she nearly collapsed on the spot because her savior had come.

“Miss Baker!” His Grace shouted and forced his way toward her. One hand up to block the wind and rain, he pushed through the shrubs and climbed felled branches. “Thank God, you’re all right!”

“Your Grace!” she cried and ran the last few feet toward him, feeling so overcome that she very nearly threw her arms around him. But she resisted the urge... just. “You came!”

“Here!” He took her by the arm and dragged her back inside the cabin, out of the storm. Body dripping wet. Chest heaving from exertion. Face red. Hair a tangled mess. He’d never looked so good.

“You came,” she said again, once they were inside. “I didn’t know if you —”

“What were you thinking?” The duke spun about and bore down on her, his size seeming doubled in the small cabin. “Is this a game to you?”

She blinked and took a step back, not at all expecting this reaction. “I... I don’t know what you —”

“Are you so desperate to... to get Lord Malnor alone that you’d risk your life like this?” he snarled. “Are there no lengths that you won’t go through so you might get his attention? Congratulations, Miss Baker, this is a new low, even for you.”

“You think I did this on purpose?”

“You tell me.” His face was contorted with fury, and the way the cabin shook about him, it was as if his rage was the cause of the storm. “You must have seen there was a storm coming. And you know this forest well enough that you managed to find this cabin before it took you. Am I supposed to believe this was just a coincidence?”

“I don’t...” She couldn’t believe what she was hearing. She had thought His Grace to be her savior — that he would be overcome with relief that he had found her when he did. But this... truth be told, she would have rather been trapped in the storm than face this level of wrath. “Is that really what you think of me?”

His laughter was cold. “I have no reason not to.”

“How dare you,” she hissed, no longer caught by surprise, her anger matching the tempest which brewed just feet from where she stood. “How dare —”

“Me?” he scoffed.

“Yes, you.” She stood up to him. “That you would think such vile things of me. That your opinion of me would be so low — yes, I knew there was a storm coming, but I did not think it would arrive so quickly. And yes, I was vaguely aware of this cabin, but of course, I was! These are my family’s lands. When the storm broke, I was lucky to find it. Lucky that I wasn’t caught in the middle of it!”

“And I’m just supposed to believe that, am I? After all you have done. Why, Miss Baker, should I not consider this just another one of your tricks?”

“I don’t care what you think,” she spat, her body shaking now. “And if you are so suspect of my intentions, why come at all? I thought you would have been happy that I might have been caught outside. It would have solved all your problems if I were. A darn stroke of luck for the way you’ve been acting.”

The Duke reared back as if struck. “That’s not... you know that’s not true.”

“I know no such thing,” she snarled.

“When I...” He looked away, almost as if ashamed to meet her eyes. And suddenly,

he didn't look nearly so big as he had. "When your mother told us that you were caught in the storm, I..." He still refused to look at her, and his voice had dropped so low she could barely hear it. "You have no idea how hard it was for me not to rush back out and find you."

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She scoffed, but her heart skipped a beat. “Yet here you are. And why is that? Worried that Lord Malnor might find me first? I know you would hate that.”

“It was only the five of us who returned early to find out that you were missing, and when we heard of it, your father...” He clicked his tongue in frustration. “He insisted that we wait until the storm eased off a little. Thankfully Lord Malnor and the others insisted that we start right away.”

“And you?” her voice cracked.

“I was the first one out the door.” His head snapped up, and he met her eyes. The anger was gone now, replaced with worry and concern that she did not know the Duke to be capable of. “The fact that I was the first one to find you was pure luck as I chose this direction to search in.”

“You must know, I did not — this wasn’t some brilliant plan on my part. Even I am not that bold,” she chuckled awkwardly.

“I know.”

“Then why?” she demanded. “Why accuse me of —”

“Because I was worried!” he roared over her but then caught his temper and bit into his lip as if angry with himself. “The thought of you out here on your own. I have never... the fear that took me... I didn’t know I was capable of such a feeling.”

“Re — really?” Her words caught in her mouth, blocked by a lump that had suddenly

appeared there.

He chuckled bitterly and looked away again. “I don’t understand it, Miss Baker. I wish it wasn’t the case, but when I saw you standing in the cabin, when I realized that you were fine and not hurt, I...” He forced himself to look at her, and that was when she saw it. Not anger. Not concern or worry or fear. It was a look she didn’t recognize because she’d never seen it before, but one she knew without having to question it because it was the same one that she fixed on him. “I can’t begin to describe how relieved I was.”

Amelia’s heart swelled in her chest. Maybe it was relief that she was going to be all right? Maybe it was gratitude because the Duke no longer seemed to blame her, even chastising himself for doing so. Maybe it was the fact that for the first time in days, she no longer felt confused or clouded or unsure of how she felt.

But she also knew that it was none of those things. And when she reached out and touched the Duke’s arm, feeling his body relax and his breathing steady, she knew that for maybe the first time ever, they were of the same mind. It wasn’t simple. It was damn messy. But alone in the cabin, the storm beating about them, cut off from the world and all its problems, she simply didn’t care.

“Last night...” she began softly. “I —”

“You don’t have to say anything.”

“I wanted to,” she said before she could stop to think. “You have no idea how much I did.”

“You did?” he said softly, disbelief coloring his tone. Disbelief and hope.

“But we could not. The risk... anybody at any time might have seen us and... and

Lord Malnor and my father and... this entire weekend and..." she stammered and stumbled over her words, not even sure what she was trying to say.

"Stop." Still looking into her eyes, he reached out and rested a hand under her chin. His touch alone, the warmth that spread from his fingers, set her body ablaze as if she was sitting by a roaring hearth. His finger stroked her chin, and she moaned softly. "You know we can't do this."

"I know." She took his hand and looked into his eyes.

"Lord Malnor is my friend, and your father..."

"I don't care."

A beat and then, "Neither do I." Without another word because in times like this, words were a waste and lips could be used for far more important things, the Duke leaned forward and kissed Amelia like he never had before.

The moment their lips touched, so did their bodies. Pressed together as if to become one, the Duke kept one hand under Amelia's chin while the other wrapped itself around the small of her back and pulled her in even closer. His lips parted her mouth, and his tongue darted inside. Soft. Wet. Their tongues massaged and lapped as their bodies shuddered and stiffened, and their hands found new ways to grab and hold. Their first kiss had been an accident. Their second, a surprise. But this was no mistake. No accident. No shock to either of them. It felt right in a way that Amelia couldn't have expected but couldn't ignore. She let it take her as she felt herself melt at the Duke's touch.

He started kissing down the side of her neck, light kisses at first, soon turned ravishing. His hands moved to her waist as if he was debating whether to push her back or pull her closer. She closed her eyes and leaned back; her skin set alight each

time he touched her. Alone. No chance of being found out. Amelia was ready to be taken by the Duke in any way that he pleased.

“Do you know what I haven’t been able to stop thinking about?” the Duke growled as his lips moved down her neck.

“What?” she breathed.

“You, Miss Baker,” he said as his hands pulled her closer. “Your taste. The noises that you make. The way you feel when I...” He trailed off as his hands moved over her breasts, and his lips kissed her collar bone.

She sucked in, almost yelped as he lifted her and laid her on her back. His hands moved to the hem of her dress and lifted it. Still kissing her neck, he gripped her thighs underneath her dress as if trying to tear her legs free. She wrapped them around his body, pressed herself into him, forced her eyes open, and looked down at the Duke, willing him to meet her eyes.

“Please...” she begged.

“What do you want?” he asked with a coy smile as he looked up at her.

“You know what I do.”

“Say it,” he demanded, refusing to go further.

She bit her lip, unable to voice the words.

“Say it.”

“Evan...”

“No, not that,” he smirked as he gently kissed her. “Say what you want me to do.”

“I want... I want...” For days now her mind had been drawn to that morning in the garden, a moment in time that she had gone back to again and again. “I want you to kiss me where you did in the garden. Between my thighs. On my... inside of me...Evan,” she breathed, feeling herself grow hot.

Once was never going to be enough, and the Duke was of the same mind. He licked his lips, spread her legs further apart, and disappeared beneath her dress.

For all the times she had tried to remember how his lips had felt between her thighs, it was nothing like the real thing. The way he licked her. The way he sucked. The sounds he made! It sent pulses through her body and made her spasm as if she was having a seizure. She grabbed him by the head, squeezed her thighs tight, pushed her pelvis forward, and looked to the ceiling as the world itself seemed to shake around her.

“Come here,” he said suddenly, pulling his lips free and sitting up.

“What?” she gasped, brought back into the moment because as soon as his lips left her, it was like being doused with cold water.

“I said...” The Duke leaned back, his legs spread apart, one hand quickly undoing his breeches as he met her eyes and licked his lips. “Come. Here.” He grabbed her by the hand and pulled her into him.

Amelia wasn't sure how she knew what to do. Perhaps it was instinct. Perhaps it was a lucky guess. Perhaps it was a similar feeling to what predators have in the wild when they know how to hunt their prey. An inborn sense of what to do and how to do it. She felt a companionship with her partner, as if she could read his mind. Whatever it was, as the Duke leaned back, breeches undone, bulge throbbing as if trying to escape, that hunger inside of her that had been building all day reaching new heights, and Amelia fell to her knees, shuffled herself in right between his legs, pulled out his engorged member, and wrapped her lips around it.

“Oh... my... God...” the Duke moaned, and his body went stiff.

Amelia's tongue licked up and down his shaft. Her hand gripped it about the base. Her lips sucked and kissed and wrapped his girth. She had no idea what she was doing. She had no idea if it was right or good or proper. But in that moment, feeling the Duke's breathing, listening to the sounds that he emitted, sensing the pleasure coming from her touch, she stroked and licked and sucked him as if she was born to it.

“Miss Baker...” he groaned.

“Call me Amelia,” she said through mouthfuls.

“All right... Amelia...” And the Duke fell on his back as Amelia leaned further forward and took him all the way down her throat.

There might have been a storm raging outside. The sky itself might have been falling. But in that moment, Amelia worked her lips to the rhythm of his intense breathing, and none of it mattered. Lord Malnor? Her father? The weight of expectation? It melted, just as the Duke did in her mouth, and she knew that from this point on, there would be no point in trying to lie to herself anymore.

She belonged to the Duke, and he belonged to her. Consequences be damned.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

“We should talk.” They were the first words spoken in what felt like hours and as Evan had predicted before speaking them, they were entirely the wrong ones.

“Must we?” Miss Baker sighed.

“We must,” Evan said, making sure that Miss Baker could hear the regret in his voice. He didn’t want to do this now. Heck, he didn’t want to do it ever. But to wait would only make things harder... and far more confusing. “You know we must.”

“Can’t it wait.” She rolled over, wrapping her arm across his chest.

“Wait until when?” he chuckled because despite the conversation he knew they must have, his mood was perhaps the best it had ever been.

“Next year,” Amelia said as if she was serious, nuzzling herself into Evan’s chest. “Or next century. I’m in no rush.”

Evan couldn’t help but laugh. This was why he’d fallen for her the way he had. Strip

away the rancor that so often colored their conversations. Forget the malice that they had one shared for each other as if they were mortal enemies. Leave behind all the fights and arguments the two had engaged in, and what was left was perhaps the most uniquely funny, strange, and highly original lady he'd ever met.

"I wish it was that easy." Somehow, Evan pushed her arm away and forced himself to sit up. "But the storm has passed and..." He struggled to say it because that would mean that this little fantasy they were living in was broken and reality had returned. "And any moment now, they're going to come looking for us."

"Maybe they've forgotten," she half pleaded. "It wouldn't be the first time my father had forgotten I existed."

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Another soft laugh. “Somehow, I doubt that. You are rather memorable, Miss Baker.”

“As are you, Evan,” she purred and then winked.

She must have known where this was going. Despite the jokes. Ignoring the puppy dog eyes she fixed him with. And never mind what the two had just done. Deep down, she must have known. But then again, so did Evan, right from the start he had, not that he it had stopped him. For one glorious moment he had given in to temptation and allowed himself to pretend that the harsh realities of the world did not exist. As if the storm had somehow washed them away.

The storm had since passed. Several minutes ago now, though it felt like mere seconds. He and Amelia lay on the floor of the cabin, bodies wrapped around one another, happy to pretend that it was still raging outside because so long as it did, they could pretend.

“What happened just now,” Evan began, forcing himself to crawl back a ways so that he couldn’t feel Miss Baker on him. “...I’m —”

“Don’t you dare say that you’re sorry.”

He grinned. “Oh, I’m not.” He was, but that felt unimportant. “I’m glad it happened. These last few days, I confess, have been harder than I expected them to be. Mostly, it’s because you are the most stubborn woman I have ever met.”

Her expression was unamused. “Was that supposed to be funny?”

“But you’re so much more than that, and although I never meant for things to go this far, I’m not sorry that they did.” He looked right at her, making sure that she could see he was no longer joking. “Not for a second.”

“Me neither.” Her smile was soft; it reached her eyes which seemed to shine like the sky after a storm.

“Good.” The self-control it took not to reach out and stroke her chin was harder than Evan could believe. “Be that as it may, you know as well as I do that...” A deep breath as the regret settled. “...that it can’t happen again.”

Miss Baker’s body seemed to cave in on itself. “But why?”

“You know why.”

“I — my father doesn’t have to know. There is no reason that —”

“That what? That we can’t sneak off together whenever we get the chance? That we can’t spend the rest of our lives hiding out in cabins and ducking into empty rooms when we think nobody is watching? You know that we can’t.”

“I don’t love Lord Malnor. I don’t want to marry him.”

“That’s irrelevant.”

“It’s not!”

“It is,” he said softly. “I’m sorry, Miss Baker. You know I don’t want to see you and Lord Malnor together.” He laughed at that, hoping she would join in. But she remained firm, glaring at him now because the fire that consumed her so often was roaring to life again. “And if I could stop it, you know I would. Dammit, what do you

think I've been trying to do?"

"Not hard enough..." She looked away as the realization hit her.

"This can't happen again," he said more firmly. "And although I'm not sorry that it did, you must know that from this point on, I will do everything in my power to make sure that this was the last time. I'm sorry."

And he was too. Oh, how he was.

Evan hated that it had come to this. That he had let things go so far that they had to. When he had found her alone in the cabin, he had been furious with her, certain that this was another ploy she'd tailored to try and seduce his friend. Jealousy was what had consumed him, jealousy because he had been through denying how he felt, and the possibility that she didn't feel the same way was like a hand wrapping itself around his heart and squeezing until it burst inside his chest.

But he'd had no need to be jealous. No need to worry. Once he had calmed down, once he had seen earnestness in her eyes and heard it on her lips, he'd known that she felt as he did. And even though it was wrong, even though he had promised himself not to let things go this far, he was but a man and had succumbed to his most base desire.

Evan didn't regret what he had done. Memories of this short time spent together, even if it was only a moment, would consume him for the rest of his life. He would love nothing more than to tell the world what they did, consequences be damned! Unfortunately, that just wasn't reality. Not one that he lived in, anyway.

He didn't know what he would do about Lord Lindstone. He didn't know what would happen between Miss Baker and David. All he knew was that if things kept this way, the inevitable end would be that much harder to bear — and it would end too. Evan

didn't believe in true love like others did. He didn't believe in happy endings and fairytales. He'd seen the way these things almost always ended, a cost that wasn't worth the price.

In his mind, it was best to cut off the infected limb now before it consumed the entire body and ended him fully.

"Miss Baker..." he said softly, realizing that she hadn't responded.

She was looking down at her hands, brow creased, expression determined as if trying to decide how to respond. It was a foolish notion, but a small part of him almost hoped that she refused him. That she told him she was going to tell her father everything, as if that might solve their woes. Maybe it would? Maybe it would make things worse? But Miss Baker was as stubborn as they came, and if she decided such a thing... that might just be the push he needed.

"Fine," she said softly, almost a whisper.

“What was that?” Evan’s chest cracked.

“I said fine.” She snapped her head up and looked right at him, coldness embodying her stare. “You’re right, this was a foolish thing for us to do, and it’s better that it never happens again.”

“Go — good,” Evan stammered.

“In fact, I think it’s best if once we return that you leave — it would not do for you to be here for any longer. You know...” She narrowed her eyes at him. “Better to be safe than sorry. I’d hate for you to slip up again.”

That stung more than it should have. The hope that she would see reason and realize that he was trying to do the right thing was dashed in an instant. The reality that she was furious with him for not fighting, likely deciding here and now that he wasn’t worth a second thought, crashed upon him like a wave in a storm. Really, it just confirmed what he’d always suspected.

“In fact,” she continued coldly, “perhaps it is better if after that...” She hesitated, as if the words caught in her throat. “...we don’t see one another again.”

“I —” Evan opened his mouth to defend himself, to point out that this wasn’t what he wanted but what he must do. But before he got the chance, he heard a voice calling from the distance.

“Miss Baker! Miss Baker!”

He recognized the voice immediately as David's. With the storm having passed, his friend had widened his search and was closing in on their hideout. If he wasn't ridden with guilt, Evan would have stood and taken Miss Baker's hand, guiding her from the cabin so that David might see that it was he who found her first. That he was the one who kept her safe during the storm.

Instead of that, fear seized him, and all he could think was what he might say when David found them alone like this. It wouldn't take a genius to figure out what they had done.

As luck had it, Miss Baker saved them both from such a happenstance. But that just made things worse.

"You should wait here," she said coldly as she pushed herself to her feet.

"What?" Evan half made to rise.

"I'll go," she said, turning her back on him and starting toward the door. "Lord Malnor shouldn't see us together like this. If he asks, I spent the storm alone in this cabin, and thank heavens that he found me when he did." She looked over her shoulder and raised an eyebrow.

"Go — good idea," Evan succumbed. And then, because he was feeling properly chastised, he added, "Think of how good it will look, your true love being the one to find you."

She curled her lip and shook her head. And then, without another word, she turned back and stormed from the cabin. "Over here!" she cried out. "Thank God, you found me!"

Evan remained on the floor, listening as David cried for joy at the sight of Miss

Baker. And he stayed right there, listening to their footsteps crunch through the forest until there was nothing but silence to consume him. Silence and his own sense of idiocy because the way he felt right now was entirely his own doing.

He had no reason to feel this way. Miss Baker clearly had feelings for him, that was obvious enough. And he had them for her. In the perfect world, he would admit them to her, tell her father that he wished for her hand, and be done with it. But that just wasn't Evan. A lifetime spent mistrusting people. More walls erected around his emotions than Buckingham Palace. That nagging sensation that if things were too good to be true then they probably were.

Memories of his father flooded his mind, forcing him to stay glued to the floor of that cabin and let Miss Baker walk away before he had a chance to say how he felt. The love his father held for his stepmother. The way she used that love to take advantage of him. And how his father had refused to believe it, so damn in love that he couldn't accept that it wasn't returned the way he needed it to be. Inevitable pain was what came when you opened your heart like that. That's all it could be.

As such, Evan had taken the easy route and given up before he could risk being hurt. But then again, if it was so easy, why did it still hurt? Now more than ever, he realized why he'd never bothered with romance and love and women. Whether one tried to do the right thing or not, the chances were that it would come crashing down on you anyway. Best to avoid such things and live a life of isolation.

And what better place to start than alone on the floor in the cabin in the middle of the forest. It was a situation that Evan was wholly used to by now.

CHAPTERSEVENTEEN

"Knock knock." It was her father, loitering by the open door, wearing the biggest smile she had ever seen. Bigger than she'd known him capable of.

“Father,” Amelia said simply. She sat on the end of her bed, staring aimlessly out the window, her mind a million miles away with no sign that it might return anytime soon. She’d been home for a little over an hour now, bathed and dressed for supper, waiting to be called while wanting nothing more than to be left alone for now and possibly the rest of her life.

“I think congratulations is in order,” her father beamed as he waltzed into the room. Just about danced! Why, he was so happy that had Amelia been in another place, emotionally speaking, she might have asked who this man was and what he had done with her father.

Instead of all that, she simply said, “And why is that?”

“Now, now, no need for modesty.” He reached the end of her bed, and for a brief moment, it looked as if he was going to sit down beside her and put an arm around her shoulder. Thankfully, he curbed that impulse. “What you did today, Amelia. Brilliant. Truly, a masterstroke if I do say so myself.”

Amelia frowned at her father as she had no idea what he was talking about. Clearly, this had nothing to do with the Duke, so what on earth was he so cheery for?

“The forest,” he prompted, raising his eyebrows at her. “The storm. Finding yourself trapped by it — I confess, I’d completely forgotten about the cabin that my father had built. But to sequester yourself there until the storm ended, knowing that Lord Malnor would be the one to find you. I suppose you must have mentioned it to him earlier.” He rubbed his chubby hands together in front of his face. “Brilliant, Amelia. Truly, I didn’t know that you had it in you.”

“I didn’t...” she said softly, although her father wasn’t listening.

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“I only wished you’d told me of your plan in advance, as I might have urged Lord Malnor to head in that direction. A good thing the storm was so unforgiving, as Lord Winstead and his son were forced to return early. Again, bravo, Amelia. Bravo.”

Ah, now she understood.

It was on account of her returning from the forest with Lord Malnor. When she did, having left the Duke behind, it appeared to those watching that Lord Malnor had been the one to find her. And even the affable lord, knowing not of the Duke’s presence in the cabin, had believed that he’d been the one to save her... even though the storm had well and truly passed, and there was no need for her to be saved. But the gesture was the same, and the moment the two had emerged from the forest, it was nothing but praise for the brave lord and worry for the foolish young lady who was lucky that such a strong, handsome man had found her when he did.

If this was just a few hours ago, Amelia might have rebuked her father’s notion. She might have told him that she hadn’t gotten herself trapped on purpose, and really, all Lord Malnor had done was walk her home. If this was just a few hours ago, she certainly would have tried to temper her father’s excitement because she could see from the excitable look in his eyes that this visit was about more than a chance to congratulate her on her devilish ways.

Instead of any of that, all she was able to offer was a soft, “Oh. Right.”

“No need to be so modest,” her father continued. “You took my instruction, and you went beyond anything that even I might have conceived. And I must say...” He stood over her, still rubbing his hands together, a look of pure greed written across his

visage. “I’m even thinking that I owe you an apology.”

Amelia blinked. “You — you do?”

He chuckled. “I doubted you, Amelia. All this time, I thought you were working against me. And I know, I know you promised me that you were not, but can you blame me with the way you have behaved? As if you were trying to thwart me. But now I see that you were just bidding your time. A tiger in the grass, so to speak.”

“Yes, well... I suppose I got lucky with the storm.”

“And you played it perfectly. I’ve just been speaking with the Marquess too, and —”

“You were?” she blurted before she could stop herself. Panic set in, fear that her father might have taken this single instance and used it to finally strike the deal he’d been meaning to since this whole charade began.

His nostrils flared; her father hated being interrupted. But his mood was such that this time, he chose to let it go. “I did. And he was most glad that you’re all right. He could not have sounded happier. I get the feeling that he’s become quite taken with you.”

She sighed with relief but then noticed her father eyeing her and forced a smile. “I guess we’ll have a lot to talk about over supper then, won’t we?”

“Ah yes...” He grimaced. “About that.” He looked to where she was sitting on the edge of the bed and raised an eyebrow. It took Amelia a moment to understand what he was suggesting, but then she was quick to shuffle across, so he might sit. Which he did do, beside her, but not so close that they were touching, or he might risk doing so. “I’m afraid that supper has been cancelled.”

“What?” Amelia blurted again, unable to hide the excitement in her voice.

“After the storm and what happened with you...” Her father shook his head. “Plus, Lord Wexley’s son sprained his ankle in the storm, and Lord Chalmers sustained a cut to his cheek from a falling branch. The entire thing...” He exhaled and shook his head again. “The storm has made a mess of things, so I made the decision to cancel the final night so that they might go home and attend to their injuries.” He didn’t sound happy about it.

Amelia, on the other hand, was thrilled. The last thing she had wanted to do was sit through another long evening, feigning interest, forcing herself to engage when she would have much rather had been in her room, mourning the day’s outcome while assessing where she was to go from here.

And what was more, with this new twist concerning herself and Lord Malnor, Amelia would have had to work extra hard to keep his affections. The Duke wouldn’t have been there to intercede. Her father would have been egging them on. And with the way she was feeling, Amelia wasn’t entirely sure how she might have behaved, what she might have said, and the fallout that was sure to follow.

But she didn’t tell her father any of that.

“That’s a shame,” she said instead, forcing herself to sound upset.

“It is...” Her father eyed her skeptically. “But not to worry, for when God closes a door, he opens a window.” His eyes then flashed, and Amelia’s stomach sank because that could only mean more bad news. “Mr. Gregory!” he then barked.

Suddenly, one of the manor’s many servants, Mr. Gregory, appeared in the doorway. He held in his hands a large, flat cardboard box with a ribbon wrapped about it. He hesitated as he appeared, and her father waved the man in.

“What’s going on?” Amelia asked, eyeing the box.

“As you know, the Galentine Ball is in a few night’s time,” he explained as he collected the box from Mr. Gregroy and then shooed him away. “And as it so happens, Lord Wexley’s estate is just down the road. Seeing as we were forced to cancel tonight, I suggested to Lord Wexley that he host us and the others that evening and the following morning. We may get ready there, perhaps sup before we leave, and then retire for the night as one of his guests. Personally, I loathe his manor. It’s cold and ancient and has an odor to it that Lord Wexley claims he can’t smell, but I know he must.” Her father undid the bow atop the box. “Nevertheless, it will be a perfect opportunity.”

“An opportunity...?” A lump formed in her throat as she eyed the box. “For what?”

“For a final push.” Her father’s eyes widened with excitement, and he looked at her. “Not that a push will be required, mind you. Not after we had this unexpected delivery.” He lifted the box and placed it on her lap.

Amelia didn’t move to open it. “What — what is it?”

“Again, Amelia, I must admit that I’ve underestimated you. All this time I thought Lord Malnor to find you uninteresting, but clearly, he has become as besotted as I could have hoped.” A beat. “Open the box.”

Her hands shook as she lifted the lid with no idea what the box might contain but knowing it had to be bad. However, once she lifted the lid and saw what was inside, Amelia couldn’t help but gasp. Why, for a moment she forgot entirely what her father was saying and gave herself over to excitement.

“Where... how... who?” she gasped to herself.

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“Your mother was beside herself,” her father sniggered. “This wasn’t what I ordered. Who does he think he is? I’ve never been so insulted. And so on,” he sniggered again. “But as I pointed out, the gesture is what matters, and this...” He clicked his tongue. “It’s as good as a proclamation of love.”

Amelia wasn’t listening. Inside the box, folded gently, calling to her it seemed, was the most gorgeous dress that she had ever seen. Made from a weave so fine it was practically gossamer, dark yellow with canary yellow woven through the seams, red about the hems, a feel to it that was like silk through her fingers, it was the dress from her dreams. She remembered instantly where the material had come from, unable to fathom how it had arrived on her doorstep, lost in the excitement of the moment such that it took her a little longer than it should have for her to realize.

“You will wear that dress on the night,” her father was saying. “And when Lord Malnor sees you wearing the dress that he picked out —”

“What?” Her head snapped around as the realization struck her. “Lord Malnor? He’s the one who... who... this was him?”

Her father frowned. “Of course, it was. Who else? Your mother told me how you’d shown an interest in the material in the store, and Lord Malnor must have gone back when you were done and ordered it for you specially. Again, Amelia...” He hesitated, but then, as if it pained him like nothing else, he rested a hand on her knee and gave it a loving squeeze. “You have out done yourself.”

It didn’t make any sense. Amelia eyed the dress in her hands, thinking back to that day in the store, trying to recollect how Lord Malnor had been acting and when he

might have done such a thing. And why?! Despite her father's jubilation and assurances, Amelia knew that she and Lord Malnor weren't nearly as taken with one another as he would have liked. The fact that he had gone out of his way to do this for her... again, it made no sense.

And she knew this for fact too because for the first time in her life, Amelia knew what it was like to be wanted by somebody... and to want them just as much. Things might not have turned out how she had expected. And her heart was breaking even now because of it. But the embers of that feeling burned softly inside of her, and they in no way had anything to do with Lord Malnor.

"Things are looking up." Her father rose to his feet and clapped his hands together. "And I must say, I am quite piqued. Yes... very much." He then rubbed his hands together. "The Galentine Ball, Amelia. The night will live in infamy for you, I am sure. Come this time next week, and everything will be just as it ought to." His eyes flashed, and in that moment, the look of evil that struck his visage almost made Amelia gasp.

He wasn't happy that his daughter might find someone to marry and live happily ever after with. He didn't care about her wellbeing or happiness. This, all of it, was about him. And with his plan having finally come together, as bizarre and unbelievable as it was, he could not have been happier.

As to Amelia and how she felt about it all? Truthfully... she didn't really care. Oh sure, there was a seed of depression buried deep inside, one that with enough light might grow into something truly heartbreaking. But there was no light left to give, certainly not in her life, so that little seed remained buried and ignored.

Her father wanted this courtship to happen. By the looks of things, it was going to whether she wished it or not. And seeing as there was nobody else in her life to whom she might wish herself promised, that there was no other man that might sweep in and

save her from her fate — not anymore — there was really no point in complaining. Broken. Defeated. Bereft of hope. Amelia forced a smile, knowing it might be the last she wore for a very long time.

CHAPTEREIGHTEEN

It was a strange feeling, hating how good you looked. Knowing that you might have been the most stunning, gorgeous, impossible to look away from person in a room while wishing it wasn't the case. To walk into a room and see heads turn, to notice conversations literally stop as mouths gaped in your direction, was a dream that any lady of the ton should have desired above all else.

Even Amelia, once upon a time, had harbored such fancies. She could remember the first ball she ever attended, what she had assumed would be the best night of her life, one that she had spent months preparing for because she wanted her name to be on the lips of every single person in attendance. She had imagined stampedes forming as men rushed to meet her. She had pictured women weeping because they didn't look as splendid as she. In the end, it had been a modest affair, for the dress her mother had forced on her that night was as shapeless as it was plain.

Tonight was different. Tonight was a dream come to life. Tonight was a once in a lifetime experience in which those fancies of youth finally came to fruition in ways that she couldn't have expected. When she entered the Galentine Ball, when she swept into the monstrous hall filled with hundreds of her contemporaries all vying for the affections of various lords and ladies, there was no doubt from the looks on the faces of those whom she passed that she was the bell of the ball, and everybody else could only hope to contend with second best.

Funny that she didn't give a damn.

“Lord Malnor has his work cut out for him tonight,” her father chortled as he walked

her through the hall, smiling broadly to those who they passed, nodding and smirking to himself as if this was his doing.

“It looks like it,” she said simply, noting the eyes on her but not caring for them one little bit. “A shame he wasn’t with us earlier. I thought he might have liked to see the dress he picked out.”

“Yes well, as he said, he had business to attend.” He didn’t sound happy about it, and indeed, he’d been nothing short of furious earlier. “But no matter, he will be here tonight. Besides, maybe seeing all these men gaping will remind him of how lucky he is.”

“I’m sure it will,” she responded pleasantly, albeit not pleasantly enough. Amelia caught her father side-eying her, and she forced a smile and fluttered her eyelashes. “I look forward to seeing him. I’ve...” She choked on the words but forced them out. “I’ve missed him.”

Her father nodded his agreement and then looked ahead as he continued to lead her through the ball.

It was a packed event. The hall was at least twice the size of the last ball she had attended, a veritable colosseum for how spacious it felt. There must have been hundreds of people in attendance, and that wasn’t to mention the scores of servers moving through the crowds with trays balanced on their arms filled with drinks and nibbles.

As was always the case with these events, it was the colors that captured the eye. The women were dressed in bright frocks of reds and yellows and greens and oranges and blues, all colored in every conceivable shade, paired with jewelry that shone and sparkled in the candlelight, matched to their fine make-up and lavish hairstyles and sashes and braids and crowns beset with bright stones worth more than their weight in

gold. Even the men, nowhere near as colorfully dressed, still wore suits styled to match their partners; cravats and cummerbunds worn in darker shades of the same color.

And even still, among it all, Amelia managed to stand out from the rest.

Her dress looked even better than she could have hoped. The dark yellow highlighted the soft tones of her milk-colored skin perfectly. The way it clung to her waist and scooped under her neckline was both elegant and just the right amount of bodacious. Her light-brown hair was worn in curls with ribbons to match her dress woven throughout. And her jewelry was mostly rubies, pairing perfectly with the dress and its red hems.

She had no doubt that Lord Malnor would like it. No doubt that he'd agree with the choice he'd made in picking it. No doubt that, come the end of the night, if everything went to her father's plans, he would officially court her, and the next phase of her life would begin. The only thing she doubted was her ability to stomach it and present an agreeable front that wouldn't turn the man off.

And it wasn't even that she didn't like Lord Malnor. The truth was, he was pleasant enough, friendly to speak with, and rather handsome also. Nothing wrong with the man at all, such that Amelia knew she should have been grateful for the match. Things could have been much worse. But Amelia felt like a child who had been given candy before the main course; her appetite was spoiled, knowing now how sweet things could be while knowing how bad for her it was to want more.

It was, of course, His Grace the Duke of Northrade of whom she thought.

Three days had come and gone since that afternoon spent in the cabin. Three days of wishing. Three days of wanting. Three days of wondering if maybe, just maybe, the Duke would change his mind and come to her. Three days of knowing it was never

going to happen because she had told him not to.

Had Amelia made a mistake? She'd spent a lot of time considering the possibility. When he had told her that they couldn't see one another again, should she have argued further? Should she have refused to accept? And if she had, would he have seen the folly of his suggestion and agreed that he'd do anything he could for them to be together. Did he even care to?

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That was the problem, she had decided. While they had shared in one of the most intimate, wonderful, damn arousing experiences of her life, she still didn't know how the Duke felt about her. Yes, he was clearly attracted to her. But did he care for her? Did he want her beyond the obvious? And would he fight for her if he needed to? The fact that she hadn't seen or heard from him in three days should have answered that well enough.

In the end, the only conclusion that Amelia could draw was that the Duke did not feel about her the way she felt about him. If he did, then she wouldn't be in this situation in the first place. If he did, then nothing she had said would scare him off. If she did, then she wouldn't feel as glum and utterly hopeless as she did right now.

"Where is he?" her father grumbled as he led her. "He should be here."

"Who?" Amelia said stupidly.

"Who do you think? Lord Malnor! He promised me that you would be his first dance — his only dance is what he should have said."

"Maybe he's running late?" she offered, sounding a little too hopeful.

"No, I saw his carriage outside. He is here." Her father yanked on her arm suddenly and dragged her across the ball. "This is unacceptable!"

Her father had been in a mood all day. Ever since he'd learned that Lord Malnor wouldn't be joining them before the ball. Lord Wexley had opened his home to those who had spent the previous weekend at her father's estate, but the only two not to

show were Lord Malnor and His Grace.

“Excuse me,” a voice spoke suddenly from behind Amelia. She recognized it although she hadn’t expected it. Not tonight. Not every again. “May I have this dance?”

Amelia spun around to find His Grace standing just behind her, body half bowed, hand out for her to take. She was certain he wouldn’t make an appearance tonight. After their last encounter, she expected him to avoid her for the rest of the Season at least — he had certainly acted like he would. And yet here he was, almost her knight in shining armor, looking just as dapper and delectable and damn perfect as she remembered.

She eyed the hand extended for her. Hesitated. Glanced up and met the Duke’s clear blue eyes. There was a plea for forgiveness in them, a silent apology that he couldn’t voice but wanted her to have. For three days, she had cursed the way they’d left things in the cabin, and now, possibly, the Duke had returned to rectify them.

Finally, he was ready to fight for her.

The hand called to her like a Siren, and slowly, almost unable to stop herself, she reached for it.

* * *

“I’m sorry, Your Grace.” Lord Lindstone snatched his daughter’s hand back, just as it was about to graze Evan’s fingers. “I’m afraid that my daughter has already promised her first dance of the evening to another.”

“Oh?” Evan raised a curious eyebrow. “To whom?”

“Lord Malnor,” Lord Lindstone sneered, still holding his daughter’s hand as if worried that when he let it go, it would automatically find its way into Evan’s. “We were just searching for him.”

“I’m sure he won’t mind,” Evan replied simply, keeping his smile and persona friendly for the repugnant lord, not wanting to give him a reason to flare up. “Lord Malnor and I are good friends, after all. There will be no ill feelings, I assure you.”

“Be that as it may,” Lord Lindstone responded stubbornly, “it would be best if we —”

“Father...” Miss Baker managed, pulling her hand free. “...it’s fine. I will still have plenty of time to dance with Lord Malnor.”

Lord Lindstone’s eyes widened, and his cheeks reddened, and his lips pursed together. Fury was what the pudgy lord became, such that he was momentarily rendered mute. And in that moment, Evan pounced.

“Wonderful.” He took Miss Baker by the hand and pried her from her father’s side. “I promise, I’ll return her in one piece.” A broad smile for Lord Lindstone which only seemed to anger him further.

And then, with Miss Baker’s hand clasped firmly in his own, Evan led her to the dance floor, all the while wondering to himself if this was the right thing to do, or if he was making just one more mistake in what had already been a very long list of them.

He almost didn’t come tonight. For three days and three nights, Evan had debated the merit of what he was about to do. But in the end, he reasoned that he had no choice. The way he and Miss Baker had left things in the cabin had haunted him these past three days, besieged him such that he felt ill whenever he remembered it. That look

on Miss Baker's face, part forlorn, part contempt, part disbelief that he could be so cruel. Evan couldn't leave things like that. He couldn't do that to Miss Baker. She had a right to know why he was the way he was, that this had nothing to do with her, that he was a broken man who could not be fixed.

It might not see them end up together. But at the very least, it might give Miss Baker a chance to move past what had happened and hopefully live a happy life, even if he wasn't to be a part of it. That, Evan reasoned, was the least he could do.

"You look beautiful, by the way," Evan said as the two reached the dance floor and took their positions. One hand on her waist, the other taking her hand and extending it from their bodies. He was careful not to press himself too close to her, however.

She was wearing the dress he had ordered for her. Evan didn't fail to notice it. And while it made his heart soar to see how stunning she looked, he also wondered if she knew its origins, yet he realized that in the end, it made no difference. Better really that he hadn't ordered the dress in the first place.

"Thank you." Her smile was shy and nervous, but she made sure he saw it. "As do you."

"I look beautiful, do I?" Evan raised an eyebrow.

Her eyes widened, and her cheeks flushed. "What? No, I didn't mean — not beautiful. Obviously not. I meant handsome. You look very handsome."

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“I know what you meant,” he chuckled. “And thank you. Although I think I preferred beautiful.”

She pretended to roll her eyes at his comment but couldn't keep herself from smiling. They had a natural repour, one that three days apart couldn't stifle. And even now, mere seconds in, it was igniting again in ways that were wholly familiar.

Amelia opened her mouth to speak, but suddenly the music began, and Evan was quick to lead her. There were a dozen couples on the floor, positioned in a circle, moving clockwise as they waltzed in perfect synchronicity to the music and the other couple's rhythm. Evan couldn't help but be reminded of the first time he and Amelia had danced together, how long ago that felt, how different things were now. A shame then that this dance would likely end under similar circumstances.

“You were surprised to see me tonight,” Evan said with wry smile.

“Maybe a little,” Miss Baker admitted, matching his smile. “I thought I told you that we shouldn't see one another again.” She raised an eyebrow at him.

Evan grimaced. “I didn't know if I should come.”

“I'm glad that you did,” she said quickly, her wry smile turning sincere. “Truly. Despite what I may have said, a small part of me was hoping to see you tonight. And here you are.”

This was going to be harder than he thought. It might have been nice if he had asked for a dance, and she had denied him. Or if she had accepted, only to use this moment

to chastise him for daring to speak with her. If there was a chance that she hated him, as she ought, then maybe Evan wouldn't have had to go through with this. Easier to live with himself knowing she loathed him. At least that way, it was only his own wretched emotions he'd have to deal with.

"We need to talk," Evan started simply as he guided her across the floor. The music was loud, but he could barely hear it, so focused on what he had to say that they might have been the only two in the entire hall. "The way that we left things in the cabin, it has haunted me."

"Me too," she said softly, her words filled with hope. "And I didn't mean it. What I said, it was just —"

"Please," Evan spoke over her. "Miss Baker, if I can just..." He sucked through his teeth. "Before you say anything else, I have to get this out. I have to make you understand."

Her brow creased. "All right."

"Everything that has happened between us, I need you to know that I take full responsibility. From the moment we met, it was I who attacked and forced myself on you. I was the one who hounded you and refused to leave you be. If it wasn't for the way I acted, none of this would have happened."

"I think I can take some of the blame," she chuckled. "You were, after all, only trying to help your friend."

"Which I had no right to do." Evan swallowed. "I see that now. I thought I was helping him — that he needed my help. But Lord Malnor is an adult, and what you were trying to do... it was perfectly acceptable. You told me once that it was a normal thing for a marriage to be agreed upon between a lord and lady without any chance of

love. That in our world, that is how it usually is. I dismissed it because I was suspect of you, but now, I see that you were right. I might not like your father, but he has every right to try and... and convince Lord Malnor that you would make a splendid wife. Which, by the way, I think you would.”

“All right...” Miss Baker said carefully, sensing that this conversation wasn’t going the way she might have hoped.

“The simple fact is, none of this would have happened if not for the way I behaved. And for that, I am sorry.”

“Don’t apologize,” Miss Baker said. “I don’t regret it for a —”

“But you should.” The music picked up, those around them started dancing faster, and Evan was quick to match their pace as he continued to lead Miss Baker. “I had no right to put you in that position. None. And now, because of what I have done...” He gave his head a shake, hoping she would see the regret. “I fear I may have misled you.”

She leaned back. “Misled me? How have you done so?”

“I told you of my father,” Evan said softly, voice cracking because he hated speaking about this. “How my stepmother pretended to love him so that he might marry her. How once they were wed, she bled him dry, knowing that he was too love blind to see what she was doing to him. And it was obvious too, or I thought it was. She used his fortune to fund her own projects, siphoning the money out of his accounts, setting herself up for the moment she would leave him. Which she did do.”

“It’s abhorrent,” Amelia agreed, not entirely sure where this was going.

“And my younger brother...” He sniffed. “I told you of him.”

“That he lost his life,” she finished for Evan. “You said he was attacked when he tried to retrieve the fortune.”

“Knowingly attacked. I blame myself for it...” Evan’s heart cracked as he was forced to recount one of the most painful experiences in his life. “My brother suspected what our stepmother was doing, but I refused to believe it. I’d seen her and my father together, I had witnessed how much they loved one another. But my brother... he was wiser than me, even though he was younger. He saw through it, realizing what my step-mother was doing. He tried to tell our father, but our father refused to accept the possibility. Again, he was so stricken with love he could not see the truth, even thought it was right in front of him. So, fed up, my brother investigated the situation himself, thinking that he might be able to bring proof to my father and then finally my father would be forced to admit it. Our stepmother found out what he was doing and rather than trying to convince him otherwise, she hired a group of thugs to kill him.”

Miss Baker gasped. “I had no idea.”

Evan nodded. “Few do. Even my father, after everything that happened, refused to believe what my stepmother did. And because of that, he died alone, clinging to the last vestiges of hope that she might one day come back to him. So in love was he, so convinced by it, that he refused to give it up, and it killed him.”

Miss Baker looked up at Evan, into his eyes as she studied him. There was concern there, he knew. A real sense of care and worry over the pain that this story was causing him. But there was also fear and knowing as she tried to reckon why he was telling her this and what it might mean.

“I don’t want you to turn into my father,” Evan said.

“Wh — what?” she balked, nearly tripping over her dress.

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“And I don’t want to turn into my stepmother.”

“That’s ridiculous, how could you even think that?”

“The time we spent together was lovely, and I will cherish it always — you must know that I never meant to trick or lure or hurt you in any way.”

“I know you didn’t,” she hurried to explain, finding it difficult to keep in time to the dancing as her mind clearly whirled in desperation. “Just as I wasn’t trying to hurt or trick you.”

“Be that as it may, what happened to my brother and father affected me more than you could ever know. It taught me not to trust. It taught me not to open myself up, no matter the cost. And most importantly...” He sighed and bowed his head as the music began to slow. “It taught me how fragile the human heart is and that sometimes it’s better to keep it caged and locked up tight, rather than risk opening it to the world where it might suffer the same fate as those who I loved.”

“I don’t —” She gave her head a shake. “I don’t understand. What are you saying?”

“How we left things the other day, I needed you to know that it had nothing to do with you and everything to do with me. I’m the one who is broken here. I’m the one who is to blame. It has nothing to do with you whatsoever, and you must know that.”

The music had stopped and the couples, Evan and Miss Baker included, came to a slow stop. As soon as they did, Miss Baker released Evan by the hands and took a step back, the look on her face a mixture of confusion, disbelief, and contempt.

“So let me get this straight. The reason you are here tonight, it has nothing to do with...” Her lips curled. “With you, coming to your senses or changing your mind about what you said?”

Evan frowned, surprised by the reaction. “What? No, as I said, it’s —”

“I heard you,” she hissed, low enough, so nobody would hear. “All this is, is an effort to make yourself feel better. You felt guilty about what happened and... and... and wanted to set your own mind at ease. What’s the matter, have trouble sleeping these last few nights?”

“What?” Evan leaned back as if she had struck him. “No. That’s got nothing to do — I didn’t like knowing that I might have hurt you. I wanted to make sure that you understood.”

“Oh, I understand, all right. You’ve devised the perfect excuse for never falling in love. A sort of free pass for acting like a horrible, ungrateful —”

“Miss Baker!” Evan hissed and stepped into her. The music had stopped, the couples were leaving the dance floor, but they remained where they were. And because of that, people were starting to take note. “Please, I never meant to hurt you.”

She snorted. “Oh, don’t worry about that, Your Grace. I will make this very easy for you. I do not care about you. I never did care about you. And the second that I turn about and walk away, I suspect that I won’t think about you ever again.”

“Miss —”

Miss Baker was true to her word. Or at least it seemed. Her visage set to fury, she spun on her heel and stormed across the dance floor, leaving Evan in her wake. She didn’t look back over her shoulder. Nor did she check to make sure he was watching.

It was as if he didn't exist, a reality that Evan might have liked right about now.

He had wanted to do the right thing. Knowing that he had hurt Miss Baker, thinking that he might be able to explain himself and part ways amicably, he had come here tonight with the right intentions only to make things that much worse. If there was some good to be taken from it, it seemed that at least he didn't have to worry about Miss Baker fawning after him anymore. At least now she might be free to carry on, in her own words, as if he didn't exist.

If only Evan could do the same. Despite the story he told, despite his claims that he had chosen to live a life free of love and emotional openness where his heart might stay trapped in a cage to avoid being hurt, he knew now that this was perhaps the biggest lie he'd ever told. He'd opened the cage. He'd let his heart out. And as he had known would happen, pain had followed.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Evan felt like a right fool. A moron of the highest order. So stupid that he suspected of all the men and women in England, he was the most braindead of them all. What else was there to think? With what he had done. His reason for doing it. How certain he had been that it was the right move when clearly it was the opposite of that. People this unintelligent shouldn't be allowed to mix with others. They should be locked up and shipped off to an island somewhere, so there was no chance of them causing harm to those they loved.

He wandered through the ball aimlessly. Head down. Mind elsewhere. Ignorant of those who tried to get his attention or pull him into conversation. Already known to those of the ton as standoffish and rude, the way he behaved tonight didn't harm his reputation any further. It just confirmed it for those who might have been willing to give him the benefit of the doubt.

Not that he cared. All Evan cared about, all he could think of, was Miss Baker and how he had hurt her. His heart might have been in the right place. His intentions might have been pure. But now, because of his misplaced actions alone, she was undoubtedly worse off than she had been before.

A part of him wondered if he should go to her. If he should explain further. But then he thought, explain what? Explain that he cared for her more than he'd ever cared for someone else. Explain that he didn't understand these feelings that surged through him whenever she came to mind, and rather than confront them, he would come up with excuses to dismiss them. That if he was a different type of person, he might fight for her as he now suspected she wanted him to.

But he wasn't a different type of person. As Evan skulked through the hall, catching the dismissive glances and judgmental mutterings of those around him, he knew that lying to himself wouldn't change anything. He was who he was, and that person wasn't one who could risk it all for the chance of love and happiness. He didn't even know what love and happiness were.

And so, he walked. But he also needed fresh air which was why he found himself outside, wandering the gardens instead. Unlike many balls he had been to, the gardens tonight weren't an extension of the festivities inside. They'd been cut off from the hall, bereft of light, as lonesome and dark as Evan's broken heart.

It was for that reason that when Evan heard the hushed whispers of two people speaking from just around the corner, hidden behind a large hedge shaped like a Greek deity with a sword and shield, he understood their words as if they were standing right beside him. As if they wanted him to hear.

Evan came to a sudden stop, nearly turning around because the tenor of the whispers suggested the conversation to be a secret. Short, sharp sentences. Arguing, it sounded like. And while, indeed, Evan just about spun on his heel and started in the other

direction... he recognized the voices and despite himself, he couldn't walk away.

"I cannot believe he would do this to me!" It was Lord Lindstone, his fury so strong that Evan could almost see fire spewing above the hedge as if he was breathing it.

"The audacity! The nerve of the man!"

"Maybe he fell ill?" Miss Baker suggested, her voice soft, disinterested.

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“Ill? Pah!” Lord Lindstone spat. “I saw him earlier, when you were dancing with that wretch of a duke.”

“His Grace,” Miss Baker said.

“What was that?!”

“Nothing...”

Evan kept his body pressed to the row of hedges that led to where Lord Lindstone and Miss Baker were speaking. Light footed. Breathing minimal. Careful not to be heard because despite knowing that this conversation wasn’t for him and he’d do best to ignore it, he simply didn’t have it in himself to turn the other way.

“The point is, he was here. And you...” It was a snarl. “You were busy.”

“It wasn’t my fault, Father.”

“Oh, it never is!” he snapped at her, and Evan nearly leapt around the hedge then and there, fear striking him that Lord Lindstone might be manhandling his daughter. “But all hope is not lost.”

“I don’t see how? If Lord Malnor has left already, there isn’t much I can do.”

“He has left, but he is not gone,” Lord Lindstone pointed out, a tinge of triumph in his voice now. “Remember, tonight he is sleeping at Lord Wexley’s manor. As are you.”

“All right? But if he has retired already, he is likely tired. Or as I said, ill. He won’t be awake when I return, Father. Maybe I can catch him tomorrow when he breaks his fast. I promise tomorrow, I will do better.” She couldn’t have sounded less excited by the notion, her voice cracking with each word spoken.

“Tomorrow will be too late.”

“Then what?” A pause in the conversation, and Evan crept closer. Although the two weren’t speaking, he could sense a meaning being passed between them. And sure enough, “Father! I don’t... Surely, you are not serious?!”

“Deadly serious. And why you would think I might be anything but — you know how important this is.”

“No,” she said emphatically. “I won’t do it. You can’t... you can’t make me.”

“Excuse me?” Lord Lindstone snarled. “What did you just say?”

Evan could picture the overweight lord standing over his cowering daughter. He could see the rancor in the Viscount’s eyes. Although it didn’t sound as if their conversation had come to blows, Evan prepared himself to intervene if needed.

“I’m sorry,” she said softly. “It’s just that... I don’t know if that will work.”

Lord Lindstone snorted. “Of course, it will. Even Lord Malnor, for how he carries on — you would think the man’s feces smelled like roses, the opinion he has of himself. Pah! Even he won’t be able to resist the sight of a young lady standing over his bed, begging to join him. He’ll think he’s in a dream.”

Evan’s stomach twisted. Was Lord Lindstone serious? Surely, not! What the man was suggesting, what he was asking of his daughter, there was just no way. This went

beyond trying to convince a lord to court one's daughter. This was... this was beyond anything Evan could imagine. A more reprehensible act he could not fathom.

"And if he refuses me?"

A snort. "That won't be a problem. Wear the dress he had made for you." Evan's stomach twisted further at that. "Showing just the right amount of skin. And if he tries to refuse, we'll just have to see how convincing you can be."

"There must be another way?" she pleaded.

"Don't you dare question me. I have told you what is at stake here. I have told you time and time again! Lord Malnor is who you must seduce, and seeing as you have failed me at every turn, it is time we took desperate measures."

"But there must be someone else?" Miss Baker pleaded, and Evan could just about see the tears forming in her eyes. "If it is debt that you worry about —"

"How dare you!" he cried so loudly that Evan was sure that those inside the ball could hear. "My finances are none of your concern, woman. The only thing you need to concern yourself with is the task I have set. Do you understand?" A beat, hesitation from Miss Baker. "I said do you —"

"Yes, Father," she hurried.

Evan still could not believe what he was hearing. Even putting aside the despicable act that Lord Lindstone was demanding of his daughter, the desperation of it all made little to no sense. Yes, David was wealthy. But he wasn't the only wealthy lord in London. If Lord Lindstone's debts truly were as bad as they sounded, why David? Why was he so determined that David be the one to cover them?

There was more going on here than Evan had realized. More than a conniving lord eager to see his daughter marry someone of good stock and worth. There was something else at play, and while Evan might have liked to think about it further, Lord Lindstone was speaking again.

“You understand what will happen if you fail me?”

“I do...” she said softly, speaking into her chest.

He scoffed again. “Allow me to remind you because if you fail me tonight, daughter, it won’t just be your head on the block. Bridget’s too. I wanted sons, God how I wished for them. But I was cursed with daughters instead, daughters who would do well to remember that they live by my good graces. Understand?”

“I do, Father.”

“But I will not be denied what is rightfully mine. I have many a friend and acquaintance who would literally kill for the chance to marry either of you. They may not be members of the gentry, but their purses are fat enough that it can be overlooked. Next week, Amelia, if you fail me in this, I will — look at me when I speak to you,” he snarled. “I need you to see that I am through playing about. If you fail me, next week, I will take you and your sister to my weekly game, I will put you on a stage for each of them to see, and I will sell you to the highest bidder. I do not speak in metaphor. I do not exaggerate. I will auction you off like I would a prized mule because at the end of the day, that is all you are to me.” He scoffed again. “At least a mule knows better than to talk back.”

It was all Evan could do to keep himself from storming around the corner and punching Lord Lindstone in his fat face. The only thing keeping Evan from doing so was knowing that it would make little difference. Sure, it might save Miss Baker from tonight, but Lord Lindstone was her father, and he was free to do what he wanted.

It was unbelievable. Unfathomable. What Evan had heard... he still struggled to comprehend it. As if it wasn’t real, because surely, he must have misheard or

misunderstood? And to think, sickeningly, that Evan had dared to accuse Miss Baker of trying to trick David. As if she was in anyway at fault. That alone made him —

The arguing had stopped, and Evan noticed just in time. Shadows emerged from around the hedge ahead of where he stood, and Evan was quick to press himself into the bushes and meld into them, using the absolute darkness as cover, holding his breath, not daring to move an inch, as Lord Lindstone dragged Miss Baker behind him and back toward the ball.

If Evan had thought himself to be an idiot earlier, now, he knew it for fact.

He'd assumed that he was doing the right thing by Miss Baker. By explaining why they couldn't be together, by telling her the truth as he saw it, he had wanted to spare her heartbreak.

She didn't want David She never had. But that was also irrelevant. If David didn't take to her, and there was no saying that he would, her fate would be worse than anything Evan could have imagined. Worse even than heartbreak, for she would have no heart left to be broken. If Evan didn't do something to stop this, what Lord Lindstone had planned was a fate worse than death.

He promised he would stay away from her. She demanded it of him. Only, Evan couldn't do that. Miss Baker's future, her very happiness, hung in the balance, and it seemed, ironically enough, that it was on Evan to save her. He only hoped that this time, for once, he didn't ruin everything.

CHAPTERTWENTY

Amelia stood before the closed door, her hand trembling above the doorknob, her body shaking as it rebelled against her — against what she was about to do. She had been standing there for minutes, hours it felt like, knowing that she couldn't refuse

while knowing that she couldn't possibly go through with it.

How could she? How could her father ask this of her? She still couldn't believe it. Even now, more than an hour after the demand was made, and she thought back to their conversation, desperate to find a new meaning in what was a very clear and precise request. But there was no hidden meaning. This wasn't some test that he had given her. Her father, the beast that he was, had ordered her to sleep with Lord Malnor or suffer consequences that were even worse than this most heinous of acts.

Maybe the Duke was right, Amelia thought to herself bitterly. Rather than risk being hurt, he had chosen a life of solitude and loneliness, refusing to open his heart to the world for fear it might be crushed. It had sounded pathetic to her ears, a truly pitiful way to live. Without hope. Without love. A life of misery for fear of rejection and pain. Who would want to live like that? Who would choose such a state of being?

It seemed now that the Duke had been on to something. If Amelia was as cold as he, as uncaring, as emotionally stunted, then this right here wouldn't be nearly the travesty that it was. It would be but a clever maneuver, a sure way to secure her future and that of her sister's. And surely, she wouldn't feel so dirty.

There was nothing she could do. Her father was in the adjoining room, no doubt listening for her to enter the bedroom of the Marquess. And tomorrow morning, they were to meet in the library so that the two could... could discuss what had happened. Her body shuddered at the thought that he'd want such a thing. Nay, that he would demand it!

If she refused this, next week she and her sister would be sold off like livestock, and that would be a fate worse than death. She didn't want to do it. Her stomach twisted and churned at the mere thought. But with no other option...

Amelia turned the door handle and stepped inside the bedroom.

It was too dark to properly see. The curtains were drawn. Light from outside barely slipped through the cracks. She could just make out the shape of the bed in the room's center, and the lump lying on top that told her it was occupied. Not that this came as a shock, but a small part of her had hoped the Marquess might not be here. But then again, Amelia never had been that lucky.

Silence hung heavy in the room. So much so that she could hear her heart thumping inside her chest. With each step taken, she could hear the floorboards creak under her. And the Marquess' breathing was slow and steady and peaceful. A man in a deep slumber. A man not expecting to be woken.

What did her father think would happen? That the Marquess would wake up, see her standing there, and pull her into him. That he would be so overtaken by lust that he wouldn't be able to help himself? Or was she going to have to force it? Climb into his bed, slide her hand down his leg and... and... she couldn't even think it. Let alone do it!

She reached the side of the bed and froze. Too dark to see the Marquess properly, but his shape was there. The sound of his breathing. And his scent. Standing this close, silence her only companion, she could smell the Marquess clearly, a musk that was... familiar in a way she hadn't expected. Despite herself, she breathed in deeply through her nose, and that smell wafted through her, doing things to her that she didn't want but was glad for as she was going to need it.

"He... hello?" she spoke softly and leaned forward, touching the Marquess on the side. "Lord Malnor, are you awake?"

Nothing. The Marquess' breathing remained steady, and Amelia cursed under her breath. Shaking now, she knew if she was to do this, she'd have to commit. No light stepping around it. She needed to make sure the Marquess couldn't refuse her. And for that to be the case...

A single tear rolled down her cheek, and she steadied herself, took a deep breath, and then climbed into the bed.

She pressed her body up against the Marquess', curling herself around him but not knowing what to do from there. She reached out her hand, thinking she would stroke his face and perhaps kiss down his neck? Maybe run a hand down his thigh? Maybe grab his... she couldn't! How could her father ask this of her? How did he think she'd be able to go through with something like this? As far as he was aware, she'd never even kissed a man before. And this! She lay frozen beside the Marquess, one hand hovering above him, unable to move, even breathe, such was the fear that —

The Marquess' hand reached out and snatched her wrist. She gasped and before she realized what was happening, he pulled her onto her back, rolled over, and was on top of her. Body pressed hard against her own. Legs entwined. Hands pinning her down. She was trapped.

“Don't scream,” he whispered, and she could feel the warmth of his breath on her neck.

“I wasn't going to —” she started to speak, but the words caught in her mouth.

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It was still too dark to see properly, but that didn't matter. The smell, she knew now why it was so familiar. The feel of that body atop her own, it was right in a way that it shouldn't have been. His breath, a sensation she recognized immediately. And as to that voice? She would know it even in death.

"Your Grace?" she gasped. "What are you —"

"Surprised to see me?" he growled, still holding her down, his lips inches away from her own. "I suspect you were expecting somebody else."

Fear racked her. What was he doing here? This was supposed to be Lord Malnor's room. Did he know this was going to happen? That was impossible! To him, this must have been as shocking a moment as it was for her. Shocking, and disappointing.

"I... I..." she stammered at first, embarrassment mixed with despair because the Duke would guess why she was here, and no doubt he'd be disgusted by it. She tried to find the words of apology, to explain what was happening, but then she paused. Thought a moment. Realized something that had her firming up and dispelling any sense of wrongdoing. In fact, she snarled at him, "That's none of your business."

The Duke reared back, clearly taken aback by her response. "You're not wrong."

"What are you doing here?" she accused.

"I needed some place to sleep. Feeling a little ill from too much wine, or so I told Lord Malnor, and he was nice enough to offer me his bed. What's your excuse?"

“I —”

“Got lost on your way to your room?” he asked, sounding almost amused. “Or were you sleep-walking?”

He was mocking her! Or that was how it sounded. Angry now, Amelia wished her hands were free, so she could strike him. How dare he judge her. How dare he mock what he could not know. Did he think she wanted this? Was his opinion of her so low? If only he knew the truth, maybe he wouldn’t be so callous.

“Unhand me,” she hissed at him.

“No. I don’t think I will.”

“I’ll scream.”

“I doubt it.”

“Try me.”

The grip around her wrists tightened. His body seemed to somehow draw closer. And although it was too dark to see, she could feel his eyes on her as if he was trying to see through the darkness and to her soul.

“I’m going to be honest with you, Miss Baker,” he spoke in a whisper.

“I think I’ve had enough honesty from you for one day.” She struggled, but he held her still.

“I know what you’re doing here.”

Her lip curled, and she wished he could see the fury in her eyes. “You couldn’t possibly know what —”

“I overheard you and your father speaking earlier.”

Her heart stopped, and her rage dissipated. “You — you did?”

“I did. I know what he’s asked you to do. I know how it is you feel about it. And...” he hesitated as if it pained him to say, “...I know what will happen if you don’t. All of this, it’s never been you, has it?”

A lump appeared in her throat. “My sister. She —”

“Is lucky to have an older sister like you.” He still gripped her tightly, and he didn’t make to roll off her. And dammit, she didn’t want him to. Not anymore. “I only wish that I had seen it earlier. I think back to the things I said about you, and... and I’m —”

“Don’t.” She shifted slightly, allowing one of his legs to fall between both of her own. “Don’t apologize. I told you already, you’re not to do that ever again.”

“I can stop him,” the Duke said. “If you wish it. I don’t know what I would do or say, but surely, I can seek him out and —”

“There is no stopping him.” Her voice was so quiet that she barely heard it, unconsciously willing him to move even closer. “This is the only way.”

“It was never going to work. You don’t know Lord Malnor like I do. If he had been here instead of me...” He chuckled softly. “I assure you, he would have fled this room before you’d so much as touched him.”

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“My father is desperate for me to marry him. He will stop at nothing.”

“But it won’t work. Lord Malnor —”

“Is not as cold to me as you think,” she cut him off. “Despite your... aggressive nature,” she chuckled to which he laughed also, “he has taken a fancy to me. Ironically, you’re being here to stop me tonight might have saved us. Tomorrow, my father will just think up a new scheme. He won’t stop.”

“David?” The Duke pulled back, and his grip lessened around her wrists. She tried to shift to bring him closer, desperate now for the feel of him against her, but he refused. “He is? How do you mean?”

She sighed. What did it even matter? Alone with the Duke. Held down by his body as he pressed against and entwined her. A mere action away from picking up where they left things in the cabin, and she found that she could not bring herself to excitement. At the end of the day, it was Lord Malnor who she would be with. Anything that might happen now would only hurt her in the long run.

“This dress,” she said despondently. “Lord Malnor had it made for me in secret. I did not ask him, I swear it. I didn’t even know. But he saw me eyeing the material the other day, and without any suggestion from my parents, he went out of his way to have it made especially for me. If that isn’t a sign that he is at least interested in me, then I don’t know what — Why are you laughing?”

And he was too. Soft chuckles, she could feel his body shaking atop her. “You really don’t know?”

“Know what?”

“The dress you wear, Miss Baker. Lord Malnor didn’t have it commissioned.”

“He — he didn’t?” she stammered, another lump appearing in her throat as she dared to consider what he was about to say.

“No, he didn’t.” A beat and his grip tightened on her wrists, his body wrapped further around her, and his lips came to within mere millimeters of her own. “I did.”

“But why?”

“If you haven’t guessed that by now, then perhaps I made a mistake coming to this room tonight.”

Amelia had known that the Duke had feelings for her. That was obvious. But as to what these feelings were? Amorous desires? Lustful intent? A certain level of arousal that they had both taken advantage of on more than a few occasions. And sure, she had wondered if there might be more there, but that was merely a dream and a hope because as the Duke had told her to her face, he wasn’t the type to fall in love.

She was still wearing the dress, only now she wished that she wasn’t. The light cotton suddenly felt heavy on her, suffocating, and she wanted nothing more than for him to tear it from her body. And it was no longer hunger that drove this feeling. It wasn’t a need to feel his lips all over her because she couldn’t contain herself. She wanted the Duke because he wanted her, because he cared for her, because... because he loved her. And she loved him.

Without needing to say another word, Amelia moved her lips a fraction of an inch, kissing the Duke fully on the lips and as expected, he kissed her back.

“Wait.” The Duke pulled back suddenly.

“Wh – what?” Amelia stammered, half-leaning forward as if to try and follow his lips.

“Before we...” He half-smiled. “I need to ask you. Do you trust me?”

Amelia frowned, caught off guard by the suddenness of the question. “Trust you? What do you mean?”

“I won’t let your father do this to you.”

“I told you, I don’t have a choice. There is nothing I can do to stop —”

“Do you trust me?” he cut her off, looking into her eyes with a steely determination that told her exactly what he meant.

“What are you going to do?” she swallowed.

“Do you trust me?” he said again.

There was no question about it. She didn’t know what the Duke was thinking. She couldn’t guess what he might do. But she knew right then as well as she’d ever know anything that she trusted him with all her heart. “I do.”

And that was all the duke needed to hear.

His hands left her wrists and moved to her body. They grabbed her side and held her down as his mouth devoured her. Her legs, already open, wrapped about his waist and pulled him in as close as she could, and he let her, welcomed her, lifted her into him as he continued to kiss and lick and savage her like a starving man being offered food

for the first time.

Down her neck, his lips moved swiftly. Soft kisses turned hasty and wet. Over her collarbone, toward her breasts, he was rushed and hasty, as if he couldn't contain himself and wanted to taste every inch as quickly as he could for fear he might miss out. She grabbed a hold of his head, leaned back, closed her eyes, and moaned to the feel of his lips on her skin. And his hands too. And his body. All of him, all over her, she didn't know what to concentrate on, so she let herself go completely.

The dress was torn from her body. The Duke's shirt came off and was thrown across the floor. A slither of light crossed his face, caught his eyes, and she could see the desire in them as he bore down upon her, drinking her in and marveling in her beauty. But there was something else there. More than the usual arousal that she knew so well. The look he fixed her with was passion personified. A level of want that told her they were on the same page, and there would be no leaving it. This, she knew, was a night she would never forget.

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He was both soft and gentle and rough and forceful. Caring while also animalistic. He took her legs and spread them. He mounted her and buried his head in her neck. He bit down as his hands stroked her thighs and touched the outside of her lips, gently inserting inside of her, feeling her wetness, testing her readiness.

“Yes...” she whispered into his ear.

“Are you sure?” he whispered back, already moving to take action.

She didn’t answer with words. Her hands wrapped themselves around his buttocks, gripped them tight, her pelvis rising into him as she pulled him forward, and the Duke entered her for the first time.

The sensation was impossible to describe, and in a way, Amelia didn’t want to. It was more than just sex. More than just love making as she had heard it described. This was... it was two people, finally admitting how they felt without words but with action. As the Duke penetrated her, thrusting back and forth slowly, surely, not too hard, not too fast, she felt whole in a way she didn’t know was possible. A piece that was missing, finally found. Eyes closed. Legs spread apart. Head leaning back. She gave herself to the Duke and his every impulse. As he bit her neck, she moaned. As he licked her ears, she purred. As he moved inside of her while nibbling her breasts, squeezing her thighs, kissing her lips, she shuddered and gasped and just about wept, for she was so overcome.

“Don’t stop,” she moaned as the Duke thrust slowly inside of her; his movements were slow yet firm and hard.

“I never will,” he whispered into her ear.

“Urgh...” Soft moans escaped her lips each time she felt his length penetrate her. “Urgh...” every time his hands squeezed her thighs, or his lips nibbled and sucked on her breasts. “Your Grace...”

“What did I say?” he growled, suddenly grabbing her by the hips and lifting her into him.

Her eyes shot open, and a wicked smile spread up her lips. “Evan...”

The Duke growled again, and then, with her wrapped in his arms, he lifted her forward, rolling onto his back at the same time, keeping himself inside of her as she straddled him on top.

Her nails dug into his chest as she steadied herself. He was completely inside of her so that her pelvis ground against him. She started moving her hips back and forth, each time feeling his member throb inside of her, hitting her in a way that had her knees shaking and body shuddering. Back and forth she moved, one hand on his chest, the other grabbing him by the top of his head. Back and forth she moved, his hand squeezing her butt as he helped guide her. Back and forth... back and forth... back and forth.

There was no awkwardness. The Duke didn’t push too far or ask too much of her. It was, in every way, perfect. Not because of how good it felt. Not because of how turned on she was — how much she had wanted it. But because of who it was with.

And what was more, she could tell without having to ask that the Duke was of the same mind.

“Oh my... oh my... oh my God...” She could feel it coming long before it arrived. On

top of the Duke still, her movements becoming hard and faster, the fire in her thighs spread up her body.

“Amelia...” the Duke moaned, eyes closed as he leaned back. “Yes...”

“I’m... I’m... I’m going to...” She could say the words, but there was also no need. As if her entire body was set to explode but not outward, rather inwards. As if the explosion was being directed toward her loins, making her body condense and constrict before suddenly blooming like a flower in spring.

She screamed and collapsed in a heap on the Duke. He grabbed her by the head and held her there as he continued to thrust. And then he, too, erupted inside of her, his body stiffening, his legs shaking, his breathing stopping entirely as if he’d forgotten how.

And once it was all said and done... they simply lay there, holding one another close, no words said, nothing spoken of, no need to acknowledge anything because this here was the most comfortable they had ever been.

Once, she might have worried about what would happen after this. Once, she might have felt guilty because this was unbecoming in every sense of the word, and there would be no coming back. But tonight, now, that simply wasn’t the case. The Duke loved her, she knew. She loved him. And whatever happened, she knew now that she could count on him to save her.

And never before had someone needed saving as badly as Amelia did.

* * *

For the first time in a long time, Evan’s mind was clear. No longer worrying about that which he could not control. No longer determined to ignore how he felt, as if his

feelings were some sort of burden that would be best to ignore and be forgotten. For once, Evan allowed himself to simply forget and enjoy the moment, because this was without a doubt the happiest moment of his life.

“I should be going,” Miss Baker said in a whisper, in no way sounding like she wanted to.

“What’s stopping you?” Evan said as if he wished the same.

“Well, for one thing, your arm.” She was lying snuggled in beside him, and his arm rested under her head and curled around her chest. “If I didn’t know any better, I’d say you didn’t want me to leave.”

“This?” Evan half raised the arm, as if only just noticing it. “I’ve tried to move it, but the way you’re lying on it... I’m afraid I’m trapped.”

“But I can’t move with it strung across my chest like this.” She feigned struggling to shift it.

“It seems we’re at an impasse then,” Evan said simply. “Which means that nobody is going anywhere.”

“What a terrible shame.”

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“The worst of luck,” she agreed. “Somehow, I suppose we’ll have to make do.”

They laughed together, softly, careful not to make too much noise. And then, unable to control himself, Evan rolled Miss Baker onto his stomach so that she was looking right at him, her face an inch from his. He kissed her then, long, deep, passionate kisses which she returned in kind. As she had been doing all night.

He didn’t want her to leave. If he had his way, they might never leave this room again. Lock the doors. Bar the windows. Stay here until the world ended, and they were the last two left in it. A dream that felt close enough to reality that he almost suggested it, certain she would agree in an instant.

How had this happened? Evan didn’t care. He didn’t need to. Whenever his mind tried to reckon with the previous evening, all that had led to this, how he had gotten so lucky... he simply pushed those thoughts aside and went back to enjoying the present. Luck had brought him here. That was all it was. Luck that he’d been in that garden when he was. It was lucky that David was the one Lord Lindstone had chosen for his daughter to pursue. Lucky that Evan had chosen to forgo romance and infatuation and love until Miss Baker had come along.

One day, he would sit back and reason with all that had happened, but for now, all he wanted to do was bask in the moment and relish in the feel of Miss Baker’s skin on his, the smell of her, the taste of her on his lips. For once, he chose not to care about anything other than what made him happy.

“But really,” Miss Baker sighed and rolled off him, this time not lying back, “I do need to go.”

Evan groaned and sat himself up. “Must you?”

She looked to the drawn curtains where the morning’s light was just now starting to peek through the shades. Not yet sunrise, that would be upon them any minute. “My father...” she said, looking away.

Evan might have liked to live in the moment, to forget everything else, to pretend that nothing else mattered but what was happening right here and now. but as he’d just been reminded, that simply wasn’t possible. One day, maybe. He hoped. But until then... there was one more thing he had to do.

“You’re not going to marry Lord Malnor.” He took her hand.

“But if I don’t...”

“Nor will I allow that to happen,” he said. No need to verbalize what ‘that’ was. It was too horrid a thought to say out loud.

“But —”

“I promise. Listen.” He took both her hands and held them to his chest. He looked her in the eyes, forcing her to do the same. He made her see that this was no joke, that he’d never been more serious about anything in his life. “I promise you.”

“But how?” she said in despair, trying to pull her hands free, but he would not allow it.

“Do you trust me?” Evan asked.

“You asked me that already,” she responded with a coy smile. He raised an eyebrow at her. “Of course, I trust you.”

“That’s it then.” He kissed her hands and looked at her again. “I promise that everything will be all right, and all I ask of you is that you trust me.” He raised an eyebrow. “Everything will be all right.”

Blessedly, she smiled, and he knew right then that she did. “I trust you,” she said. “With all my heart.”

“That’s it then, you won’t be marrying Lord Malnor.”

“But —” She caught her tongue as he raised his eyebrow at her. She grinned and then pulled a face, and he leaned in and kissed her again. And then continued to kiss her, falling back in the bed, bodies wrapped and entwined and melding into one.

“No.” Somehow, she pulled herself free.

This time, Evan didn’t fight her. A final kiss and he watched her hurriedly put her clothes back on — he had thought he tore the dress the previous night, but luckily, it was salvageable. Once the dress was on, Miss Baker swept to the door, spared him a final glance to which he smiled in a way that he might have thought impossible to do just last night, and she stepped outside and closed the door behind her.

Evan fell back in bed, and this time he allowed those thoughts he’d been keeping at bay all morning to rush him. He told Miss Baker that he was going to fix things, and he meant to do it. She would not marry David. She would not be sold off at auction like a piece of cattle. She would be free to fall in love with and marry who she pleased... not that Evan had to guess who that might be.

As to how he was going to do this, he had no idea. Yet. No idea yet. But he would. He had asked Miss Baker to trust him, she had given that trust, and he would not fail her. He was, he knew, in love for the first time, and in that, he would find a way. Of this, he was certain.

CHAPTERTWENTY-ONE

Amelia knew that she should have gone straight to her room. Her hair was a mess. Her make-up was... she didn't even want to think! And her dress was torn down the side, scrunched and creased and likely beyond repair and hanging off her in a way that she might have trouble explaining to another if they were to find her looking the way she did.

But she also didn't care! Her mood was such that she wanted to dance. Wanted to sing. That she felt as if she was floating. All sense of worry or concern was irrelevant, and she almost welcomed walking past somebody in the halls, so they might see the smile on her face and wonder to themselves why she was so happy and how they might possibly achieve such levels of emotional radiance.

It was still very early in the morning, so much so that she guessed most of the guests would still be in their beds, sleeping off hangovers from the previous night — her father, included. And while she knew going to her room and changing was the smart call, she simply had to share with someone what had happened. She had to get it all out! She'd slept with the Duke. They'd confessed their love for one another. And if she was to believe the Duke, which she did with all her heart, he was going to save her.

Her father was expecting to see her in the library shortly, likely an hour or so, so that they might debrief what had happened. She would lie to him, of course, putting her faith in the Duke to do as he had promised. And not for a moment did she question this decision. In a way, she almost looked forward to lying to her father, relishing the look on his face when he finally learned the truth.

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Before she did that, however, she needed to speak of what had happened. To sing it to the world! Albeit quietly. There was but one person who she could confide this in, and seeing as this one person hadn't gone to the ball last night, she guessed her to be awake. What was more, she knew exactly where she might be.

Lord Wexley's manor had an extensive library, even bigger than the one her father owned. It was on the first floor, toward the back of the house, out of the way and perfect if you didn't want to be found. Her sister, not invited to the ball, would almost certainly be there, so Amelia took the risk and snuck through the large manor, keeping an ear out for servants and guests, ducking down the halls and hurrying, trying to focus on staying hidden but unable to stop thinking about all that had happened.

The library was darker than she had expected; assuming her sister was here, the curtains should have been thrown open, bathing the large room in natural morning light. But they were drawn, the room was dark, and one look about confirmed that her sister wasn't perched in the back with a candle burning.

She probably should have turned about right then and there and gone to her room. But again, excitement flooded Amelia with a whole different type of energy, one that saw her skulk into the large library.

"Bridget?" she called softly. "Are you here?"

There was no response, which meant her sister must have still been sleeping. Amelia didn't want to go back to her room and wait, but with no choice, she turned about and slowly started back —

“Miss Baker?” Lord Malnor was standing in the doorway, caught between entering and staying put because he appeared surprised by her being there. Surprised... and confused.

“Lord Malnor!” Amelia gasped, suddenly very aware of the way she looked. She cast her gaze about as if for somewhere to hide while using her hands to try and straighten her dress and hair, even if the act was pointless. “What are you doing... awake?”

“I could ask you the same question.” He took a cautious step deep into the library, his expression still geared toward confusion, as if she was the last person he had thought to see here. Although why that should confuse or concern him, she had no idea.

“Just looking for my sister,” she said hurriedly.

“Is that right?” he frowned.

“Ye — yes,” she stammered, feeling herself grow hot as he looked her over, eyebrow raising as he moved from her torn dress to her smeared make-up to her frizzled hair. “But she must still be sleeping.”

“It would seem that way.”

It was only now, having come into the situation, that Amelia was able to take proper note of how strangely the Marquess was behaving. Which was to say, very strange.

The way he lurked just inside the door. His hesitation and trepidation, his confusion and surprise at finding Amelia in a place that wasn’t at all strange for her to be. If she didn’t know better, he was looking for someone. Someone who was certainly not she.

Amelia was about to put her head down and walk right by him when she noticed what he was wearing. The same outfit from the previous night, she assumed — a suit much

like what most lords would wear. But the shirt was untucked. The cummerbund was loose. The pants were clearly crinkled. And his hair matched her own in how messy it was. She knew the Marquess didn't spend the night in his own room, and while she hadn't considered it earlier, now, she couldn't help but wonder where he had spent it...

"I should go," she said softly, unable to hide her smile.

"Wait" the Marquess said, stepping in front of her and then forward, so the two were mere feet apart. "So, it wasn't you?"

"Me? What do you..." Her eyes widened at the realization, an assumption that he was speaking about her night spent with the Duke.

She was about to stammer out a response when the Marquess held up a single sheet of paper. "Who wrote me?" he said. "It wasn't you who asked me to meet here?"

"Why would I — Mo, of course not." She frowned and eyed the single sheet of paper. "Someone asked you to come here?"

"They did." He pressed his lips together, clearly a little upset. "I thought... no, it does not matter. Best not to say," he chuckled softly.

Amelia eyed the paper a moment longer. Thought about it. Considered a little slower than she should have. Then, it came to her, and she nearly cried out. Unfortunately, by then it was too late.

"Amelia!" her father cried from the doorway. "What are you doing?!"

She looked up, eyes widened to a state of horror. Her father, standing in the doorway, his expression properly shocked and angered... and just a little smug. The Marquess

too, he spun about, stepping back at the same time, casting his glance about in the same manner she had earlier, as if he was looking for a place to hide.

“Lord Lindstone!” he gasped. “What are you —”

“What is this?!” her father bellowed and stormed into the library. “What are the two of you doing here?!”

“Father!” Amelia cried. At first, she thought his anger to be related to what had happened last night, as if he somehow knew what she had done. “This isn’t —”

“Don’t lie to me, girl!” her father roared. He grabbed her by the arm and dragged her back from Lord Malnor. “And you!” He then turned on the Marquess. “What is the meaning of this?”

Lord Marquess stammered. “I — I’m not sure — I assure you, this isn’t —”

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“What is going on here?” Lord Wexley was in the doorway next, as was his wife. “Lord Lindstone? Miss Baker!”

“I will tell you what is going on,” Lord Lindstone fumed, still gripping Amelia by the arm. “My daughter has made a mockery of me. She didn’t return to her chambers last night — do you have any idea how worried I was?” he seethed. “I thought... I thought... what I thought doesn’t matter. It seems that my worry was misplaced.”

“Lord Lindstone,” Lord Malnor attempted. “I can assure you that whatever it is you’re thinking, it could not be further from the truth. Miss Baker and I —”

“I don’t want to hear it. You ought to be ashamed of yourself.”

“He’s right, Lord Malnor,” Lord Wexley said, clicking his tongue. He wore a cheeky grin, his eyes flicking over Lord Malnor’s disheveled appearance and then Amelia’s. “There’s no use denying it. We have eyes, you know?”

“Father,” Amelia tried desperately, “this is not —”

“I said I don’t want to hear it!” He turned on her, but what she saw in his eyes wasn’t fury at what he had supposedly caught her doing. Rather, it was triumph. “You have embarrassed me girl. And you, Lord Malnor... you have brought shame on me and my family.”

Amelia looked desperately at Lord Malnor. Pleadingly! Begging him to explain and right this wrong before it spiraled out of control. But he remained silent, bowing his head because he seemed to realize what Amelia was failing to: that it didn’t matter.

They'd been caught alone. Dressed in a way that suggested they'd been up together all night. Both looking ashamed and embarrassed and chastised as they ought to be.

And then, as if to double down, Lord Chalmers and his wife appeared in the door. Lord Chalmers shook his head, and Lady Chalmers curled her lip in disgust. Regardless of what was said, word would now spread and before long the entire town will have heard the story of Miss Baker and Lord Malnor's late-night tryst.

"Father..." Amelia said softly. "How... how could you?"

He wasn't listening. Releasing her, he strode to the others and began to hurriedly explain, loud enough for all to hear, how this wasn't nearly as bad as it seemed because, as he claimed so rightly, Lord Malnor and his daughter had been courting in secret. All this was, was bad timing, two young lovers getting carried away. Not nearly as bad as it appeared!

Her father hadn't trusted her. He had known she might stumble at the final hurdle. So, rather cleverly, he had taken matters into his own hands, and this time, he'd succeeded where she had failed time and time again. Amelia's father had won.

CHAPTERTWENTY-TWO

Amelia was waiting for her father in the foyer of their manor.

Sent home early, her father told Lord Wexley and the others he was too ashamed to see her and needed her gone from his sight, so he packed her in a carriage and ordered her off. She knew that he just didn't want her there, so she might give her side of the story. Not that it would have mattered. From the look on Lord Wexley and Lord Chalmers' faces, she knew that they'd made up their mind about her. As far as they were concerned, she and Lord Malnor had spent the night together and had been caught red-handed.

The trip home was spent steaming. Stewing. Writhing with a level of fury that she had never known. It was one thing to be forced by her father to do things that she didn't want to do. But for him to trick her like this, not to mention Lord Malnor, happy to destroy both their reputations so that he might get what he wanted.

Amelia had hated her father for trying to force her to marry Lord Malnor. Now, she despised him.

When she arrived home, she didn't bother going to her room to change. She didn't have a bath drawn, so she might clean up, maybe force herself to relax, make herself more presentable for the confrontation she was sure to have. She was too angry for that! The moment she walked inside, she stayed right where she was, pacing the foyer back and forth, cursing under her breath, kicking her heels, and wringing her hands because it was all she could think to do.

The anger lasted for some hours, but it couldn't last forever. Once she started to calm down, she felt her anger wane as fury was replaced with worry, and antipathy was replaced with distress.

Her life was over. She would confront her father. She would let him know just how she felt. But it wouldn't make a difference. Even now, she knew, he was likely striking a deal with Lord Malnor, one that would see the two wed because Lord Malnor was in the exact same position as she and wouldn't be able to deny her father any longer. How had she been so stupid? How had she let this happen? She should have gone straight to her room. She shouldn't have sought her sister out. She shouldn't have left the Duke's bed in the first place!

From worry and distress, she next found herself wandering the foyer in an apoplexy of utmost despair. One night of happiness. That was all she had. One night with the Duke, finally on the same page as she, finally ready to admit her feelings and have them returned. She loved him. And he loved her... or she thought he did. When he

found out what happened, and what was yet to happen still, how would he feel? Would he be mad? Would he be understanding? And even if he was, what could he possibly do about it?

Trust the Duke, she told herself. Trust him to save her. He had promised that he would! Only... trusting him wasn't the answer she wanted it to be — needed it to be! She could trust him with all her heart, and the result would be the same. Her father had outsmarted them both, and she could shout and scream and yell all she liked, but it would do no good.

By the time she heard her father's carriage arriving, Amelia was sitting in the middle of the foyer in a heap, a broken woman who had been outplayed, outsmarted, and out done. She almost removed herself to her room, her desire to confront her father just about gone.

But then she heard the carriage door open, her father laughing at something — how could he be so happy? Her anger returned, and by the time the door to the foyer was thrown open, she was on her feet and ready.

“How could you?!” she bellowed before he'd so much as stepped a single foot inside.

Her father didn't look at all surprised to see her. Her mother sure did, as did Bridget, but before they could do or say anything, he was dismissing them. “I'll be upstairs shortly,” he said to Amelia's mother. “Wait for me.”

Her mother looked unsure, glancing at Amelia, her face stricken with pain. “Perhaps it's best if I —”

“Upstairs, woman!” he snapped to which she balked and then bowed her head in acceptance. She hurried past her daughter, not even daring to look at her, likely because her shame was too great. “And you. I thought I said to leave us,” he snapped

at Bridget next.

Bridget tried to catch her sister's eye. A look of pity, mixed with concern, was how it read, but Amelia didn't return it. She kept her heated gaze fixed on her father, staring white hot rage in his direction as her younger sister hurried from the room.

Once they were alone, Amelia started again. "You sent Lord Malnor that note, didn't you! You... you tricked him! How could you do such a thing!"

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Her father looked her over. “You might have bathed yourself first, Amelia? It’s unseemly to still be wearing the same dress you spent the night in.”

“What?” Amelia blustered, caught off guard by the comment. “What does that matter?”

“It matters because, as you should know by now, appearance is everything.” He closed the door behind him and strode through the foyer, walking right past her as if she didn’t exist. “It’s a lesson that if you had taken more seriously, you might not be in this situation right now. Something to think about.”

“I didn’t sleep with Lord Malnor!” she shouted at his back. “Not last night. Not this morning! And he knows! He knows what you did.”

“Is that what you think?” he turned about, smirking to himself.

“He won’t marry me. And when he finds out — when I tell him it was you who —”

“Who what?” he snarled, anger appearing suddenly as if from nowhere. “Who invited him to the library? Go ahead. It won’t make a difference. The damage is done, Amelia. Lord Wexley. Lord Chalmers. Their wives!” He chuckled. “Lord Malnor knows he has been caught out, and he knows what he has to do to make it right. Why, I suspect he already knows it was me.”

“I won’t marry him,” she said stupidly, not even sure what she expected. But she had to say something! She had to fight! “You can’t make me.”

Her father's lip curled, and it wasn't anger that he fixed on her but pure dispassion. A level of antipathy one reserves for rodents and bugs and things found on the bottom of one's boot. "Who is it you think you're talking to?"

"I know who I am —"

"Who is it you think you are talking to?!" he snarled and went to her; a few short strides and he was at her as if he meant to knock her down. "This isn't a discussion. This isn't a debate. And if you had done what I had asked, I wouldn't have had to resort to such base measures."

"Me? All I have done is —"

"Failed me," he cut her off. "That's all you've done. And do you know how I know it? He was seen last night with another woman. That was where he was when he should have been dancing with you. Taken by another — you can imagine my surprise!" he shouted at her, spittle flying from his mouth, striking her in the face. "But how can this be? My daughter! She is the one who has been giving him her attention. She is the one he is supposed to be chasing. No. Your efforts to seduce the Marquess were so... so hopelessly pathetic that he would rather be off with some other harlot than you. All you have done?" He chuckled coldly. "As far as I am concerned, you almost ruined everything. Thank God, I had the foresight to come up with this plan this morning, or we would have lost the marquess altogether."

"Why?" Amelia's body shook. She wanted to scream and shout, but her father was in such a state of apoplexy that she feared him. The way he looked at her, the venom pouring from every orifice. Earlier, she had felt like a caged lion, but now, she was little more than a housecat. "Why him? Why does it have to be —"

"I told you, already." He groaned and rubbed her eyes. "Have you always been this daft? Lord Malnor is extremely wealthy, and I intend to exploit it. That's all this has

ever been, Amelia. A business transaction and nothing more.”

“But —” She almost mentioned the Duke. She almost said, what of the Duke? Why not ask him? It was right on the tip of her tongue... She just couldn’t form the words, knowing already what her father would say.

“But what?” he scoffed. “Oh, don’t give me that look, Amelia. If not for this, the situation you would be in would be far direr. Honestly, you should be on your hands and knees praising my senses.”

And he meant it too. He wasn’t exaggerating. He wasn’t speaking in metaphor. He truly thought he had done the most amazing thing and actually believed that his daughter should be grateful for it. There was no empathy there. No pity. No concern for one he was supposed to love.

Amelia glared at her father, the disgust she felt for him reaching new heights. All her life, all she had ever done was what he asked of her. She never denied him. She never fought him. She was the perfect daughter who stayed in line because that was what good daughters did. And what did she have to show for it? Nothing. A life of misery and pain.

“I hate you,” she said softly, unable to believe the words had left her mouth.

“What was that?”

She looked right at him and spat, “I hate you.”

His eyes widened. “I would not say such things if I was you.”

“Why?” she cackled. “What difference does it make now? You won. I lost. Nothing I say will make a difference, so you may as well know the truth. I hate you like dogs

hate cats. Like worms hate birds. I hate you with such... such intensity that the summer's sun would pale under the heat that radiates from my body whenever I think of how much I despise you."

Shockingly, he didn't shout at her. More shockingly, he didn't strike her. He took a few short, sharp breaths. He closed his eyes a moment and breathed out. And then he fixed her with a look of utmost calm that was worse than anything he'd done or said so far.

"Are you finished?"

"Not even close."

"The good news is, you'll be done with me soon enough. I shall be seeking out Lord Malnor in the next few days, and we will finalize the details of your wedding."

"No, I refuse to —"

"And until then, seeing as you can't bear the sight of me, let me make it easy on you." He grabbed Amelia by the arm and dragged her across the foyer. "You will not leave you room until I say."

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“What? No —” She tried to pull her arm free, but he refused it.

“You will not see anybody,” he continued, dragging her up the stairs, the grip he had on her arm so tight that it hurt. “You will not write to anybody. You will stay there until Lord Malnor himself comes and collects you!” At the top of the stairs, he started down the hallway toward her room.

“No!” she cried and tried to pull free. “No! Please!”

“And if you try anything, if you have Bridget help you, I promise that what has happened here today will be a dream compared to what I will do to you.” At her room, he kicked the door open and threw her inside. She stumbled, falling hard onto her hands and knees. “And that’s not to mention what I will do to her. You think Lord Malnor is bad?” he laughed coldly. “My dear, you have no idea.”

“You can’t!” She half made to stand, reaching a hand out as if to try and stop him. “You can’t do that!”

“Amelia, surely you have realized by now that there is nothing I can’t do. You belong to me,” he snarled at her from the doorway, looking like a giant as he towered over her. “You and Bridget. I can do anything I want. Thank God that in this instance, you found yourself in my good graces.”

“Please!” She jumped to her feet and ran for him, but he was already out the door.

The door slammed in her face, and Amelia collapsed into it. Body shaking. Chest caving in. Heart cracking and shattering inside of her. A sense that the room was

shrinking in around her, and it was all she could do to not curl into a ball and weep for mercy. But she may as well have.

It was over. Her life. All sense of hope. Any chance that she might find a way out of this. She tried to cling to the small vestibules of a chance that the Duke might save her. That he might come for her. But her father's words rang out in her head, crushing that notion like an ant beneath a boot. He was her father. He could do as he pleased, ruin her life if he so wanted it.

And in this instance, that was exactly what he wanted and had done. All sense of hope was lost.

CHAPTERTWENTY-THREE

Evan ended up falling back asleep after Amelia left him. He hadn't meant to, but he'd laid his head back down a moment, happy to close his eyes and blissfully remember the night that was, only to open them again what he thought to be a few seconds later, eventually realizing it was a solid couple of hours and mid-morning was just about on him.

Not that Evan minded. The mood he was in, there was little, if anything, that could bring him down. Even as he dressed himself in the same clothes as the night before and stubbed his toe on the corner of the dresser — pain lancing up his foot in a way that should have had him crying out — he laughed it off because life right now wasn't worth getting upset about silly little things like that.

No need to say why his mood was so piqued. No need to ponder as he'd been doing that all morning. Even his dreams were filled with visions of Amelia, the true beauty that she was, the fiery lady who had stolen his heart, she whose heart he also held. Is this what love felt like? Is this why David obsessed over it the way he does? Evan couldn't help but wonder what he'd been so afraid of all this time, and if he'd been

missing out on anything — he clearly had. Why, if he'd known that this was how he would feel when he finally fell for someone, he might have started looking sooner!

Such as it was that when Evan crept from the room, smiling all the while, he couldn't have possibly foreseen the other side of the coin, the reason that men like David needed protecting. Love was a wonderful thing, but it came with an inevitable dark side which could kill as quick as any knife.

"Your Grace!" Lord Wexley found Evan walking the halls. He was coming from the other direction, looking hurried. "What are you — you're here?!"

Evan, the fool that he was, had completely forgotten that he hadn't been invited to Lord Wexley's residence. His mind was elsewhere, and if it wasn't for the difference in architecture, he might have thought he was in his own home and wandered to the dining room to break his fast.

"Oh!" Evan started, suddenly very away of where he was and how he was dressed. "Lord Wexley, this is... I'm sure you're surprised to see me." He then tried for a chuckle.

"Surprised is perhaps an understatement." Lord Wexley frowned and looked Evan over. "Did you sleep here last night, Your Grace?"

"I confess I did." He turned his palms out and grimaced. "I was feeling a little under the weather, and Lord Malnor offered me his room. I hope that is all right? I would have asked you first, but I was unable to find you, and truly, I just needed somewhere to rest my head and shut my eyes. I meant to leave at first light but... to be honest, the bed was a little too comfortable. I don't think I've slept that well in years."

"It's not a bother," Lord Wexley assured him. "A surprise. But a perfectly agreeable one. Have you broken your fast yet? I can have the kitchen —"

“No, no, it’s fine,” Evan hurried to assure him. “I should be on my way, anyhow. A bath is what I need. Say, Lord Malnor isn’t still here, is he? I was hoping to catch him sooner rather than later.”

“Oh...” Lord Wexley’s eyes lit up. “You mustn’t have heard.”

“Heard what?”

Lord Wexley glanced about the empty hall and then hurried closer. “While you were sleeping, I’m afraid to say that Lord Malnor found himself involved in quite the scandal.”

“He did?” Evan leaned back, wondering to what the Lord was referring. “What happened?”

Again, Lord Wexley’s eyes flashed, and the delight in the man was evident. “Perhaps you’re to blame,” he chuckled. “Taking Lord Malnor’s room like that. The poor man had nowhere else to go.”

“What do you mean?”

“I don’t like to gossip. That’s women’s business. But seeing as you asked...” He glanced around again, licked his lips, and leaned in closer to Evan. And then, he told him what had happened.

As to Evan’s response? Apart from the way his face drained of color, the sickening sensation that rose in his stomach, the lump that formed in his throat and threatened to choke him while wishing that it would do just that? He fled, was his response. Barely managing a goodbye, he hurried from the manor and called for his carriage, directing the driver not to take him to his own home but to David’s. He needed to talk to his best friend, and something told him that his best friend might need to talk to

him also.

* * *

The carriage ride to David's house was an experience that Evan wouldn't wish upon his most mortal of enemies, for even they didn't deserve such sorrow and rage and disbelief and heartache and doubt and self-pity and consignment to the very likely fact that their life was over. It was cavalcade of the harshest emotions, bearing down on Evan's shoulders, playing havoc with his mind and body and soul in a way that he didn't know was possible.

Earlier, he had wondered why he'd been so scared to let down his barriers and open himself to the possibility of falling in love. Now, with how he was feeling, he knew the answer. Pain was why. Indescribable pain for which there was no panacea.

He didn't believe for a moment what Lord Wexley had told him as if it was the truth — that Lord Malnor and Miss Baker had been found together 'canoodling' in his library. Laughable. Impossible. Clearly a set-up with no need to say who was behind the machinations. But that was also irrelevant. What came next was what had Evan besieged in a state of agony from which he could not escape.

Apparently, to avoid a scandal and the diminishing of Lord Lindstone's family's name, Lord Malnor had agreed to marry Miss Baker. It was as good a done, Lord Wexley had said, while adding that Lord Lindstone was a generous man for accepting such terms because if it was his kin who had been found committing such a reprehensible act as that... 'There's no telling what I might have done.' And he seemed to mean it.

Evan was furious at Lord Lindstone for tricking Miss Baker and David like that. He

was furious at David for allowing himself to be caught in such a compromising situation — and for going along with it! He was annoyed at Miss Baker for not being more careful. But mostly, Evan allowed for his wrath to settle on his own shoulders. This was his fault. He had known that Lord Lindstone would stop at nothing to get his way. He had known that after last night, the repugnant lord would be forced to take matters into his own hands. And he had known that there were no depths Miss Baker's father would not sink to.

If Evan hadn't fallen asleep the way he had, he might have stopped it. If Evan had gone straight to David earlier and told him of his feelings, he might have changed things. If Evan had... No, there was no sense in wading through 'ifs' and 'buts.' The simple fact was that Evan had failed Miss Baker, and despite how hard he tried, he couldn't fathom a way he might save her.

His only hope was David, that David might agree to cancel the wedding and set the record straight. Although he knew his best friend well enough to know that was a wish he wouldn't bet on and likely there would be nothing he could do or say to change his mind.

Needless to say, when Evan finally arrived at David's manor, he was in a worse place mentally than when he had started the trip. He fell from the carriage and stumbled up the drive. He didn't bother knocking but threw the doors to the foyer open and stormed inside.

"David!" Evan cried out as he strode across the foyer. "David! Where are you?!"

"Your Grace!" Mr. Rogers, one of David's chief servants, gasped at the sight of him.

"What are you —"

"Where is he?" Evan demanded without breaking stride.

“He’s in no state to —”

“David!” Evan called out again as he made for the stairs. “We need to speak!”

“In here!” David’s voice echoed out. “The drawing room! And tell Mr. Rogers I need more brandy!”

“Your Grace!” Mr. Rogers hurried behind him. “I really must insist —”

“You heard the man,” Evan said without looking back. “And I suggest you bring a bottle.”

He found David in the drawing room, and one look at his best friend and Evan almost stuck his head out the door and told Mr. Rogers that maybe some coffee was a better option. By the looks of things, David had drunk enough brandy to last him a lifetime.

He cut a pitiful figure. Slumped over in his chair by the hearth, glass in one hand, empty bottle in the other, if Evan hadn’t seen him just last night, he might have guessed David to have been there all week. The way his body sagged in the chair. How disheveled his hair and clothes were, how limp his limbs, how sunken his face and eyes. It was a look that Evan recognized well, for it was one that David embodied every time that he had his heart broken and needed consoling.

For a brief moment, Evan lost the rage that was swelling inside of him. Pity threatened to consume him, and he very nearly fell to his knees by his best friend’s chair so he might tell him that everything was going to be all right, and no woman was worth succumbing to such a state. Only... this time, it wasn’t true. There was one woman who was worth it, but why she had this effect on David, he wasn’t sure.

“Am I interrupting something?” Evan said coldly.

David glanced over his shoulder and chuckled bitterly. “No actually, you’re right on time? Drink?” He held up the empty bottle and frowned. “Did you see Mr. Rogers on your way in? Be a good friend will you and tell him to bring me another?”

“I think you’ve had enough.” Evan walked into the room but didn’t approach.

“Ha! This... this isn’t even close to what I’ll require. The day is young, Evan, and if I have my way, I’ll be out cold before the inevitable dark of the evening descends on this cruel world and consumes us all.”

“I thought you might have been in a good mood?”

“What?” David pushed himself up the best he could. “Why on earth would I —”

“I hear you’re to be married.” He crossed his arms and raised an eyebrow at his friend, dismissive and sharp, no sense of congratulatory sentiment whatsoever.

“Oh...” David’s lip curled. “So, you heard, did you?”

“How could you be so foolish?” Evan sneered, unable to control himself. His friend was suffering, but his feelings about what had happened smothered any sympathies.

“Me?!”

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“Lord Wexley told me what happened. That you allowed yourself —”

“Allowed!” David jumped to his feet, stumbled, caught the side of the chair, and pushed himself to standing. “There was no allowing it! It wasn’t something that I simply let happen. I was tricked, Evan! Beguiled! Lured and trapped like a rat! You think I want this to happen? You think I... you think this is something I yearn for?” He scoffed and snarled at Evan. “You of all people should know me better than that.”

“Then why agree to the marriage?” Evan demanded hotly, taking a step closer to David, shoving a finger into his chest. “Why not explain what happened? Why go along with this farce!”

“It’s not so simple.”

“It is!”

David leaned back as if he’d been slapped. His body swayed, and he was forced to catch himself on the couch again. “You really don’t understand, do you?”

“Understand what?”

“It’s so easy for you, isn’t it? A duke. A man who has spent his life spurning his station, caring not for what others think of him.”

“I hardly see what that has to do with this.”

“No, you don’t, and that’s the point. I have spent my life building my reputation, Evan.

I don't have the grace of a dukedom to fall back on. I can't write to the king and ask him to turn a blind eye if I misstep or bring shame to my name."

Evan pushed his lips together. "You know that's not how it works —"

"Irrelevant! All I have ever wanted, Evan, is to fall in love. To meet a woman who I could spend the rest of my life with – who wanted to spend hers with me. Not because of who I am or my title. But because of me. And I had that. I had it!"

"You still could," Evan tried. "There's no reason that you can't —"

"Of course, there is!" he cried. "I don't blame Miss Forbes for spurning me. She did what she thought she must. And why wouldn't she? After what Lord Wexley and Lord Chalmers and Lord Lindstone saw. Ha! She'd be a fool to take a chance with me because from this moment on, my name will be linked to what they thought I'd done – what they will tell the entire ton I have done. No, Evan..." He shook his head to himself, looking a broken man. "This is it for me. I had one chance, one. And now it's gone."

God, how he wished to be angry with his friend. How he wanted to blame him. Or better, to take him by the scruff of the neck, shake some sense into him, and force him to stand up to Lord Lindstone. He clearly knew that Lindstone was the one who tricked him, but that didn't seem to bother him as much as it ought to have.

In the end, David was right. He was trapped in a marriage he did not want, and there was nothing he could do about it.

"So... you were saying about a drink?" Even sighed, body slumping, feeling the fight begin to leave him because the truth of the matter was that it was never really there in the first place.

David grinned. “Mr. Rogers! Brandy!”

As Mr. Rogers got about bringing them another bottle and then pouring them each a glass, Evan pulled another couch over beside David’s and sat himself down — but not before helping David into his own because the man could barely stand on his own two feet, let alone guide his buttocks back into the chair.

“I’m sorry,” David then started, slumping down in his chair, nearly spilling his drink all over himself.

“It’s all right.”

“No, it’s not. You warned me — or your actions did. Don’t think I didn’t know what you were doing and why.”

“It was that obvious, was it?” Evan chuckled, not seeing the point of denying his feelings any longer.

“You knew Miss Baker and her father were bad sorts, and you meant to stop it. And me? The fool that I am, thought you were being a tad over-protective. Ha! Isn’t my face red.”

Evan frowned and studied his drunken friend. He still didn’t know? He still thought that Evan’s barging in here, the anger in him, was on account of his disappointment for letting his friend be tricked like this. He had no idea how Evan felt about Miss Baker, and most importantly, how she felt about him.

Evan wondered if he should keep it a secret now, seeing as it wouldn’t do him any good to speak out loud. But another sip or two of his brandy and he was feeling the urge to speak it. Just because he knew that come tomorrow, all that was and all that ever might have been would be nothing more than a dream, and to keep it a secret

like this felt wrong somehow.

“There’s something you should know,” Evan sighed. “Miss Baker and I —”

“What I don’t understand,” David spoke up, apparently not hearing Evan speak, “is why me? Why is Lord Lindstone so insistent upon me marrying Miss Baker? I mean, to pursue me is one thing. But the lengths he has gone through are beyond anything I have ever heard.”

Evan looked at his friend. “Do you really no know?”

“You do?!”

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“He owes you money,” Evan said, not entirely sure if David was being serious or not. “That’s all this is. He owes you a small fortune and knows if you are to marry his daughter, you’ll cancel the debt. How do you not know this?”

David groaned and rubbed his eyes. “I should have known.”

“Yes, you should have. How did you not, is my question?”

“I don’t handle my own finances, of course. I have litigators who take care of that for me. It saves me having to worry and get my hands dirty and...” His eyes widened, and somehow, he managed to slump down even further in his chair. “Of course. How did I not see?”

“See what?”

David shook his head to himself. “I suppose there’s no point keeping it a secret now, is there? These past few weeks while you’ve been engaged trying to keep me away from Miss Baker — I should have told you. Saved you the trouble.”

“Told me what?”

“I have no desires toward Miss Baker. I never have. Truthfully, all this time, I’ve been...” He grimaced and looked away sheepishly. “I have been pursuing Miss Forbes instead.”

Evan’s mouth dropped open. “You’re joking?”

“That is where I was last night. With her...” He smiled softly to himself, a smile that Evan recognized because it was similar to one he wore when he thought of Miss Baker. “Only, I finally managed to work up the courage to ask her if she would be interested in being courted publicly. I love her, Evan. I do, with all my heart.” He fixed Evan with a no-nonsense stare, so his meaning couldn’t be misinterpreted. “And I told her as much.”

“And what did she say?” Evan asked, knowing the answer already.

“She denied me. Truthfully, I could not believe it. I actually thought she was joking... well, until she walked out on me,” he chuckled bitterly. “She told me she did not feel the same way, and we had no choice but to end things before they went too far. Only, an hour later I received the note that led me to the library, and I thought...” He sighed. “I thought she had changed her mind.”

“What does this have to do with Lord Lindstone’s debt?”

“She must know of it, is what. She must have known what Lord Lindstone was planning or guessed it. Realizing that in the end, Miss Baker and I would end up together and to pretend otherwise was a fool’s errand.” He scoffed. “I only wish she had told me; I might have... I don’t know. Not been caught in such a compromising position this morning,” he chuckled.

“You and Miss Forbes?” Evan frowned as he considered the likelihood, only to remember certain instances over the past week that made the match so obvious he couldn’t believe he hadn’t seen it. He’d been so predisposed with trying to stop Miss Baker, he hadn’t even noticed his friend falling in love right before him. “You love her?”

“I do.”

“I can relate...” Evan took a long sip of his brandy.

David frowned. “What do you mean? You’re in love with Miss Forbes?”

“What?” he scoffed. “No, of course not.”

It took David a moment. But only that. As if a sudden realization struck him, one that had been there the entire time, only hidden and aloof because Evan had worked hard to make it so, David smiled and nodded his understanding. “Miss Baker.”

“Right in one.”

“In hindsight, it was rather obvious, you know.”

“Is that right? You could have told me sooner. Saved me a lot of time.”

“Do you want to talk about it?”

“It’s a long story,” Evan muttered.

“I have time.”

“I’d rather not. Seeing as what is going to happen.”

David’s expression soured. “Good point.” He took a big mouthful of his brandy.

“You know, I’m starting to understand why you are the way you are.”

“Meaning?”

“Your eschewing of romance is what. I always thought you somewhat daft, but now, I’m thinking that maybe you’re the smartest man I’ve ever known. Why do we even

bother?" He finished his drink and then tossed the glass into the fire; it shattered against the brick, and the flames burst.

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It was a good question. Why did they bother? What was the point? If the end result was this pitiful experience, two men drinking themselves into a stupor because their hearts were broken, and there was nothing either of them could do about it. If Evan could go back in time, he would have simply avoided Miss Baker altogether, saving himself the pain and misery that consumed him.

Although... would he? Despite what had happened, despite how much better off he would be, Evan couldn't help but think of that smile that David had just shared with him, the one that came automatically to his face as soon as Miss Forbes' name was mentioned. It was happiness, plain and simple. A sense of wonderment that could only be found when you opened your heart and gave it to another. And when they gave theirs back. Yes, love spurned was a horrid thing. But love returned was a sensation unlike any that Evan had even known, one that even now he knew he would cherish for the rest of his life. And what was more, one he wanted to feel again.

Why did they bother? They bothered because the end result was worth it. Yes, it was hard. Yes, it hurt. And yes, it didn't always turn out the way they wished. But somehow, that didn't feel as important as it should.

Evan looked over at his friend. Studied him. Remembered that time six months ago when he had made a promise that never again would David fall for a woman only to have his heart broken. It was a promise that he had made in earnest, and one he intended to keep. Come hell or high water, he would.

And in that, a plan suddenly came to mind.

"David." Evan sat up. "Tell me true, if there was a way out of it, would you cancel

your marriage to Miss Baker?”

“Technically, it isn’t even official. I’m to visit Lord Lindstone in the coming days and —”

“But would you?” He leaned over his armchair and fixed David with a determined stare.

“Of course, I would,” David sighed. “But it’s no good. I told you, I don’t have a choice.”

“What if you did?” Evan said.

David blinked, turning and looking at Evan for the first time. He took note of the way Evan was sitting, the excitement in him, the sense of hope that wasn’t there even a few seconds ago. “Why?” he asked slowly. “What do you know?”

“Nothing. Yet. But I have a favor to ask, although before I do, I need you to trust me. Do that and I think I might have a way out of this.”

Trust him. It didn’t escape Evan’s notice that he had asked Miss Baker the exact same thing just this morning, and she had agreed wholeheartedly. Now, if Evan’s plan worked, he would pay that trust back. To prove to Miss Baker that he was worth it, that this wasn’t the end for her, and that maybe, just maybe, they might have a chance to spend the rest of their lives together.

It was a long shot but considering the alternative, Evan knew he had no choice. The things one did for love.

CHAPTERTWENTY-FOUR

The sound of her door unlocking had little effect on Amelia. She'd heard the sound of footsteps approaching from down the hall. She'd heard them stop once they reached her door. And she'd heard the sound of keys clinking together as whoever was on the other side fiddled about with the key chain before slipping one inside the lock and turning it.

She was at her desk when the door opened, and as had been the case for the last three days, she didn't bother so much as a glance over her shoulder. Lost in what she was writing, not wanting to lose her thoughts, she opted to ignore who she assumed to be a maid dropping food for the second time today. That was how it had been these last three days, so there was no reason today should be any different. Locked away in her room, she was only allowed to leave so she might bathe and use the washroom, and even that was a heavily guarded process by which she was kept an eye on by her father. So she couldn't run or pass a letter to a servant or do anything else that might see her escape.

Was she a prisoner? It was how she felt. Trapped in her room the way she was, unable to leave or speak to anyone — even her sister — Amelia was a prisoner in her own home, forced to wait under lock and key until Lord Malnor collected her. As to when that might be? Her father hadn't been forthcoming.

To pass the time, Amelia concentrated on her writing. She kept a diary, spending hours each day filling it with thoughts and feelings that she wanted to voice to the world but knew now there to be no point. Her father's wicked plans. How she had felt about them, the way he had forced her to do his bidding. The tricks he had played, the evil he had wrought, and what he might do if she didn't play along.

When she wasn't writing about her father, it was the Duke who she focused on.

The truth was most of her writings pertained to him. Sometimes, she would write regretfully, lamenting the fact that they would not end up together. Sometimes, she

would write hopefully, dreaming of what might have happened if things had proceeded differently. And often, she would write from the heart, detailing their short time together, how they met, how they fought, how brightly they burned because of it. And, of course, long and detailed passages about their most intimate moments.

She was writing one of those right now, desperate to catch the flame of the memory before it burned out. Their last night together when the Duke had turned her into a woman. She had transformed between his thighs, finding a piece of herself that she didn't even know to exist, one she refused to forget because to do that would mean that her life was over, and her father would have truly won —

“You know, it's polite to stand when your betters enter the room.”

Amelia's skin crawled when she heard her father's voice. She very nearly wretched, such was the revulsion she felt toward her father. But there was a spike of fear there also because if he was here then it meant that Lord Malnor had finally come to collect her, and any dreams she had harbored that things might change were just that, dreams.

She stayed seated, too scared to turn back and confirm the truth.

“Amelia,” her father barked. “Don't ignore me when I speak to you.”

A deep breath, she prepared herself and spun about. Her father stood in the doorway, looking as disgruntled as she expected. Thankfully, he was alone, and she breathed a sigh of relief. “Hello, Father.”

His lip curled. “What are you doing?”

“Writing in my diary.” She shot out her hand and covered the diary, suddenly terrified that he might read it. “Nothing exciting,” she then added.

“Well, I suspect you’ll have something new to write about after tonight.”

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“Wh — what do you mean?” she glanced behind her father, expecting Lord Malnor to pop out.

He sighed and strolled into the room. “I have some bad news. Lord Malnor...” His lip curled, and he shook his head. “He wrote me earlier, and it seems that he has decided not to go through with the wedding.”

“He did?!” She couldn’t hide the excitement from her voice; her eyes went wide, and she dared a smile. “Wh — why? Did he say?”

“He did not.” Her father reached the middle of the room and stopped. Arms folded across his chest, he looked about the room as if angered by it. “The man is an embarrassment to his class. After what the two of you were caught doing —”

“We didn’t do anything,” she blurted.

Her father narrowed his eyes in warning. “After what you were caught doing,” he repeated coldly, “I would have thought he’d have enough respect for himself, not to mention his station, to do the honorable thing. It seems that I underestimated you.”

“What do you mean?”

“All this time, I thought I had a daughter than any man would be thrilled to wed. I was led to believe that you were desirable, that it would be a simple thing to hand you off. Now, I know better.”

Oh, how she hated him. Did he really blame her? Did he really think that this had

anything to do with her? What she would have liked to have said was that this was his doing. That Lord Malnor likely knew who tricked him, and this was his way of getting back at the man. She would have liked to have laughed in his face and called him a failure — an idiotic, fat loser who wasn't fit to tie the Marquess' boots!

She didn't, not because she didn't want to upset him but because deep down, she wondered if maybe, just maybe, he might have changed his mind. He said, he would auction her off if the Marquess denied her. But what if it was an empty threat? What if there was a chance he might seek someone else? And that she might even suggest it.

"I'm sorry, Father," she forced herself to say, speaking through her teeth to keep the anger at bay. "I don't know what to say."

"There's nothing you can say. What's done is done, and it is as simple as that. Which means..." He leveled a stare right at her, and in that moment, she knew exactly what was coming. "...that —"

"Please!" Amelia leapt to her feet. "You don't have to do this."

Her father frowned as if surprised by her reaction. "This again? Really, Amelia? You embarrass yourself."

"There has to be another way." In a moment of desperation with no other choice left to her, she threw herself at her father's feet. "I will marry another. There has to be another who —"

"I told you already, there is not. And now that Lord Malnor has rejected you, what man will have you?"

"I know of one!" she cried before she could stop herself. Her eyes went wide, and she

covered her mouth.

“What?” her father growled. She shook her head, and he stepped forward. She fell backwards so that she was looking right up at him. “Who?”

She had no choice. A final, desperate plea because that was where she was at. “His Grace...” she said a little too softly. “If you were to ask —”

“His Grace?!” her father snarled. “Have you lost your mind?”

“Please! I know that if you —”

“If I what? If I went to him, hand in hat and begged him? Do you really think I would put myself through that? Do you really think I would suffer that indignity, just to be laughed at? I thought you daft girl, but I had no idea how stupid you were.”

“He will!” she cried. “I promise you, if you were to ask —”

“The decision has been made, Amelia. And you know what it is.” He cocked an eyebrow at her, and she gasped.

“No. Please. You can’t!”

“It is done. Tonight, you and your sister will join me in London. I have already told my friends what to expect, and needless to say, they were nothing if not excited.”

“Just me then!” she begged, pushing herself back up and grabbing a hold of her father’s hands. “Just me! Don’t include Bridget. There is no need to —”

“Just you?” he barked a laugh. “You certainly have a high opinion of yourself, don’t you. My friends are rich, Amelia, but you are not worth the price I require. Both you

and Bridget however...” The smile that crossed his face made her blood run as cold as ice. “Yes, the two of you will fetch a fine price.”

The man who stood before her wasn’t her father. There was just no way. He was a monster, ripped from the pages of one of the stories she used to read as a girl. There would be no bargaining. No reasoning. One needed a soul to be reasoned with, and this cretin didn’t possess such a thing.

“We leave in four hours.” He pushed her away and started back across the room. “I expect you to be —”

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“I won’t do it.” On her knees, she stared daggers at him, defiance personified as if she meant to cower him with a single glare. “Nor will Bridget. You can’t make us.”

He laughed at that. Laughed as if she had told the funniest of jokes. “You really don’t get it, do you? You have no power here, Amelia. None whatsoever. And if you try and deny me. If you try anything at all...” He bared his teeth. “It is your sister you worry for? You ruin this for me tonight, and I promise that you will never see her again, regardless of who she marries. She will be as good as dead to you, and you will spend the rest of your life wondering if she is because if tonight doesn’t go the way I hope, then there really is no need to keep her around.”

Amelia gasped and held a hand to her mouth as the threat took hold.

“Four hours,” he growled as he reached the door. “Be ready. Oh, and Amelia, make sure you look your best will you...” He stepped through the door and turned back. “I expect you to fetch a high price.” Through the door, and it slammed behind him.

As to Amelia? She collapsed on the floor, like a vase being smashed into a million pieces. Tears pouring from her eyes. Breathing labored. Stomach twisted as if trying to escape through her mouth. She lay on the floor, weeping as she never had before. Hope gone. Dreams dashed. Any sense that this might not be the end, a distant fancy so out of reach it was as if it no longer existed.

Even the Duke... memories of him... that thin veil of hope that he might save her. She tried to picture how. She tried to force herself to believe. But it was no good. He wasn’t going to save her; maybe he never meant to. Maybe this was just Amelia’s lot in life, to live and die in misery because her father wished it so.

CHAPTERTWENTY-FIVE

As a good Christian woman, Amelia had read the bible more times than she could count. She went to church often and even prayed occasionally. She had an idea in her head what heaven must look like, knowing it was different for everyone but acquainting it to a paradise of sorts where all manner of things were possible, and all dreams were turned into a reality.

But where there was a heaven, there was also a hell, and this too, she had pictured although she tried not to. Fire and brimstone was what came to mind. Lakes filled with lava, and ash raining from the sky. Demons and monsters and ghouls walking the plains, haunting her everywhere she dared look, a nightmare come to life that she would be forced to live for all of eternity. Hell was, she thought, the worst place a person could go, and she lived a life that she hoped meant she would never have to see such a thing. Sure, she strayed morally every now and then, but she was a good person, and hell was reserved for the worst of the worst.

To say all of that when she and Bridget were led into the dungeon that was the gaming hall where her father spent his free time — as shocking as that was to reckon with — she couldn't help but wonder if she had died without realizing and despite all the good she had done with her life, had somehow found herself in the Devil's playground.

It was unlike anything she might have imagined.

A dungeon, yes, located beneath a tavern somewhere in the center of London, but the curtains had been drawn on the way over, purposefully so, so that she and Bridget couldn't see where they were being led. A cellar was her guess as they'd walked down several flights of stone steps, feeling the room grow hotter the deeper they descended beneath the earth. But as she cast her eyes about the room for the first time, logic telling her that she was mistaken in her assessment, again she could not

help but consider the likelihood that her buyer tonight would be Satan himself.

Smoke filled the room. It was the size of a small ballroom, but smoke hung thick from the rafters to the floor — mostly cigar smoke, but it was mixed with that which came from the many torches lining the stone walls. The music that played was somber and melodic, and she spied the orchestra set up in the corner, all dressed in black cloaks, heads bowed, bodies stiff and expressionless. Booze flowed freely. Laughter and merriment, shouting and crying echoed from all over. And as to the men? She didn't see a one.

Demons were what Amelia saw. Dozens of them. They were dressed in fine suits, some carried walking sticks, many wore hats, and a few were draped in cloaks. But this didn't fool her. Each to the last wore a mask similar to what she had worn not so long ago at the masquerade ball, covering their demonic faces so they might appear human. But there was just no way...

“What are you doing, girl?” her father hissed in her ear.

She stood frozen on the final landing of the staircase as she took the gaming hall in, unable to move for the fear that took hold. “What is going in?” she breathed.

“You know what,” her father snapped. “And don't you dare make a —”

“Why are they wearing masks?” she spun about. “Who are these men?”

Her father rolled his eyes. “Don't be so dramatic, girl. What we mean to do here tonight is... frowned upon in some corners of society. It would not do for identities to be revealed.”

“But... then how will you know who we are... who we are being sold to?” She could barely say the words.

He chortled. “Does it matter? I’m not picking them based on looks, Amelia. It’s their purses that matter most. And from the looks of it...” He cast his gaze over the sea of masked men. “There will be many a fat purse here tonight.”

Amelia looked desperately to her sister, wanting to meet her eyes and show her that she wasn’t alone. To instill some sense of support in the poor girl because as terrified as Amelia was, Bridget must have been feeling even worse. But her sister refused to look at her, staring down at her feet, as silent as a mouse, as she had been behaving all evening. It was so unlike her too — not the lively sister she knew and loved. Her father had broken her, and what was more, he didn’t care one little bit.

“Father,” Amelia began, “if I manage to fetch a high enough price, please reconsider selling Bridget. There is no need to —”

“Not this again,” he groaned. “I told you to behave!”

“And I will. But please, consider it. If you make enough from me, there is no need for the two of us. She is only seventeen!”

Her father rolled her eyes. “We will see.”

“Really?” she asked desperately.

“But only if you behave!” he growled. “Now, down the stairs. And be quick about it. The auction starts soon, and I want to show you about first. Let the buyers see what they’re getting.” He raised both eyebrows at her and pointed down the stairs.

With no choice, Amelia tried to meet her sister’s gaze a final time, and then she turned about and descended the steps into hell.

There was no need to speak. No need to pretend that she was happy or having a good

time. It was the complete opposite to a standard courting experience as she might imagine, more how a prized pony must feel before being purchased. Dressed in a simple sky-blue dress that was tighter than she would have liked but thankfully had long sleeves and a high neckline, hair worn in curls, make-up over-done to make her eyes pop, the looks the men gave her and her sister might have suggested she was wearing nothing at all. Hunger was what she saw behind those masks. Excitement too. A few spoke to her father as if they were old friends, jokes were made, backs were slapped, and ears were whispered into.

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Amelia kept her sister close as they walked, holding her hand tight, wanting nothing more than to tell her that everything would be all right but also not wanting to lie to her. Everything wasn't going to be all right. She knew that now. At most, she might hope to fetch a high enough price and save her sister, but she knew her father better than to wish for such things. His greed knew no bounds, and if she was bought for an absurd amount, that would likely only encourage him to auction off Bridget and leave tonight with a small fortune.

How long she walked the floor? She had no idea. Her conscience was a million miles away, to better times, ones she knew she wouldn't see ever again. But before long, her father was ushering her and Bridget toward a stage set in the middle of the room — two feet high, another five wide, to stand on, it would put them above the rest so that all eyes might focus on the two ladies, missing nothing, seeing everything,

She held her sister's hand as tight as she could. She wanted to pull her away, cover her somehow, to show the other men that she was not for sale. But her father made sure to have them standing side by side as he set them on the middle of the stage for the room to see.

The raucous laughter in the room began to die slowly as the men about realized what was happening. A few conversations lingered, a couple of them were told to be quiet, and through the smoke, Amelia could see just about every single pair of eyes on her and her sister. The heat from the room made her sweat. The smoke had her coughing.

“We all know why we're here!” her father began loudly, forcing the few who weren't paying attention to quieten down. “But I want to begin by thanking you all for coming! And for recognizing the honor that sits before each of you. The chance you

have to not only secure a marriage to a true lady of England, the daughter of a viscount but also to secure your name beside that of my own. The Lindstone lineage is a long and proud one, and soon, my good friends, two of you will be as good as brothers to me and mine!” The men cheered and cried out and clapped their approval.

Amelia forced herself to withdraw. She didn’t want to hear it. What her father was saying. How triumphant he appeared — how sanctimonious, as if he was doing these men some great favor. She stared at her feet, forcing her mind from the room, away from here, picturing the Duke and his smile, his lips, their feel on him. They were back in that bedroom, he was wrapped around her, his big arms warm and protective and right. He would never let her go, holding her forever, keeping her safe because he loved her.

Somehow, Amelia even managed to smile.

“Five thousand pounds!” Amelia vaguely heard someone shout.

“Six thousand!” another cried.

“Six thousand, five hundred!” a third hollered excitedly.

“We can do better than that!” her father demanded gaily. He stepped behind Amelia and pushed her forward. “Look closely, gentlemen! A truer beauty you will not see!”

“Eight thousand pounds!”

Her father took Amelia by the hand and forced her to twirl; he gripped her waist roughly and spun her while she continued to stare at her feet. “Childbearing hips, too, mind you! She was built to start a family.”

“Ten thousand pounds!” one of the men shouted from the front.

“That’s more like it! Can I hear twelve?”

“Fifteen!” one man demanded. “To close the bidding.”

Amelia dared a glance, finding him immediately in the crowd. He wore a red cape, a white mask, and had a stomach on him that stretched the width of three men. Even beneath the mask, she could see the blotchy red skin, the multiple chins, and the yellow teeth as he smiled his pending victory.

“Sixteen!” A second man declared. Amelia’s head snapped around to find him, landing on what looked to be a taller man in a black cloak, matched to his black mask, with broader shoulders and a firm chin beneath the mask. His hair was dark and his smile was... well, it wasn’t as bad as the other.

“Seventeen!” the one in the red cloak shouted angrily.

“Eighteen,” the man dressed in the dark cloak countered immediately.

“Twenty!” The fat one in the red cloak pushed the men around him to the side as he stormed toward the stage. “Twenty thousand pounds, Lord Lindstone. And I expect —”

“Fifty thousand pounds!” the man in the black cloak shouted, staying right where he was, arms folded, smirking to himself because the number he had just called was as outrageous as it was shocking.

And indeed, the room gasped as one. And her father giggled to himself, unable to hide his excitement. “Did I hear fifty?”

“Fifty to close the bidding,” the man in the black cloak repeated; his voice was deep and commanding, like a storm raging over a placid lake, demanding its attention.

“Outrageous!” the one in the red cloak cried and spun back to confront the other. “No one would pay as much — he’s trying to hustle you!”

“I assure you that I am not.” The man in the black cloak spoke calmly and coolly. Again, he stayed put toward the back of the room, not bothering to raise his voice because he had the room’s complete attention. “Again, fifty thousand pounds, Lord Lindstone. Do you accept?”

“Yes!” her father shouted without pause, his eyes were wide and hungry, and Amelia had never seen him look so excited. “That’s fifty-thousand with tax of course – but we can discuss the finer points later on.” He stepped in to Amelia and pushed her forward. “Congratulations, ah... I’m sorry. I don’t believe I recognize you.”

“I can’t imagine you would.”

“Can we have a name?”

“I’ll do you one better.” The man in the black cloak took a few short steps forward. Those standing about parted ways, creating a small circle about him as if scared to get too close. Whoever he was, he knew how to be dramatic as he paused for a moment, casting his gaze about, making sure all eyes were on his person.

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And then he looked right at Amelia. Nothing was said. Just a pair of crystal blue eyes beyond the mask, meeting her across the room, a silent conversation that she understood immediately because in that moment, she realized who it was behind the mask. And when she did, she just about wept.

The Duke removed his mask, dropped it to the floor, stepped back, and offered a short bow. “I am His Grace, the Duke of Northrade.” His voice boomed like a cannon. “And you, Lord Lindstone, are in serious trouble.”

CHAPTERTWENTY-SIX

“You!” Lord Lindstone gasped. He grabbed his daughter by the shoulder and pulled her back. “How dare you —”

“No!” Evan shouted him down. “How dare you! How dare all of you!” he shouted over the room, sweeping his gaze over the men who had suddenly grown quiet, reserved, even scared. Indeed, many attempted to push their way toward the back of the room, likely figuring that they’d rather be anywhere but here. “You should all be deeply ashamed of what you’ve done here tonight.”

“It’s none of your business!” Lord Lindstone said. He stood on the edge of the stage, attempting to take control of a room that he was very quickly losing his power over. “This has nothing to do with you whatsoever, and I would ask that you leave!”

“Is that what you would ask?” Evan chuckled. “I don’t think so.”

He strode toward the small stage as the men before him hurried to get out of the way.

Then it was a few short steps up the stairs until he found himself face to face with the horrible lord whom it was taking every ounce of self-control Evan possessed not to strike.

To his credit, Lord Lindstone didn't back down. He stood up to Evan, chin pointed as high as it would go, doing what he could to come across as threatening. "I will ask you again. Leave! This is a private event, and you are trespassing."

Evan ignored him.

To the Lord's right stood Miss Baker, body shaking, still withdrawn as she had been all night, not daring to believe yet that the worst was behind her and that she had nothing to fear. She was looking at Evan though with the faintest of smiles which she refused to let take over her face. And her eyes... they were filled with hope.

"Miss Baker," he said softly, stepping around Lord Lindstone. "Are you all right?"

She forced a nod. "You came."

"Of course, I did." He reached out and touched under her chin, looking into her eyes until the smile she wore reached them. "I told you, remember? Trust me."

"Do not touch her!" Lord Lindstone grabbed Evan's arm.

Evan threw him back and turned on him, growling as he stepped forward quickly as if he meant to knock the lord from the stage. "This auction is over, Lord Lindstone. And I suggest you have some sense of decency to recognize it as such."

"Over, is it?" he laughed coldly. "I refuse your offer, Your Grace."

"You can't refuse."

“I can do what I like!” he bawled his fists and stamped his foot. “Amelia —” He pointed right at his daughter. “She belongs to me. As does this one!” Another finger pointed at Bridget, who stood at the back of the stage, shock taking her as she clearly had no idea what to think. “They are mine, and I can do with them whatever I want! You came here tonight under false pretenses, Your Grace, thinking to save my daughter when you don’t have the power to.”

“You won’t take my offer?” Evan said calmly.

“No! Twenty thousand is more than I could have imagined, and it will certainly do. Because you see...” He stormed across the stage and grabbed Bridget, who yelped in pain. “I have two of them!”

“Bridget!” Miss Baker cried.

“Quiet!” Lord Lindstone roared. “Do not speak unless I say! Now, Your Grace, if you don’t mind, I have a bidding to finish, and you are very much not welcome to see it done!”

“Is that what you think?”

Lord Lindstone’s face was bright red, and his body shook as if it might explode. “Are you deaf! I said leave!”

“And what of your debt?” Evan said coolly, very much aware that the entire room was listening, that he didn’t need to raise his voice because they were each enraptured by what was happening before them.

Lord Lindstone balked. “That doesn’t concern you.”

“Twenty thousand isn’t nearly enough to pay it off. Not even half, in fact.”

“As I said, I have two daughters!”

“But still, fifty thousand pounds is a lot of money, Lord Lindstone. How on earth did you fall into such debt in the first place.”

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“Fifty thousand!” Miss Baker gasped. “Father?”

“Quiet!” he hissed at her and then turned back to Evan. “It is none of your concern!”

“On the contrary, Lord Lindstone, as of yesterday, your debt is my concern.”

“Wh — what?” he stammered stupidly. “What do you mean?! Speak!”

“As you know, Lord Malnor is a very good friend of mine, and when I learned of how much you owed him, I offered to take your debt off his hands. Really, after all you’ve put him through, it’s the least that I could do.”

His eyes widened, and he stumbled. “You’re lying!”

“I assure you that I am not.” He walked forward and took Miss Baker by the hand, pulling her away from her father, who this time didn’t try and stop her. “As far as the banks are concerned, you, Lord Lindstone, belong to me. At least until you see fit to pay off the fifty thousand pounds you owe me, but after a quick peek at your financials, I can’t begin to imagine how you might do that.”

Evan had never seen someone look so angry. The little man shook on the spot, fists bawled up, face bright red, eyes as wide as dinner plates. So angry was he that steam seemed to pour from his ears and nose like a kettle that needed to be lifted from the fire. He had lost, and he knew it, and now, he was reckoning with how that felt.

Only... as he was soon to find out, this wasn’t even the worst of it.

“Fine,” he snarled. “If you want to buy my whore daughter for fifty thousand pounds, what do I care. Take her! Take her and consider my debt honored.”

“You know what...” Evan tilted his head and smirked. “No, I don’t think I will.”

“What? But you just said —”

“I’ve had an interesting few days.” Evan turned to address the room, ensuring that everyone was watching. “I was curious how one might rack up such extraordinary levels of debt — and what they might do to try and alleviate it. More precisely, the types of characters they might be willing to work for to see it expunged. And do you know what I found?” He swung back on Lord Lindstone. “Does the names Miss Scarlett Jones mean anything to you?”

Lord Lindstone’s face paled, and he took a nervous step back. “I... I’ve never heard... that name isn’t familiar —”

“She married my father some years ago, tricking him into falling in love with her so that she might siphon off his fortune into a number of ventures that, truth be told, were even more revolting than this one. One such venture was the hiring of bully boys as debt collectors for loan sharks, men of despicable morals who didn’t mind beating up and maiming those who didn’t have the means to fight back. But she couldn’t do it alone, knowing that her face couldn’t possibly be associated with such rascallions. So, she used a proxy.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about, and I demand that you —”

“It was you!” Evan pointed a single finger at the Viscount, the effect of which was as if he slapped the man across the face. “You were in charge of hiring these petty thugs to collect debts all over town. But it didn’t stop there. One instance in particular, involving a young lord whom Miss Scarlett wished to make disappear because he was

becoming a problem. Do you know of whom I speak?”

Evan had done well to remain calm up until this point. Having the higher ground, knowing that he was untouchable, and enjoying the shock and awe of the moment, he'd been able to keep himself composed in a way he didn't know was possible. Indeed, from the moment he entered this room and spied Miss Baker, it was all he could do to wait and bide his time, the sight of her in such duress like a dagger through his heart.

But he was through being calm. Done with being collected. His temper was up, his rage was boiling, and it had everything to do with what he was about to say. For two days now, he'd been forced to sit and wait, the desire to seek his revenge held in check only because he knew that for this to work, he'd need witnesses... not to mention a little bit of theatre.

Now, the time for calm was gone. The time for vengeance had arrived.

“My brother,” Evan growled. “He was jumped not far from here, in fact. A few blocks over while investigating a warehouse he had linked to Miss Scarlet. Jumped by a group of assailants who beat him such that he died on the street, alone, scared, succumbing to wounds that I wouldn't wish upon my worst enemy.”

“I had nothing to do with that!” he cried.

“Liar!” Evan roared, and the room seemed to gasp. “You were the one who hired those men! When Miss Scarlet learned what my brother was going, she reached out and asked you to collect the worst of the worst, those who you knew would finish the job where others might not.”

“That wasn't...” He took a step back. “I didn't — I never asked them to —”

“To what? Kill? Maybe you did. Maybe you didn’t. Truly, I don’t care. The result was the same. My brother died because of you, Lord Lindstone, and for that, I demand retribution.”

“Take her!” he pushed Miss Baker toward Evan. “Take her, and we can forget —”

“I intend to.” Evan took her by the hand and pulled her behind him. “But it won’t stop there.”

“Wh – what do you mean?” he stammered, looking frightened now as he should have.

“The way I see it, you have two options.” Evan’s tone was ice. “And I suggest you listen closely, you fat pig, because I won’t repeat them. One, you want your debt removed? Fine, it’s done. Gone. We are even. But if you accept this, if you sell your daughter to me, I will inform Scotland Yard of what you have done, and they will arrest you. And you, Lord Lindstone, will spend the rest of your days in chains with hammer in hand, breaking rocks, forced to remember what it is that you did and how your life came to such misery.” He bore down on the Lord who was cowering now. “Personally, for a cretin such as yourself, it’s a fate far beyond anything you deserve.”

“You wouldn’t!”

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“Do you care to test that theory, you insufferable rodent?”

“How dare —”

“Or two,” Evan spoke over him, taking a step forward and forcing Lord Lindstone to retreat.

“You remain in my debt,” Evan said coolly. “You work for me how I see fit – and I promise you, you detestable worm, it will not be pleasant. It will not be befitting your station. But work it will be. It will take some time, years by my guess, but you will work it off. Oh, I promise that you will. And as to your daughters — both of them — they no longer answer to you. You no longer own them. It will be as if you were never lucky enough to sire children, married to the job because for the rest of your days that is all you will have to cling to.”

Lord Lindstone didn’t answer, but that was just because he couldn’t. He cowered back, eyes wide as he searched the room for an ally, an escape, some means of getting himself out of this hole that he had dug. But those who stood beneath the stage cast their eyes elsewhere, refusing to look at him because he had become poison, and none of these men wished to be associated with such filth.

Evan glared ruefully, standing over him, suffocating him with a force of will that was like water being poured over an open flame.

“And there is one more thing,” Evan then said.

“Wh — what?”

He had debated if he should do it or not. For the past two days, ever since he'd learned the truth, he'd imagined this situation a hundred times over. It almost always went the same way, always ended in victory, but the final stroke was one that Evan wasn't so sure of. The battle was won. The war was over. Anything more was pure vanity, giving in to his emotions which were nowhere near as fiery as they had been when he'd first learned of Lord Lindstone's link to his brother's death.

And he almost didn't do it. Miss Baker stood beside him. She reached out and pulled her sister in close, holding her and whispering into her ear that all would be fine. The mood in the room shifted toward repulsion, whispers starting, judgmental glares all fixed on Lord Lindstone. Very nearly, Evan didn't commit his final act. That was until he did.

He curled his fist into a ball and threw it with force at Lord Lindstone's exposed jaw. The blow was true, striking him full in the face.

"Argh!" Lord Lindstone cried and stumbled back, hand reaching for his jaw, eyes set wide as if he couldn't believe what had happened. "How dare you!"

"That was for my brother," Evan said coldly. "And this —" He threw a second punch. Harder. Truer as it struck him clean in the nose. It had the Lord crying out as he stumbled and fell backward, landing on his fat buttocks, rolling onto his back, shaking the stage as his full weight collapsed like a sack of flour. "This was for Miss Baker."

There was no smile on Evan's lips as he looked down at the Lord. No look of triumph. He didn't gloat or smirk or bother kicking the man when he was down. The way Lord Lindstone quivered on the floor, holding his face and shielding himself in fright as he whimpered, he didn't think there was much need. It was over.

And then, with nothing else to say, Evan took Miss Baker by the hand, ensured that

she had her little sister's held tight, and led her from the stage. He wanted to pull her in and kiss her. He wanted to hold her and tell her that from this point onwards, all would be all right. He wanted... he wanted to do so many things, but before he did any of that, he wanted to leave this place behind and never come back.

So, that's exactly what they did.

CHAPTERTWENTY-SEVEN

Evan didn't even remember picking Miss Baker up, but by the time they reached his carriage, she was in his arms, and he had to resist the urge to walk around the block because he didn't want to let her go and knew that once they were inside the carriage, he'd have to.

It seemed that she was of the same mind, however. The driver opened the door for them, Bridget was the first one to climb in, and once Evan lifted Miss Baker inside and placed her down on the seat, she was quick to climb into his lap, wrap her arms around his neck, and hold on as if for dear life. And there she stayed as the carriage started down the street, moving at a gentle clip, rocking back and forth such that he thought for a moment that she might have fallen asleep on his lap.

On the other side of the carriage sat Bridget, Miss Baker's younger sister. Inside that horrible room, she had seemed like a mouse cornered by a cat. Shaking the entire time. Shoulders hunched over. Refusing to look anywhere but at her feet. It was a wonder she hadn't shed so much as a single tear, but now that she had been saved, Evan could see why that was. She wore a smile as she shuffled to the edge of her seat and looked out the window, a sense almost that she had known something like this might happen and was now relishing how right she had been. Or maybe, most likely, she was stronger than she looked. At least as strong as Miss Baker.

Speaking of which...

She sat curled in his lap, both arms around his neck, head buried into his chest as her breathing slowly steadied. He stroked her soft hair, kissed the top of her head, and wanted to ask her how she was and if she was all right, but figured that she would speak when she was ready. For now, it seemed that she was happy to simply hold him so that he would know that she was his and he was hers.

“You saved us...” she said suddenly, her voice soft, barely audible.

“What was that?” Evan shifted slightly.

She forced herself to sit up so she could look in his eyes. The dark blue glimmered from withheld tears, tinges of happiness mixed with a look that he wouldn’t have recognized until a few days ago because it was one that he himself had never known until then. Love.

“You saved us,” she said again. Behind her, Bridget was careful to remain looking out the window, happy to pretend as if she was not there because this moment needed to be for Evan and Miss Baker alone. “I thought... for a moment I didn’t know...”

“Hey.” He smiled and stroked her hair. “Of course, I did.”

“I should have known you would. I’m so sorry I didn’t —”

“Don’t ever apologize,” he told her. Her chin trembled as she licked her lips, and all he wanted to do was kiss them, a means of finalizing what had happened. “There’s nothing to apologize for.”

“But —”

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“If anything,” he spoke over her, “I should be the one apologizing to you. I was going to come to you sooner — as soon as I learned of your father’s past. I’m so sorry to have had to put you through that.”

She opened her mouth, likely to tell him also that there was no need to apologize, but then she closed it, licked her lips again, and he could see a thought form behind her eyes. One that was joined by a coy smile as her eyes suddenly lit up and even before she spoke, it was as if he knew what she might say.

“You really should have,” she grinned. “Why, I’m almost inclined not to forgive you.”

“Is that right?” He cocked an eyebrow at her.

“But I will, I think. Only because the sight of you punching my father is one that I’ll dream of for years to come. I might even have an artist recapture the moment, so I can hang it above my bed.”

Evan chuckled. “Better make it two, that way I can hang one above my bed also.”

“I can’t believe you came,” she followed up, snuggling in closer. “I hoped you would but... but my father... these past few days... it’s been horrible.”

“Hey,” he cooed softly and stroked her hair, “you don’t have to worry about him anymore. Not now. Not ever again.”

“I know.” She smiled then, perhaps the first real one she had worn since he’d seen her

today. A smile of acceptance. A smile of gratitude. A smile that told him the past was where it belonged, and it was time to start thinking toward the future.

Speaking of the future, it was strange, but despite all that had happened between then, Evan still didn't know exactly where he stood. Sure, he had saved her. And sure, without him, she would have been sold to another, forced to live a life as a veritable slave. But that didn't mean that he now owned her — that was the point. And despite how he knew that he felt, that didn't mean necessarily that she felt the same way. She was grateful sure, but he didn't want that gratitude to feel like a penance. As if she owed him something.

They'd had so little time together, he now realized. Just one night and a single morning where they'd been free to express their feelings. It felt a lifetime ago, as if so much had happened in that time, as if things might have changed. When they had slept together and when they had held one another after, things had been different. More complicated, sure. But in a way, that had made them simpler.

As he held Miss Baker in his arms, as he stroked her hair and kept her safe, Evan wanted nothing more than to confirm what they had started all those days ago. He wanted to tell her that he loved her, that he would keep on loving her, and that if she wished it, he would marry her. But now that she was free of her father's clutches, he couldn't help but wonder if she might have changed her mind...

"There is one more thing," he began, feeling a lump form in his throat as if trying to block himself from saying the words.

"Yes?" she asked, a tinge of hope coloring her tone as she leaned back and looked up at him.

"Now that you know longer have to worry about your father, you are free to... to pursue whoever you wish. You can fall in love and marry how you please — or not.

It is up to you, and I want you to know that.”

“All right...”

“And I know that we have a history, of sorts. And I know that we have... that we have unfinished business — no,” he stammered. “That’s not what I wanted to say.”

“What did you want to say?” She wore a tiny smirk as if she knew where he was going with this.

“I’m not in the habit of taking young women to my bed,” he started again. “In fact, it’s something that I never do. You know the reason for this.”

“Is it because you’re a cold fish?” she giggled.

He looked at her flatly. “To put it bluntly, yes. But with you, Miss Baker, it’s different. With you... the other night when I — when we...” He glanced toward Bridget, who was humming softly to herself, purposefully not listening. “When I bedded you, I didn’t do that on a whim or because I was trying to... to trick you or anything like that.”

“Is that right?” her eyes flashed.

“I did it because...” He swallowed. “Because I find myself falling in love with you. It’s not a feeling that I am used to. It’s not one that I imagined happening. But it has, and with all that has happened, you should know.” He looked right at her then, through the humor she wore, into her soul. “I love you, Miss Baker. And if you would wish it, if you can see it in yourself then... then I think we should... I would very much like to – gah! Why is this so hard?”

She rolled her eyes. “You’re a fool, you know that, don’t you?”

“Excuse me.”

She pushed herself up and sat back. “Obviously, I love you too.”

“You do?” he beamed, feeling his heart soar.

“Of course I do. And what’s more...” She smiled sheepishly and looked away, only to force her eyes back on him. “...yes, I would love nothing more than to marry you.”

“You — you would?”

“But on one condition.” She cocked an eyebrow at him.

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“Which is?”

“You stop calling me Miss Baker. Call me Amelia. If you’re to be my husband, I think I’ll allow it.”

Evan’s smile was so large that it hurt. “All right, Amelia...”

And with all that said, Evan did the only thing that made sense. He kissed Amelia full on the lips, and as expected, she kissed him right back. Their first kiss in the open, no longer needing to hide or pretend that it meant anything other than what it did. The kiss of two people desperately in love, knowing that love to be returned, knowing that love to be one that would burn bright and hot for years to come.

It was a kiss so sweet that Evan would remember it for the rest of his life. And what was more, it was a kiss that implied the evening to still be young, and with his manor their destination, he knew exactly where such a kiss was going to lead...

* * *

Carrying Amelia in his arms, Evan kicked the door to his room open; it swung back and smashed against the frame, letting off a loud bang, likely alerting the entire manor to where he was and what was about to happen. Not that he cared one little bit. His intentions were clear from the moment the carriage arrived, and even the presence of Bridget couldn’t stop them — he’d made sure to arrange for the staff to take her in, sparing those few precious moments to ensure her safety, but that was all he could possibly allow himself.

Through the door Evan raced, careful to close it behind him with a flick of his ankle, and then to the bed which called like a Siren.

Evan was as careful as he could be when he laid Amelia on her back on the bed. He wanted to throw her down. He wanted to climb on her and tear her dress free. He wanted to do all manner of things that had haunted his dreams since that morning spent in the garden under the elm tree. But he curbed those most wicked thoughts for a moment, just long enough to stand back and marvel at the beauty he now had all to himself.

He couldn't believe his luck. The milky-white skin. The dark blue eyes. The thick lips, sharp features, and petite frame that curved in ways that made him salivate. The dress itself was simple, but beneath it was a body of wonder, one that his hands would be around soon enough, that he would be devouring as if it was his last meal. But not yet... for now, to gaze upon her beauty and thank God and all those listening that she was his, was what he wanted. No more secrets. No more hiding. Finally, they could be together.

"What?" she asked, propping herself up on her elbows, voice cracking slightly as if she was nervous. "What are you looking at?"

"You," he said simply. "Just you."

She pushed her lips together to stop herself from beaming. "Well, stop looking and start... you know..." Her eyes flashed, and he could see the wicked thoughts racing behind her eyes.

"Whatever you wish..." he growled as he climbed on the bed and mounted her.

Evan's lips found Amelia's instantly. Her taste was one that he remembered but one that he had forgotten how much he craved. They kissed fully and passionately as his

hands gripped her waist while her legs opened, and he fell between them. Soon, his tongue was inside her mouth, lapping and wrestling and massaging as she bit down and nibbled playfully on his lips.

From there, it was her neck that Evan devoured. Soft kisses that turned ravishing. She leaned back, eyes closed, and moaned each time he licked and sucked at her. His hands were busy, moving up her waist as they tried to find the opening to her dress, only to become frustrated, tearing it open and exposing her perfect breasts. He went for them as if his life depended on it, lips wrapping each nipple and sucking and licking... and biting just until he heard her gasp.

Amelia was more willing to take control this time. No longer unsure. No longer shy and reserved. Her hands moved to his pants, unlatching them at the front, opening them the best she could, reaching her hand down his front and grabbing his member with such satisfaction and eagerness that Evan's body stiffened, and he was forced to shove his head into her neck and groan as she played with him.

"Amelia..." he moaned as she slowly stroked him beneath his breeches. "Don't you ever stop."

"I don't plan on it," she purred into his ear.

But it was never going to end there. They might have had the rest of their lives together, but the way they were acting, you would think that this was their one and only chance to take advantage in the only manner that they knew how. Soon, their clothes were off, torn and ripped and tossed across the room. Naked bodies pressed together as hands grabbed and pawed like animals in the wild, tearing at carcasses, desperate to get every last piece.

Evan moved to mount Amelia, but she was quick to push him onto his back and climb atop him. There was a fire in her eyes, a hunger in her smile, and he wasn't

going to fight it. On his back, Evan held Amelia by the waist as she slowly lowered over his girth. Slowly... carefully... body shuddering with each inch taken... she swallowed him. Then, leaning forward, finding his mouth and kissing him like she never had before, Amelia began to move her hips back and forth, and Evan again found himself thanking God and anyone listening.

It was unlike anything he could have imagined. All those nights and days picturing this moment, and Evan found his imagination lacking severely. The feel of Amelia on top of him. The sensation of being inside her of. Her breasts heaving as she moved back and forth. Her body shaking. The sounds she made! His future wife, and Evan could not have been happier.

The evening was young when the two started, and it was late when they finally finished. Hours passed, Evan guessed, even if it only felt like minutes. They rolled around the bed, finding themselves on the floor, standing and pressing themselves against the wall, then back on the bed. Any way that Evan could take her, he did. Any means he could find to be as close to her as was possible, to please her, to let her know that she was his, he committed to. It was rough and wild. It was soft and sensual. It was beyond pleasure because pleasure is a thing for mere mortals and this felt heavenly in every sense of the word.

And when they were finally done. When their bodies were drained of fluids and energy and the will to keep going, Evan fell on his back, and Amelia snuggled into his arm. She didn't say anything, and nor did he. Rather, he kissed her on the head, held her close, closed his eyes, and together the two drifted into a deep sleep from which they might never wake.

No dreams were had that night either. There was no need. Life was beyond reality, and any dream they might have had would only spoil the perfection that they had found in one another's arms. Evan, he knew, was the happiest he had ever been, and what was more, he couldn't foresee it ending anytime soon.

EPILOGUE

“I still think you should forgive her,” Bridget said rightly. “You know you should.”

“I know no such thing,” Amelia responded stubbornly. She pulled her gaze from her reflection, looked over her shoulder, and fixed her sister with a self-righteous scowl.

“Amelia...”

“And even if I was going to — that’s not to say I am — but if I was going to...” Back to her reflection, Amelia touched lightly at her hair, double checking that it would stay once she started to move. “Why does it have to be today? Of all days, why does this have to be this one.”

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“It’s because it’s today that I think you should.” Bridget pushed herself to her feet and swept to where Amelia was standing, putting herself right beside her older sister so that both their reflections were looking back at them. “She’s our mother.”

“I know it.”

“She just wants us to be happy.”

“She had a funny way of showing it.”

“And you know it wasn’t her fault,” Bridget pressed as she raised her eyebrows at her Amelia’s reflection. “You know this. It was our father who —”

“Who she never stood up to. Who she almost let sell us off like a couple of sheep.”

“Let!” Bridget barked a laugh. “You know she didn’t let that man do anything. As if she had a choice. She was trapped as much as we were, sister. And you of all people should know that.”

Amelia pressed her lips together into a frown, understanding the sense in her sister’s words but not quite ready to accept them. Today was supposed to be the happiest of her life, and the last thing she needed was to get upset, which she knew would happen if she was forced to remember a period of her life that she’d spent the last few months doing everything she could to forget. That was the real reason she didn’t want to forgive her mother or see her for that matter. It was the reminder that she bore, memories that came with her simply because she’d never stood up to the man who had nearly destroyed both Amelia and Bridget’s life.

“Martha?” Bridget sighed, looking back across the room to where Martha sat, fiddling with the hems of her dress because she likely didn’t want to be pulled into this conversation. “Can you speak some sense into her.”

“Well...” Martha pushed her tongue into the side of her cheek. “I’d rather not.”

“And yet clearly you have something to say,” Amelia responded dryly.

“Only this.” Martha stood up and crossed the room, standing on the other side of her best friend. She took her hand and focused on their reflection. “You claim you don’t want to forgive her.”

“Not today.”

“And yet even still, it was you who invited her, was it not?”

“I —” Amelia started to argue, but her words became caught in her mouth. “It was the right thing to do.”

“Or was it that deep down you want this,” Martha countered. “Yes, she failed you. And yes, you have every right to be angry. But today is the first day of the rest of your life, Amelia. Don’t you want to put the past behind you and start it fresh? Even if that means finally forgiving your mother. I know it would mean the world to her.”

“Oh, do you now?”

Martha shrugged. “We still talk on occasions.”

“Martha!”

“I’ve known her my entire life,” she countered. “And after what happened to your

father... she misses you, Amelia. Both of you.”

“I’ve forgiven her,” Bridget said rightly.

“Yes, but she wants to see you together,” Martha pressed. “And what’s more... I think she wants to congratulate you.” Martha wore a cheeky smile. “You did manage to land a duke, after all. Who would have thought you’d have it in you.”

Despite a stubborn streak that was legendary, Amelia felt herself caving to good sense and reason. With her sister on one arm and her best friend on the other, both offering good points to which there were few arguments against, Amelia couldn’t rally a defense that might quiet them. They were right. She had spent a long time blaming her mother for what had happened, likening her to her father because it had felt just, but she had lately begun to wonder if maybe it was time to forgive her.

Bridget had already. She’d done so a month ago, about the time that Evan informed her that she’d be living with them officially until the time came for her to meet a man of the ton and begin the courting process. Not an adoption, per se. Just a roof over her head with the finances behind her to ensure that she met the right man, one who was deserving of her. So, if her sister could see it in her to forgive and forget...

“Fine,” Amelia sighed, slumping her shoulders in exaggeration. “Let her in.”

“Yay!” Bridget beamed, letting go of her arm and hurrying across the room. “I know you’ll feel better for it.”

“I sure hope so.”

“This is the right move,” Martha agreed. “Why, if it wasn’t for the fact that you’re to be married in less than an hour, I might have even said this would be the best thing you’d do today.”

“A shame I’m getting married in an hour.” Amelia couldn’t help but grin.

“Such a shame,” Martha chuckled and offered a wink.

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Oh yes, today was Amelia's wedding day, and as should have been obvious but never hurts to overstate, she was thrilled for it.

The last three months, in fact, it was impossible to determine in which moment she had been at her happiest. Was it the day that Evan rescued her, and they confessed their love for one another? Was it the next week, when her father finished sending the last of her things to her new home, signaling the ending of her old life? Was it the weeks that followed, every day a dream spent with the man whom she adored beyond reason? Or was it each night when she curled up in Evan's arms, drifting off to sleep, realizing that when she woke, the next day would be as blissful as the one she was leaving?

Really, it didn't matter. There were no bad days, so why try and compare them? The simple fact was that she had never been happier, and if her life continued to trend in this direction, the rest of it would be just as wonderful.

Today, she supposed, was technically the happiest yet. Putting aside the stress that a wedding brings, everything else was going perfectly. The ceremony was being held at Evan's church; she was there now, sequestered in an antechamber as she readied to walk down the aisle. Her and Evan's friends had turned up in droves, there to bear witness to the majesty that would be them committing the rest of their lives together. And her dress, as well as her hair and make-up, had her looking like a princess from a fairytale.

Waiting for her mother to arrive, feeling her nerves spike just a tad, Amelia went back to looking at her reflection. The dress she wore was similar in color and design to the one that Evan had secretly ordered for her all those months ago — a slightly

lighter yellow but with the same red hems and lighter yellow floral patterns weaved throughout. Her hair was done up, held back by a crown beset with rubies, and her make-up was simple, designed to make her white skin contrast to the dress so that she seemed to glow.

She looked beautiful. And what was more, she knew Evan would agree. He told her every day how stunning she was, meaning it even when she was at her worst, and she could not wait to see his eyes light up as she appeared at the end of the aisle.

“Amelia...” her mother’s soft voice cut through her imaginings, bringing her back into the room.

Amelia stiffened and slowly turned, forcing a smile when she spotted her mother lurking by the door. She was looking frailer than Amelia remembered, wispy, as if a stiff breeze might pick her up and carry her off. Strange that when Amelia had allowed herself to remember her, she’d seemed much bigger, sharper, crueller was how she remembered her. Not at all the woman who stood gaping.

“You look... beautiful,” she said, voice cracking, smile showing the truth in her words.

“Thank you, Mother.”

The two women stood staring at one another, the silence that grew between them heavy and awkward.

“Ah... we’ll just... yes.” Martha hurried across the room and took Bridget by the hand, leading her from it and closing the door behind them.

“I was surprised when I was sent an invitation,” her mother began. “Really... I didn’t know if I would be...”

“Of course, you would be,” Amelia sighed. “You’re my mother.”

“Am I?” Her mother’s shoulder slumped, and she looked away. “I haven’t much felt like one. Not for years. A mother is supposed to protect her daughters, and in that, I failed the two of you.”

“You did,” Amelia agreed. “Father... you were going to let him sell us.”

“I didn’t want it.”

“But you didn’t try and stop him,” Amelia pointed out. She wasn’t angry, which surprised her. Rather, the words spoken felt like a form of catharsis, needed to be said as a means of getting them off her chest finally. “Not once did you —”

“But I did.” She looked pleadingly at Amelia. “You have no idea how much. Those days he had you locked in your room, you have no idea how much we fought.”

“Not hard enough.”

“I didn’t believe he would truly go through with it,” she pleaded. “When he told me what he planned... I thought he was speaking wildly. How could I not? To think that even he was capable of such horror? Our debts were bad, but I couldn’t have imagined...” she trailed off, unable to say it.

“But he did do it,” Amelia responded coolly. “You were there. You saw it.”

“I wanted to stop him. You have to believe that I begged him!”

“Not hard enough.”

“I... I did my best, Amelia.” She looked away as if from shame. “I only wish I could

have done more.”

“As do I.”

Her mother flinched as if stung. Then she shrank back, growing smaller somehow. “I understand if you want to hate me. And I know I have no right to ask for your forgiveness. I just...” She forced a smile and then forced herself to meet Amelia’s eyes. “I just wanted to see you today, is all. To see you this happy. To know you’re with a man who loves you the way the Duke does.” She sniffed and wiped her nose. “I’ve never been more proud.”

It would have been so easy to dismiss her mother there and then. She had seen her. She had heard what she had to say. And with that done, Amelia could put it out of her mind and move on to the rest of her life. Only... in that moment, Amelia realized it wouldn’t be so easy. Not nearly as much as she had thought.

She was wrong. It really was that simple. It was an easy thing to blame her mother for what her father had done, for never standing up to him and going along with his schemes. But it would be wrong to do, and a misremembering of the truth — giving her father an out, was how it felt. When she had been living under her father’s roof, Amelia had felt like a prisoner, and now that she was free, she realized that she wasn’t the only one.

Her mother had been trapped in a loveless marriage, a prisoner like she had been, unable to do or say anything for fear of the retribution it might bring. No, she didn’t stop him. And no, she didn’t stand up to him as Amelia might have liked her to. But she also didn’t have a choice. And seeing how truly happy she was for her now... well, Amelia had to hold back tears because she didn’t want her make-up getting ruined.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 12:09 am

“I’ll go,” her mother said softly and started to turn. “I just wanted to see you one last time...”

“Mother...” Amelia sighed, and her mother spun back around. “You don’t... you don’t have to go.”

“I... I don’t?” Hope embodied her, and Amelia couldn’t help but smile.

“Of course not. You’re my mother, and I’m glad you’re here.”

“Really?”

Amelia beamed. “Yes, really. And I want you to know that I don’t blame you for our father. It was he and he alone that did those things, and you... you did you best.”

Her mother hesitated as her smile took over. Tears formed in her eyes. She fiddled with her hands, not sure what to do. And then, as if overcome by emotion, she threw herself at her daughter. “Oh, Amelia!”

“Mother!” Amelia gasped as her mother fell into her arms.

It was a strange thing. Amelia had just been wondering what the happiest moment of her recent life might have been, and while her time spent with the Duke was certainly at the top of the list, this moment right here might have been a close second. She and her sister were close and always would be. But to know that she also had a mother who loved her, and one who she could love in return... the feeling was indescribable.

Her mother left her shortly after that, giving Amelia just enough time to double check her hair and make-up before Bridget popped into the room to inform her that it was time to get started. She was buzzing with excitement, but that was nothing compared to how Amelia felt.

Seeing as she didn't have a father to give her away, Amelia had asked her sister if she would do the honors. And so, together and hand in hand, they left the anteroom and walked into the church, ready to finally marry.

* * *

Evan had never seen anyone look so beautiful. And yes, that felt like a cliché to say, but it was true! When Amelia appeared at the end of the aisle, when she fixed him with a smile that reached her eyes, Evan's jaw hit the floor. It was like seeing an angel. Light streamed through the windows, shining a halo behind her. The orchestra that played was angelic, as if her beauty was the cause of the melody. And as she walked, it was as if she was floating... or maybe that was Evan?

In short, as Amelia walked down the aisle to join him, Evan was forced to remind himself that this was no dream, and the word happy seemed to fall painfully short of how he was feeling.

"Try and contain yourself," David whispered into Evan's ear.

"I will not," Evan grinned at his best friend.

"All right, but when it's my turn next month, I'll remember this."

Evan rolled his eyes at David... catching the way he looked past Amelia to Martha who was following in toe as she made her way to a seat at the front. David and Martha had announced their engagement only days after Evan and Amelia had announced theirs. A surprise to some, a shock to others, perfectly predictable to Evan

as he'd been the first to know how much the two loved one another.

And for the first time ever, Evan found that he didn't have to worry after his friend. No need to guard him against heartbreak. No need to make sure that he wouldn't suffer as he had so many times before. This was love, Evan realized whenever he saw them together. He knew it for fact because he was in love also, so he recognized the signs.

The ceremony got underway as soon as Amelia reached him. They held hands as they looked into one another's eyes, not really listening to the sermon, not caring about the words spoken because they didn't matter. They didn't need to be told how they felt. They didn't need to be ordained in front of others. They knew what they were, and as Evan stared into his future wife's eyes, and she stared back, this shared sense of knowing spoke volumes. So lost were they in one another that when it came time to kiss, they nearly missed it.

But kiss they did! A glorious thing. Not the first. Certainly not the last. But one that they would remember for it signaled the beginning of the rest of their lives, lives which started the moment they walked down the aisle together, hand in hand.

Just months ago, if Evan had found himself married, he probably wouldn't have been able to name ten people he'd want to share the experience with. Funny that today, half the town had turned out, all eager to bask in his and Amelia's love. He smiled at them as he walked past, waved and nodded and simply enjoyed himself; it was a good feeling, knowing that one's happiness might inspire others.

And it continued as they left the church and climbed in the carriage, sitting in the back seat, right before the window, so they could wave everyone off. Which Evan intended to do. He turned back and readied to wave as the carriage kicked off, but his wife, ever the scoundrel, had other ideas.

She grabbed hold of his face and pulled him into another, rather inappropriate kiss.

One that the entire wedding party bore witness too. One which had them crying out with joy and clapping their salutations as the carriage rattled down the road and out of sight. And all the while, Evan continued to kiss Amelia, wondering if he would ever want to stop, knowing that he probably wouldn't, realizing that there was no need.

She was his, and he was hers. They would spend the rest of their lives together. And that kiss... it would be but one out of a million shared, a single memory in thousands he planned to make with her. This was happiness, Evan thought to himself with a smile as he kissed his wife. This was love. And seeing how good it felt, he couldn't help but wonder what it was he had been scared of all this time.

The End?