



Three Scandals for the Wild Duke

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Category: Romance, Adult, Historical

Description: "Stop goading me, my lady, or I might do something I'll regret..."

This house party is Emma's last chance to find a match. Otherwise, her parents threaten to intervene... and their means are not nearly as noble...

Duke George despises one thing above all else: vixens desperate for a scandal to trap a man. And that is exactly what he sees behind Emma's enchanting mask of innocence.

George is determined to ruin each and every one of Emma's plans. Yet the more they bicker, the stronger the fire between them grows. Until it threatens to burn them both in scandal...

*If you like powerful Dukes, loving Duchesses and a marvelous depiction of the majestic Regency and Victorian era, then Three Scandals for the Wild Duke is the novel for you.

Total Pages (Source): 83

CHAPTER 1

“Your time is up, child!” Tristan Lovell, Baron Dewsbury, chastised as their carriage made its way through the English countryside. Emma Lovell sighed softly, the familiar censure prickling her insides.

“I have never heard of a lady in her third season without so much as a glance from an interested suitor!” he continued, his eyes wide as if he was in disbelief.

“It is not entirely unheard of, Father,” Emma responded, before turning her attention to the window, seeking a momentary escape in the landscape whisking by.

At that moment, the imposing silhouette of Firman Manor emerged through the dense foliage, its stone towers tall against the summer sky. The sight gave Emma a sense of dread instead of comfort, for she detested the impending social maneuvers that awaited at the Earl of Firman’s house party.

“We are almost there,” her father declared. “I have been patient enough as a father. And you have wasted enough time, Emma.”

“Oh, Tristan dear,” Caroline Lovell, the Baroness Dewsbury, interjected with a soothing voice that did nothing to move him. “I am sure Emma knows what she must do. This is an opportunity she will not waste.” Turning to Emma, she surreptitiously gestured to her to say something.

“Of course, Father. Rest assured that I will make a match,” Emma said more to silence him than to convey any true intent.

She disliked how her mother always seemed to fuel her father's relentless expectations. The man was never wrong in his own eyes, and his words were final—unchangeable. This had fostered in Emma resentment toward her father, and pity for her mother.

“See, My Lord, I told you the girl is just as desperate,” her mother chimed in with a nervous smile.

Emma felt a bitter sensation clawing its way up her throat. Was she truly a daughter to them? Or merely an asset to be used in their social ambitions? The notion of being nothing more than ‘the girl they must marry off well’ settled over her spirit like a shroud.

“You must make the best match. And no, a man without a title will not do,” Baron Dewsbury continued. “I need a son-in-law who would pay me back all the money I have wasted on you in the last three unsuccessful seasons.” Emma fought to keep her composure, the lump in her throat painful.

“I heard the guest list is quite extensive,” Caroline interjected, her voice carrying a hint of enthusiasm as she recited the names of four Viscounts and a Baron rumored to be attending the house party.

Emma's father, however, remained distinctly unimpressed by the enumeration of lesser nobility. His stern gaze flicked briefly over his wife, prompting her to hastily supplement her earlier statement.

“The Duke of Seymore is to attend as well.”

“Are you in your right mind, woman?” Tristan suddenly sat up against the plush cushion of the carriage seat. “I am trying to marry off my daughter, not to smear my family name and plummet in society!”

At her husband's stern rebuke, Caroline's cheeks turned a bright shade of pink.

Emma knew little about the Duke of Seymore, besides whispers that fluttered through society like sinister butterflies. He was a sworn bachelor, renowned for his rakish exploits and the scandals that seemed to cling to him. Rumors abounded that he had compromised the reputations of several ladies and had stubbornly refused to offer for any one of them marriage. To be associated with someone like Seymore was ruin for any gently bred lady.

"I was merely stating the guest list as I heard it, My Lord," her mother quickly corrected. "But I'm sure the Earl, must be in search of a wife..." she insinuated, her eyes alight with a hint of mischief that seemed to momentarily dissolve the stern air around her husband. Predictably, his demeanor softened at the prospect.

"Now that is a catch worthy of consideration. Whether he is searching for a wife or not is beside the point. The man is a peer and must produce an heir to carry on his title." He turned to Emma with meaning in his gaze.

She felt a cold dread settle within her as her father opened his mouth yet again to speak. "I do not care how you do it. Get him to marry you before the end of the house party."

Emma swallowed convulsively. She had no words to respond to such a blunt command. Her parents' intentions for her were crystal clear; they saw her as little more than a means to secure their own social ascent.

"If you fail, I have a suitor waiting for you in London," he finished, his voice curiously smug now, as if he held the winning card in a game of piquet.

"A suitor?" Emma suddenly sat up. This was certainly news to her. While she had been under tremendous pressure to secure a suitable match, her father had not yet

attempted to force a specific gentleman upon her. Alas, she should have known better than to believe his meddling would remain merely verbal for long.

“Yes. My friend, the Marquess of Neads, is more than willing to take you off my hands,” her father responded, his tone dismissive, as if he were discussing the transfer of property rather than the future of his daughter.

Emma turned her gaze toward her mother, seeking some semblance of support or surprise, only to be further shocked and profoundly disappointed. Her mother’s eyes held a resignation that betrayed her foreknowledge of this scheme.

The Marquess of Neads was a decrepit old man, well into his sixties, notorious within society circles for his unabashed pursuit of a young wife to bear him ‘sons’. Emma felt as though she would cast up her accounts at any moment. She knew then with a sinking heart that she must secure a favorable match at this house party.

Relief washed over her when the carriage stopped in front of the manor. The cool breeze and the spacious grounds of the estate were a welcome reprieve from the cramped, tense atmosphere she had endured throughout the nine-hour trip.

A gentleman she assumed was Alexander Winger, the Earl of Firman, stood atop the marble steps, his hands clasped in front of him and a warm smile on his handsome face. His greeting was polite, but he seemed rather aloof.

“Lord Firman, we are most honored by the invitation,” her father said as he bowed, his voice dripping with a fervor that was almost desperate. “This is my lovely daughter, Emma,” he introduced, practically pushing her forward such that she nearly stumbled.

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Emma curtsied as gracefully as she could, holding the posture for a moment longer than necessary. As she slowly rose, she blinked demurely and allowed her eyes to meet the Earl's. The moment was crucial; if she was to make any efforts to secure his attentions, the time to start was now.

Firman's response was perfect courtesy and charm as he took her gloved hand and placed a kiss upon her knuckles. "Lovely indeed, Miss Lovell." His voice held warmth that sent a flutter of hope through Emma's chest.

When she glanced at her parents, she saw them exchange a look of triumph. They couldn't be more pleased by the Earl's observation, seeing it as a promising start to their ambitions for this house party. Emma, however, felt a twinge of apprehension at their eagerness, knowing all too well that things could go horribly wrong if she did not act cleverly.

Firman gestured at a dark-haired young lady who came forward. "Allow me to introduce my sister, Lady Olivia Winger." She appeared rather reserved, her eyes darting away quickly during introductions.

"Mrs. Hampton will show you to your rooms, Lord and Lady Dewsbury," Lady Olivia said, gesturing toward the middle-aged woman who stood by the side, her posture speaking of years spent managing a household efficiently.

"I will show Miss Lovell to her chambers," she added as she turned to Emma with a slight, encouraging smile and asked, "Shall we, Miss Lovell?"

This is promising. The sister appears to find me agreeable. "Please, do call me

Emma,” she responded, returning the smile as she followed Lady Olivia into the manor.

As they ascended the grand staircase, Emma’s spirits were lifted perceptibly by the absence of her father’s overbearing presence. “We have most of the young guests lodged in the east wing of the manor, and the older in the west,” Lady Olivia explained as they walked through the hallways. “I find that it is better that way to make acquaintances of a similar age.”

“That is very thoughtful of you, My Lady.”

“Please address me as Olivia.” She smiled. “It is only fair if we are on even grounds of informality.”

They stopped before a door, which Olivia opened to reveal a spacious chamber decorated in soothing pale shades of green, brown, and ivory. The room was filled with light, the decor elegant yet inviting—very unlike the dark, heavy drapes and furnishings of Emma’s familial home.

“Parents can be obstinate in their archaic ways. Better to leave them to themselves,” Olivia remarked with a conspiratorial wink as she stepped inside the room.

“Indeed,” Emma chuckled. She found herself warming to Olivia Winger, her easy manner a balm to Emma’s frazzled nerves.

“There is going to be a dinner later tonight. The official opening of the house party,” she announced.

“It sounds like a marvelous time,” Emma murmured. She could practically feel her father’s impatient, demanding gaze burning into her, could hear his harsh whisper in her mind: ‘You fail to secure a match, you marry the Marquess of Neads...’ The title

“Neads” echoed ominously in her thoughts.

Her tone must have conveyed her lack of enthusiasm, and Olivia must have heard it, because she smiled. “I am not fond of gatherings either. My brother’s house parties have quite the reputation for being very entertaining, you see. I am sure you and I will find good diversion here.”

“I am sure,” Emma responded, mustering a reassuring smile to mask her inner turmoil.

If only her father had sought the Earl’s invitation because of his reputation as a gracious host. But no, Baron Dewsbury had reached out to the Earl for far more selfish and desperate reasons—to corner their host into a match with his daughter.

“Whatever you need, Mrs. Hampton and I will do our best to make you comfortable. You need only ask,” Olivia added before she excused Emma to finally settle in and prepare for the dinner.

Flopping into a chair, she reflected on how effectively the young lady embodied the role of hostess. Despite her initial reservations about the party, Olivia’s warm demeanor offered a faint glimmer of solace amidst the brewing storm of expectations. Emma let out an audible sigh before making her way toward the window. She gazed at the lush, meticulously tended grounds below, admiring the way the late afternoon sun cast long shadows across the vibrant green lawns.

A wave of curiosity overcame her, a sudden desire to explore the manor and momentarily forget the true reason she was here. She imagined herself wandering through the medieval walls of Firman Manor, each stone whispering secrets of the past, allowing her to travel back in time and escape the looming pressures of the present.

Just then, a knock on the bedchamber door interrupted her reverie. Antoinetta, her lady's maid, entered, closely followed by a footman holding several boxes. Upon Antoinetta's subtle nod and quiet instructions, the footman set them down and promptly exited the room.

"I never saw a household more alive and merrier," Antoinetta exclaimed. Her blue eyes sparkled with enthusiasm, presumably for the days they were to spend here, filled with grand events and new acquaintances.

Emma inclined her head. Antoinetta was six years older than her. During her grandmother's lifetime, she had formed an unlikely friendship with Antoinetta, who had been her companion. They would play in her grandmother's house until they were called to behave. As Emma watched Antoinetta unpack the boxes, a smile touched her lips, recalling those carefree moments.

"I have a good feeling about this house party, Emma," Antoinetta said, breaking into Emma's thoughts with a hopeful tone.

They were informal whenever they were alone. To each other, they were simply Emma and Antoinetta—friends rather than mistress and servant. "I hope you are right, Antoinetta," Emma replied.

"Oh, cheer up, Miss grumpy," Antoinetta chuckled, trying to lift Emma's spirits with her lighthearted banter.

"I wish I could," Emma responded, her tone flat.

Antoinetta's expression softened, her brows knitting together in concern. "Are they bothering you again about it?" she asked gently. Emma nodded. "Oh poor dear," Antoinetta murmured, squeezing Emma's hand reassuringly. At that moment, Emma felt the warmth of true companionship, very unlike the cold ambitions of her parents.

“Well, I say, do not let them get in the way of your having a wonderful time here, Emma,” Antoinetta advised, her voice brimming with optimism.

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This optimism reminded Emma of her good friend, Frances Hughes. Both women had an uncanny ability to see light even in the darkest of situations. Emma wished she could adopt their cheerful outlook. Alas, she tended to see things as they were, not as she hoped them to be, a trait that often made her all too aware of the harsh realities of her life. One would call her a realist. Or a pessimist, as Frances often playfully chastised.

“Only with a bright smile would you win the heart of the most eligible gentleman,” Antoinetta continued as she shifted through the contents of Emma’s wardrobe. “Let us forget the Baron and Baroness, and make the most of our time here, Emma dear,” she concluded with a reassuring smile.

“You are right,” Emma couldn’t help but agree, feeling a spark of Antoinetta’s infectious cheer warm her spirits. Together, they went through her boxes, selecting a dress and matching shoes, gloves, and jewelry for the evening’s opening dinner. As they laid out a delicate, ivory silk dress, Emma wondered if the Earl would notice.

Her spirits lifted considerably after deciding on her attire, so much so that she felt an urge to explore. With a few hours to spare before she needed to dress for dinner, she made her way downstairs, her steps light.

She had just passed by an ajar door when a most shocking sight halted her. Curiosity piqued, she retraced her steps and peered into the room.

In the salon was Olivia, in a compromising position with a gentleman.

CHAPTER 2

Emma couldn't believe Olivia's recklessness: sitting alone with a gentleman in an ajar room so exposed in a house filled with members of the ton. And worse, the gentleman was holding Olivia's hand while she smiled as though he was the most important person in her life. Emma rather liked Olivia and couldn't find it in her to simply ignore this and let the girl jeopardize her future so carelessly.

Thus, she pushed open the door, and stepped into the room with a firmness that belied her racing heart. To her surprise, neither Olivia nor the gentleman seemed startled at being caught together. If anything, the duo appeared comfortable and at ease, as if such encounters were commonplace here.

"Oh, Emma," Olivia began pleasantly at the sight of her, her smile warm but with a hint of nervousness. "Are you?—"

"With all due respect, sir, you should be ashamed of yourself for taking advantage of a young lady in her own home," Emma addressed the gentleman, her tone stern and her gaze unyielding. The gentleman quirked a brow in ostensible surprise and... Amusement? The nerve of him! Something about his demeanor and lack of remorse for his actions irritated Emma deeply.

Olivia attempted to speak again. "Oh, but Emma?—"

"Do not worry, Olivia. Your secret is safe with me, for I shall not speak a word of this to anyone. You can be on your way. You are safe."

Olivia tried again, a note of desperation in her voice, clearly wanting to explain. "You see?—"

"It is all right, Olivia dear. Go on," the gentleman said softly, his tone soothing and his expression one of calm assurance.

Emma could not believe his audacity. There he was, flirting with Olivia despite her interruption and continued presence in the room. Olivia herself seemed torn, as though she wanted to argue, but upon reconsideration, she chose to exit the room.

Unbelievable! He has charmed her out of reason and caution, Emma thought, her brow furrowed in concern. She'd heard tales of gentlemen like him who preyed on the naivete and innocence of young ladies—a lot like the notorious Duke of Seymore.

“If you care about that lady, as you have no doubt professed to her, then you wouldn't risk her reputation so,” Emma admonished him sharply after Olivia had left the room.

“Is that so?” He folded his arms across his broad chest, his blue eyes gleaming with amusement, which only served to heighten Emma's irritation. “You sound quite certain of my...professions,” he added, his tone now teasing.

“Probably because I just walked in and interrupted them,” she retorted defiantly. “Fortunately so, too. God knows what would have happened if anyone else had walked by the door.”

“I suppose I should be grateful that you walked past then,” he said, maintaining that infuriating air of amusement.

“I do not care for your gratitude,” Emma snapped back, her patience wearing thin. He looked almost taken aback, surprised perhaps by her fervor. “Olivia deserves more, and better than a smeared reputation.” My intervention was solely for Olivia's sake, and Olivia alone, she told herself. Not to win her or the Earl's favor.

“How would you know that? Is Olivia your friend, Miss...?” he probed, his tone shifting as he sought to understand her connection.

“Lovell,” Emma responded quickly before adding, “I wouldn't call us friends just yet,

but?—”

“Then you have no business interrupting her private conversations,” he cut in sharply.

“Private conversation?” She echoed, her disbelief audible. “You were seated too close to her for comfort, and propriety, sir. You were even holding her ungloved hand! That is taking advantage of her. Not to mention courting a scandal which is bound to be devastating.” Her ire was rising, and she could not truly understand why.

The gentleman was quiet for a moment, his gaze lingering on Emma with a mirth that made her feel unexpectedly self-conscious.

She suddenly felt on display, very much aware of her lone presence with him in the room. Just when she thought that he was unaware, he said, “You know... For a lady so obsessed with propriety, you have stayed a rather long time alone with me in this room.” His observation, pointed and unsettling, left Emma grappling with a mix of indignation and a dawning realization of her precarious situation.

She blinked, a gasp suddenly escaping her as she realized her own recklessness. Her cheeks flushed with a sudden heat, and without another word, she quickly turned on her heels and hurried out of the room. Something about this man infuriated her intensely, setting her nerves on edge in a manner she hadn’t anticipated.

As she hastened down the long hallway, she collided with something... Someone.

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“Oh, there you are, Emma!” came Olivia’s voice as she steadied both of them.

“Is everything well, Miss Lovell?” the Earl inquired, his brows furrowed with what looked like concern. Emma stared from brother to sister, her confusion increasing.

“Oh, just fine, My Lord” she replied, attempting to collect herself and regain her composure.

“Did you leave him in the salon?” Olivia asked with an innocent enough tone, but it pricked Emma’s already heightened senses.

“Who?” Emma blurted, momentarily taken aback by the question. “Oh yes! Yes, of course.” She recovered, her mind racing as she pondered whether the Earl was aware of his sister’s suitor and their earlier encounter.

“Mind if we return to the salon then, Miss Lovell?” the Earl suddenly asked, his inquiry pulling her from her thoughts.

Emma’s brow furrowed at his odd request. She glanced at Olivia, who gave her an encouraging smile, though it did little to dispel her perplexity. “Is everything all right?” Emma asked as they walked.

“Quite well, Miss Lovell. I merely have something to show you back there,” the Earl responded with a pleasant smile that seemed to mask an underlying purpose.

Reluctant yet curious about what the Earl intended to show her, Emma took a deep, steadying breath. Upon entering, she noticed that the infuriating gentleman was now

helping himself to some liquor from a cabinet. He turned at their entrance, his expression not betraying any surprise.

“To what do I owe the growing number of company?” he asked, his tone even yet unmistakably filled with his usual aggravating insouciance.

She tried not to dwell on the way he now stared at her like some amusing creature he had underneath his magnifying glass. He was incredibly handsome with dark hair and captivating blue eyes. The intensity of his gaze was disconcerting, yet she forced herself to maintain composure.

“Miss Lovell, allow me to introduce my childhood friend, George Mullens, the Duke of Seymore,” Firman announced, his voice pulling her from her uneasy thoughts.

Her stomach turned. And Emma found herself briefly robbed of words in her shock. So, this was the notorious Duke of Seymore. She ought to have known, what with how he tried to take advantage of Olivia earlier, or so she had thought.

“Olivia, Seymore, and I grew up together, Miss Lovell,” Firman elaborated.

“You see, my dear Emma, Goerge is more a brother to me than anything else,” Olivia said.

There was a look of triumph on Seymore’s face as he said, “The late Lord and Lady Firman were good friends of my parents and were magnanimous enough to take me in upon my parents’ premature demise.”

“George is quite our brother, Miss Lovell,” the Earl said as though to reinforce what everyone else had said.

“Oh,” Emma let out, her voice a mere whisper as mortification threatened to strangle

her. All of her ire and harsh words to him in an attempt to protect Olivia's reputation had been uncalled for.

"I'd tried to tell you earlier and introduce you but you appeared to be very concerned for me," Olivia said, and Emma realized just how quick she'd been in jumping to conclusions and overreacting.

"I...I apologize for my behavior earlier, Your Grace," Emma curtsied to the Duke now. A part of her wanted to avoid his smug gaze so as to save herself more indignation, but that defiant part of her won over, and she met and held his eyes, unwavering. Challenging.

Where she was expecting another snide remark from him, or even a childish 'I told you', he surprised her instead by saying, "You had merely been protecting a friend."

He was pleasant in his dismissal of her attitude, but she couldn't help noticing his stress on the word 'friend' in reference to her relationship with Olivia. Was he taunting her now? After she'd made it clear to him earlier that she was just acquainted with Olivia.

"If you'll excuse me." Emma decided to bring an end to this display of her brashness and stupidity. She exited the room without giving them the opportunity to put in further conversation, her cheeks burning and her mind a whirl of embarrassed thoughts.

"Emma!" Olivia caught up to her in the hallway.

She stopped and turned, pinning a smile on her face despite the mortification gnawing at her insides. "Olivia," she greeted, managing a semblance of warmth.

"I should thank you for what you did for my reputation earlier," Olivia said sincerely.

“Very few people would have been as thoughtful,” she added, her tone soft yet earnest.

Heavens save me! Did I truly do it for her sake? Emma wondered if she had already turned into the conniving woman her parents expected her to be.

“Oh, it was nothing,” Emma dismissed quickly, her cheeks coloring slightly. “Utterly unnecessary, too. If I had known,” she added sheepishly, feeling the weight of her earlier actions even more.

“I do appreciate it, despite the misunderstanding,” Olivia insisted, her expression telling Emma that her efforts, however misguided, had not gone unnoticed or unappreciated.

They parted soon after, and Emma was grateful to finally be on her way to sulk in her bedchamber before dinner. Whatever solitude she was anticipating came crashing down the moment she walked into her bedchamber. The unwelcoming sight of her mother rummaging through her clothes while a beleaguered Antoinetta stood to the side, instantly set her nerves on edge.

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“Where were you?” Caroline demanded, her tone curt and focused, not bothering to look up as her daughter entered.

“I was out for some air,” Emma responded.

“Dinner isn’t going to wait for you. You must get ready. We cannot have you late for the first event,” her mother said, still sifting through Emma’s belongings.

“I have picked out your clothes.” She finally looked up, her expression one of steely determination.

“Oh, but we’ve already decided on my attire for the evening, Mother,” Emma countered, hoping to assert some control over at least this aspect of her life.

“That won’t do!” Caroline dismissed without a second thought. “It is too...proper. We need you in something more...alluring,” she added, her choice of words sending a shiver down Emma’s spine.

“But Mother?—”

“Those are your father’s instructions. To have you dressed accordingly, Emma. I will not countenance any further protests,” Caroline said with an air of finality Emma had never observed about her before. She met Antoinetta’s apologetic gaze, which offered a silent commiseration before returning her attention to her mother, who was now choosing matching jewelry with a decisive hand.

So, her father wanted her dressed like a wanton. What was the word her mother used?

‘Alluring’, Emma recalled, the realization making her stomach turn. Nevertheless, she heard herself ask, “Why do you do it, Mother?”

“Do what?” Caroline was confused, her brow furrowing.

“Why do you always dance, without question, to his merciless tunes?” Emma caught Antoinetta excusing herself.

Her mother sputtered for a moment, clearly taken aback by her frustrated outburst before replying, “What is so merciless about wanting to marry off our only child?”

“Wanting to marry her off in the right way,” Emma countered sharply. “And do not make this sound as though he is doing it with my best interest at heart, Mother. You and I both know that that is far from his reason.”

“In time, you will grow to appreciate what efforts we are making for you, Emma,” her mother said instead, her eyes bearing a look of tired resignation. In the end, her mother would always protect him, Emma thought bitterly, even if it was at her own expense.

“Efforts I never asked for. Not in this manner,” Emma returned.

“Must you always be defiant? Your father?—”

“Isn’t always right, Mother!” Emma cried desperately. “Why can’t you open your eyes for once and see what he’s doing to you? To both of us?”

“Do not make me out to be his puppet!” Caroline’s posture stiffened as she faced her daughter.

“But is that not what we are to him?” Emma shot back, her frustration boiling over.

What you have allowed him to make of us, Emma thought to herself, her heart sinking with the weight of her unsaid words.

Her mother appeared wounded and at a loss for words. She did not reply. Instead, she took a step back to admire what she had laid out on the bed, changing the subject to hide her discomfort. “There. This should do for an opening dinner. You will look splendid in it,” she said with a smile that Emma found irritatingly superficial.

“Now get dressed and be on time!” She turned on her heels. “You cannot expect to catch the eye of any gentleman, much less the Earl, dressed like a pigeon in mourning,” she added over her shoulder, her words sharp and dismissive.

“I didn’t realize pigeons mourned,” Emma returned defiantly, her tone matching her mother’s in its sharpness.

Her mother paused at the door and turned, sending a displeased look her direction before finally exiting the room. Emma was left standing there, a mix of anger and sadness swirling within her. She had no choice in this. She never had any to begin with. She found herself all but dreading dinner now.

My parents’ ability to snuff out every positive emotion within me ought to be a talent, truly, she thought bitterly just as Antoinetta walked back into the room. Her lady’s maid did not say a word as she began preparing her for the evening in what the Baroness had selected.

Emma was grateful for the silence, for she was in no mood for conversation. Least of all optimism.

CHAPTER 3

“That apology seemed rather painful to her, don’t you agree?” George chuckled as he

poured some brandy into a tumbler for Alexander.

The memory of his encounter with Miss Lovell lingered in his mind, intensified by her fiery green eyes. “I never saw a woman with such fire,” he added, his amusement touched with a genuine intrigue. There was an indefinable quality about Miss Lovell, magnetic yet elusive, that piqued his curiosity further.

“She does seem most interesting,” Alex agreed, accepting the drink with a nod.

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“Oh, she bestowed upon me quite the vehement reprimand when she found me speaking to Olivia earlier. Her assumptions were rather bold.”

“Do you blame her? She was unaware of your relation.” Alex shrugged, a mild defense in his tone.

“Nevertheless, her intentions were most thoughtful, I must admit,” George observed, leaning against the counter in the salon and crossing his legs at the ankles. “How long have you known Miss Lovell?” he inquired.

“Oh, we met an hour or so, a little over perhaps. She arrived earlier today.”

“One would presume she was an old family friend by her manner,” George chuckled softly.

“Some people possess a natural ease about them, I suppose,” Alexander commented.

“Although I’ve only just made her acquaintance, she strikes me as quite the decent lady, unlike her father,” Alex muttered, seeming to be in thought.

“The Baron?” George raised an eyebrow.

“Indeed, he was most insistent on securing an invitation for his family, much to Aunt Jane’s chagrin. I assure you, the man’s persistence was nothing short of aggravating.”

“It almost sounds as if he forced the invitation from you, Alexander,” George teased, a playful smirk playing on his lips.

“The gentleman seemed not merely to want but to need the invitation. Thus, I obliged.” Alexander shrugged.

“You are too magnanimous,” George clucked his tongue, not surprised by his friend’s kindness, a trait he had known in him since childhood.

“Ah, but our world is sorely lacking in goodness and consideration. Those of us capable must uphold those virtues, don’t you agree?” Alex said, his tone turning reflective.

“Indeed, but we must also remain vigilant so as not to be exploited,” George counseled. “As you said, in a world where goodness is scarce, it is all too easy for kindness to be taken advantage of.”

“You are such a cynic,” Alex laughed.

“One of us needs to be.” George shrugged. Alex still saw the world as a place that could become better. He could not disagree more with him.

A short while later, as he was passing through the hallway, he came across Olivia who appeared to be in somewhat of a hurry.

“Ah, finally! Just the person I was looking for,” she sighed, stopping before him with a look of relief.

“Is everything all right?” he inquired, noting her slightly flustered demeanor.

“Oh, all is well. Just Aunt Jane throwing another of her tantrums,” she replied, her tone a mixture of exasperation and amusement.

“Dear Lady Amberton decided to change the colors of the napkins at the last

moment. After the table has already been set,” Olivia added, her expression one of someone beleaguered by the whims of an unpredictable mother. “She doesn’t want the ivory napkins anymore. She thinks they’re overdone and that they ‘drain’ the dining room of color,” she continued, waving an impatient hand in the air as she mimicked her aunt’s words.

George noticed the two tawny napkins she held, one lighter and one darker shade of the color. “And I presume those are the replacements?” His gaze followed them.

“She thinks these are more cheerful and unique. But she cannot seem to decide between the lighter and darker shade. And she doesn’t particularly trust my judgement either. She says my sense of color is as tame as my personality,” Olivia replied, a hint of sheepishness in her voice.

“Will Aunt Jane ever change?” George chuckled, recalling the wonderful moments they all had with her. She was the closest thing to a mother all three of them had, and she was dearer to them than anyone else.

“Hopefully not,” Olivia gave a fond laugh, echoing his sentiment.

“Well, I told her that I’d seek a more mature opinion. Thus, I came to find you,” she added, holding up the napkins to him expectantly.

“I would suggest the darker shade,” George responded after a moment’s consideration. “The candlelight is sure to complement it perfectly and make it stand out as she wants,” he added, envisioning the setting.

Olivia pursed her lips in thought. “But if she wants more cheer, don’t you think the lighter shade would be better?” she suggested.

“Ah, but the lighter shade would only clash with the candlelight. The room would

look too garish. And knowing Aunt Jane, she likes to be ostentatious without appearing to make an effort,” he replied, his knowledge of her tastes apparent.

“Ah, spoken like a true artist.” Olivia seemed genuinely impressed. “And you couldn’t have been more correct about Aunt Jane. For someone so glamorous, she sure is obsessed with subtlety,” she added with a chortle. “I am glad I have you, George. Alex is hopeless with colors.”

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“I told him he lacks a clear sight and perception of colors, but he is still living in his delusions that his vision is perfect. At least where colors are concerned.”

“What party is going on here without me?” The man in question suddenly appeared, his voice carrying a playful note of accusation.

“Oh, we were just discussing your impeccable sight and ability to distinguish colors,” Olivia sent a conspiratorial wink in George’s direction. George grinned impishly, enjoying the moment.

Alexander’s gaze narrowed dubiously as he regarded them, and as though to prove her point, Olivia held up the napkins once again and asked her brother to choose a shade.

“What choice is there to be made between two identical colors?” Alexander gave her a look, his tone flat, betraying his complete bafflement at the situation.

“They’re not the same shade, Brother. Even a blind man can see it,” Olivia laughed.

“They look the same to me.” Alex shrugged, clearly unbothered by his inability to discern the difference.

George burst out laughing as well.

Much to Emma’s disappointment, she found herself seated next to none other than the Duke of Seymore at dinner. The flickering candles that cast a soft glow over the table, accentuating the opulence of the room, did little to lift her spirits.

“Fancy meeting you again, Miss Lovell,” he said pleasantly as she sat, his voice carrying a smooth, mirthful undertone that irked her for reasons she couldn’t quite place.

“I doubt if our meeting again qualifies as much of a surprise, living under the same roof, we were bound to come across each other again, Your Grace,” Emma responded, her tone clipped as she focused on arranging her napkin meticulously on her lap.

“Sheathe the dagger, Miss Lovell. I come in peace,” he chuckled.

Emma, however, heard every annoying nuance of his laughter distinctly, as if it were so just for her ears. “Why, you make me out to be quite the aggressive woman,” she observed, not quite able to keep a note of accusation from creeping into her voice.

“Well, your words just now weren’t the most welcoming, Miss Lovell. And considering our first impressions of each other...” He let his words trail off, a teasing glint in his eye that suggested he enjoyed this little exchange.

Emma felt her jaw clench as mortification warmed—and no doubt stained—her cheeks. As if she needed a reminder of her earlier actions. She forced herself to meet the Duke’s gaze, refusing to give him the satisfaction of seeing her discomfort. “I must have left quite the impression, it seems, Your Grace,” Emma managed to say, her words edged with a feigned nonchalance as she gave him a tight smile.

“An unforgettable one,” he agreed.

“I tend to do that,” she stated, lifting her chin slightly, employing an air of pride that she hoped masked her inner turmoil.

“Why am I not surprised?” His laugh was richer this time, as if he truly found

genuine delight in their conversation.

“You make it sound as though you know me,” Emma pointed out. She found his presumption increasingly irksome.

“I am a good judge of character,” he claimed.

At that, a loud snort escaped her before she could stop it. The sound cut through the surrounding chatter, which suddenly died down, leaving a brief, echoing silence in its wake.

Emma felt a flush of embarrassment as she realized quite a number of eyes were now on her. Her gaze inadvertently found her mother’s across the room, and the woman’s expression was anything but pleased.

She had fleetingly forgotten her manners, a lapse she remembered all too well as she was supposed to engage the Earl in conversation. Seymore was as distracting as he was aggravating, pulling her thoughts away from her social duties.

“Excellent mutton, Lord Firman. I must commend your cook,” Emma addressed the Earl now, her words a weak attempt to draw his attention and to settle the curiosity directed at her along with the awkwardness that lingered in the air.

“Oh, give Francois an empty pot and a ladle, Miss Lovell, and he would manage to conjure up a meal for you from nothingness,” Firman replied proudly, his statement met with hearty agreements across the table. Baron Dewsbury’s voice rang the loudest, his tone ingratiating as he sought the Earl’s favor.

Emma spooned more mutton into her mouth and chewed, fighting the urge to roll her eyes or send a disparaging glance in her father’s direction. Could his manners be any more lacking?

Her gaze drifted back to the Duke. He wore a sly smile, his eyes gleaming with amusement as he watched her, almost as if he enjoyed the slight chaos of the moment. What is the matter with this man?

“There you are!” Caroline almost jumped when Emma suddenly appeared before her. “Where were you?” she demanded, her nose turning up dubiously at her daughter.

“I sought the retiring room,” Emma lied smoothly. “I must have had too much sherry at dinner,” she added for good measure, hoping to divert her mother’s suspicion.

“So much so that it apparently made you forget your manners, too, at the table,” her mother observed sharply. “What were you thinking? Snorting about like a piglet in front of half of society. And goodness gracious, you were seated right next to the Earl and the Duke of Seymore too!”

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Emma had to admit that it was not a formal seating arrangement. If it were, she would not have been able to see the Earl or the Duke, much less converse with them. She felt a jolt of defiance; she had never tried to impress her parents, muchless live up to their unrealistic expectations. “Are you not happy I was seated near them?”

Her mother glared at her. “Do pinch some color into your cheeks and make yourself more presentable before rejoining civilization,” Caroline instructed sharply. “And meet me in the conservatory in a moment,” she added as like an afterthought.

“Conservatory?” Emma echoed in surprise, her brow furrowing. “Whatever for?”

“Meet me there and you will find out,” her mother responded impatiently.

“But Mother?—”

“No questions! The conservatory,now! Wait for me there.” Her mother’s voice brooked no argument, effectively silencing any further protest.

Emma did as she was told, her steps echoing softly as she made her way to the place. The space was quiet and dark, the only light coming from the gentle glow of the moon that filtered through the glass. The tranquil sound of water trickling from a fountain nearby filled the air, adding to the serene yet eerie atmosphere.

As she wandered deeper into the lush surroundings, her foot accidentally kicked something small and hard. It clattered noisily across the stone floor. Curious, she squinted through the dim light and bent down to retrieve the object. It was a lovely brooch, ornate and sparkling even in the limited light. She wondered to whom it

might belong; surely some lady at the party was missing this beautiful piece of jewelry.

Opening her reticule, which was securely strapped to her wrist, Emma placed the brooch inside. She resolved to find its owner and return it once the evening's more pressing matters were attended to.

Her thoughts wandered to her mother's unusual insistence as she took in her lush, verdant surroundings. The foliage seemed almost to crowd around her, making the glass-encased room feel smaller, more intimate.

Just then, a shadow moved behind her. Emma turned swiftly, expecting to see her mother, but instead, she found herself staring at the silhouette of a gentleman. It was too dark to discern his features clearly, but his build was imposing—a presence too significant to be anyone of lesser stature.

Her mother's words echoed in her mind, chilling in their newfound context: Pinch some color into your cheeks and make yourself presentable... Meet me in the conservatory in a moment. The realization that this might be orchestrated by her parents hit her with a wave of revulsion. The unpleasant taste of betrayal filled her mouth as she considered that they might indeed be using this moment to push her toward someone, likely for their own gain.

Could it be the Earl? The figure bore a striking resemblance to him. If so, this was a deliberate plan, and she was meant to seize this opportunity to further her parents' ambitions. A knot of discomfort tightened in her stomach.

The gentleman was leaning over a cluster of some small potted plants and appeared oblivious to her presence. Emma didn't want to do this. She thought of sneaking away, but an apprehensive voice in her head reminded her of the Marquess of Neads. What if this was the only opportunity she would have during this party? What if she

forfeited it and doomed herself to a life with Neads?

At this instant, she didn't know what was worse. She only knew that what she was about to do, what her parents wanted her to do, was utterly wrong.

Emma approached the gentleman. The Earl. When she was less than an arm's length away from him, she raised her hand. Something crunched underneath her shoes, and given her already nervous state, she started. This alerted him to the presence in the room, and he swiveled from the potted plants.

Emma was further perturbed by how close he was and the sheer intimidating size of him before her. She tried to take a step back, only to trip over a potted plant. Arms came firmly around her, catching her fall and holding her against a strong chest. She still couldn't make out his features in the darkness. But something about him was very familiar. No doubt it was the Earl.

Emma's thoughts were in upheaval as she scrambled to collect them. Still, an untamed voice in her head pointed out: This is your opportunity, girl. Remember, it's either this, or Neads...

Fear and desperation gripped her, and she felt her hands suddenly do the thinking for her now. They traveled up to the man's jaw, cupping it tentatively. He pulled her even closer to him. Then his face lowered to hers. Emma's breath caught. Was he going to kiss her?

"I didn't realize you harbored such feelings for me, Miss Lovell." His voice was familiar. Excessively so. "Is that why you made such a scene about Olivia keeping my company earlier?"

Seymore!

CHAPTER 4

Emma gasped and nearly pushed him away in shock. You're not the Earl? She nearly said aloud.

"You!" her voice couldn't be more accusing now. "You tricked me!"

"I saved you from breaking a leg," he countered.

Where she was utterly flustered, he appeared completely calm and unperturbed. "Were you expecting someone else then? Did I perhaps interrupt a planned tryst?" he asked, his curiosity palpable, a slight teasing tone in his voice that did nothing to alleviate Emma's growing discomfort.

"I need to leave," she blurted before quickly turning on her heels and practically running out of the dark conservatory. The warm air in the hallway touched her face as she emerged, providing a small relief from the stifling tension inside.

She nearly collided with her parents. "Emma—" her mother began, her voice filled with concern and a hint of suspicion.

"The Earl was supposed to be there, but Seymore ruined things..." Her father whispered in agitation. Her parents tried to question her, but she was in no mood for their inquiries. "Not now," she managed to say, her voice firm yet weary.

Leaving them, she turned at the end of the hallway and hurried without thinking where she was going. They followed her, relentless in their mission. As she passed an open room, she heard a voice say, "I could have sworn I had my brooch on me earlier." Emma recalled the brooch she'd found. Perfect timing, she thought. The heavens seemed in her favor tonight. What better excuse to avoid a further interrogation from her parents?

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“I can help,” she said quickly, stepping into the room without further thought. Lady Amberton blinked at her—as though wondering where she had come from. “I overheard as I was passing. Forgive me.” Emma removed the brooch and showed it to her.

“Oh, where did you find it?” Lady Amberton was ecstatic, relief washing over her features.

“I nearly stepped on it,” Emma offered half the truth, choosing not to disclose the precise location lest it implicated her in some unforeseen manner.

“Oh, this is a gift from my late husband,” Lady Amberton exclaimed. “I couldn’t afford to lose it. Thank you, Miss...”

“Lovell. Emma Lovell,” she introduced herself, curtsying politely.

“As lovely as your name,” Lady Amberton chuckled warmly before thanking her once more.

With a polite nod and a small smile, Emma excused herself. Her parents were thankfully nowhere to be seen, but she suspected they were nearby. No sooner had she closed her bedchamber door behind her than it reopened, and her parents walked in, their faces etched with expressions of apprehension and curiosity.

“What happened?” they echoed, their voices overlapping in their urgency to understand.

If they weren't her parents, she would have sent them out and slammed the door shut. But instead, she met their gaze steadily. "I came across the Duke in the conservatory. I left so as not to be inappropriate," she shrugged, her voice even, masking the turmoil she felt inside.

Her father let out an audible sigh of relief. The way their faces relaxed confirmed her suspicions: they had indeed meant to set up a meeting for her with the Earl. "The Earl is a botanist, so I brought up his plants and asked him to show us one of his rare collectibles from the conservatory," he explained, seeming satisfied with his supposedly clever arrangement.

"I insisted that he fetch the plant himself, so we could follow with an audience and find you two alone. However, the Duke volunteered to retrieve it instead," he added, his displeasure at having his plan thwarted all but palpable in the tense lines of his face.

"We are glad you thought quickly and left. The last thing we need is for the Duke to ruin our plans and tarnish our family name," Caroline interjected.

"Indeed," her father agreed, nodding solemnly. "But no worries. We shall try again," he added with a determined set to his jaw, as though plotting yet another maneuver in their relentless social chess game.

Emma listened, appalled by her parents' desperation and schemes. They spoke of her as though she were a pawn in their grand strategy, a mere tool to be positioned at their convenience.

If only I had a choice.

"The Earl was supposed to be there, but Seymore ruined things."

George could not dismiss what he'd overheard Baron Dewsbury saying in the hallway. The words echoed in his mind, mingling with the memory of Miss Lovell's palpable disappointment in the conservatory when she realized his identity in the dim light and accused him of tricking her. She'd clearly been expecting someone else—Alexander, perhaps?

Surely not!

Was this an attempt at entrapment he'd inadvertently come between and possibly foiled? He also remembered how insistent the Baron had been that Alexander personally retrieve the plant to show them himself. George rather thought the Baron displeased when he'd volunteered to get it instead. He'd only offered to do so to escape for a private moment to smoke. Were his actions now a blessing to Alexander? Had he saved his friend from a possibly orchestrated scandal?

Miss Lovell didn't seem like the sort to be involved in such schemes. But then, what did he know about her, save for her temper that he curiously found interesting. Indeed, people are deceptive.

He turned back to the liquor cabinet in Alexander's study and refilled his tumbler. "What exactly do you know about the family of Baron Dewsbury, Alexander?" George asked his friend. They were sharing a drink in Alexander's study later that night after the guests had retired for the evening.

Alex quirked an eyebrow, equal parts curious and perplexed by his question. "What do you mean?" he returned.

"Do you trust the Baron?" George probed, his tone serious.

"If I had to trust everyone in order to host them, then my house would be empty right now, George," Alexander chuckled, his response light-hearted but touched with truth.

“Why?” He added, now fully in the conversation.

George contemplated what he’d overheard and his suspicions. “I’m merely advising that you be cautious and watch yourself more often, Alexander. Especially in the company of Miss Lovell.”

“Miss Lovell?” Alex was surprised.

“She seems particularly interested in you,” George shrugged after a sip of his drink.

“Whatever interests she may harbor seem rather harmless, don’t you think?” Alexander chuckled again. “She’s a most decent lady, from what I’m coming to gather,” he added, his tone reflecting a hint of admiration.

Alexander is too trusting, George thought, a little frustrated by his friend’s casual dismissal. “One should not be too free with people.”

Alexander appeared thoughtful for a moment before responding, “One would think you would grow less protective as an adult. You haven’t changed a bit, George.” His friend suddenly had a wistful look in his eyes.

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“Only because you are constantly getting yourself into trouble,” George jested. “One of us needed to keep the focus for two,” he added with a light chuckle.

“And a half. Don’t forget Olivia,” Alex laughed.

Olivia had been their little appendage growing up, the little child who had followed them about everywhere. They reminisced a bit into the night and shared a good laugh.

However, George still couldn’t stop thinking about Miss Lovell, and the Baron’s words. She was intriguing. And now most dubious too. All the more reason for him to keep an eye on her.

CHAPTER 5

Emma purposefully delayed her breakfast the following morning, for she was in no mood for company—especially her parents’—after last night’s events. Finally, she made her way to the morning room, hoping it would be emptied by this time.

To her surprise, she found the Earl seated alone at the table. He was drinking some coffee while perusing the morning’s paper. He looked up on her entry and rose, greeting her cordially.

“I trust you had a pleasant night, Miss Lovell.”

“Most pleasant, My Lord. You have a very beautiful manor.”

Firman smiled. “You are very kind, Miss Lovell.”

Emma wasn't sure if she should feel disappointed to find company in the morning room, which she had been avoiding, or be glad for the opportunity and privacy she found with the Earl. Her parents would have wanted that after all.

She made her way to the sideboard to serve herself. And as she filled her plate with food she was barely interested in, a shadow suddenly appeared on her left.

"A lovely morning for scones, is it not?" a familiar and rather unwelcome voice said.

Emma looked up to the sight of Seymore grinning down at her. She returned his humor with a tight smile. It was all she could do not to roll her eyes and move away instead. The memory of his arms around her last night suddenly surfaced in her mind, and Emma quickly returned her gaze to the sideboard in an attempt to hide the warmth that stained her cheeks. Why am I feeling this way? I find this man most disagreeable!

"A morning is only lovely with good company, Your Grace," she said flatly, moving to the egg dish and helping herself.

"And here I thought it was the food that defined the mood," he said in ostensible thought as he picked up a plate and made to serve himself.

"The company makes all the impact on one's appetite or the lack thereof, don't you think?" she returned, hoping he would take the cue and leave her alone—as unlikely as that was. Seymore, she was coming to realize, was a man stubborn and persistent in his ways...

"I assume that is why you're filling your plate, Miss Lovell. That you find the company pleasant enough to indulge heartily?" He quirked an insolent brow.

Emma tensed. "I am not one to allow such trivial matters get in the way of my

repast,” she responded coolly, her posture stiffening.

“You wound me, Miss Lovell!” He winced, his hand theatrically clutching at his heart.

“Good,” she returned briskly, not bothering to mask the bite in her tone.

“What did I ever do to you to be so unwelcome?” He served himself some coddled eggs and sausages before moving on to the tomatoes, his movements deliberate.

“Is that even a serious question?” She was unable to believe the nerve of him.

“I suppose I have an idea of how I might have erred.” A smile played on his lips as he acknowledged their difficult past interactions. “You see, one’s plans do not always go as intended, Miss Lovell,” he added, and when she met his gaze, it was searching, intense enough that she suddenly felt invaded. His choice of words struck her as odd, too.

Surely, this is a coincidence.

There was something knowing in his gaze, however. Memories of the conservatory resurfaced, and this time, she was too slow in hiding her fluster; he saw it, and his smile turned sly—almost challenging.

Emma carried her plate from the sideboard and turned, only to see that the Earl was deep in conversation with a gentleman who had occupied one of the chairs next to him. So distracted had she been, she’d neither heard nor noticed the man’s entrance. Seymore appeared just as surprised.

Emma eyed the other empty chair next to the Earl and walked toward it. Seymore walked past her, his strides far more purposeful than her and covering the distance

quicker. Her heart raced, and her ire rose. He took the seat and grinned at her, unabashed. Emma's jaw clenched as she settled for the chair opposite and farther away from the Earl instead.

Firman then went on to introduce the gentleman next to him. He was a Viscount whose title she didn't bother remembering in her indignation. She felt eyes on her and couldn't help looking up. Seymore's gaze was intense from across the table. The smugness about him was almost suffocating, and she struggled to maintain her composure. She took a sip of orange juice, the sweetness helping to calm her frayed nerves—but only slightly.

"It is most refreshing, indeed," Emma commented aloud, attempting to divert her thoughts.

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“As a matter of fact, Miss Lovell, I planted the very tree on the grounds myself,” Firman replied, his voice filled with passion and pride for his horticultural endeavors. Only then did she realize she had given her thoughts a voice.

“It is fruiting marvelously. Francois is beside himself,” the Earl continued, his eyes lighting up with the mention of his estate’s successful harvest.

“I am sure his talents would work wonders with citrus, too,” Emma smiled, aiming to engage further on the topic she found genuinely interesting.

“Oh, wait until you taste his tarts, and orange cakes.” This response came unexpectedly from Seymore.

Emma was not impressed by his intrusion into her conversation with the Earl. He was always wedging himself into discussions in the most inconveniencing of ways. She gave him a displeased look, only for him to return it with another grin that served to infuriate her more. Yet, despite herself, a part of her couldn’t help but find him quite fascinating—the treacherous part.

Emma decided to ignore the Duke and returned her attention to Firman, hoping to redirect the conversation. “What other fruits do you have on the property, My Lord?”

“There are lemons and apples. Strawberries in the greenhouse...” Seymore listed once more before the Earl could respond.

Emma felt her fingers curl tighter around her fork. He was doing it again. And that impudent grin remained pasted on his face.

“That is correct, Miss Lovell,” Firman confirmed with a nod. “I have some blueberries, black currants, and some plums, as well.”

“Impressive,” Emma managed to say, trying to keep her tone even. “Do not tempt me to spend my springs and summer here.”

“You are more than welcome to, Miss Lovell, and my sister has taken a liking to you.”

Symore cleared his throat. “Firman has some dried figs and bananas imported from around the world. I am sure he will grow them once he discovers a way to make them thrive in English soil.”

“What do you not have, My Lord?” Emma chuckled, purposefully making sure to avoid Seymore’s gaze and pretend as though he hadn’t just spoken. She was also attempting to be flirtatious.

“I should show you the nursery sometime, Miss Lovell,” Firman unexpectedly suggested, his invitation had her blinking.

“Oh, that would be lovely.” Emma tried to hide the wave of guilt that coursed through her with a smile.

“I haven’t been in there a while. I should join you,” the Duke suggested, inserting himself into the invitation.

“We can all make a visit then,” Firman decided, much to Emma’s dismay.

She nearly groaned aloud in frustration. She reached for her steaming mug of coffee in an effort to distract herself from her anger. Perhaps she should declare war on the Duke, for a more irksome human being she had never met.

“What a lovely day to be outside!” a woman’s voice suddenly joined them in the breakfast room. It was Lady Amberton, her presence always marked by a vibrant cheer. “I’m having the carriages prepared. I think we should put the clement weather to use and take a trip to the village,” she declared. The Earl nodded in agreement before turning back to Emma.

“You see, Miss Lovell, the weather here is excellent for an orchard. I try to take advantage of that,” he said to her, his voice infused with a passion that was nearly tangible.

“Oh, I can definitely see it,” Emma chuckled, her gaze sweeping over the lush greenery visible through the window. “With such sweet oranges, even I would plant more,” she added playfully, lifting her glass of orange juice to her lips. The Earl laughed heartily at her remark, clearly pleased with her appreciation.

“Oh, Firman, did I tell you that Miss Lovell here found my lost brooch?” Lady Amberton said, her eyes sparkling with gratitude as she turned toward Emma.

“Is that so?” The Earl’s interest was piqued as he directed his attention at Emma.

“It was my pleasure,” Emma replied, her smile genuine. Finding the brooch had been a fortunate accident, but she was glad it had endeared her to Lady Amberton. The woman was agreeable.

Why did you truly do it, Emma? To win their favor?She immediately quieted the probing voice.

“Oh, you saved us a great deal of trouble, Miss Lovell.” the Earl folded the newspaper. “We would have never heard the end of how she lost her precious brooch.” He grinned at his aunt as he finished his coffee.

“Indeed, her lamentations would have been endless, and now she will never stop talking about you, Miss Lovell,” Seymore said mischievous glint in his eyes.

Lady Amberton sent a playful glare in his direction at his remark. In response, he blew her a theatrical kiss, which only caused the Earl to laugh even more. Emma found herself caught up in the jovial atmosphere, her earlier frustrations momentarily forgotten.

After their mirth had subsided, Lady Amberton said, “I shall pair you with Miss Lovell here for our outing, Firman.” Emma sucked in her breath. She ought to be satisfied with the arrangement, yet she was left feeling ill at ease. She looked at Seymore and found him looking almost displeased. Despite herself, she decided to play his game and grace him with a wide, smug grin. His eyes flashed at the challenge.

“Did you say you were paired with the Earl?” Caroline clapped her hands together in ecstasy in Emma’s bedchamber. “We must get you dressed to impress,” her mother went on, choosing a dress for her with the lowest neckline she could find.

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“I cannot possibly wear that, Mother!” Emma protested. It was one of the scandalous dresses her mother had made for her specifically for the house party. Emma had had no intention of ever wearing them, not here, not anywhere else.

Alas, it appeared as though she wouldn’t be able to wiggle out of this one. “I will hear no such thing,” her mother said sternly. “Now get her dressed, Antoinetta!”

Emma slumped onto the bed, dejected. “Dressed, I shall get you, Emma. Do not worry.” Antoinetta wore a sly smile as she produced a sewing kit. Realization dawned on Emma, and a grin crept onto her face. Her lady’s maid made use of her impressive sartorial skills to quickly raise Emma’s neckline before getting her dressed.

“There. All you have to do is avoid your mother,” Antoinetta took a step back to inspect her handiwork.

“That shouldn’t be too difficult,” Emma said hopefully. She did not want Antoinetta getting into trouble and her mother causing a scene because of the raised neckline.

Outside, Lady Amberton showed Emma the carriage she was to ride in with the Earl. She supposed Olivia would be joining them as their chaperone, and she looked forward to a lovely conversation with her. However, when the footman opened the door for her, she found none other than Seymore reclining with a book inside.

He smiled devilishly at her while she looked around the carriage in search of the Earl. “Looking for someone?” he teased.

Before she could respond, the Earl appeared, his smile bright and warm. He gallantly helped Emma into the carriage before joining in. As their journey began, she looked out of the window at the manor fading into the scenery, wondering whether Seymore's presence was a curse or her saving grace.

She turned to the Earl. "What can you tell me about Firman Manor, My Lord?"

"It was built during the time of the Tudors," Seymore supplied. "In fact, there was quite the controversy over the manor in the late sixteenth century when it was nearly taken away from the family."

"How was it retained?" she asked Firman, hoping Seymore would not speak.

"The then Lord Firman courted the Crown's favor." Again, the response was not from the man she hoped, and Emma wanted to gouge the Duke's eyes out.

Firman laughed and encouraged him, saying, "He is right again, Miss Lovell. I tell you, he knows more about the manor and my family history than I do." He followed that statement with a sheepish smile.

Emma's eyes found the Duke's, and he sent her another satisfied smirk. She glared at him.

CHAPTER 6

It was clear to George now that Miss Lovell was trying to get Alexander's attention. The moment they arrived, he alighted from the carriage and offered to help her down before Alex could. He needed to protect his dear friend, and besides, he couldn't help the impish part of him that enjoyed thwarting her plans and riling her.

She hesitated, but giving her no choice, he gently but firmly took her hand in his. As

she made to get down, their gazes locked. Her lips parted as though she was going to say something, but no sound came forth. She suddenly seemed breathless. He felt breathless too.

When she finally got down, George lingered before he released her hand. He found himself unable to resist. Her delicate hand in his felt just right. He tried to understand, but couldn't wrap his head around the curious pull she had on him.

Her gaze fleetingly moved to the side, and he saw her eyes widen in what he could only interpret as alarm. Somewhat concerned and curious, he followed her gaze to the unexpected sight of his aunt and Baroness Dewsbury. The Baroness wore a scowl as she regarded her daughter glaringly. Strange, he thought.

Miss Lovell just as quickly averted her gaze. She seemed somewhat nervous now. "Trouble in the nest?" George couldn't help but ask, his tone light but probing.

He watched a smile creep onto her lovely features before she shook her head and said, "I am simply learning to fly." Her words were light, yet they carried a weight that hinted at deeper currents swirling beneath the surface.

She pinned him with a gaze now searching, and he thought that something about it seemed almost imploring. Disturbingly so, it stirred something within him—a desire to understand her struggles and perhaps, to aid her in her flight.

He couldn't help but recall the Baron's angry words in the hallway. And now the Baroness's glare. The pair seemed controlling. He wondered if all was well with their daughter. Was there more to her reason for seeking his friend's attention? Perhaps he'd gotten something wrong somewhere, and this was not about Miss Lovell as he'd suspected from the start, a voice in his head contemplated. Still, he would continue to watch her closely, he decided.

“There is nothing quite so scary, but at the same time thrilling as leaving one’s nest,” George said, his tone contemplative, perhaps even a bit probing.

“I hardly think it scary,” she responded with an air of anticipation and hope, her eyes alight with what seemed like a mixture of defiance and determination.

Alexander alighted just then. But instead of handing Miss Lovell to him, George placed her hand on his arm and decided that he would keep her by his side. He enjoyed riling her up for some reason he couldn’t understand. This way, he’d be killing two birds with one stone, he thought. He could indulge his whim, and protect his friend at the same time.

He watched her surprised gaze fall to her hand on his arm before it traveled back up to meet his. She was not pleased. George returned her glare with a smile.

He felt her tense. And this gave him that curious satisfaction once again.

“An unexpected pairing,” Lady Amberton noted with a touch of amusement in her voice.

Firman was paired with another lady, but decided to keep close to them nonetheless.

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“The English countryside never disappoints, My Lord,” Miss Lovell suddenly said to Alex as they walked. Despite being on another man’s arm, she was still determined to engage Firman, George thought. He should have known that she wasn’t one to be easily deterred.

There was challenge in her gaze when she briefly looked up and met his too. “Now I understand what you meant, My Lord, when you spoke so highly of the weather and environment here,” she added, fleetingly shutting her eyes and taking in a deep breath as though to test the very air and atmosphere she was so commending.

George found himself admiring her features when she closed her eyes. His gaze settled on her pert little lips, and he quickly averted it. What was wrong with him?

“I am glad to see that I haven’t exaggerated and disappointed you, Miss Lovell,” Alexander replied from across.

“Oh, I was already convinced since that orange juice, My Lord,” she chuckled, leaning forward and smiling at Firman, who responded in kind.

“You have been full of praises for Francois, Miss Lovell. I shall remember to relay this to him,” Alex chuckled.

“Oh, I hardly think those praises are for Francois,” George met her gaze with renewed challenge in his own. He’d seen her cards. And he wanted her to know that.

“Well, it is the Earl’s efforts and the cook’s hard work and passion combined that are pleasing our taste buds so, don’t you agree, Your Grace?” She smiled sweetly, clearly

accepting his challenge now.

George was enjoying this, he realized curiously.

“You flatter me, Miss Lovell,” Alexander said.

“I merely state an observation, My Lord,” she replied, giving George a sly smile as she spoke.

“On the contrary, Miss Lovell, I do agree that there is nothing a little hard work and passion cannot yield,” George picked up from where he’d left off, refusing to give her the satisfaction of excluding him from the conversation.

Just then, Aunt Jane suddenly reappeared, seeking Alexander’s attention. “Oh, Firman, I’ve been meaning to introduce you to Lady Ashbury. She joined us late last night,” Jane said before whisking him away, leaving George alone with Miss Lovell.

They fell into an awkward silence as they continued walking until they came across a stall displaying various hand-crafted goods. Among them was an interesting painting of Aztec inspiration.

“Such fascinating patterns,” Miss Lovell paused before the painting, her interest piqued.

“You have a good eye, My Lady,” the stall owner, an elderly man who appeared to be in his seventies, complimented her with a warm smile.

“This should be Aztec,” George supplied. “They are known to exploit such curiously intricate geometric patterns,” he explained, his tone casual yet informative.

“The lines and shapes seem to jump at one, I could almost touch them,” she

remarked, looking positively captivated as she stared at the work of art.

“You like art, Miss Lovell?” George couldn’t help but inquire, noticing her absorbed expression.

“Why, I positively adore it in all its forms,” her eyes somehow shone with even more interest. “Sadly, I haven’t the talent for it,” she sighed, a note of regret in her voice.

“But a keen eye for good judgment, it would seem,” the old man commended, and she smiled demurely in response.

“Such talent... So real...” She turned back to the painting. “The wet on wet cross-hatching brush technique tends to highlight the shadows and make the angles stand out,” George explained further, his knowledge evident.

“You seem quite versed in this,” she observed with a hint of surprise, her gaze flickering with new curiosity.

“One cannot help but pick up a thing or two if they indulge in a hobby for years,” he responded with a modest shrug.

“Hobby?” She echoed, the perplexed look on her face dissolving into one of realization. “You paint!” She exclaimed, her tone a mixture of astonishment and admiration.

George nodded, confirming her guess even though it was not posed as a question.

“Now I feel envious,” she declared, her expression as sheepish as it was impressed.

And George couldn’t help but laugh at her bluntness, finding her candor refreshing. “How honest,” he remarked with amusement.

“I’ve heard that a lot,” she returned smugly, her confidence returning.

“And quite humble too,” he laughed again.

“Indeed,” she agreed.

She was good company. George had to admit that. The afternoon was uneventful, and more pleasant than he’d anticipated. When they returned to the manor, Alexander alighted before him and helped Miss Lovell down from the carriage.

“It’s been a pleasant afternoon, Miss Lovell,” Firman said as he kissed her knuckles. And she blushed—shamelessly too, George thought to himself, observing the scene with a mix of amusement and something he couldn’t quite place.

“I should show you some of my works, Miss Lovell,” George suddenly said. If the admiration he had observed about her earlier was genuine, this was bound to draw her attention away from Firman, he knew. And it worked.

“Oh, the paintings!” Her eyes lit up, reflecting a spark of genuine interest.

“You told her about the paintings?” Alex inquired, a slight furrow forming between his brows.

“She found out,” George nodded simply, offering no further explanation.

“Oh, I should love a glimpse of them, Your Grace,” she responded happily.

And for the first time, her demeanor was genuine. There was no defiance, no spite, no pride, or challenge about her whatsoever. Just pure earnest curiosity and anticipation. He found this just as appealing, for some reason, her enthusiasm drawing him in a way he hadn’t expected.

The Baroness walked past them then, and when her gaze met her daughter's, she gave her the same look of disapprobation he'd seen earlier. The expression was brief but loaded, full of silent communication that Emma clearly understood.

Miss Lovell quickly averted her gaze, that anxiety returning about her once more. Strange.

CHAPTER 7

Antoinetta was helping Emma change out of her dress after returning to the manor when the bedchamber door practically burst open and her mother walked in. The woman did not look pleased. Emma had tried to avoid her, but she hadn't been very successful. And on the few occasions of their meeting, her mother had made sure to show her displeasure. Emma assumed it was to do with the dress, for she couldn't think of anything else she might have done wrong.

"Simple instructions," Caroline began, her voice sharp and cold. "All you had to do was look pretty for the Earl. But instead, you choose to alter your frock and take the company of that Duke!" She added, her tone thick with accusation.

"I do not see anything wrong with my actions, mother," Emma said in a cool voice. She refused to succumb to her mother's intimidation.

"And you," the Baroness spat as she swiveled to Antoinetta. "You will pay for disregarding my instructions as well," she added harshly.

Antoinetta colored up as she gave a quick perfunctory curtsy and quickly exited the room. Emma felt horrible for getting her lady's maid in trouble now.

"Antoinetta was only following my instructions, mother. She did nothing wrong," Emma defended, her voice steady yet filled with regret for the position she had put

her friend in.

“Do you know what the ladies are already saying?” Her mother ignored her and continued, pacing the room with growing agitation. “They’re already debating that the Earl and the Duke are competing for your attention and affections,” she trudged on.

“How is that supposed to look on your chances with the Earl? Do you think he would want to be rumored to be in competition for a lady with another man? He could so easily give you up then,” she threw exasperated hands in the air.

“First of all, Mother, the Earl has no special interests in me,” Emma began calmly, trying to insert some reason into the conversation.

“Maybe not yet. But you must change that,” her mother interjected, cutting her off.

“And second,” Emma ignored the interruption and continued, “I think I deserve better than a man who would so easily give me up. I am not some object to be fancied and disregarded,” she added, her voice firm and resolute.

“And that is precisely what that Duke would do to you. He may fancy you now, but once he’s bored, he will just as easily let go,” her mother countered sharply.

“You don’t know that,” Emma returned, her defiance growing.

“Have you been deaf all this while, child? Do you not know his reputation?” Caroline said, her voice rising in frustration.

“I know the rumors going about,” Emma responded, her tone less certain now. And she didn’t even know why she was suddenly defending the Duke. Perhaps it stemmed from the desire to refuse her mother’s control and stand up for herself.

She needed to find a husband, yes. But she refused to be a puppet any longer.

“And how do you think this looks on our family image? Our only daughter, dallying with two gentlemen...” Her mother’s voice was sharp, filled with disappointment and accusation.

And since when did she care about modesty too? Emma wondered. Her parents had more regard for their image than they’d ever have for their own child. She swallowed an uncomfortable lump which rose to her throat.

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“And so what, Mama?” Emma finally lost her patience. “Is it such a bad thing that I appear to have two suitors now?” She challenged, her voice rising with her burgeoning defiance.

Her mother seemed taken aback and sputtered, momentarily at a loss for words.

Emma opened her mouth to voice more of her grievances then, but her voice was drowned by her father’s, who angrily joined them. “Did I not tell you to steer clear of that Duke?” Tristan spat. “What did you think you were doing? Clinging onto him the entire afternoon?” he added, his tone accusatory and harsh.

“I did not cling onto anyone, father,” Emma defended, her voice firm yet weary from the constant battles.

“That reprehensible man will only ruin our plans,” the Baron cried indignantly. “Now you listen here, girl,” his voice lowered to a dangerous whisper. “You stay away from Seymore. And do whatever it takes to captivate Firman and make him yours,” he said. “Your clock is ticking. And I am sure the Marquess of Neads is waiting...” He added, his words hanging ominously in the air.

Emma felt even more sick at the mention of Neads. She watched her father’s lip curl smugly when he noticed how affected she was by his threats. The man derived pleasure from inflicting her pain, she concluded dejectedly.

When her parents stormed out of the room, she slumped into the chaise by the window, fighting the tears which burned at the back of her eyes. She looked out the window and saw Firman and Seymore in the gardens below. The Duke raised his head

just then. And Emma found herself staring back at him as he held her gaze through the window. Something within her sank. What had she done to deserve her circumstances?

Emma felt dreadful still the next morning. “Oh no, you cannot skip breakfast, Emma!” Antoinetta cried when Emma said she had no appetite, and thus had no plans of going downstairs for breakfast. “You need some sustenance to start your day,” her lady’s maid insisted.

When Emma saw the concern in her eyes, she decided to humor her. “Very well. I will go down after finishing these letters,” she said, acquiescing more for Antoinetta’s sake than her own.

She was writing letters to her two dearest friends, Frances Hughes and Agnes Young, both of whom were happily married and rustivating in their family seats in the country with their husbands. Emma had gone to finishing school with the girls and missed them dearly—their adventures and times together. And as much as she was happy for them, she couldn’t help but envy them too. Frances had married a Duke, and Agnes had married a Marquess, and both men adored their wives to distraction.

If only she could find such love too. Alas, her own reality was different. Perhaps she even lived in a different world from her friends, she thought to herself. Hers was definitely no fairytale.

Writing the letters was an excuse she sought to delay going down for breakfast. She wanted the room emptied. She didn’t think she could countenance any company today.

“Do you promise to go down after the letters?” Antoinetta looked skeptical.

“I promise,” Emma chuckled lightly.

“And to eat a proper meal?” Her lady’s maid pressed on.

“And to eat a proper meal,” Emma echoed, her voice light but her heart heavy, as she returned her attention to the letter she was writing Frances.

My dearest Frannie

It warms my heart to think of you nestled in your country, and I must encourage you to enjoy every moment before the start of the season—much is expected of the Duchess of Preston, after all.

I am currently attending a splendid house party in Wiltshire, hosted by the Earl of Firman and his family. The company is lively and the evenings are filled merriment. You should see the Earl’s garden—it is positively from a dream! These are just the delights and diversions an old lady such as myself needs.

Good heavens! Frannie, I sounded very unlike myself there, telling you about the splendid time I am having here while in truth I am miserable. The gentlemen are dull, and dearly I miss you and Aggie. Why am I unhappy, you ask? This house party augurs an uninteresting season. I often wonder if my parents will allow me to remain unmarried by its end.

I shudder at the thought of having to do something desperate to find a husband. Do pray for your hopeless little friend, Frannie. And give many kisses to Caspian for me. I grow fonder of him every day.

With all my love,

Emma

As she read the letter after writing, she realized that her fingers had betrayed her and

given her friends some of the truth of her emotions. Sighing, she sealed it and prepared to go down for breakfast.

The breakfast room was thankfully empty when she arrived. She fetched her food and sat to eat, grateful for the peace.

Her solitude was short-lived, however, when Seymore suddenly made an appearance. A part of Emma didn't want to see him. But another part of her couldn't help but notice how handsome he looked dressed in a dark blue coat.

She felt warmth stain her cheeks when he greeted her, and she tried not to meet his gaze. While he fetched his food, she tried to compose herself and concentrate on her own meal.

He returned and sat across from her. And she felt his gaze intent on her, practically shadowing her every move. The intensity of his attention was unsettling yet oddly thrilling, and Emma found herself caught between annoyance and a curious intrigue.

She purposefully kept quiet and refused to engage him in the conversation he no doubt sought. She filled her mouth with food and chewed slowly, focusing intently on her plate as if it held the answers to her growing disquiet.

“What, pray tell, are you sulking about on such a lovely day?” He finally broke the silence, his tone light, yet edged with a challenge that Emma knew all too well.

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She knew it wasn't going to last anyway. Emma swallowed her food and prepared herself for the inevitable exchange.

"Why do you have a habit of intruding into people's lives and complicating them for them?" She returned instead, her voice steady but her hands beneath the table clenched in her lap.

"By complication you mean?" He quirked a brow, leaning forward slightly, his interest visibly piqued.

And Emma decided she'd had enough. She refused to let this continue. She didn't think she could bear another confrontation with her parents as a result. Thus she said, "I know you're trying to come between the Earl and me."

He surprisingly did not feign ignorance. "Does that mean you're trying to get the Earl's attention? And possibly affections too?" His gaze was searching as he inquired, tilting his head slightly as if to read her more clearly.

Emma suddenly felt self-conscious. Her throat ran dry too, and she took a sip of her orange juice to calm her nerves.

"What business of yours is my relationship with the Earl?" She returned sharply, meeting his gaze with a defiant lift of her chin.

"First, he is like a brother to me. So of course, it is my business to look out for him," he replied, his tone softening just a bit as if to remind her of his genuine concern.

“I believe he is a man more than capable of looking out for himself,” Emma shot back, unwilling to let him see the turmoil beneath her composed exterior.

“You are right,” he agreed, nodding slightly. “But that is family, is it not? We look out for each other, even when not needed,” he added, a light shrug accompanying his words.

Your family. Not mine, she almost blurted out. But instead, she said, “You tried every means yesterday afternoon to get in the way. Is that your definition of looking out?”

“You make it sound as though I gave you no choice. I didn’t force you, Miss Lovell. You could have easily left my company for Firman’s, you know. But you didn’t. Why?” he returned her question with another of his own, a slight tilt of his head indicating his curiosity.

He was right, damn it, Emma thought to herself. She’d had a choice. Yet she’d subconsciously chosen to remain with him. And she didn’t have the answer to his question right now, for she didn’t know why. Only that she’d chosen to remain with him. For whatever reasons elusive, and yet unknown.

Emma let her gaze fall back onto her plate. She really had no appetite to continue eating.

She thought of abandoning her meal, and wondered if that would give him the upper hand on her. The satisfaction of affecting her so that he eventually put her off her food weighed heavily on her mind. As she contemplated her options, they suddenly heard voices in the hallway before Lady Amberton appeared.

“Oh, Emma dear. There you are. I’ve been looking all over for you,” she said, her voice carrying a cheerful urgency that Emma found both relieving and opportune.

“Is everything all right?” Emma asked, her expression one of mild concern, grateful for the interruption.

Lady Amberton smiled warmly and explained, “I am planning a treasure hunt for the afternoon and need your help writing the clues on the cards.”

Emma couldn’t be happier for the excuse to leave her food behind. She really couldn’t stomach more, not to mention she desperately needed a breather from the Duke’s suffocating company. He’d somehow deduced that she’d set her cap for Firman now, and she had a feeling he wouldn’t back down and let them be...

Things had taken an unexpected turn now. As if she needed more complications in her life.

She forced herself out of her disturbed thoughts and prepared to leave. Emma was only too glad to join Lady Amberton, seeing it as a perfect escape from the tense atmosphere.

And as she walked out of the breakfast room, she felt his eyes on her and couldn’t help glancing back when she reached the door. Seymore regarded her with such intensity it felt almost as though he could read her very soul. Something curiously akin to excitement fluttered in her stomach in concert with the cold blanket of apprehension that suddenly came over her.

CHAPTER 8

George lit his cigar in the library and took a long puff. His mind was racing from the events of the afternoon. If he thought he’d imagined Baroness Dewsbury’s initial disapproval of her daughter, he was certain that he hadn’t mistaken the second one upon their return. Something was definitely going on in that family. With Emma. And for some reason, he felt the need to unravel whatever it was.

He'd had to admit to himself that Emma was pleasant company. And the more time he spent with her, the more he curiously enjoyed it. And wanted more. A voice in his head warned him at this thought. And he moved to serve a drink in an attempt to distract himself and hopefully change the course of his thoughts away from Emma Lovell.

"Need a drinking mate?" Olivia suddenly popped her head into the room.

"That depends," George returned with a smile.

"I do not take conditions," Olivia strode into the room and plucked a tumbler off the display.

"Do not tell Alex. I cannot stand his lectures," she gave a conspiratorial wink as George chuckled and obliged her.

He poured her a drink. "Thank God for lenient brothers," Olivia laughed as she accepted her drink happily before sitting in the chair opposite the one he occupied.

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“The trip to the village was quite refreshing,” Olivia took a sip of her drink. “I am sure you had a good time. Miss Lovell is quite the pleasant company,” she added with a mischievous glint in her eyes.

“Indeed,” George found himself distracted once again by thoughts of Emma. He wondered if she’d found the trip as rejuvenating as Olivia had. Not with the way her mother watched her like a hawk with those disapproving eyes, he doubted.

A thought occurred to him just then. Perhaps Emma wasn’t the problem to her mother, but her association with him. After all, he knew only too well what reputation he had in society.

“George?” Olivia’s voice broke into his thoughts. She was regarding him expectantly.

“So?” She prodded when he didn’t speak. And he realized that she might have asked him a question. He asked her what it was, and she repeated, “Do you intend to court Miss Lovell?”

A little laugh escaped him at this. And Olivia quirked an inquisitive brow.

“What do you think?” he returned.

She pursed her lips in thought. “I cannot tell with you, George,” she said. “You may have a reputation in society, but I never met a more unpredictable person,” she added.

And he couldn’t help his mirth once again. “Well thought,” he winked.

“Well, I personally like Miss Lovell. Her honesty and confidence are admirable. Society needs more people like her,” Olivia gushed with much enthusiasm.

George could tell that she liked Emma. But there was still a bit of dust he needed to clear up where she was concerned.

“Those are admirable qualities, yes,” George said. “But people aren’t always as they seem, Olivia,” he added.

“What do you mean?” Her good humor faltered.

“Merely that you should be careful to protect your boundaries and evaluate what company you keep,” he advised.

“Oh, Alex always says you’re more cynical than an old woman, George,” She laughed now, clearly not taking him seriously. And he shrugged, his mind still partly on Emma and the complexities she brought into his otherwise predictable life.

Lady Amberton handed Emma the cards along with instructions on what to write. They were alone in the drawing room, the soft afternoon light casting warm hues across the plush furniture.

“Oh, the children quite loved treasure hunts growing up,” Jane Amberton wore a nostalgic expression on her face as she sighed. “I used to organize these games for the children even back then, you know. And George always loved to pretend he was a knight on a mysterious quest whenever they played. Olivia was always his little princess,” she continued. Her voice carried such fondness; it was palpable and made the room feel smaller, more intimate.

“The Duke must be quite close to the family,” Emma observed as she organized the cards before her according to their colors.

“Why, George is like their older brother. The accident which claimed the former Duke and Duchess’s lives was most tragic. But we gained an additional family member,” Jane said fondly. “He’d been so young. Too young to be orphaned,” she added with a rueful sigh.

“Fate can be cruel,” Emma remarked, her voice soft, reflecting the somber mood Jane’s memories had evoked.

“Most certainly,” the woman agreed, nodding slowly as if weighing the truth of their words against her own experiences.

“I suppose the Duke spends more time here than at his own estate?” Emma tried not to appear too obvious in her curiosity, but her interest in George’s life was genuine.

“Oh, that boy is as busy as a bee, I tell you. He is always traveling back and forth. Managing his own affairs, and helping Alexander run estate and business matters here too,” Lady Amberton responded. She spoke with such maternal pride about George; it was clear he held a special place in her heart.

“They have quite the rare friendship,” Emma observed, thinking of her own dear friends and the different but equally strong bond they shared.

“It is the most precious brotherhood,” Lady Amberton affirmed. “My late brother and sister-in-law adored him just as much too,” she added.

In a way, Emma envied the Duke. She may have Frances and Agnes, but she’d always wished she’d had a sibling growing up—someone to share the most intimate moments with. The Duke had been an only child too. And albeit tragic his circumstances, fate had compensated him somehow by giving him Alexander and Olivia, and the most adoring family too.

“Why, you seem more interested in George than Alexander, dear,” Lady Amberton cut into her thoughts suddenly.

Emma sputtered, caught utterly off guard by her insinuation. She felt her cheeks warm as she shook her head and said, “Oh, it is nothing but idle curiosity, Lady Amberton.”

“Idle curiosity which has you blushing like a debutante now, eh?” Lady Amberton teased, her tone light but pointed, causing Emma to flush even deeper.

Emma tried to convince her otherwise, but Lady Amberton remained skeptical, her eyes gleaming with mischief. “I tell you what, Emma,” she lowered her voice to a conspiratorial whisper even though they were alone in the drawing room. “Even if you want Seymore as your suitor, your secret is safe with me,” she added, clearly enjoying the possibility of a little romantic intrigue under her roof.

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“Oh, I do not have such interests,” Emma protested, feeling her cheeks grow warmer still under the scrutinizing gaze of her host.

“If you say so,” Lady Amberton winked, her skepticism couldn’t be more apparent. Emma opened her mouth to make another attempt at convincing her, but just then, the housekeeper appeared and sought Lady Amberton’s attention. Emma was left alone, her thoughts swirling.

As she took another card to write on, she suddenly spied her name on one of the cards Lady Amberton had been working on. Emma succumbed to her curiosity and went through the cards, her heart skipping a beat when she saw that she had been paired with Seymore. And she didn’t think it a coincidence. No doubts Lady Amberton was trying to match her with the Duke now.

She quickly shuffled the cards and switched them, pairing herself with Firman instead. Besides, she didn’t think she could countenance an entire hunt in the company of the infuriating Duke. As her partner no less.

No sooner had she returned to her cushion than Lady Amberton reappeared. “Oh, we must hurry and finish these,” the woman sounded breathless. And as Emma watched her shuffle through the cards, guilt suddenly came over her. What had she been thinking? She found herself wishing Lady Amberton would get called out again so she could return the names as they’d been.

Alas, they finished working on the cards without the opportunity to right her wrong. Lady Amberton called a footman and gave him the cards with instructions to have them delivered to the guests. She turned to Emma and handed her hers somewhat

abstractedly as she went through the few cards that were left on the table, her mind clearly elsewhere. Emma held the card in her hand, her stomach twisting with the weight of her impulsive decision.

“The afternoon looks promising already,” Jane anticipated.

Emma felt too guilty to look forward to anything. If only she could change the cards again.

The treasure hunt was set on the expansive grounds of the manor. Emma saw the Earl approaching and braced herself, only for him to nod and smile cordially at her before walking past. Confused, she swiveled and saw a young lady from the guests placing her hand on his arm before he led her away. They appeared to have been paired.

“You look as if you just lost a good sum in a horrid wager, Miss Lovell,” a voice came from beside her. Emma wanted to groan out loud. She raised her gaze to see Seymore, whose expression was filled with a sense of satisfaction.

“What did you do?” She cut straight to the point.

“The footman gave me my card and Firman’s. I saw the names, and switched them,” he shrugged nonchalantly.

Emma supposed she ought to be glad. She’d wanted to right things after all. But this only infuriated her more. “Besides, I think you will enjoy my company more than Firman’s,” he grinned, clearly pleased with his meddling.

“How dare you?”

“How dare I not?” He tossed back, his tone playful yet challenging.

“You are insufferable,” she accused, her frustration mounting.

“And yet here you are,” he pointed out, a sly smile on his lips.

“Because you switched the cards,” she returned sharply. “And don’t you dare tell me that you’re giving me a choice right now. Because this is holding me hostage,” she added, her words fierce.

“Hostage?” he echoed, amusement evident in his voice.

“Quite so,” she jutted her chin out in defiance.

“I suppose Firman would be willing to pay a fine sum in exchange for you,” he laughed, his humor not quite reaching her.

“How is that for a deal?” He added as she began to walk away. Their first clue was to look around the hedges, presumably for their second clue...

“Not nearly fair,” she complained.

“Allow me,” he stopped her when she crouched by the hedges to look around.

“I didn’t realize you had a chivalrous bone in you, Your Grace,” she couldn’t help but tease, a slight smirk touching her lips. “Look at you, all ready to do the dirty work,” she added.

“Is that how you show your gratitude?” He straightened, bearing a small card now.

“What’s it say?” she asked, her curiosity piqued despite herself.

“That’ll cost Firman extra if I tell you.” He held the card out of her reach when she

tried to snatch it away.

“How is that fair?” she cried. “We were paired to be a team!” She added, her tone a mix of exasperation and challenge.

“Were we?” He quirked a sly brow.

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“Well, you switched the cards to team up with me. So we should work together,” she corrected, trying not to dwell on the fact that he was her original partner, and that she had been the one to make the initial switch.

“Well, you said it yourself just now, did you not, Emma?” He whisked the card away when she tried to reach for it again. “That I don’t play fair games,” he added, his voice low and teasing.

“It is no excuse to allow your lack of manners to rear its head at a time like this,” she returned sharply. And he chuckled, clearly enjoying their banter far more than she deemed appropriate.

“Now is precisely the time when I must act,” he said, a gleam of determination in his eyes. “I am not a man to let a good opportunity pass me by,” he added, his tone suggesting a challenge he relished.

As intolerable as he was, she found herself enjoying his company nonetheless. There was something about his audacity that intrigued her.

“Come,” he turned and began to walk away, his steps confident and sure.

“Where to?” She asked, skipping to keep up with his long strides despite herself.

“To the next clue,” he replied, not looking back, his focus fixed on the game ahead.

Emma suddenly felt a hand yank at her shawl as she walked, halting her abruptly. She turned to the sight of her scowling mother. She looked at Seymore and saw that he

was a few paces ahead of her, and didn't seem to notice her absence behind him just yet.

"You quickly find whatever means to pair yourself with the Earl before your father notices," Caroline instructed, her voice low and urgent. "Otherwise, he'll have both of our heads," she added. And despite her displeasure, Emma saw fear in her mother's eyes too.

With these words, Caroline let go of her hold on her shawl, and Emma proceeded to meet Seymore. But just then, she spied the Earl and his partner parting ways. Presumably to cover more ground, she thought.

An idea occurred to her.

"Keep up, keep up," Seymore hollered when he turned and saw her way behind him, struggling to catch up.

"Why don't we split up to cover more grounds? I think we will be faster in gathering all our clues then," Emma suggested when she finally caught up to him.

"Good idea," he agreed without arguments. Much to her surprise. But she had no complaints.

When they parted, Emma immediately headed in the direction of the Earl. "My Lord," Emma acknowledged when she reached him.

"Miss Lovell," Firman beamed. "I trust you are having a good time?" He asked. He was looking around a nearby tuft of grass for his own clues.

"Most enjoyable, My Lord," she responded pleasantly as she positioned herself a little away from him, but making sure to remain directly, and in his full view as she

pretended to look around some hedges.

She allowed a minute to pass before she let out a cry, and slumped onto the grass around, pretending to twist her ankle. She closed her eyes and clutched at the said body part in ostensible pain.

“Oh, Miss Lovell, are you all right?” the Earl’s voice held a tone of alarm in it as he quickly left his position.

Soon after, Emma felt strong arms circle around her, scooping her up from the ground. But something did not feel right as she was held. Or rather, something did not smell right. The scent which suffused her senses was overly familiar.

She opened her eyes. Seymore was carrying her.

CHAPTER 9

George leaned close to Emma as he carried her back and whispered, “I know you are unhurt.” She pinned him with a deathly glare that could have frozen any other man in his tracks.

He’d had a feeling she was up to something. And he’d agreed to part ways with her to see what she had planned. The moment he saw her slump, he suspected, and rushed to get to her before Alexander could. He needed to save his friend from her clutches—or was it her mother’s clutches? He recalled the way the Baroness had yanked at her daughter earlier. George had pretended not to notice and trudged ahead to respect her privacy.

Maybe Emma wasn’t the villain, he wondered. After all, despite her protests earlier, she’d appeared content with their hunt, and only hatched this plan of hers after speaking to her mother.

“I cannot think of anything more hackneyed in getting a man’s attention than a feigned twisted ankle, Emma,” he couldn’t help but goad now. As annoyed as he was, he found himself curiously glad she was in his arms and not another man’s.

She neither took his bait nor argued her innocence. She simply accepted her fate in his arms as the others rushed to them, inquiring if she was all right. Alexander was at the fore.

“What happened?” His friend asked, concern creasing his features. George suddenly felt something prick at his insides. Alexander was not supposed to be this worried. Not about Emma. He had no right. A voice in his head pointed out how irrational he was being right now, and he quickly schooled his thoughts. He was acting quite odd lately.

“I think her ankle might be quite hurt,” George spoke for her, meeting and holding her gaze in silent communication. She gave him a look which promised future retribution. And he strangely found himself looking forward to paying for his so-called crimes.

“Oh dear,” Aunt Jane gasped.

“I will take her back inside,” he added. And an equally worried Olivia quickly volunteered to accompany them.

They met Emma’s lady’s maid in the vestibule, and the girl, alarmed at the approaching sight of her mistress, rushed toward them. She threw back the covers up in Emma’s bedchamber, and George gingerly placed her on the mattress.

“Would you like a physician, Miss Lovell?” He squared her with a deliberate look as he asked.

“No. I am fine,” she quickly shook her head.

George felt a sly smile tug at a corner of his lips. She must have noticed it too, because her scowl deepened as she regarded him.

“Oh, it is nothing a little ice wouldn’t be able to solve,” she added when Olivia insisted on a physician.

“I shall get the ice at once, My Lady,” the lady’s maid said before disappearing.

After making certain Emma was comfortable, Olivia said, “Do call us if you need anything, dear.”

Emma nodded. And with one last glance at her, and a glare in turn from her, George led Olivia out of the room.

Frustration inadequately described what Emma felt right now. Nothing she did seemed to work. The Duke was a menace she couldn't seem to shake off.

She got to her feet the moment she was alone, feeling the dampness of her dress cling uncomfortably to her skin. The door reopened just then, and panic fleetingly rose within her until she saw Antoinetta bearing a bowl of ice and a towel.

Her lady's maid's eyes widened in surprise and worry when she saw Emma standing. "You should be off that foot, Emma. You're going to worsen it," she began to fuss.

"I am fine, Antoinetta," Emma grumbled before going on to confess to her what had really happened. "My parents are about to chew me alive, and that confounded Duke is always getting in my way with the Earl," she complained.

Antoinetta was thoughtful for a second before she ventured, "Perhaps he secretly harbors some affections for you, and that is why he is always getting in the way. To keep other gentlemen away from you."

"Don't be ridiculous, Antoinetta," Emma snorted dismissively. Seymore had no feelings for her. He was just naturally spiteful and conniving, she thought irritably. Besides, she wouldn't entertain a suit from him if he was the last man on earth, and her father had a blunderbuss to her head to marry.

Better him than Neads, a voice in her head suggested. But she extinguished the thought just as quickly. She refused to contemplate it, much less admit it to herself.

"Maybe you should let him court you," her lady's maid suggested with a mischievous glint in her eyes now.

"Father would send me to a finishing school for ladies on the shelf before that would happen," Emma snorted, dismissing the ludicrous suggestion.

“But you don’t mind his suit, do you?” Antoinetta pressed on, clearly enjoying the direction of their conversation.

“I am not interested, Antoinetta,” Emma ground out, her patience wearing thin. “And besides, the Duke has no intentions of courting me, or anyone else. He’s a sworn bachelor, remember?” She added, her voice firm, trying to convince both her maid and herself.

“You’re blushing, Emma,” Antoinetta teased, a knowing smile playing on her lips.

“Are you going to help me out of this wet dress, or not, Antoinetta?” Emma purposefully closed that subject of conversation. But in fact, she felt the warmth in her cheeks then, betraying her outward dismissal.

Antoinetta winked before getting to work.

The following night, Emma found herself unable to sleep as she pondered her pitiful prospects and bleak future. She had exhausted all her options in trying to get close to the Earl, and George was always in the way, thwarting her efforts almost as if by design.

Donning her robe, she slipped out into the dark and quiet hallway. It was quite late, and the household had retired for the night. Seeking some solace in a warm drink, she snuck into the kitchens where she found the housekeeper working late on what looked like some household accounts.

“Oh, pardon my intrusion,” Emma said, her voice soft, surprised to find anyone still awake.

The woman dismissed her apology with a pleasant smile before asking, “Is there anything you need, Miss Lovell?”

“Just some milk, if it’s no trouble,” Emma responded, grateful for the kindness.

With a warm glass of milk in hand, Emma left the kitchens feeling slightly more content. The night outside looked quite peaceful and appealing through the windows, so she allowed herself to step out into the orangery. She took a seat on a bench underneath one of the fruiting orange trees, savoring her solitude and the comforting warmth of the milk.

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But just then, she heard rustling not too far away, followed by footsteps. Emma's breath caught in her throat. She thought she had been alone. Who could possibly be up at this time of the night? She drew her robe tighter around her nightgown, apprehension gripping her as the footsteps grew nearer.

Then, someone emerged from the shadows. A man.

"George?" She heard herself blurt out in surprise, recognizing the figure before her.

He stopped in his tracks, looking slightly taken aback to find her there. He was dressed casually, in his waistcoat with his shirt sleeves rolled back, and his hair was disheveled. A faint smell lingered in the air around him.

Tobacco? She sniffed, trying to place the familiar scent that now mixed with the fresh citrus from the trees around them.

"Emma," George said. "What are you doing here at this hour?" His expression softened, curiosity replacing the initial surprise.

"I could ask you the same," she replied, her voice steady despite her racing heart. The night suddenly seemed less quiet, less lonely, with George's unexpected presence.

Her gaze moved to her glass of milk, and she sighed. George quietly joined her on the bench, and they sat in companionable silence for a while as she sipped at her milk. The night was peaceful indeed, she thought, enjoying the quiet. And as though he'd somehow read her thoughts, George finally broke their silence with, "Not even the

crickets and frogs seem to be out tonight.”

“Only gentlemen getting in the way of a lady’s solitude and peace,” Emma quipped.

“Does this mean I am not welcome again?” He gave an exaggerated grimace.

“You just have the worst timing imaginable,” she chuckled despite herself.

“Tell me then, when is the right time?” He asked, a playful note in his voice.

“Perhaps when you learn to mind your business,” she returned lightly, and he chuckled.

“Please take a step back and let me get close to the Earl, George,” Emma suddenly heard herself voice before she could fully process the thought much less rein it in.

He grew pensive, his expression unreadable in the dim light. Albeit he betrayed no surprise about him at her request.

“Why?” he finally asked, his voice low and serious.

“I cannot explain...” She faltered, unsure how to convey the desperation and the direness of her situation.

That her parents were blackmailing her to marry? How ridiculous would that sound? He would never believe her. He already thought her grasping as it was.

“Try,” he encouraged gently.

“It is too difficult to,” she shook her head, feeling a lump rising to her throat. “But I really need to do this, George,” she implored, her voice thick with unshed tears.

“Do you love Firman?”

Her brows rose slightly, a mixture of resignation and defiance playing across her features. “I could grow to love him, in time, perhaps, but that is not what is important.”

“Then what is?” he insisted.

When she did not respond immediately, caught in the gravity of their conversation, he pressed further, “You realize that I need to protect my friend, Emma?”

She met his gaze, her eyes reflecting a turmoil he was only beginning to comprehend. She remained silent, but the understanding was there—she knew of his loyalty to Alexander. But she had no choice. She needed him to understand that.

“I cannot presume to know your reasons, Emma. But if it is not love, I cannot allow it. Alexander is a brother to me. I must look out for him,” he continued, his voice steady yet filled with an undercurrent of protectiveness.

“Especially after what happened in the conservatory, I must watch his back, as I would mine,” he added, referencing the recent incident that had caused quite the stir.

Emma felt her cheeks warm at the reminder of the conservatory. She realized just then how closely they were seated, their proximity under the dim light of the orangery creating an intimacy that was both unsettling and undeniable.

“George I...” she began tentatively, her voice a soft whisper in the quiet night.

But he raised a finger and placed it against her lips, silencing her. His touch was gentle yet firm, a contradiction that somehow epitomized George himself.

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Emma saw his face move closer, her breath catching in anticipation. But instead of the kiss she braced herself for, he suddenly got to his feet, breaking the moment and the spell.

“Surely you understand, Emma,” he said, his voice low. And without waiting for her response, he added, “Have a pleasant rest of the night.”

CHAPTER 10

Pacing back and forth in his room, George grappled with the unsettling thoughts that swirled through his mind following his encounter with Emma in the orangery. He was unable to rid himself of the image of her under the moonlit sky, her hair loosely braided, her cheeks touched with a soft glow.

Stopping by the window, he shoved his fingers through his hair. What was happening to him? Why was he so affected by her? Why now more than ever?

Her plea for him to step aside so she could approach Alex had been desperate, almost palpable in its urgency, yet she offered no explanation. He couldn't help but suspect motives of social ambitions, though nothing in Emma's demeanor suggested she was capable of such scheming.

Her parents, however... They were the likely source of any manipulative designs. Yet, as he pinched the bridge of his nose, trying to dispel the inappropriate warmth that thought of her stirred within him, he felt a troubling contradiction.

Was he refusing to believe her capable of scheming because she had captivated him?

No, it could not be. There were women in England who were more...

No! There was something about Emma that arrested his senses and held them captive, and until he had dealt with it, he might not be able to save Alex from her. He was certain that sleep would be a lost cause tonight, and thus, he sought to occupy himself with something else.

George walked up to his desk and opened a drawer, retrieving a wooden box. Slowly, he ran his fingers across the worn wood. "Eighteen years and we are still here," he muttered to himself.

Opening the box, he selected a paintbrush from the collection of nine. This had been his father's final gift to him, and he only used these brushes to paint his most significant works. He moved to a waiting easel and sat in front of it. As he mixed the colors, bright green eyes appeared in his mind, then long brown hair, followed by a laugh so beautiful he nearly dropped the brush.

Heavens! Could this woman not leave him be? His jaw clenched, he dipped his brush in the paint and raised it to the canvas, working in quick determined strokes.

I will not allow you any triumph, Emma, he thought to himself. I am the Duke of Seymore, and no one can hold me captive!

The following morning, George timed his breakfast to coincide with Emma's usual appearance, hoping to observe her in a more informal setting or perhaps engage in a light conversation that could shed light on her perplexing behavior. He descended to the breakfast room only to find it bustling with unfamiliar faces.

He chose a seat, poured himself some coffee, and waited as the room slowly emptied, each departing guest a minor disappointment as Emma never appeared.

Could she be evading him? George drained his lukewarm coffee and decided to seek her out. His concern over Emma's unusual absence from breakfast had deepened, mingled with a puzzling eagerness to see her again. He wandered through the salons and drawing rooms, finding each charmingly empty, until he eventually found himself back in the grand front hall.

"You look like you're looking for someone," Jane Amberton's voice caught him off guard. She was busy directing the housekeeper and some footmen about the arrangements for the upcoming soiree.

"Me?" George paused, caught mid-step. "Ah... No. No one at all," he lied, attempting to sound casual.

Jane dismissed the servants with a nod before turning to face him, her eyes narrowing slightly with a knowing look. "If you're looking for Miss Lovell, she's out riding, you know," she informed him, as if reading his thoughts.

George couldn't hide his surprise. "She is?" he blurted out, immediately regretting his lack of composure. It was indeed quite early for a ride; the thought added to his confusion.

"I thought you said you weren't looking for anyone?" Jane's eyebrow arched skeptically as she placed her hands on her hips, her stance echoing her disbelief.

"I wasn't," George cleared his throat, feeling somewhat sheepish under her scrutinizing gaze.

"Shamelessly lying now, are we?" Jane teased with a sly grin, clearly amused by his discomfort.

"Very well, Aunt Jane," he conceded, offering a resigned smile. He knew better than

to try to fool her.

“She’s out riding with Alexander,” Jane suddenly added, her casual mention of this new piece of information causing George’s heart to skip a beat.

“What?” He couldn’t help the sharp response, his voice echoing slightly in the spacious hall. Why was she only telling him this now?

Jane’s expression softened slightly at his reaction, her features molding into a semblance of sympathy. “Yes, they left just a short while ago. Seemed keen to enjoy the morning sun,” she explained, her tone neutral but her eyes watching him closely, perhaps a bit too closely for comfort.

George felt a tightness in his chest at the thought of Emma out riding with Alexander, alone. This was exactly the sort of situation he had hoped to avoid. His protective instincts, already finely tuned, now edged toward alarm. He needed to see for himself, to ensure that everything was as innocent as it appeared. With a curt nod to Jane, he excused himself, stepping briskly toward the stables, his mind racing as much as his heart.

“The Baroness suggested a ride at breakfast. And Olivia was most excited to get some air too, so Alex obliged,” Jane elaborated, a hint of curiosity in her tone. “I must say, the Baroness seemed rather insistent when she suggested to Alex to take Emma out riding,” she added, almost as an afterthought to herself.

“Of course, she would be,” George mused, something uncomfortable settling over him. He could not shake the feeling that there was more to the Baroness’s insistence than mere pleasantries.

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“What?” Jane asked, perplexed. Her eyebrows knitted together as she regarded him with concern. George realized just how dubious he sounded.

“Oh, nothing, Aunt Jane,” he dismissed, placing a quick kiss on her cheek before turning on his heels. The last thing he wanted was to worry her with his suspicions.

“If you hurry, you just might catch them not too far away,” she called out after him, her voice carrying a note of encouragement.

George did not waste a moment. He had a horse saddled in the stables before galloping out as quickly as the beast could carry him. The landscape blurred past him, but his mind was fixed on one thing: reaching Emma and Alex.

As he approached the edge of the estate, he finally spied their party. They had stopped, and Alex was talking animatedly, his gestures broad and confident. Emma’s laughter rang in the air, clear and joyous.

Something heavy sank in George’s stomach before twisting unpleasantly. She seemed comfortable with Alex, he observed. Too comfortable.

“Such tardiness, George. You should be ashamed of yourself,” Olivia teased when he finally slowed down beside them.

“My invitation was just as late,” George said, giving Alex an almost accusing look.

“Ah, it was a most spontaneous decision,” Alex chuckled in turn, his laughter light but unconvincing.

A forced one too, perhaps, George thought, recalling what Jane said about the Baroness's insistent suggestion at breakfast. His unease deepened, but he masked it with a polite smile.

He let his gaze travel to Emma. A slight pink stained her cheeks, and George thought that she looked somewhat apprehensive. Her mirth had died down upon his arrival.

He did not like this. He was suddenly struck with a desire to change that. To make her laugh as Alexander had. To keep the smile constant on her face.

"How about a race?" he suggested, his voice infused with a newfound enthusiasm. As anticipated, her eyes lit up, although she clearly tried not to show much of her excitement.

There was something suddenly dubious about her too as she leaned into him and whispered, "What game are you playing at now, Seymour?"

"Horse racing," he gave a deliberate shrug, his expression innocently nonchalant.

Emma glared at George, but underneath, he saw humor, and it thrilled him. There was a spark in her eyes that he had missed, a spark he was determined to keep alive.

"Before we start, what's in it for the winner?" she asked, her tone challenging, but her lips twitching with a suppressed smile.

"Satisfaction?" George shrugged again, the simplicity of his answer belying the complexity of his feelings.

"Not enough," Olivia, who was suddenly excited about the race, shook her head, her eyes gleaming with anticipation.

“Surely you do not think that I’ll race without anything in it for me, Your Grace?” Emma quirked a sly brow, her playful challenge unmistakable.

“Indeed,” Alexander chuckled his agreement, his amusement evident as he looked between George and Emma.

“You sound certain that you’ll win,” George challenged her, a competitive edge creeping into his voice.

“I like to remain optimistic,” she returned slyly, her confidence unwavering.

“Good spirits, Miss Lovell. Good spirits,” Alex praised. She turned that shade of pink at his compliment once again, and George felt his jaw clench. He did not like the way she responded to Alex.

“Fine. What do you want?” he asked, his tone more brusque than intended. Anything to get her attention away from Firman, he thought to himself.

She pursed her lips in thought before she responded, “A wish.”

“Granted,” he said, eager to see her smile directed at him once more.

They made to take their positions. George was about to turn his mount into position when he remembered his manners and paused.

“Is everyone in agreement with the terms of the prize?” he asked Olivia and Alexander, his voice carrying over the excitement of the moment.

They nodded as they assumed positions, their expressions eager and competitive. George counted to three before they spurred their horses and tore through the fields, the thrill of the race coursing through him.

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Alexander quickly took the lead, his form perfect, his confidence unshakeable. He had always been an excellent equestrian. Where George had spent his childhood before a canvas, Alex had spent his in the stables and on the fields.

George wasn't too far behind him as he galloped on to catch up. He glanced back and was shocked when he saw Emma a few feet behind him, catching up at an alarmingly fast pace too. She was good. He'd had no idea. Most impressive indeed, he thought.

"You look in shock, Your Grace," she called out to him, her voice clear and teasing despite the wind.

"You're probably seeing things, Miss Lovell. A distortion of the wind," George called back, his tone light yet competitive.

"It wouldn't hurt to admit that you're impressed, Your Grace. I'll keep your secret," she teased. The wind carried over Olivia's laughter from behind Emma.

"It seems like I'm getting that wish after all," Emma caught up to him, her eyes sparkling with determination.

"Firman is leading. Not you," George pointed out. "And not for long too," he added, spurring his mount and racing after his friend. But not before he'd caught a look of apprehension on her face. Was she supporting Alexander too? George was not impressed.

The race was most enjoyable despite the outcome of it. It was as he'd expected, however. He'd never been able to beat Alexander at a race after all.

He doesn't care that he lost. He never has, but something is niggling him. Emma let out a delighted squeal as they finally reined in their horses, her laughter infectious and bright.

"Well done, My Lord!" she praised, her cheeks flushed with excitement.

"Thank you, Miss Lovell," Alexander replied, bowing his head slightly. "It was a fine race indeed."

George dismounted, his eyes still on Emma. "You rode splendidly," he said, his voice sincere despite the underlying tension he felt.

Emma smiled, her earlier apprehension seemingly gone. "Thank you, Your Grace. It was quite exhilarating."

George frowned when she turned and smiled at Alexander. In fact, he thought that he'd never seen her quite so excited before. He pushed down something bitter that rose to his throat at the sight of her praising Alexander and congratulating him.

To his surprise, however, his irritation dissolved the moment she met his gaze with a bright grin on her flushed face. He quite liked seeing her smile, he realized.

"That was a worthy match," he said, feeling a smile take over his own features.

"I never saw a man so pleased by his failure," she quirked a teasing brow, her eyes dancing with amusement.

"Oh, I failed not, Miss Lovell," he said, his tone light and playful. "In fact, I gained something," he added. I gained your smile, he thought to himself.

"Pray tell, what did you gain?" Her curiosity was palpable, and she leaned in slightly,

her interest piqued.

“Ah, but if you’d won, I would have answered your question,” he winked. She gave a petulant pout in protest, her lower lip jutting out charmingly. He burst out laughing, unable to contain his amusement.

Alexander and Olivia joined in the laughter.

Although she was the subject of their teasing, Emma laughed with them, her eyes sparkling with genuine delight. George couldn’t be more pleased.

At that moment, he felt a sense of triumph that had nothing to do with the race and everything to do with the joy radiating from Emma.

George found himself inexplicably elated throughout the remainder of the day. He hadn’t been able to stop smiling since their race earlier. Memories of Emma’s smile and the sound of her laughter filled his mind as he went about preparing for dinner.

He was down early and positioned himself in clear view of the drawing room door in anticipation of her arrival to await the announcement for dinner along with the gathered guests. His gaze refused to waver from the door as a number of ladies walked in and out. The clock ticked, and just when he began to despair of her arrival, George heard himself take in a sharp breath. He forgot how to exhale as he watched her walk into the room.

She was dressed in a pale green satin evening dress, and her hair was adorned with a quaint gold and jade tiara. She was a gift of nature, graceful and regal in every movement.

George started toward her, his heart pounding with a mix of anticipation and admiration. But before he could get to her, Alexander did. George watched with an

unpleasant taste in his mouth as his friend kissed her gloved knuckles and asked to escort her to dinner. She blushed and accepted.

George felt his jaw clench.

CHAPTER 11

The sight of Emma blushing under Alexander's gaze stirred George in all the wrong ways. What was worse was how he couldn't understand this feeling. Only that it was anything but pleasant. He wished he could remove Emma from Alexander's arm right now, and any other man who would dare approach her.

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Just then, he felt a delicate hand slither around his own arm. He looked down at a beaming Olivia, clutching onto his arm.

“I think they make a splendid couple, don’t you think?” Olivia’s gaze trailed Alex as he took Emma for a turn about the room while they waited for dinner.

George heard a grunt escape him in response as he too followed them with his displeased gaze. Emma was giggling at something Alex was saying now. The nerve of them!

“They look like the perfect pair,” Olivia added.

Just when George opened his mouth to dispute this, the butler appeared and announced their meal.

“Shall we?” he said to Olivia instead.

The guests paired up and began the slow procession toward the dining room. George trailed a little behind. He couldn’t take his gaze off of Emma and Alexander ahead of them.

“Do you think Alex is courting her?” Olivia whispered as they followed the other guests into the dining room.

“That is ridiculous!” George couldn’t help the sharpness in his tone.

“How is that ridiculous?” Olivia’s expression conveyed her perplexity.

“He is not courting her, Olivia,” George insisted, attempting to maintain composure.

“Well then, if Alexander isn’t courting her, are you?” Her voice held a playful yet probing note, her eyes glinting with both mischief and hope.

“No,” George responded, his words terser than he intended. He shifted his weight from one foot to the other, feeling suddenly out of place.

The thought of Alex showing any romantic interest in Emma was unsettling, and the idea of himself doing the same was inexplicably daunting. As they entered the dining room and found their seats, George’s mood darkened further. Emma was placed next to Alexander, far across from him. Throughout the dinner, her laughter reached his ears, light and frequent, as she chatted animatedly with Alexander. George’s grip on his fork tightened with each peal of laughter that floated across the room.

“Is all well, George?” The soft inquiry came from Jane, who noticed his discomfort as she sat beside him. Her hand rested gently on his, drawing his attention.

“As well as it can be, Aunt Jane,” George replied, managing only a strained smile as his gaze involuntarily flicked back to Emma. “As well as it can be,” he found himself repeating, the words echoing in his own ears.

Alexander leaned in and whispered something to Emma, causing a delicate blush to rise to her cheeks. Under the table, George’s hand clenched into a fist, his knuckles whitening with the effort. When he finally tore his gaze away to meet Jane’s, he caught a slight smile on her features—a smile he could not decipher.

After dinner, George followed Emma when he saw her excuse herself instead of going to the gardens with the others. She paused in one of the dimly lit halls, likely sensing him. George decided to reveal himself.

“Are you following me, Seymour?”

“What if I am?”

He heard footsteps and quickly took her hand, pulling her into a salon and closing the door. “What are you doing, George? This is scandalous!”

“Your attention on Firman is scandalous,” he said, allowing her to take a step from him. Her face was flushed, and he had to maintain his composure.

“What do you want from me?” she asked.

“Answer me this question. What do you require in a suitor, Emma?”

“Why are you asking this?” George was not so much interested in the answer as he was in keeping her here with him, not out there smiling at Alexander.

“Am I not allowed to be curious about you?”

She looked at the door, seeming impatient. She had looked at it all evening, and he wondered why. Her happy demeanor from earlier had all but disappeared. “Why do you derive such pleasure from stepping on people’s toes?” she demanded, her voice low and intense.

“I do not recall us ever dancing. And by people, you mean yourself, Emma?” he returned insolently, keeping his voice smooth, almost teasing.

“I have to go,” she said, moving past him.

George took hold of her wrist. “What has you in a temper this evening, Emma?” He drew her toward him—unable to help himself.

“They will be looking for me.”

“The guests?” When she shook her head, he asked, “Your parents?”

Emma did not answer, and something darkened within him. She freed her hand and stepped back. “George, I should not be in here alone with you.”

But you would be with Alexander, he almost said. “Forgive me,” he murmured and opened the door. She lingered and looked up at him as she wanted to tell him something. The moment was fleeing, however, and she slipped out.

He had acted like a fool just now, taking risks so he could keep her from Alex. George pinched the bridge of his nose. Emma was turning him into a man he barely recognized, and he had to stop this—whatever he was feeling.

When he joined the guests in the garden, he found Emma with Alexander, and his eyes hardly left them until an unexpected opportunity arose. A lady, the one Alexander had been paired with during the earlier treasure hunt, approached and drew him into conversation. Seizing the moment, George approached Emma.

“After all the food you devoured earlier, I believe a walk would come in useful for you, Miss Lovell,” he teased, a playful tone veiling his nervous anticipation.

“Why, it sounds like you were watching me throughout, Your Grace,” Emma chuckled, her eyes sparkling with amusement.

George felt a sudden jolt of surprise at her remark. Had she noticed his gaze lingering

on her throughout dinner? He hoped not, as an uncharacteristic flush of embarrassment warmed his cheeks. He had, in all honesty, been almost unable to tear his eyes away from her.

Goodness! What must she think of him?

George offered her his arm, and with a graceful nod, Emma accepted. As they strolled away from the gathering, a subtle fragrance from her caught his attention. It was an intriguing scent, complex and unexpectedly delightful, much like Emma herself.

“I must say, Firman had you glued to him like an appendage throughout the evening,” George remarked as they ambled along the cobbled pathways that wound through the lush gardens.

“You sound like a jealous man, George,” she giggled, the sound light and teasing. “Why, if I didn’t know you were on a mission to protect Firman, I would have thought you claimed this walk with me out of jealousy,” she added with a sly grin that hinted at her playful mood.

George felt a smile tug at the corner of his mouth, her words igniting a spark of amusement within him. He wanted to counter her teasing accusation, but her challenging gaze spurred him to respond instead, “Well, Emma, someone has to remove the cat’s claws from the meat.” He shrugged insouciantly.

“I don’t think I have my claws deep enough,” she retorted, her voice carrying a mock lament. “A certain gentleman keeps getting in my way, I’m afraid,” she added, her tone subtly accusing yet filled with an underlying flirtation.

Recalling their earlier encounter in the orangery and how she’d implored him to keep from meddling, George couldn’t resist continuing their playful banter. “Ah, but that

gentleman has never met a more slippery feline,” he said.

“Why, is that a compliment now?” She laughed, her amusement clear in the melodious sound that followed.

As he listened to her laughter, George found it as enchanting as he remembered. The liveliness in her face, illuminated by the soft glow of the garden lanterns, warmed him more profoundly than the mild night air.

He didn’t want to let go of this moment, watching her laugh and smile for him. He shouldn’t let go of her. You are treading a fiery path, George, one that could harm one or both of you, a voice in his head warned as soon as the thought materialized, yet George found himself disregarding every one of them.

They circled back to the terrace which led into the house, but instead of entering, they lingered, relishing the solitude afforded by the cool evening air.

“It was just the two of us now, and I wanted to keep it that way,” George thought, his gaze lingering on Emma as she admired the gardens below. The area was aglow with an array of lamps and fairy lights, each one casting its own pool of luminance that danced on the plants and the faces of the people wandering among them.

“I never saw such a concentration of light in one garden,” Emma remarked, her voice filled with wonder as she observed the scene. The lights bathed everything in a magnificent glow that seemed almost magical.

George smiled, knowing well the source of such extravagance. “Aunt Jane always likes to go the extra mile in all she does, though she would never admit to any lack of subtlety.”

“Rembrandt would have had a swell time with such light,” he commented, his mind

picturing the famous painter who had been iconic in his use of light and shadow—a technique George had always admired and sometimes drew inspiration from.

“Indeed,” Emma sighed, almost dreamily. Her eyes sparkled with interest as she turned to him, her thoughts seemingly far away. “I’ve always found his painting of *The Night Watch* most intriguing. The guards are a clear symbol of order, yet for some reason, he captured them in quite a chaotic piece: a motley of people and weapons. It sheds a new light on our understanding of the word order.”

“Ah, now that is a perfect depiction of his manipulation of light and shadow,” George exclaimed, his voice filled with admiration as he spoke of the famed artist. “Rembrandt not only captures these elements with his brush strokes and colors but takes us on figurative journeys through ‘light and dark.’ He feeds our minds a paradox in that particular painting, especially,” he elaborated, his eyes alight with fervor.

“I see you have quite the admiration for him,” Emma observed, her chuckle mingling with the evening air as she noted his enthusiasm.

“Who wouldn’t? Rembrandt was legendary, Emma,” George replied with a nonchalant shrug, his admiration for the artist evident in his tone.

Just then, Alexander and the lady from the treasure hunt, Miss Clorette reappeared, joining them on the terrace. George’s initial displeasure at the interruption flickered across his face, but he quickly composed himself, striving not to betray his annoyance.

“Ah, there you are,” Alexander greeted them.

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“Were you looking for us, My Lord?” Emma’s voice held a quick, perhaps too enthusiastic tone, which George noted with a slight tightening in his chest.

“You disappeared rather unexpectedly back there, I must say,” Alexander chuckled.

George reflected silently on his decision to seize the moment to capture Emma’s full attention, a choice he did not regret despite the interruption. “Perhaps his Grace is quite the magician then,” Miss Clorette quipped, her light chuckle echoing Alexander’s amusement.

“Seymore cannot do magic to save his life,” Alexander laughed heartily, and the ladies joined in with equal mirth.

“Just like how you cannot hold a paintbrush to save your life, Firman?” George retorted, his words filled with humor as he returned the playful jab.

“Or tell the differences between your ridiculous color combinations,” Alex chimed in, turning to the ladies with an amused smirk. “You see, Seymore here would hand you two identical swatches of colors and challenge you to distinguish them. Preposterous!” He burst into laughter, which quickly spread to the surrounding company.

“They’re different shades, Firman. Different shades. Far from identical,” George protested, rolling his eyes exaggeratedly, which only elicited more laughter from the ladies.

“Oh, Firman. There you are!” The conversation was suddenly punctuated by a new

voice, drawing the group's attention.

"Lord Devonshire has been looking for you all evening," Jane chimed in, her tone light but carrying an undercurrent of urgency.

"I'm afraid I must excuse myself now," Alex said, his reluctance clear in his voice, which George thought bordered on rueful. Was it because of Emma? Did he regret leaving her company? George felt a twinge of satisfaction at the thought, though he couldn't quite quell the stir of unease that accompanied it.

"I should like an introduction to Lord Devonshire too, My Lord," Miss Clorette lady interjected, her eyes gleaming with a mix of ambition and anticipation.

"I can take care of that," Alex assured her, offering his arm which she accepted with a pleased smile. They descended the short stairs back into the gardens, Jane following close behind, leaving George to his private musings.

Relief washed over George as he found himself alone with Emma once again. However, when he turned to her, he noticed a change in her demeanor. Her expression was thoughtful, her gaze distant, as if she were pondering something profound or troubling.

"I think the differences, like our strengths and weaknesses, add to the uniqueness and intrigue of life, don't you think?" Emma's voice broke the silence, her words carrying the weight of their earlier conversation.

George nodded, recognizing her continued reflection on the topic. "Indeed, where you see the treasure in colors and wield them excellently to communicate to our senses and imagination, the Earl's strengths lie in plants and animals like horses, appealing instead to our fancy of nature and thrill for sports..."

“These little differences we tend to overlook set us individually apart,” George affirmed, his voice carrying a tone of agreement that resonated with the soft ambiance of the garden.

“Strengths and weaknesses... Sounds like a field of contrasts Rembrandt would have loved to exploit,” Emma mused, her gaze drifting to the scattering of lights around them.

“A battlefield of opposites,” George echoed thoughtfully.

“I would consider it more of a dance,” she suggested, her eyes lighting up with the analogy.

“A dance of opposites...” He tested the words, finding them fitting perfectly into their dialogue. “Spoken like a true art lover,” he chuckled, his admiration for her perspective evident in his tone.

“I would take that as a compliment then,” she beamed, her smile infectious.

“Enjoy it while it lasts. I don’t give those out often, Miss Lovell,” he chortled, his playful banter drawing a light laugh from her.

“They wouldn’t be as special if you did,” she agreed, her voice soft yet sincere.

She glanced back behind them, a subtle shift in her demeanor catching George’s attention before she suddenly said, “I should check on the Baroness.”

She avoided his gaze as she spoke, and George sensed the distance she tried to impose. He couldn’t dismiss the feeling that it was just an excuse—an excuse to leave him, perhaps even to find Alexander. A suspicious voice in his head suggested as much.

This irritation gnawed at him, kindling an odd anger within George at himself for caring too deeply about her actions and intentions. Surely it ought not to be his concern. Yet, somehow, he had made it precisely that.

Never mind that his ostensible mission here was to shield his friend from what he suspected might be a cleverly laid trap.

Before he could gather his thoughts to stop her from leaving, Emma turned and descended the stairs. However, at their base, she paused, casting a glance back over her shoulder at George. Her expression was almost conflicted, and in her eyes, there shimmered something curiously akin to longing. It was a look that tugged at his senses.

Then, without another word, she turned away, her figure blending into the shadows of the garden. George stood there, his thoughts a tempest, as he tried to decipher the silent message held in that last, lingering look.

CHAPTER 12

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“How do you feel about the Earl?” Antoinetta asked as she brushed Emma’s hair.

Emma thought for a moment, although she had no need to. “He is a good gentleman, but I can only regard him as a friend.” She saw Antoinetta frown through the mirror.

“You have no romantic inclinations toward him?”

Emma shook her head. “No, I do not. I fear that does not bode well for me if I marry him.” George was the one she thought of night and day. “I do not want to do what my parents ask.”

“And you shan’t, Emma.” Antoinetta gave her an encouraging smile. Her eyes then took on a mischievous gleam. “What about the Duke?”

The question immediately sent a flutter through her. “What about him?” she asked, avoiding Antoinetta’s gaze through the mirror. To occupy herself, she picked up the earrings she’d earlier removed and placed them in the jewelry box in front of her.

“Oh, do not be coy with me!” Antoinetta laughed and nudged her shoulder.

“The Duke is insufferable,” Emma sighed.

“That is not what the servants are saying.” She set down the hairbrush and gathered Emma’s hair to braid.

“What are they saying?” Emma asked a little too quickly, but she sucked in her breath to keep a composed demeanor.

Antoinetta raised a brow. "I thought you are entirely uninterested in the Duke."

"A lady is born curious, Antoinetta. Now, will you tell me what the servants are saying?"

"Only that he is one of the kindest and most generous gentlemen in England." When Emma rolled her eyes, Antoinetta asked. "What? Did you expect the servants to have the same opinion of him as you do?"

"He is out to make my stay unbearable." Emma's mind chose that moment to remind her of the life their conversations had. There had never been a dull moment with George.

"Yes," Antoinetta drew out the word, "and that is why everyone thinks you make a splendid pair."

"Everyone?" Emma felt her eyes widen.

"With the exception of your parents, of course." Antoinette finished braiding Emma's hair and retrieved her robe.

Emma sighed and rose. The day had been most eventful, but she was ready to forget her parents' demands at this moment. She had just settled into the soft embrace of her bed when the door to her bedchamber burst open with a force that made her heart jump. No gentle knock preceded the intrusion; it was her father, his face contorted in anger, who stormed in.

"You think you have a right to close your eyes and slumber in peace when I stay awake worrying about your prospects, girl?" Her father's voice boomed through the room, thick with fury.

Her mother, appearing at the doorway behind him, looked nervous and beleaguered. She wrung her hands as she spoke, her voice a stark contrast to her husband's thunderous tones. "You had the Earl for a good part of the evening, Emma. Why did you give him up to Miss Clorette?"

Tristan, her brother, followed suit, his own expression sour. "She left the Earl to flirt with that confounded Duke whose only motive is to ruin our family name, I'm certain," he accused sharply.

Emma understood then; it was never about her happiness or her reputation. To her father and brother, these were mere shadows compared to the looming specter of the 'family name' and how it might be perceived. She felt a bitter taste rise in her mouth as she contemplated their words.

"I did no such thing, Father," Emma defended herself, her voice steady despite the growing turmoil within her.

"Are you calling me blind now?" His voice rose even louder. "Did I not see you with him the entire evening?" he added, his eyes narrowing.

"It was the second half of the evening, Tristan dear," her mother, Caroline, interjected tentatively, attempting to soften the accusation with a gentle correction.

"Hush it, woman!" The Baron rounded on his wife, who flinched and shrank back in palpable fear, her eyes darting nervously between her husband and daughter.

"Now listen here, girl," his ire redirected back toward Emma, his tone sharp as a whip.

"The Marquess of Neads is running out of patience. And I am about this close to giving up on you too," he declared, pinching his thumb and index fingers together for

emphasis, his eyes narrowing to slits.

Emma swallowed convulsively, her anxiety morphing rapidly into fear. She felt her face pale, her expression likely mirroring her mother's—a blend of dread and resignation.

“As a matter of fact, his last missive stated his desire to meet you,” her father continued, his voice taking on a smug tone as he turned back to his wife with an expectant stretch of his hand.

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Caroline, with a trembling hand, placed a letter in his palm. He, in turn, handed it to Emma with a flourish that belied the gravity of the situation.

Uncertain and dreading what she might find, Emma opened the letter, her fingers trembling slightly. The words within confirmed her worst fears. It was the letter from the Marquess of Neads, filled with demands and expectations that made her skin crawl.

‘I need a healthy heir for my estates, Dewsbury. And I shan’t settle for anything less than a fine and healthy wife of promising child-bearing age and capacity. I hope to examine your daughter as soon as you return to London. I trust you will keep your promise and the end of our arrangement,’ the letter read, each word slicing through her like a knife.

Emma’s stomach churned with revulsion at the Marquess’s cold, calculating words. They reduced her to an object, a means to an end—mere livestock to be assessed for breeding. This realization cemented the harsh truth of her circumstances: in the eyes of men like her father and the Marquess of Neads, she was nothing more than a brood mare, her personal feelings and desires utterly inconsequential.

“There you have it, girl,” her father declared with a smug smirk, clearly untroubled by the visible apprehension etched across Emma’s face. “Either way, I am marrying you off before the end of the season. At whatever cost,” he added emphatically, waving the letter he’d snatched back in front of her as if to underscore his resolve.

His words hung in the air, more menacing than ever before.

Her mother wore a rueful, helpless expression, her eyes filled with sorrow as she cast a final, lingering look at Emma before reluctantly following her husband out of the room.

Once alone, Emma slumped onto her bed covers, the weight of her situation pressing down upon her. As the door clicked shut, sealing her fate, the tears she had been fighting to hold back finally broke free, streaming down her cheeks in silent, sorrowful trails.

She must do something, she thought desperately. Her life under her parents' command was unbearable enough; the prospect of spending her future as the Marquess of Neads' broodmare was an unimaginable hell. She could not—would not—submit to such a fate.

The next morning, Emma awoke with a surprising surge of resolve. Fortified by this newfound determination, she decided to take matters into her own hands and seek out Alexander directly, hoping he might offer an alternative or aid in her plight.

She inquired with the butler, only to be informed that Alexander was out attending to estate business. Disappointed but not deterred, Emma resolved to try again later in the day. Surely, he would be back by late afternoon to prepare for dinner.

Giving up was not an option—not now, not with so much at stake. With a resolute breath, Emma rose and made her way to the drawing room where Lady Amberton was hosting a late morning embroidery session for the ladies. Emma thought that she could use the distraction at this moment.

She heard voices echoing down the hallway just before she caught sight of Seymore rounding the corner, deeply engaged in conversation with two other gentlemen. Emma felt her heart skip a beat, though she couldn't quite discern if it was from anticipation or apprehension. Seymore's company was the last thing she sought—or

so she tried to convince herself. A dissenting voice in her head argued otherwise, but Emma promptly ignored it as she quickly altered her course, hoping he hadn't spotted her.

Instead of heading to the drawing room as originally planned, she veered off toward the conservatory, seeking refuge among the lush foliage. Settling herself on a secluded bench in the deepest part of the verdant space, she intended to hide away just long enough to ensure Seymore was well out of sight and it was safe to venture back without risking another encounter.

As she exhaled a breath she hadn't realized she was holding, Emma found solace in the tranquility of her surroundings. Nature always brought her peace, she mused, allowing the rustle of the leaves and the soft hum of the garden to calm her nerves.

Just as she began to relish the solitude and the gentle embrace of the conservatory's peaceful atmosphere, a shadow abruptly cast itself beside her. Emma looked up, her tranquility shattered, and a frustrated groan escaped her lips.

"You sound like you have just seen the angel of death," Seymore laughed, his tone light and teasing despite the sharpness of her gaze.

"The angel of death would have more courtesy," she shot back promptly, her words holding cool irony.

"You are never full of kind words, Miss Lovell," he remarked, giving an exaggerated grimace as if wounded by her sharp tongue.

"If you are looking for kindness, I would advise you seek it elsewhere, Your Grace," Emma replied flatly, her voice devoid of warmth.

"Of course," he agreed with a nod, his smile unfazed. "I forget that you do not have a

kind bone in you,” he added, his remark holding a playful yet pointed barb that hovered between jest and judgment.

“I do not run a charity for privileged Dukes who do not know how to mind their own business and keep to themselves,” Emma retorted sharply, her tone crisp in the quiet of the conservatory.

“Such venom. And so early in the morning too,” Seymore chuckled, seemingly amused by her candor.

“May I join you?” he then asked, with a surprising hint of politeness in his voice.

“No,” Emma responded curtly, leaving no room for misinterpretation.

“When I saw you escape in the hallway, I just had a feeling you’d be this sour,” he said, clicking his tongue in mock disappointment as he observed her with an exaggerated expression of sorrow.

“How impressive. I see your judgment of character is improving,” she drawled sarcastically, her words dripping with disdain.

“Oh, I’ve always been a keen judge of character,” he replied, tugging proudly at his waistcoat as if to emphasize his point. “Besides, I must be observant and remain on my guard now more than ever,” he added, his tone taking on a serious edge.

Emma met his gaze, and in it, she found an unexpected depth. His words seemed to carry more weight than she had anticipated, hinting at something beyond their usual banter. A curious hurt flickered within her at his implication. She stood abruptly, her movement brisk and decisive. This was precisely why she had sought to avoid his company. Being near him brought nothing but turmoil and an unsettling stir of emotions—none of which she could afford to entertain.

“Emma,” he called after her, his voice carrying a note of desperation that halted her in her tracks.

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“Leave me alone, George,” she said firmly, not even pausing to look back at him. And without giving him the opportunity for any further conversation, she continued on her way, her steps determined and swift.

“Never,” she heard him declare softly behind her.

Her steps faltered at his single, emphatic word. But she quickly decided not to read any meaning into it, pushing away the stirrings of emotion it provoked. She needed to keep her focus, to maintain her resolve. He was complicating matters enough as it was, and she did not need any more distractions.

The Earl did not return later that afternoon. In fact, Lady Amberton and Seymore hosted their dinner without him that evening. Whatever estate matters the Earl was attending to, they seemed to be consuming all his time, much to Emma’s chagrin. Nevertheless, she refused to be deterred by his absence.

Back in her bedchamber after dinner, Emma took up her pen and composed a letter to the Earl. She was determined to see the plant nursery, a visit he had all but promised her over breakfast that fateful morning. With careful words, she penned her request, hoping to remind him gently of his earlier commitment.

She sealed the letter and handed it to Antoinetta. “Ensure that it is delivered directly to the Earl.”

“I will. Do not worry. I know his valet quite well.”

As she watched Antoinetta leave with the letter, Emma allowed herself to feel a

flicker of hope that perhaps the next day would bring a change, a small step closer to freeing herself from her father's cruel grasp.

George was on his way to Alexander's study after dinner when he happened upon his friend's valet, who was evidently in search of his master. Alex had been conspicuously absent from dinner, detained by unexpected estate matters that had only just resolved, allowing him to return home. George was keen to catch up with him in his study.

"Is everything all right?" George inquired of the valet, noting the slight agitation in the man's demeanor.

"Oh, it is just a missive I have for him," the valet responded, holding up a small, sealed note.

"I learnt that he's just returned. As a matter of fact, I'm on my way to his study. I'll pass it across to him," George offered. The valet's face brightened immediately, a look of relief washing over him as he handed George the note.

Turning the note absently in his hand, George was caught off guard by a faint but unmistakable scent—it was the perfume that Emma wore. A flutter of recognition stirred in his stomach. The letter bore no identification, but the lingering fragrance was a telling sign of its likely author. Against his better judgement, he broke the seal and opened it.

My Lord,

I write to remind you of a small yet delightful engagement you promised me—the viewing of your nursery. Your extensive collection of extraordinary plants, which you so charmingly boast of, has piqued my curiosity to no end.

Miss Lovell

A wry smile touched his lips as he murmured to himself, “So you think you are clever, eh?” His voice echoed softly down the empty hallway.

With a newfound purpose, he refolded the letter, tucking it securely into his coat pocket. Fate, it seemed, was playing into his hands tonight. With a smug sense of satisfaction, George altered his course, deciding to retire to his bedchamber to ponder this unexpected turn of events, rather than continuing on to Alexander’s study. His plans for the evening had suddenly taken a very intriguing detour.

CHAPTER 13

The following morning, George decided on a late breakfast, timing it so he might coincidentally meet Emma in the dining hall. Alas, she was nowhere to be seen. Had she chosen to forgo her meal? Or perhaps she had already dined? These questions lingered in his mind as he fetched his food from the sideboard.

As if in answer to his silent queries, he looked up just in time to see her through the wide glass windows that overlooked the gardens. She was not alone; to his dismay, she was accompanied by Alexander. George’s fingers tightened reflexively around the serving spatula he held, an acrid taste of jealousy souring his mouth.

How had she managed to persuade Alex to take a walk with her, especially since George had withheld the letter? The thought irked him immensely, as an annoying little voice in his head taunted, she’s a step ahead of you, apparently.

Temptation flared within him to abandon his meal and confront them, to insert himself into whatever conversation they were having. But cooler judgment prevailed, and he decided against it. It would be best to observe from a distance.

Alexander was demonstrating some of the finer points of the garden's botany to Emma, leaning in close to impart a whispered remark. The air around them seemed to sparkle with her laughter, catching the attention of several guests who turned their heads in their direction. From his hidden vantage point, George watched, a tight feeling in his chest as more guests, intrigued by the scene, began to gather at the windows and French doors of the house to watch the pair.

With every laugh that floated across the lawn, a bitter taste rose in George's throat. God help him, but he found himself desiring nothing more than to pull Emma away from Alexander, to have her attention focused solely on himself. He wanted her to look at him and only him. This fierce, possessive thought took him by surprise, unsettling him with its intensity.

And for the life of him, he couldn't fathom why he was so agitated.

With a sudden clarity about the precariousness of his emotions, George turned sharply and made his way back into the house. He recognized he was treading on dangerous territory, and he needed to retreat before he did something he might regret.

"You look like you're on your way to punch someone," a voice abruptly halted him in his tracks.

Jane stood there, a slight smile playing on her lips, amusement in her tone. "Or something," she added, her eyes gleaming with a mix of concern and curiosity.

"Would you like a drink, Aunt Jane?" George asked hastily, grasping at the opportunity to distract himself from the turmoil brewing inside him. It was a simple request, yet one that required no exertion of the physical energy he felt coiling tightly within.

Jane's eyebrow arched, perhaps in surprise.

He found it rather difficult to guess her thoughts at this moment. Perhaps he was too agitated to think clearly. George half expected Jane to admonish him for indulging in spirits quite early in the day, but to his relief, she said instead, "A glass or two wouldn't hurt anyone."

As he handed her a glass in one of the quiet salons, she suddenly remarked, "I see Alex is finally showing Miss Lovell the nursery." George almost groaned out loud—just the topic of conversation he needed least at the moment.

The regret of inviting her for a drink started to seep in.

"She seems quite enamored with the plants..." Jane continued, her voice trailing off a moment before she added with a chuckle, "Or is it the man she's enamored with?" Her gaze on George was as sharp and probing as her words, clearly goading him for a reaction.

"I neither read Miss Lovell's mind nor her feelings, Aunt Jane," George replied dully, striving to keep his composure.

"Yet you spend an awful lot of time in her company," Jane observed. "One would think you'd have a bit more to say than that," she added, her tone dipping into slight disappointment.

"Not as much as Firman, apparently," he snorted, the mention of his friend bringing a defensive edge to his voice. "Perhaps you should be asking him about her feelings

instead,” he suggested tersely.

“Do you think she’s shared them with him?” Jane pressed on, her inquiry sharp. “Do you think she harbors such strong sentiments for Alex in the first place?” Her persistence was starting to grate on him.

“I suppose only time will give you those answers you seek, Aunt Jane,” George said, pinning a smile on his face that didn’t quite reach his eyes. He hoped his dismissive words would be enough to steer her away from further probing into a subject that was becoming increasingly uncomfortable for him.

“I find myself as impatient as the guests, I’m afraid,” Jane sighed after another sip of her drink. The weight of her gaze hinted at a depth of thought behind her seemingly casual remark. “Do you know they’re beginning to place bets on whether or not Alex would court her and make her his Countess?” she added.

George should have known that Jane Amberton was not a woman so easily deterred from a topic ripe with scandal and speculation.

“And what wager have you placed on this?” He couldn’t help the curiosity that crept into his voice, despite how intolerable he found the notion of Alexander marrying Emma.

“Oh, you should know that I am not so impatient and reckless with my wagers, George,” Jane chuckled, her laughter light but carrying an undercurrent of shrewdness. “I bid my time for the outcome I want,” she added, taking a measured sip from her glass as if to punctuate her strategy.

“And pray tell, what is that outcome?” he asked, leaning in slightly, both intrigued and apprehensive about her answer.

A sly smile crept onto Jane's features, and she paused, letting the anticipation build. Just when George began to despair of receiving an answer, she leaned forward, lowering her voice conspiratorially.

"Why, my wish wouldn't be too different from the rest of society's," she murmured, her gaze locked onto his with piercing acuity. "To see Miss Lovell married at last."

A sudden, vivid image of Emma happily married—not to him—flashed in George's mind's eye, startling him with its clarity and the surge of emotion it evoked. He tossed back his drink in an attempt to wash away the unsettling thought and reached for the decanter again. 'Married.' The word echoed in his head, relentless and taunting.

"Slow down on the cups there, Seymore," Jane remarked with a hint of concern, rising from her seat. She approached him and gave his shoulder a gentle pat, her touch light but her expression serious. "I wager things are about to get a bit more interesting around here now," she added, her voice low and filled with a knowing tone that piqued George's curiosity even further.

Before he could probe the meaning behind her cryptic words, Jane turned on her heel and swung the door shut behind her.

A quick knock came on Emma's bedchamber door. But before she could respond, the door was pushed open to reveal her mother, Caroline, standing at the threshold with an air of purpose. Emma's heart sank a little; the soiree was tonight, and no doubt her mother had come to choose her outfit, a task Emma had hoped to manage herself.

Antoinetta, who had been folding some freshly laundered clothes, paused at the sight of Caroline. She gave a perfunctory curtsy and quickly excused herself from the room, leaving mother and daughter alone.

“I trust you are well prepared for tonight?” Caroline’s voice broke the brief silence, her tone carrying an undercurrent of urgency.

“It is just another house party event, Mother,” Emma replied, trying to keep her voice light despite knowing exactly where this conversation was headed.

“It is not simply another event, Emma,” Caroline’s voice sharpened, her eyes searching Emma’s face for signs of understanding. “It is one of your only, and last opportunities with the Earl,” she continued, her words heavy with desperation.

Emma observed her mother more closely and noticed how tired she looked. The shadows under Caroline’s eyes were dark and pronounced, adding years to her face and betraying the strain she was under. Emma knew much of it was due to the constant worries about Tristan’s future and behavior, which never seemed to leave her mother’s mind.

“You must make use of the night properly. Find the perfect moment with the Earl. No matter what,” Caroline pressed, her hands clasped tightly in front of her as if holding onto the last vestiges of hope.

“I shall try, Mother,” Emma sighed.

“No. You must!” Caroline’s voice escalated nearly to a yell, piercing the usual calm of Emma’s chamber.

Emma flinched, startled by her mother’s sudden vehemence. Caroline, realizing perhaps that her outburst was too much, glanced around the room almost in caution. She then lowered her voice to a near whisper, leaning closer to Emma as she spoke. “Don’t you realize that this isn’t about you alone anymore, Emma?”

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“I beg your pardon?” Emma’s voice cracked, disbelief and hurt intermingling in her response.

“Your father would have both our heads if things do not work out,” Caroline confided, her eyes darting nervously as if the walls themselves might be listening.

It would seem that she was merely trying to save her own neck from the noose, Emma thought bitterly. The realization stung, the disillusionment with her mother deepening.

“Either way, things would work out for him, don’t you think, Mother? Since he intends to sell me to Neads if I fail to secure a match here,” Emma retorted with a scornful scoff, her voice thick with contempt.

“Sell you?” Caroline repeated, taken aback. Her face contorted as though Emma had physically struck her, her eyes widening in shock.

Emma found that she felt no remorse for her harsh choice of words. She stood firm, her resolve hardening against the hurt reflected in her mother’s eyes.

“We only want your future secured,” her mother finally said, her voice a mix of plea and defense.

“No. You want to save yourself from Father’s ire,” Emma accused sharply, her voice steady despite the turmoil swirling within her.

“Emma!” Caroline exclaimed, visibly stricken by the accusation, her hands reaching

out as if to bridge the widening gap between them with a touch.

“The truth always burns, mother,” Emma carried on, her voice quavering as she struggled with her own rising emotions.

“And Father only wants his title and coffers polished by a rich and influential son-in-law since he cannot possibly give himself anything more than the Baronetcy he was unfortunately born into,” Emma added, defiance and resignation in her voice. Now that she had begun this line of conversation, she felt compelled to lay all her feelings bare—it was high time, anyway.

“Is this how you feel?” Caroline’s voice wavered, her eyes shimmering with the onset of tears, a sign of her own inner conflict breaking through.

“It is not about how I feel. But about the reality. The truth, Mother,” Emma responded firmly, her gaze steady and unflinching as she confronted the painful honesty of their situation.

Her mother grew pensive, the corners of her mouth twitching slightly as if she were grappling with words too painful to utter. After a moment of heavy silence, she finally spoke. “I—I am sorry you feel this way, Emma,” she said, her voice a whisper of its usual self.

“No, you’re not,” Emma retorted quickly, her tone sharpening with her words. “Because if you were, you’d stand up to your husband’s tyranny and stop him from treating us both like his chattel,” she added, her words slicing through the tense air between them.

“You’re being overly judgmental, Emma,” Caroline countered, her voice rising slightly in defense.

“Perhaps because my future, my entire life is at stake here, Mother,” Emma fought to keep her voice level, but the tremor of desperation was palpable. She was battling not just for her future but for her very sense of self.

“Tonight is an opportunity you should not misuse, Emma,” her mother continued, brushing past the emotional pleas as if they were mere whispers in the wind. “I must tell you that Neads is not a certainty. The Marquess may be desperate for an heir, but he is just as unpredictable. If you lose your chances here, and your father, God forbid, loses the agreement with the Marquess too, there is no telling what he would do to us both. I hate to think of it,” she swallowed convulsively, her fear evident.

“Take my advice, Emma. Do what you must,” she finished, her voice a blend of resignation and urging, before turning on her heels and leaving Emma alone with her swirling thoughts and a heavy heart.

Emma now dreaded the soirée.

Later that evening, Emma paused by the ballroom door, her heart heavy with dread. Her stomach churned uncomfortably. The anxiety gripping her was like a mocking voice in her mind. She felt sick at the prospect of what the night might bring.

Just as she gathered herself to step into the fray, someone suddenly took hold of her arm, causing her to nearly jump out of her skin. With her father on the prowl, ready to march her straight into Alexander’s arms, her nerves were taut, stretched thin by the weight of expectation.

She breathed a sigh of relief, however, when she turned to see Olivia, who was grinning despite the tight grip she had on Emma’s arm. “You look nervous, dear,” Olivia observed, her spirits faltering a bit as concern creased her brow.

“Oh no, I am quite all right,” Emma responded, mustering a smile to mask her

discomfort. She let Olivia lead her into the ballroom, trying to steady her beating heart.

As they entered, Emma's anxious gaze inadvertently wandered across the room and locked onto George. He found her gaze as well, and held it intently. There was a question in his eyes, a silent inquiry that spoke volumes, and Emma knew precisely what he was asking. Tonight, of all nights, she couldn't afford any distractions. She couldn't allow him to interfere with the plans laid out for her. With a firm resolve, she returned his gaze, imbuing her own with a clear warning.

Yet, warning or not, George refused to heed it. He began to make his way toward her, his determination clear in every step. Emma felt her heart begin to race, panic setting in as she frantically scanned the room for an escape route. Her eyes caught sight of her father then, his glare sharp and commanding.

Good lord, she thought in alarm, as George was rapidly closing the distance between them. Desperate to avoid a confrontation, she made to withdraw her arm from Olivia's grip to make quickly leave the ballroom, but just then, a man's voice called out, "Emma."

CHAPTER 14

"Yes?" Emma answered and turned. Before her stood Firman, his hand outstretched with a bright smile gracing his features.

"May I have your first dance, Miss Lovell?" he asked, his tone hopeful.

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Without a second thought, Emma accepted, her heart swelling with relief for the timely excuse to avoid Seymore, and for capturing the very Earl's attention which she so desperately sought. Indeed, fate seemed to smile upon her tonight.

As Alexander led her onto the dance floor for their quadrille, Emma glanced toward her parents. She caught sight of their expressions—there was pride shining in her father's eyes, and a look of relief mixed with anxiety etched across her mother's face. Their approval was palpable, adding a layer of responsibility to her steps.

“You look like a pigeon ready for flight,” Alexander observed lightly as they positioned themselves among the other dancers. His voice held concern. “Is everything all right?” He eyed her curiously, his brow furrowed in worry.

Emma realized she must be doing a horrible job of concealing her emotions. “The warmth in the air must be getting to me, I'm afraid,” she replied, offering him a reassuring smile that she hoped looked more convincing than it felt.

“Oh, in that case, a dance isn't what you need, but something cool. Perhaps we should—” he began, his suggestion hanging in the air.

Quick to maintain the facade of composure, Emma interjected, “Oh, I think I can countenance a bit of movement just fine. Besides, being stationary for long is only bound to add to one's restlessness,” she added with a slight chuckle, hoping to dispel any further scrutiny.

She had the opportunity now, and she would be foolish to let her nerves hinder her, especially under her father's watchful gaze. Emma could feel his eyes on her,

tracking her every movement as she danced with Firman. The Earl was genuinely one of the kindest people she had met; however, she had to admit to herself, albeit reluctantly, that he did not stir her heart the way Seymore did. This realization surprised her, and she inwardly scolded herself to appreciate the Earl's attention. After all, her parents seemed quite pleased with the pairing.

No sooner had her dance with Firman concluded than George approached swiftly and requested the next dance—a waltz. “Are you certain you do not need that lemonade first, Emma?” Alexander asked with a hint of concern as he handed her over to George.

Emma reassured him with a smile, “I’m quite all right, thank you.”

“He’s feeding you lemons now?” George quipped, a playful note of amusement in his voice, along with something she couldn’t quite place—was it jealousy?

“Lemonade,” she corrected him lightly.

“Same,” he shrugged nonchalantly as he took her hand and led her toward the dance floor.

“Well, I certainly do not see any lemonade trees on the grounds,” Emma remarked, her tone teasing as they began to waltz.

“Oh, even Firman does not possess such skill,” George chuckled.

“Yet,” Emma returned impishly.

“You have quite the confidence in him, it would seem,” George quirked a brow, the air around him tensing noticeably. Emma found herself puzzled, unable to decipher the undercurrents swirling in his tone.

“Oh, he has such passion for his field, it’s admirable,” Emma responded warmly, her thoughts drifting back to her recent encounter with Firman in the gardens.

She had come across him the morning after she had sent him the note, where he’d mentioned that he owed her a tour of his plants. As he hadn’t responded to her note, and made no mention of it, Emma had been left to wonder if he had received her correspondence at all. The Earl had seemed entirely oblivious to her letter—or perhaps he had chosen not to acknowledge it, though that seemed unlikely. She found the whole situation rather curious.

Nevertheless, it ultimately did not matter. She had achieved what she wanted in the end.

“Indeed,” George replied tersely, snapping her back to the present moment.

“You sound like you do not agree with me. I think Firman’s skills and dedication are rather commendable,” Emma remarked as he skillfully twirled her past a clumsy pair on the dance floor. She noticed the protective way his arm instinctively tightened around her waist, sending a subtle thrill through her.

“I trust your plans for Firman are going quite well without my interference now?” George diverted the conversation, deliberately ignoring her previous comment.

Emma felt her brow rise in surprise at his pointed question. Was this what he deemed a lack of interference? When he’d practically pried her out of Alexander’s arms the moment their quadrille ended? And he’d done it in such a manner that, with the curious eyes of the guests upon them, she had felt compelled to acquiesce. After all, one does not simply turn down a Duke.

“Oh, are you planning a grander way to interfere and trying to deceive me by pretending you’re no longer meddling?” Emma quipped, her tone light yet edged with

a real curiosity.

“You sound like a skeptical and suspicious old woman,” he retorted, a playful smirk tugging at the corners of his mouth.

“And what on earth would I stand to gain by doing that?” he added, genuinely perplexed or perhaps feigning ignorance, she couldn’t quite tell.

“Why, to make me bring my guard down of course,” she responded quickly, her eyes narrowing slightly as she considered his possible motives.

“You do not believe me then,” he observed, his voice lowering, carrying a hint of something deeper, more earnest.

“Oh, you have never known to mind your business, George. My skepticism is not without experience,” Emma chuckled, her laughter sounding more nervous than she intended. Yet, he appeared to find no humor in the moment as he held her gaze with his, penetrating and inscrutable. Emma suddenly felt exposed under his intense scrutiny. But, for some inexplicable reason, she found she liked his invasion of her defenses. She realized, perhaps with a start, that she wanted it.

Something about this man never ceased to draw her in and hold her captive. As he guided her across the dance floor, his movements were so filled with ease and finesse it felt as though they were floating. The ballroom, the whispering guests, the glittering lights—all seemed to fade away. For those moments, it was as if Emma and George existed alone in time. Her heart raced, not just from the dance, but from the thrilling, terrifying, and utterly spellbinding proximity to this man who always managed to unsettle her so completely.

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George's gaze held hers so intently, so unwaveringly, that it seemed to pierce through her. Magical would inadequately describe what Emma felt at this moment, and something within her was changing quickly.

The music slowed, bringing the dance to an end, and she became aware of everything around them once more. She curtsied with as much grace as she could muster, though she felt somewhat dizzy—whether from the spin of the dance or the intensity of the moment, she couldn't quite discern.

“Thank you, Miss Lovell,” George said, his voice a low murmur that seemed to resonate more deeply than usual. He lifted her hand to his lips, placing a kiss on her knuckles. The gesture, though chivalrous, lingered just a moment longer than propriety strictly allowed. Emma thought she might be imagining the added warmth in his touch, given her flustered state, but the thought did little to calm her racing heart.

Nevertheless, as he released her hand, she felt heat flood her cheeks, accompanied by an unfamiliar fluttering sensation in her stomach. What was wrong with her? She should be more composed, more detached. This was George, after all—infuriating, meddlesome George, who never seemed to mind his own business.

Yet, as she stepped back, the warmth from his touch lingering on her skin, Emma couldn't help but question the nature of her feelings. Was it mere irritation that caused her heart to flutter so, or something deeper?

George pressed his cigar against the glass tray, extinguishing it as the library door opened and Jane walked in.

"What has you smiling so, Aunt Jane?" he inquired, raising an eyebrow in mild curiosity.

Jane's smile widened, a mischievous glint in her eyes. "The house party is going better than I anticipated," she replied, sitting on the sofa across from him.

George leaned back in his chair. "How so?" he asked, genuinely intrigued.

Jane's eyes sparkled with delight. "There might be a wedding after the party. I can feel the romance in the air."

George snorted, shaking his head. "You are referring to Alexander and Miss Lovell, I presume."

Jane laughed. "Why do you think Alexander will not marry Miss Lovell?" she asked.

George sighed, knowing he was about to indulge her musings despite his reluctance. "Miss Lovell is not his match," he stated simply.

Jane's amusement deepened. "And why is that, pray tell?"

"Miss Lovell needs someone who matches her in intelligence and humor. Alexander, while undoubtedly intelligent, is very different from her," George explained. "She also requires a firm companion, and Alex is too soft."

Jane leaned forward, her eyes gleaming with interest. "You sound as though you are describing yourself as a match for Miss Lovell."

George stiffened. "That is utterly ridiculous, Aunt Jane," he dismissed her suggestion with a wave of his hand. "I have no such intentions. I cannot be caught."

Jane laughed again, clearly enjoying his discomfort. "Well, my dear George, sometimes the heart sees what the mind refuses to acknowledge."

George huffed, turning his gaze back to the fire. "You and your romantic notions. I assure you, there is nothing more to it."

Jane simply smiled as she rose. "Time will tell, George. Time will tell." She placed a gentle hand on his shoulder as she passed him. "Do rest and, my dear."

George rose from his chair, the need for fresh air and clarity compelling him to pick up his coat. The manor's stifling warmth was no match for the crisp night air, and he ventured out into the gardens, his mind wandering back to that fateful night in the orangery.

He vividly recalled finding Emma there, her hair in a simple braid, her face lovely and seemingly innocent. He gritted his teeth at the memory. She is not innocent. She cannot be. If she were, she would not seek Alexander's attention or throw George into a state of confusion.

Lost in thought, he looked up absently and stopped walking abruptly. There was a figure in the distance, unmistakable even in the moonlight. He quickened his steps, his heart pounding with concern.

"What are you doing out here at this hour?" he asked.

Emma looked over her shoulder, her eyes widening slightly in the soft glow of the moon. "I might ask you the same question," she replied, her tone gentle but curious.

"I asked you first," George countered, his tone more brusque than intended.

She stopped and faced him. "I am unable to sleep," she admitted softly.

He moved closer, standing directly in front of her. “It is dangerous for a lady to be out alone at this hour,” he admonished gently.

Emma smiled. “But you are here now, and you can protect me.”

Her words sent a protective surge through him, and he offered her his arm. “Then you shall remain with me,” he said firmly.

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They walked in silence for a while. The silence between them was comfortable, yet charged with something unspoken between them. After a few moments, Emma broke the silence. “What are we doing, George? One moment we are in agreement, and the next we are arguing as if the earth is too small for us to coexist.”

George couldn’t help but tease her. “Perhaps it is too small for us.”

Emma looked at him, and his breath caught. She was stunning, her features illuminated by the moonlight, and he struggled to resist her pull. She smiled. “If the earth is too small, perhaps we should conquer it together.”

George laughed softly, his tension easing. “That sounds like a plan fraught with peril.”

“Indeed, but we are both rather adept at navigating peril, are we not?”

“Speak for yourself, Miss Lovell,” George retorted. “I am a model of caution and restraint.”

Emma chuckled. “Is that so? I seem to recall a certain gentleman climbing a tree to rescue a kitten years ago. Olivia told me.”

George feigned indignation. “That was a noble act of heroism, I’ll have you know.”

“Of course,” Emma agreed, her eyes dancing with amusement. “And the fact that you fell and landed in a rose bush only added to your valor.”

He laughed, shaking his head. “You are incorrigible, Emma.”

“And you are infuriating, George,” she retorted.

“For now, let us enjoy the peace of the night.”

“I agree that we should,” she said softly. Then she glanced at him, curiosity in her eyes. “But where are you taking me?”

He chuckled. “I am not taking you anywhere,” he said playfully.

Emma glanced over her shoulder, then back at him, a wry smile on her lips. “We are out of the gardens and leaving the manor behind,” she pointed out.

George smiled. “An adventure awaits us beyond the manor,” he teased.

Emma laughed. “Have you always been so adventurous, George?”

No, you bring out that trait in me. George was behaving in ways that contradicted his very nature, and he was not sure whether he would win the battle against his inclination toward Emma. Her pull was too strong—like a forest creature meant to draw him in and keep him there for all time.

“I have always been cautious,” he admitted.

She was quiet for a long moment, her steps slowing slightly. “I am cautious too,” she said softly. “And obedient.”

George wondered if there was a deeper meaning to her words, suspecting there was but unable to guess. He nudged her shoulder playfully. “Obedient? You?”

Emma's eyes sparkled then. "I can be obedient when I choose."

He laughed. "Thank you for correcting yourself—when you choose."

They arrived at a small lake, its surface shimmering under the moonlight. Fireflies danced above the water, their tiny lights creating a magical scene.

Emma smiled, her face enchanted by the sight. "It looks like it is from a storybook," she whispered, awe in her voice.

George nodded, his gaze fixed on her. "It looks like it is from a dream," he said softly.

She turned to him suddenly, her eyes searching his. "Do you dream, George?"

He did not answer, unable to trust anyone to carry his dreams. Instead, he cleared his throat and said, "We should return before it gets too late and too cold."

She frowned, evidently surprised by his sudden distance. He walked her back to the manor. As they reached the servants' entrance, he lingered, holding her hand a moment longer than necessary.

"Good night, George," she said softly, her eyes holding his.

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He lifted her hand to his lips and kissed it gently. “Good night, Emma.” Reluctantly, he let go of her hand, watching as she disappeared inside. His heart ached with a longing he could not name, and he turned away, the night air suddenly colder without her warmth beside him.

An hour later, George paced the length of his room, each step echoing the chaos of his thoughts. Sleep eluded him, his mind stubbornly fixed on Emma. She had infiltrated his thoughts, becoming a constant presence he could neither ignore nor dismiss.

It was now undeniably clear to him: Emma needed to marry, and she needed to marry well—and quickly. Yet she kept the exact reasons shrouded in mystery, a puzzle that gnawed at him with increasing urgency.

He recalled the sight of her dancing with Alexander, how it had left the most unpleasant taste in his mouth. It dawned on him that his distress was not rooted in any particular concern for Alex’s well-being or happiness. No, it was the thought of Emma with any man but himself that he found intolerable. The jealousy was a bitter revelation, its truth inescapable.

George realized he could no longer pretend his interference was merely for his friend’s sake. That facade had crumbled away; he wanted Emma for himself, and this admission struck him with the force of a revelation.

Abruptly, he halted his restless pacing, a decisive moment crystallizing his next steps. Before he fully grasped the implications of his resolve, he found himself exiting his bedchamber, drawn irresistibly toward Emma’s.

As he approached, he noticed her door was curiously ajar. He paused, a flicker of hope igniting within him—perhaps she, too, was awake, caught in her own web of thoughts. He wondered if she found sleep as elusive as he did, if her mind was as tempestuous as his. With both apprehension and anticipation, he moved silently toward the slightly open door, driven by a newfound resolve to confront, perhaps to confess.

Most importantly, however, he no longer wished to hide behind pretenses.

CHAPTER 15

Firman is the one who would secure my future; the one my parents—particularly my father—wants. Emma sighed and ran her hand through her hair. If only George were not so determined to remain a bachelor. If only he were not known to be a rake!

The evening's events had left her in a state of dire confusion. Her head and heart were at war, each pulling her in opposing directions, vying to emerge victorious in her decisions.

A barely audible knock at her door startled her from her reverie, and she turned toward the sound, her heart rate accelerating slightly. Who could it be at this late hour? Taking a deep breath to steady her nerves, she crossed the room and opened the door. Her mother, still dressed in her evening finery and looking very weary, stood in the doorway.

“I was hoping you’d still be awake,” Caroline said as she walked into the room without waiting for an invitation.

“Is something the matter?” Emma asked, her concern deepening as she noted the serious expression on her mother’s face.

“After seeing you with the Earl tonight, I think it is time we take a step further,” Caroline declared without preamble. The firmness in her tone suggested that retreat was not an option.

That familiar sinking feeling overwhelmed Emma once again, and she began to regret opening the door. “Couldn’t this have waited until morning, Mother?” she asked, her voice a mix of weariness and frustration.

“We have waited long enough,” her mother responded sternly. “I already have some information which would help us. The Earl’s daily schedule,” she elaborated, producing a piece of paper.

“Are you stalking the Earl now, Mother?” Emma sighed, the weight of her predicament settling heavily on her shoulders. She wouldn’t be surprised at the lengths her parents would go to ensure her advantageous match.

“I didn’t have to,” Caroline replied coolly. “I got all the information I needed from a footman. A few coins did the trick,” she added, her tone shamelessly pragmatic.

“Even worse,” Emma muttered under her breath, feeling a mixture of dismay and disgust.

“Mind your manners, young lady,” Caroline admonished sharply before continuing, “We need that scandal to happen as soon as possible. I was told that the Earl received a new shipment of plants, and he tends to them in the west wing of the gardens every morning after breakfast.”

Emma felt a wave of nausea at the thought of her mother’s schemes. “Is it not enough to continue getting acquainted with him, Mother? I have his attention now, after all. Surely, we do not need to resort to—” she began, hoping to appeal to some sense of decency.

“Do you think your father will give you more time?” Caroline cut in abruptly. “Or that the house party will last forever?” she added, her words sharp and unyielding.

These were points Emma couldn’t dispute. Her father knew no patience, not anymore. And she had fleetingly forgotten that the house party was indeed coming to an end soon.

Panic lit an unpleasant flame within her at this last realization. She was getting nowhere, and her time was running out—if it had not already.

“The truth is,” Caroline sighed, her expression wearing a mask of resignation that seemed deeper than ever before. “Your father is already negotiating your dowry with the Marquess of Neads,” she announced, her voice low and heavy with inevitability.

“What?” Emma’s voice cracked, the panic within her igniting into a full-blown inferno. Her mind raced, her thoughts a chaotic whirl as she tried to grasp the reality of her situation.

“I tried to reason with him, believe me,” her mother continued, her eyes reflecting a turmoil that matched Emma’s own. “Especially after your dance with the Earl tonight. But he lacks any more faith in you and is determined to conclude things with Neads. I cannot stop him anymore. I cannot buy you any more time after this,” she added, her voice filled with a defeat that was almost palpable.

Emma’s gaze fell to her white knuckles, clenched so tightly around her night rail that they ached. She was gripping it as desperately as she clung to the remnants of her autonomy, feeling each moment slipping through her fingers like sand.

“And you should know that the Marquess is paying for too,” her mother’s words cut through the tense air, each syllable a hammer strike to Emma’s hopes.

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Dear Lord, Emma thought despairingly. Her father was so desperate to secure this match that he was defying custom, allowing the groom to pay for her, rather than her family providing a dowry. It was both humiliating and horrifying.

“He really is selling me,” Emma heard herself say, her voice distant, as if it belonged to someone else—a stranger caught in a dreadful tale.

“The Marquess seems desperate for that heir too, it seems. He’s willing to pay,” Caroline added, her words clinical, detached.

“Now, after getting the Earl’s schedule, I managed to persuade your father for one more chance before he signs the agreement with Neads. This is the last we have, Emma. He will not give another,” she concluded, her tone final, leaving no room for argument.

“What must I do?” Emma finally asked, her voice a whisper of resignation as the weight of her situation pressed down upon her.

“You must go to the west side of the gardens tomorrow after breakfast when the Earl will be there with his plants...” Her mother instructed, her voice firm, as if carving the path Emma was to walk with precision.

Caroline continued to outline the plan, detailing each step with an efficiency that felt chilling. Emma listened, her heart sinking deeper with each word. She was horrified not only by the machinations of the scheme but also by her own passive acceptance of it. She felt as though she had become an observer in her own life, watching as her path was dictated by others.

The following morning, as the sun cast a gentle glow through the curtains, Antoinetta entered Emma's room with a letter in hand. "You look like you didn't get a wink of sleep," her lady's maid observed with concern as Emma accepted the envelope.

"I had a most restful night," Emma replied, her voice barely concealing the fatigue she felt. She unfolded the letter somewhat abstractedly, her fingers trembling slightly as she scanned the words from her friend.

My Dearest Emma,

I hope this letter finds you in good health and high spirits, though I confess I am eager to hear of all the happenings at the house party from which I am so regretfully absent. I trust you are dazzling the guests with your wit, as you always do.

I write to you with thrilling news! Gillingham and I, along with my brothers, are preparing for a grand tour of the continent later this summer. We plan to visit the majestic cities of Paris, Rome, and perhaps even venture as far as the Grecian isles. Gillingham's enthusiasm for the ancient ruins is quite contagious, and I find myself equally excited for the art and the culture we shall experience.

We will be back in England by fall, but I shall call upon you as soon as you return to London, which should be before our departure. How I miss you, dearest Emma! I hope to hear all about your adventures and, perhaps, any romantic escapades that may have transpired in my absence.

Know that you are very much in my thoughts, and I am counting the days until we can sit and share a pot of tea with no cares for the time passing by. Until then, I remain,

Yours always,

Aggie

Aggie's happiness resonated through her words, painting a picture of her fulfilling life. Emma felt a genuine smile touch her lips as she read about her friend's adventures and plans, yet that smile was touched with a shade of envy. Agnes had her husband's love, the support of her family—blessings that seemed so distant and unreachable to Emma. Her friend's life appeared as a farfetched dream from where Emma stood, mired in her own troubles.

She couldn't help but contrast her life with those of her friends. While both Aggie and Frannie were happily married, Emma found herself still struggling to make a suitable match after three unsuccessful seasons. What pained her the most was the way she was being compelled to pursue such a match—through schemes and manipulations that chafed against her very morals.

Tears stung her eyes as she refolded the letter, the paper crinkling under her fingers. With a heavy heart, she placed the letter back in its envelope, deciding not to reply at the moment. Not while her emotions were so raw, her heart so heavy.

"You're lying to me, Emma," Antoinetta's voice cut through the heavy silence of the room, yanking Emma back from the dark tendrils of her thoughts.

"I am positive you did not sleep last night," she added, her eyes piercing as they fixed on Emma, probing for the truth beneath her weary exterior.

"If this were a wager, you'd have lost it, Antoinetta," Emma managed a weary chuckle, trying to deflect with humor.

Her lady's maid, however, did not share in this humor. Her expression remained stern, her concern evident and unyielding.

“Fine. I couldn’t sleep,” Emma confessed, her shoulders slumping as the admission fell from her lips.

“Is it your parents again?” Antoinetta’s voice softened, her usual briskness giving way to worry.

The concern in her eyes nearly sent Emma over the edge, her composure fraying as she fought to keep her tears at bay. Yes, her parents were a constant pressure, a relentless force at her neck. But the turmoil that gnawed at her was rooted deeper than the mere machinations of making a match.

She found herself yearning for something else, something more profound and fulfilling, which she feared she would never have. When she wasn’t even certain of securing the outcomes her parents demanded, how could she dare to hope for something more?

“Father is already negotiating my dowry with the Marquess of Neads,” Emma revealed instead, her voice barely above a whisper.

She couldn’t bring herself to confide in Antoinetta about the internal war raging between her desires and her duties. Not yet.

“Oh dear,” Antoinetta breathed out, her usual stoicism faltering.

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“The Marquess is also desperate enough that he’s agreed to pay for me too,” Emma continued, her voice growing colder with each word.

“If I fail here, Antoinetta, I am going to be sold to him,” she finished dejectedly.

“You are not going to fail,” Antoinetta said, gripping Emma’s hand with a firmness that conveyed not just comfort but conviction.

“I’m afraid I do not have as much faith,” Emma admitted, feeling a lone tear escape and trace a path down her cheek.

“Oh please don’t say that, Emma,” Antoinetta implored, pulling her into a comforting embrace. “Every breath we take is a chance, Emma. And so long as you believe it, nothing is impossible,” she murmured into her hair. “Promise me you will not give up. Promise me that you will go out there before this party ends, and make the most of it,” she added, pulling back to look Emma squarely in the eyes.

Emma wiped away her tears, moved by Antoinetta’s unwavering support. Her lady’s maid was right; every breath was indeed a chance.

And this party wouldn’t last forever. If she did not seize the opportunity now, the regret might shadow her for the rest of her life. She had to try, for her own sake, if not to defy the dire predictions that seemed to loom over her future.

She would set aside her weeping for another day and leave no room for regrets. Emma straightened up, a new resolve hardening within her. “Help me get ready for the day, please,” she asked Antoinetta, her voice steadier than it had been moments

before.

“That’s the spirit,” her lady’s maid beamed, her face alight with approval and pride.

Fortified by this small but significant rally of spirit, Emma descended to the morning room, hoping to find Alexander and perhaps a chance to alter her course. However, upon entry, she found not Alexander but George, sitting alone, nursing a cup of coffee. The room was otherwise empty.

When he looked up and met her gaze, the expression in his eyes startled her—it was cold, almost venomous. For a moment, George seemed like a complete stranger to her. A chill ran through her as she stood there, perplexed and somewhat frightened.

What was wrong? She wondered, her heart sinking further. What had caused such a drastic change in him overnight?

CHAPTER 16

Oh, do not think the worst, Emma!

She must be imagining things, she reasoned. Perhaps the stress of the recent events was making her see shadows where there were none. George’s demeanor was likely no different from any other day; it was her perception that had altered under the weight of her anxieties. Yes, this had to be it!

With a deep breath to steady her nerves, Emma approached him. “A lovely morning is it not, Your Grace?” she greeted, forcing a smile that felt more like a grimace.

“Is it?” he asked in a tone that was clipped and cold. This only served to heighten her worries, confirming that something was certainly amiss.

Without another word, she turned away and made her way to the sideboard. Her movements were mechanical as she abstractedly served herself, her mind swirling with a torrent of thoughts about George's uncharacteristic behavior.

Choosing a seat as far from him as possible, Emma sat down quietly. It was only after a footman served her some orange juice and she glanced down at her plate did she realize what she had absentmindedly gathered from the sideboard—a solitary slice of toast.

They sat in silence, the seconds stretching into what felt like an eternity. Emma bit into her toast, the bread dry and difficult to swallow. She couldn't decide what was choking her more: her meager meal or the palpable tension that filled the room.

Seeking any distraction to ease the discomfort, she reached for the marmalade and began to spread it thickly over the bitten toast. It was then she felt the weight of George's gaze on her. Lifting her eyes, she found him staring at her, his look one of accusation.

Emma was more confused than ever. What could possibly be going through his mind to look at her so? Was it something she had done, or was there something else troubling him?

She didn't know why George was acting this way, or what it was she might have done. Especially after their dance last night, all had seemed well when they'd parted. A part of her wanted to bridge the gap, to take her meal and move closer to him so she could quietly ask what was wrong. But the other part, the more sensible one, reminded her of the pressing matters awaiting her attention, matters far greater than deciphering the moods of George.

Thus, with a sense of resignation, she continued to eat her toast, though each bite seemed more laborious than the last. Quickly finishing her meal, she left the room,

her thoughts already shifting to the tasks ahead. She needed to find Alexander; there were plans to set in motion, plans that couldn't wait for the resolution of whatever storm brewed within George.

"Just the lady I was looking for," a cheerful voice called out in the hallway just then, pulling her from her reverie. Emma turned and saw Olivia approaching, her face alight with excitement. Before Emma could respond, Olivia looped her arm through hers and led her down the hallway.

"Some paintings just arrived. Fancy catching the first glimpse?" Olivia proposed with an enthusiastic tug, not pausing to wait for an answer before pulling Emma along with her.

They made their way to the gallery, where footmen were just finishing up hanging one of the newly arrived pieces. The servants bowed politely and excused themselves as Olivia and Emma approached the new addition to the collection.

"It's magnificent, is it not?" Olivia said, stopping before a dramatic painting of a ship caught in a tempest, the dark swirling clouds and churning sea rendered with breathtaking intensity.

"This is the other one," Olivia pointed to the painting adjacent to the tempestuous sea, drawing Emma's attention to a cheerier scene. It depicted a grand castle standing tall under the bright sun of a summer day, its majesty undeniable, resembling Firman Castle in its regal stature and serene setting.

Emma's gaze, however, drifted back to the painting of the ship caught in the storm. Both artworks struck a chord with her, unsettling her as she compared them to the current turmoil in her life. She felt akin to the ship, battered by relentless waves, yearning for the safety and stability represented by the castle. Yet, as she looked on, the castle seemed more unattainable than ever, a distant dream not meant for someone

like her.

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“I must say, the Earl has quite the keen eye for art,” Emma remarked, admiration creeping into her voice despite her troubled thoughts.

“Alexander?” Olivia snorted, a playful smirk crossing her features. Emma’s brow lifted in surprise. What other Earl could Olivia possibly mean?

“My brother cannot appreciate art to save his life,” Olivia clarified, laughter tinting her words. “George acquired them,” she revealed, her tone shifting to one of fond amusement.

“Oh,” Emma exhaled softly, taken aback. Her eyes returned to the paintings, and a pang of something akin to sadness tugged at her heart, knowing now whose taste had selected these pieces.

“George is the connoisseur here. He always has been, since childhood,” Olivia continued, her voice swelling with the pride of a younger sister. “Our late mama always said he was like a bird who saw color in everything and everyone. He had quite the free spirit, you see. He still does,” she added fondly, her eyes glinting with memories.

Alas, Emma thought, a bittersweet feeling washing over her as she recalled George’s cold, almost venomous gaze earlier that morning. Despite his affinity for seeing color in everything, he seemed to see none in her. How could such a man, who appreciated beauty and depth in art, look at her with such disdain? The contradiction pained her.

How Emma longed not only to alter his view but to transform the entirety of his feelings for her, and perhaps even influence his reputation in society and his sworn

bachelorhood. It was a daunting wish, yet it tugged at her heart with relentless persistence.

“You speak of the Duke as you would an older brother,” Emma observed, hearing the curiosity and wistfulness in her tone.

“Why, there is no difference. I hold him in just as much regard. We all do,” Olivia responded, her voice rich with affection. “George and Alexander are my brothers, and I wouldn’t change them for the world,” she added, her words flowing with a fervor that spoke of deep familial bonds.

Hearing Olivia speak with such warmth, Emma felt a pang of emotion tighten around her chest. The stark contrast between Olivia’s cherished relationships and her own familial struggles was poignant. What had she done, or not done, to be deprived of such love in her life? She thought of Aggie’s letter, recalling how her friend had spoken of her husband and family with equal adoration.

Emma inwardly resigned at that moment. Perhaps love simply was not written in the heavens for her. Olivia suddenly looped her arm through Emma’s.

“What do you say we have some tea brought up here? I am quite reluctant to join Aunt Jane and the ladies in the drawing room.”

Emma mustered a smile. “Is embroidery draining your spirits, dear friend?”

Olivia winced, guiding Emma to a sitting area near the fireplace. “It is not so much the embroidery as it is the company. All the ladies ever talk about is the coming season.”

“I know precisely what you mean,” Emma returned, then added under her breath, “At least, your aunt and brother do not expect you to find a husband this season.”

Olivia walked to the bell near the door and pulled it. As she walked back to Emma, she asked, “Is that what your parents are asking of you, Emma?”

Emma felt her eyes widen. “I did not think you heard that.”

Olivia sat beside her and smiled softly. “I have very sharp ears, and I have noticed that you seem quite distressed as of late.”

Emma dropped her face into her hands and sighed. “Am I this incapable of concealing my feelings?”

“No, dear Emma.” Olivia touched her shoulder. “I am too observant for my own good. George hates it.”

Please, do not mention George.

“He says I might find myself in trouble if I witness something I should not,” Olivia continued, and Emma raised her head, her chest feeling constricted. “Something scandalous.”

The mention of scandal brought to Emma’s mind George’s reputation. She wondered why he was treating her so coldly when he was not better himself. He was a rake, and one who would never protect a woman’s reputation.

Do you know all the facts, Emma?her mind prodded.

“Olivia, forgive my impertinence. I have come to know George to be quite different from what society thinks of him.” Olivia’s shoulders straightened as she listened to Emma. “There is no truth in the scandal he was involved in, is there?”

Olivia was about to answer when a knock came. They looked up to see a footman in

the doorway. He bowed politely. "You called, My Ladies?"

"Please, have some tea and biscuits brought here," Olivia instructed. When they were alone again, she turned to Emma, her expression serious. "Women of the ton are vicious creatures, and they will say and do anything to trap a man with George's wealth and title. Even Alex is not safe."

Olivia's words struck Emma like a blow, and she had to lower her eyes to keep her composure. She still did not know the truth about George's scandal, but this was no longer about him. It was about the fact that she was one of those vicious women of the ton.

"Emma?" She felt Olivia's gentle hand on hers and looked up. "Are you well? Is it your parents?"

Perhaps it was time for Emma to confide in a friend other than Antoinetta. "They have grown weary of my search, and this season will be my third."

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Olivia's eyes widened. "Oh, but you have George and Alex's attention, Emma."

This made Emma wince and she shook her head. "They are not courting me."

"But they could." Olivia took her hand. "You have become dear to me, Emma, and I would so love to have you in our family."

Their tea arrived just then, granting Emma time to consider her answer. Olivia couldn't know that she was after her brother, and the thought of lying made Emma feel very sick.

"Allow me to pour," Emma offered in an attempt to distract herself. She filled the first teacup, then looked up. "Sugar?"

"And milk, please."

Emma added them and handed Olivia the cup before pouring herself a cup. "My parents do not approve of the attention I have." Emma's words were carefully thought out and they were true. Her parents disliked George.

Olivia blinked. She must have been thinking about what manner of parents Emma had. "Whyever do they not? One is a Duke and the other an Earl!"

Emma laughed despite herself. "George has their disapproval because of his 'reputation'."

"Oh, I see." Olivia frowned slightly. "You asked to be certain that he is a good man,

did you not?"

"I can see that he is a good man, Olivia."

She leaned closer and lowered her voice. "Do you know something, Emma?" When Emma inclined her head, Olivia added, "I thought you and Alex would make a lovely pair, but I am beginning to think that you and George might be perfect for each other."

Emma had successfully confided in Olivia without telling any blatant lie. This should have made her feel better but it didn't. "I think so, as well."

Olivia's eyes misted. "This is why you have been so distressed, is it not?"

"It is." Emma sipped her tea, hoping the warmth would revive her. It did not.

Olivia set her cup down and hugged her. "I am sorry, Emma. Please, allow me to help in any manner that I can." She pulled away and looked at her. "Would you like me to speak to your parents, to vouch for George?"

"No, please!" Emma replied quickly. "It would be better if George defends himself."

"He is too proud to," Olivia pointed out with a sigh.

"I know."

Her friend believed an impossible love story here. Whether or not that was a good thing was yet to be determined.

"We should speak of something else," Emma suggested.

"Oh, yes." Olivia picked up her cup again. "Aunt Jane is considering hosting a final

picnic before the party ends. What do you think?"

"That is a splendid idea."

"She is very fond of you, Emma."

"I am very fond of her, as well," Emma confessed with a smile that felt very genuine. "How long have you lived with her?"

"She was married to the late Earl of Amberton for three years before he died. I heard he fell off his horse. Aunt Jane was inconsolable. Father, who was her brother, brought her to live with him, Mother, and Alex. Mother died during my birth, and Aunt Jane decided to raise us instead of remarrying." Olivia smiled wistfully. "She says Lord Amberton is her only love."

This was the sort of love Emma dreamed of. Even though Lady Amberton lost hers, she had true love.

"She seems happy now," Emma observed, reaching for a frosted biscuit. "I suppose you complete her life."

"She tells us that we do. George was very reserved when he came to live with us after his parents' death. He was ten, Alex was eight, and I was two. Aunt Jane drew him out, and then he grew charming and decided to lord over all of us." Olivia animated that with a roll of her eyes, and Emma laughed.

"He became our older brother, and he knows more about the affairs of the Firman earldom than Alex. I would even venture to say that he is both Duke of Seymour and Earl of Firman for how responsible he has been for both realms. Alex would rather be left alone with his plants."

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Emma's chest tightened again. She was learning more about George and coming to respect him while he hated her. What ugly fate!

"Olivia," Emma said softly. "If you continue to speak of George in this manner, I might think you are earnestly attempting to endear him to me."

Olivia smiled. "I do not think I need to do that, but perhaps you need reminding that if you want something, you should aim for it."

Emma returned her smile. "That is very good advice."

"Oh, I am certainly going to miss you, Emma dear!" Olivia suddenly exclaimed, pulling her into a tight embrace that was both comforting and suffocating with its intensity. "I wish this party wouldn't end so we could have more time together," Olivia added, her voice muffled against Emma's shoulder.

"Oh, we will meet in Town once the season commences," Emma reassured her friend, managing a smile as she spoke. Yet, even as she uttered these words of comfort, her heart ached with a sense of impending loss. The party would end, and with it, perhaps, her last chance to change her fate and find a semblance of the love and belonging she witnessed so often around her.

She was unsure whether she would participate in the season. Not if she failed here. Then, her father would have sold her, she thought dejectedly.

"I must say, the best thing that happened to me this house party was meeting you, Emma," Olivia carried on, her voice filled with a warmth that soothed Emma's frayed

nerves.

“Oh, you are too kind,” Emma responded, trying to muster a smile, though her heart was heavy.

“Why, you do not believe me?” There was genuine surprise in Olivia’s face as she pulled away slightly to look at Emma more directly.

“You are one of the most genuine souls I have ever met, Emma. You are a magnificent young lady. Believe it, treasure yourself, and don’t ever forget it,” Olivia added earnestly, her eyes earnest and insistent.

Tears pricked at the back of Emma’s eyes now. She desperately wanted to believe Olivia’s words. She wanted to see in herself what Olivia apparently saw.

“Thank you, Olivia,” Emma managed to say, her voice thick with emotion.

“No. Thankyou,” Olivia responded, giving Emma’s hands a comforting squeeze before releasing them.

After her little tour of the gallery with Olivia, Emma felt the weight of her impending decisions pulling her outside. She decided to go to the gardens, each step heavy with the gravity of what she was about to do. What shemustdo.

She made her way to the west wing as per her mother’s instructions. But instead of proceeding to where her mother had described, Emma took a little detour. She followed a winding cobbled path that led to a small pond surrounded by beautiful flowers. It was peaceful here, a great contrast to the chaos roiling within her.

She sat on a bench by the pond, watching the dragonflies waltz over the silken surface of the water. The tranquility of the scene offered her a moment of respite

from her turmoil.

For the umpteenth time, Emma searched for any other way out of her situation. She didn't want to do this. The Earl did not deserve this from her. He's been too kind, she thought to herself.

It was all too wrong.

Footsteps nearly startled her, and when she turned, her heart both skipped a beat and sank. George was walking toward her.

CHAPTER 17

"Did you follow me?" Emma turned sharply to face George, her heart sinking as she watched him approach, yet unable to suppress the familiar flutter of excitement that his presence always seemed to invoke. She was fast becoming a paradox, affected by him in ways she couldn't fathom, adding yet another layer of complexity to her already tumultuous emotions.

"I didn't need to," George shrugged nonchalantly, his eyes locking onto hers with an intensity that made her uneasy. "I already knew you'd be out here in the gardens looking for Firman," he added. The displeasure and accusation in his gaze and tone were unmistakable and stung her more than she cared to admit.

Emma felt a mix of hurt and confusion at his words and the underlying suspicion they conveyed. "Do you see him here?" she snapped, her irritation rising swiftly. "Or do you see me looking for him?" she challenged, gesturing around the empty garden to emphasize her point.

George met her defensive stance with a skeptical look, his disbelief apparent. The nerve of him to doubt her so openly was infuriating.

Somehow, he seemed more suspicious than ever this morning. Emma couldn't understand what had shifted since their last encounter. What had changed from the night before that had turned his manner so cold by this morning?

"If there's any truth in your claims, then what are you doing out here all by yourself?" he countered, his voice carrying a hint of challenge.

"So, I cannot seek some solitude now?" Emma retorted sharply, her patience thinning. "I wished to be alone," she added firmly, her gaze steady on his, daring him to contradict her need for peace away from the prying eyes and incessant demands of the house party.

"Why?" His gaze was piercing, searching, delving deeper than the surface of her simple need for solitude.

"Did I not just give you my answer?" Emma returned impatiently, frustration edging her tone as she met his probing stare.

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“Why, Emma?” he pressed, his voice low, insistent, and Emma sensed a shift in his questioning. It wasn’t merely about why she sought solitude now, but something more profound, more intrinsic to her very being.

Emma remained silent, unable to articulate the maelstrom of emotions and secrets that lay beneath her composed exterior. She could not reveal the full weight of her burdens, not here, not to him.

Something else flickered across George’s face at her silence—disappointment. Emma saw it clear as day, and it pierced her heart more sharply than she anticipated. The realization that he expected more from her, that he was disappointed in her, was unexpectedly painful.

She rose to her feet, her body tense as she prepared to leave, to escape the intensity of the confrontation.

“You’re being a coward,” he said sharply, his words stopping her in her tracks.

Emma felt her jaw clench, her teeth gritting as if to physically hold back the pain his words elicited. “And you are being especially nosy,” she shot back, her voice cold.

“Emma—” he started, but she was quick to cut him off.

“Is protecting my privacy now cowardliness, George?” She challenged, turning to face him fully, her eyes flashing with a mix of anger and defiance.

“What you’re doing has nothing to do with privacy, and you know it,” he retorted, his

voice firm, accusing.

“What I am doing is no business of yours,” Emma snapped back sharply before she turned on her heels to leave.

“Oh, you can fool anyone, Emma, but you cannot fool me,” he called after her, his voice carrying a mix of frustration and conviction.

Emma quickened her pace, desperate to put distance between them, to escape the scrutiny and the unbearable closeness that threatened to unravel her.

“This has been my business from the start,” he added, his voice following her.

“Because you made it so!” Emma called over her shoulder, her words touched with bitterness. “With no permission of mine, if I might remind you.”

“I do not need permission to do what is right. Unlike someone I know.” He quickly closed the distance between them, and Emma felt his hand encircle her wrist, halting her escape. Reacting instinctively, she yanked her arm free of his grasp, her heart pounding.

“What do you want from me, George?” She asked, her voice shaky yet firm, as she faced him squarely.

“Answers. The truth!” His demeanor was dark and barely readable. She wished he could understand the duress she was under.

“Which have nothing to do with you,” she ground out yet again. I cannot allow him to soften me.

“They have everything to do with me, Emma,” he countered forcefully. His words

hinted at stakes much higher than Emma could decipher in the heat of the moment. Before she could say anything, George touched her cheek, stroking with tenderness that had her leaning closer to him.

Don't do this to me, George. She closed her eyes for a moment—grasping at the remnants of her composure. It would be too easy to fall into his embrace, and perhaps that was what he was counting on to disarm her.

George's voice was very soft when he spoke again. "Emma, I told you from the start that I cannot let you do this." He sounded as though he were pleading with her to understand a point of view she stubbornly refused to see. She knew the game he was playing—one only a rake could play—and she would not fall for it.

"Then don't," she said tersely, blinking and taking a step back. "Don't do anything, George," she added, her frustration boiling over as she gathered her skirts in her hands, preparing to flee from this confrontation that threatened to unravel her composure.

He made a move to follow her, but she didn't give him the chance. She began to run, her footsteps quick and desperate on the soft earth of the garden path.

"You can run after me and cause a scene if you wish," she called out over her shoulder, her voice carrying a challenge she hoped he wouldn't accept.

And to her relief, she saw him stop. As she fled, she threw one last glance over her shoulder and saw him run a frustrated hand through his hair. He stood there, watching her leave, his disappointment in her evident in his intense gaze. It was a look that would haunt her, a silent accusation that she was running not just from him but from the truth he sought—and perhaps from a part of herself as well.

Emma forced down the hurt that welled up inside her, manifesting as a painful lump

in her throat. Her feet carried her aimlessly through the deserted portion of the garden, her mind swirling with the recent confrontation. Almost without realizing it, she found herself at the entrance to a maze. Her steps, driven by a desire to escape, led her deeper into the labyrinth of hedges and pathways.

By the time she recognized her misstep, it was too late. She could not find her way back out. With a resigned sigh, she continued forward, hoping each turn might reveal an exit. Instead, after what felt like an eternity, she arrived not at the edge but at the very center of the maze.

And there, to her surprise, was none other than Alexander, right in the midst of tending to a variety of plants. The sight of him, so engrossed in his botanical pursuits, momentarily distracted her from her own turmoil.

Something churned uncomfortably within Emma as a voice in her head reminded her that this was the chance she had been seeking since the start of the house party. This unexpected encounter was not just fortuitous; it was almost fated.

“Oh, Emma,” Alexander looked up, his expression brightening into a wide smile upon seeing her. “I see you have found my hidden plant laboratory,” he quipped, his tone light and inviting.

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“Indeed, I have,” Emma replied, collecting her scattered nerves. She approached him, returning his smile with one that she hoped masked what had driven her here.

“Cherry saplings,” Alexander explained, his gaze following hers to the delicate seedlings he was tending. “I received them only recently. From the Far East,” he added, a note of pride coloring his voice.

“I see your collection reaches out to even the farthest corners of the world,” Emma remarked, genuinely impressed despite the emotions swirling within her.

“Oh, but where is the adventure if one stays within the confines of their quarters?” Alexander responded with a playful smile. He handed her a pair of garden shears, an invitation clear in his eyes. “Would you like to try pruning the more mature plants with me?”

“Why, I’d be honored,” she accepted, taking the shears with a sense of purpose she hadn’t felt in days.

“These plants seem to have seen more adventure than I have,” Emma found herself chuckling sheepishly as she carefully snipped away at the branches. Or ever will, she added silently in her thoughts, a trace of melancholy shadowing her brief mirth.

“Would you like to travel, Emma?” Firman asked, his question slicing neatly through her reverie.

“More than anything,” Emma responded, hearing the longing in her voice. She had always wondered about what lay beyond the horizon, what mysteries the other side of

the tide might hold.

Alas, that was something also not written for her, she thought miserably, her dream seeming as distant as the lands that nurtured the saplings before her.

“You will. One day. I can feel it,” he said encouragingly, his confidence unwavering as he expertly tended to the plants, snipping away the unwanted parts with precision.

“You have such confidence,” she remarked with a sheepish chuckle, touched by his optimism.

“Because I can feel it,” he replied, giving her a conspiratorial wink. His lightheartedness was infectious, and despite the heavy shadows that clung to her thoughts, Emma laughed.

“I often make accurate predictions, Emma. So you just wait and see,” Alexander added with a twinkle in his eye that suggested he was only half-joking.

“Why, I didn’t realize I was friends with a soothsayer,” Emma responded, making a show of being thoroughly impressed, which drew a hearty laugh from him.

“Indeed, you are,” he agreed, his laughter subsiding into a warm smile.

“But do you know something, Emma?” he suddenly asked, his tone shifting to one of gentle seriousness. “The best adventures lay right at our doorsteps. But we often get caught up looking too far ahead, we miss the best ones right in front of us,” he added, his eyes scanning the garden around them as if to emphasize his point.

Emma contemplated his words for a moment. They resonated with her more deeply than she expected, stirring thoughts of missed opportunities and overlooked joys in her own life.

“I suppose every breath we take is an adventure. If only we spare a moment to truly feel and look,” she agreed, her voice soft, reflecting the introspection his words had prompted.

“Ah, now I see the wisdom Olivia speaks so highly of,” he said, a note of admiration in his voice that caught Emma off guard.

And Emma felt her brow quirk in surprise. “Yes,” he nodded, responding to the unspoken question in her eyes. “Olivia speaks so much of you. My sister is very fond of you, Emma. And with good reason too,” he elaborated, his affirmation sending a wave of warmth through her.

Everyone around her seemed to harbor such faith and confidence in her abilities, if only Emma could muster the same for herself. She suddenly felt a strong desire to live up to these expectations. She didn’t want to let down those who believed in her—not Antoinetta, not Olivia, not Lady Amberton, not Firman, and especially not George.

The thought of George tightened her chest once more as she recalled their recent, strained parting and the evident disappointment in his eyes. Perhaps, she thought ruefully, it was too late to mend things with George.

“Thank you, Alexander,” Emma said, her voice slightly shaky as she fumbled with the garden shears in her hands.

“It is but the truth,” he responded warmly, his smile encouraging.

As she returned his smile, a voice in her head reminded her of the daunting task she was stalling. Emma swallowed hard, her smile faltering as reality seeped back in. She set down the shears and dusted off her hands, her mind racing with her next steps. If she was to create a scandal, as her mother had plotted, she needed a witness.

Perhaps if someone saw her exiting the maze with him? The idea formed fully in her mind, and while it repulsed her, desperation edged her forward.

“I should be on my way now,” she announced, more abruptly than intended.

“So soon?” Alexander’s voice carried a hint of disappointment.

“C—can you show me the way out? I’m afraid I got lost earlier, and that’s how I stumbled in here,” she added, managing a weak smile. At least one of her statements was true, and she clung to that small truth to make herself feel less appalled by the duplicity of her actions.

“Why, of course I can,” Alexander said as he dropped his dirt-covered tools with a clatter.

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“Shall we?” He offered his arm in a gentlemanly gesture, his smile reassuring.

Emma followed him, each step measured and heavy as he led the way out of the labyrinthine maze. With every step, her heart threatened to beat its way out of her chest, her anxiety mounting as they moved closer to the exit.

As they neared the edge of the maze, voices and laughter from outside the hedges reached their ears, signaling the presence of other guests just beyond the green barrier. Emma’s steps faltered, her resolve crumbling under the weight of what she was about to do.

She couldn’t do this, she realized with sudden clarity. It was too immoral, too deceitful. And Alexander—he had been nothing but kind to her. Throughout the house party, they had forged a genuine friendship; she had grown to like and respect him deeply. How could she betray him like this? No matter how desperate her situation, she couldn’t bear the thought of living with such guilt.

And it wasn’t just Alexander she would be betraying if she went through with her parents’ plan. It would be a betrayal of all the friends she had made here, the people who had come to hold her in high esteem and cared for her. Emma had never truly had her parents’ love and respect, but here, amidst these new friends, she had found a sense of worth and acceptance.

She couldn’t—she refused—to betray that. No matter the cost, she would not tarnish these newfound bonds. Emma realized now, more than ever, that some lines simply could not be crossed, not even at the behest of her own parents.

“Is everything all right?” Alexander asked, concern etching his features as he noticed Emma had stopped following him.

“I just realized I left my reticule at the other side,” she lied hastily, feeling a twist of guilt for the deceit. “We have come far enough. I think I can find my way out now once I retrieve it,” she added, hoping her voice sounded more convincing than she felt. With a polite nod, she quickly turned to make her retreat.

In her anxious frenzy to part with him before anyone saw them together and misconstrued their encounter, Emma’s foot caught on the hem of her skirts. Her balance faltered, and she stumbled forward.

Alexander, reacting instinctively to her sudden movement, reached out to catch her. However, he was a little too far away to secure a proper grip, and his attempt only slightly altered their course. They both ended up tumbling to the ground.

He landed atop her.

CHAPTER 18

“What is that sound?” One of the voices they’d heard outside the hedges inquired.

“I think it came from within the maze. Let us see what it is,” another lady suggested, her words carrying a hint of excitement at the prospect of uncovering a mystery.

“Heavens!” Alexander mumbled as he clumsily struggled to get off Emma. “Forgive me.” His movements were awkward and hurried. Panic gripped Emma from every direction, her mind racing with the implications of their accidental pose being discovered.

Just then, she saw another shadow loom over them before a pair of strong hands

grabbed Alexander by the jacket and lifted him effortlessly from her. Emma gasped softly as she sat up, brushing off her skirts, only to meet George's fuming gaze.

His glare was such that it made her heart sink further into the pit of her stomach before turning his attention to Alexander. "We should leave before people find us and misunderstand," he said sternly, his voice low but filled with an urgency that brooked no argument.

Alexander appeared fleetingly perplexed as he glanced between Emma and George. Then, as realization dawned on him, he nodded, a flush of embarrassment coloring his cheeks. "I—I apologize for my clumsiness, Emma. I truly am."

George, without waiting for any further discussion, practically dragged Alexander away by the sleeve. They quickly turned and disappeared back into the maze, leaving Emma alone with her thoughts.

It is I who ought to apologize. She gained her feet, brushing off the remnants of grass and leaves from her dress. She was as relieved as she was miserable. I did what was right, she reassured herself as she hastily patted her hair, trying to regain some semblance of composure.

The ladies they had heard outside the maze appeared at the entrance. Their expressions were a mixture of curiosity and concern as they scanned the scene.

"Oh, Miss Lovell," one of them exclaimed in surprise, her eyes wide as they landed on Emma standing alone, her attire slightly disheveled.

"We heard a sound..." the other lady added, her voice trailing off as she looked around, expecting perhaps to find more than just Emma.

"What sound?" Emma asked, feigning ignorance with as much innocence as she

could muster under the circumstances. Her heart was still pounding, but she held the ladies' gazes steadily.

"You're hearing things now it seems, Agatha," the first lady teased, chuckling softly as she observed no immediate sign of the drama that Agatha had anticipated.

"No, I'm not," Agatha returned defensively, her brows knitting as though she doubted her own assertion as the scene before her seemed entirely benign.

With the ladies' attention diverted into mild bickering and reassured by Emma's composed demeanor, they soon turned to leave, their curiosity unsatisfied. Emma watched them go, her breath easing out in a quiet sigh. She looked down at her frock and noticed a slight tear on the side near her waist. She held her arms closer to her body to conceal it.

Taking advantage of their departure, Emma found her way out of the maze. Once she was within the castle walls, she gathered her skirts and ran up the stairs at the rear. As she swung shut her bedchamber door, the weight of the afternoon's events descended upon her, and she slumped against the door.

Tears burned at the back of her eyes, but she refused to allow them to fall. She gathered herself and mindlessly paced the length of her bedchamber, each step echoing the pounding of her heart.

I did what is right, she told herself repeatedly. I did not wrong Alexander, nor myself, nor George...

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These words did little to assuage the fear that clutched at her heart, the dreadful realization of what her integrity had cost her. In doing the right thing, she had likely sealed her fate, consigning herself to a life with the Marquess of Neads. Worse still, she faced the imminent wrath of her parents, whose ambitions she had thwarted.

Unable to hold back any longer, Emma surrendered in the fight against her tears. They burned a slow, torturous path down her. It was all too much—the weight of her decisions, the crushing expectations, and now, the looming consequences. She covered her face with her hands and clenched her teeth in an effort to control the sobs that shook her.

Emma thought she heard her bedchamber door opening, but she was uncertain, but the gasp that followed told her she had company. Nevertheless, she did not look up.

“Goodness dear, what happened?” Antoinetta exclaimed, rushing toward her. Before Emma could respond, she felt Antoinetta’s arms wrap gently but firmly around her shoulders, guiding her toward the bed.

“There, there,” Antoinetta cooed softly as she sat Emma down and perched next to her. Emma allowed herself to cry Antoinetta’s arms, for it was the only place she had at this moment where she would neither be misunderstood nor scorned.

“Tell me what happened,” Antoinetta encouraged after giving Emma a moment to gather herself.

“I could not do it, Antoinetta. I could not bring myself to betray the Earl in that manner,” Emma confessed, her voice muffled against Antoinetta’s dress.

“I knew you wouldn’t do it. You’re not that sort of person, Emma,” Antoinetta replied.

Her maid’s unwavering faith in her character, despite her current ordeal, brought a small comfort to Emma. Even if the world were against her, she had Antoinetta’s understanding.

“I was in the garden to be alone, and I came upon the Earl,” Emma continued, her voice faltering as she recalled the appalled look George had given her when he’d intervened between her and Alexander. The memory stung, for it seemed to confirm her worst fears about how he perceived her. She couldn’t fathom why his disapproval hurt more acutely than the prospect of failing to secure a decent match. “He saw me with the Earl, and he is disappointed now.”

“Who?” Antoinetta inquired, her brows furrowed.

“The Duke. Seymore,” Emma clarified, realizing she had not given Antoinetta the entire story.

“Oh, I see.” Her features softened, followed by a flicker of something else—perhaps surprise or understanding—that Emma could not quite decipher. “I suppose you hold his opinions in such high regard.” She mumbled, more to herself than to Emma.

“What?” Emma asked, not sure she had heard her correctly.

“I am sure the Duke will understand it was merely a walk in the gardens.”

Emma shook her head, feeling her face tighten. “It was not only that,” she whispered. “I could not trap the Earl, but I tripped over my dress and fell. The Earl fell with me, Antoinetta, and the Duke saw us.”

Antoinetta's face colored. "Oh, my dear Emma."

"No one else saw us, but the disdain on the Duke's face told me that I have lost his good opinion, and what little dignity I came into this house party with," she lamented, her voice thick and her throat tight.

"Never say that. Never allow your parents that triumph over you, Emma," Antoinetta squeezed her hand. "You told me that you couldn't betray a good friend as they'd ordered you to. You did the right thing, and I never saw a more admirable act of selfless sacrifice," she added, her words holding warmth meant to fortify Emma's crumbling spirits.

"It certainly is a sacrifice, for now I am doomed to a life with the Marquess of Neads," Emma said resignedly, her voice hollow, as if the very thought leached the life from her.

"There is hope yet," Antoinetta insisted gently.

Emma simply could not see the light. Not anymore. Not when the house party was concluding. She would return to Town and face the fate that awaited her there. A future as the Marchioness of Neads.

"You have been too quiet since we left the castle," Alexander finally broke their long silence as they walked through the farm fields stretching out from the manor grounds.

George's mind was indeed a storm. He'd harbored suspicions, yet the thought that Emma could actually devise such a plan was something he had refused to accept. He had believed in her, believed she was above such deceit. Alas, it seemed his faith had been misplaced. The realization brought not just disappointment but a deep, stinging hurt. If he was being completely honest with himself, it was more than just the act itself—it was the betrayal of the trust he had placed in her.

“What were you thinking, Alexander, allowing yourself to be alone with Emma in that maze?” George demanded, his words carrying the harshness of the emotions raging within him as he battled to keep his anger at bay.

“Surely you do not think I did that on purpose?” Alexander asked, his eyes widening with incredulity. “She found me in the maze when she got lost, George.”

Alexander’s defense seemed to contain the truth of the unexpected meeting, yet for George, the pieces did not fit neatly. “Lost. Yes,” George replied with a heavy dose of sarcasm, and his friend’s face registered a look akin to having been struck.

“What are you implying?” Alexander bristled, his stance tensing as if bracing for a blow.

“That you should have left the maze the instant she ventured toward you. It is fortunate that I saw you with her in there and not someone else,” George responded, his voice strained. All of this was exhausting him, and he was sure he would not be in this state if it was not Emma he’d seen with Alexander.

“Ah, so it is my fault now that I didn’t foresee her tripping?” Alexander retorted with equal impatience. “Or that I would try to help her and unfortunately fall along with her?” His voice rose very slightly.

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“Is that what happened?” George asked, his skepticism palpable. He recalled a similar encounter with Emma in the conservatory where she had tripped, and he had instinctively reached out to assist her. Was it merely a coincidence? He doubted it.

“You disbelieve me?”

“That is what she probably wants you to believe. That it was all simply an accident.” George stopped and looked about. They had arrived at the thicket that marked the beginning of the old woods where they had spent countless hours as children. George realized he had been walking mindlessly while Alexander had followed him quietly.

“What are you talking about, George?” Alexander’s confusion was now mingled with irritation, his brow furrowed as he appeared to struggle to grasp the implications of George’s accusations.

George paused, mulling over his next words carefully, knowing the weight they carried. Finally, he said, “Have you ever considered that perhaps Emma sees you not as a friend but a suitor, and that she had intended to trap you earlier in that maze?”

Alex now regarded George with an expression that mirrored the way one might look at a stranger. This unexpected shift in demeanor further tore at George’s already strained emotions. He did not need his friend’s shock and disappointment, too. Not now, when his own feelings were so conflicted and raw.

“Do you hear yourself, George?” Alex cried throwing his arms in the air. “A ploy to trap me, you say?”

“To create a scandal and trap you into marriage, yes,” George confirmed. Alex might not understand this because he saw everyone with a generous heart. He believed them to have the purest intentions. George thought that perhaps it was his fault for shielding Alex too much.

“Emma would never do such a thing!” Alex’s defense of Emma immediate and forceful. “Besides, I only see her as a good friend. If you asked me to marry her, I would not, for I have no romantic inclinations toward her,” he added, as if to clarify his stance and perhaps to reassure both George of his intentions.

“If you think her incapable of such, then you clearly do not know her.” George turned and continued walking, again heedless of where he was going. He only knew that he could not remain in one place in his enraged state.

“And you do?” Alex retorted sharply, keeping pace with him.

“I know what you do not,” George responded tersely. “I am not as naively trusting,” he added, his voice carrying a hint of bitterness. This conversation was veering into dangerous territory, threatening the foundations of their longstanding friendship.

“What is wrong with you, George?” Alexander stopped and pulled George by his sleeve, causing him to stumble slightly.

They stood facing each other for what felt like a long moment. George closed his eyes and inhaled. He could not blame Alex. Even George himself could not fully understand what had come over him, why the possibility of Emma’s deceit gnawed so deeply at him, and why it hurt to consider that she might manipulate someone’s affections so coldly. Only that he felt a profound disappointment in her, and it was a feeling so potent that it seemed to cloud his judgment and poison his perceptions.

George let out a curse before shoving a hand through his hair and storming off,

unable to answer Alexander's query.

CHAPTER 19

Emma heaved a sigh as she stared at the dress and jewelry Antoinetta had laid out for her on the bed. She did not want to go down for dinner. Every part of her being screamed to defy her lady's maid's encouragement and remain secluded in her bedchamber. As if fate conspired against her solitude, her door suddenly burst open.

"Why are you not yet ready?"

Emma turned, expecting to see Antoinetta, but instead, her mother stood in the doorway. Caroline was dressed in a bright peach and gold attire that shimmered ostentatiously under the light, her presence as commanding as her attire.

"You must dress at once. Dinner would not wait for you," Caroline added, her tone brooking no argument.

"I wouldn't want it to," Emma sighed again, her voice low and resigned.

"What is that supposed to mean?" her quirked a brow, her displeasure evident in the sharp arch of her expression.

"That I am not going," Emma stated firmly, finally making up her mind. Tonight, she was in no mood to endure the company of anyone, preferring own miserable self. "I'm afraid I do not feel well, Mother," she added, hoping perhaps to soften her refusal with a plea of feeling poorly.

"Listen here, girl. You will go down for dinner even if you have to crawl." Her mother walked into the room and picked up the dress, tossing it at Emma.

“You are starting to sound a lot like your husband, Mother,” Emma observed, catching the dress.

The anger that ignited in the depths of her mother’s eyes was both immediate and intense, a clear indication that her remark had struck a nerve. “Watch your words!” she warned sharply as she whipped around, her gaze scanning the room with evident irritation.

“Where is your lady’s maid?” she demanded, her eyes narrowing as she apparently noticed Antoinetta’s absence for the first time. Just as the words left her mouth, fate intervened; Antoinetta, unaware of the brewing storm, chose that very moment to reappear in the doorway.

“You are becoming careless with your duties, girl,” Caroline turned her wrath toward the poor lady’s maid, who blinked in surprise at the sudden accusation. “Perhaps half a wage would get you to pick up your pace,” she threatened, her voice harsh and unforgiving.

“Mother!” Emma admonished. “You know how diligent Antoinetta is. You cannot threaten her thusly.”

“Why should I not?” Caroline swiveled back to face Emma, her eyes alight with a challenging gleam. “You best cooperate if you want her wages intact then,” she added with a sneer that turned Emma’s stomach.

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She stood aghast, unable to reconcile this vindictive stranger with the mother she once knew. The harshness of her tone, the cruelty of her words—it was as if she was looking at a reflection of her father, not the woman who had raised her.

“Are you using her to intimidate me now, Mother?” Emma asked, her voice strained as she tried to keep her composure under Caroline’s unyielding gaze.

“If that is the only thing that will incite you to find a husband, then yes. I am not merely threatening, Emma. I will cut her wages by half if you do not do what is expected of you.” her mother replied coldly.

“Now get dressed,” she barked as she strode over to the wardrobe. “I change my mind. You are not wearing that dress.” Caroline pulled out a different garment that she deemed more suitable for Emma’s purposes tonight. A pale green silk dress with an embroidered neckline intended to draw attention.

With a heavy heart, Antoinetta helped Emma into the dress her mother had chosen. Throughout the process, Caroline watched like a hawk, issuing commands on what to change and add with every second breath. Her scrutiny was relentless, each directive more critical than the last.

“This is the last night of the house party and your last chance here. You will not catch the eye of any gentleman dressed like a nun,” her mother declared as she adjusted the pearls around Emma’s neck.

Resigned, Emma finally descended the stairs for dinner, her mother following closely behind, ensuring that her daughter adhered to every instruction. As they entered the

drawing room, Emma's heart sank, for the first gaze she met across the crowded room was George's. His eyes were like sharp blades, and if looks could indeed wound, she felt that his could cut her to the core.

Her heart both raced and ached from the intensity of his scorn, and although she had braced herself for his disapproval, the reality of facing it at this very moment was more than she had anticipated. With a heavy sigh, Emma looked away. The evening was already unbearable, and it had only just begun.

Her gaze settled on Firman next. He was deeply engaged in conversation with Colette, but he sent a warm smile in her direction when he saw her. His friendly gesture was a small solace, but Emma knew this was going to be a long evening.

"I'm starving," Olivia declared, appearing beside Emma with her usual bright smile. She looped her arm through Emma's, anchoring her with a familiar comfort.

"So am I," Emma lied, managing to pin a smile on her face to mask her nerves. The last thing she wanted was to invite any probing questions from Olivia, who was always quick to sense any unease in her.

"I hope Francois would make this meal memorable."

"Oh, I am sure he will," Emma responded, playing along with as much enthusiasm as she could muster. She was also careful not to meet George's gaze across the room. However, she was keenly aware of his presence in the room as he leaned against the window and watched everyone, especially her.

"You have such confidence in him, one would think he pays you to put in a good word for him," Olivia laughed.

"Oh, with such elaborate meals every day, I think that is more than payment enough,

don't you think?" Emma quipped back, finding a bit of truth in her own jest.

"I think we might have to get our dresses adjusted a little bit after this house party," Olivia chuckled, patting her stomach in a playful manner.

Emma found herself laughing genuinely for the first time that evening. Olivia's presence was indeed a good distraction, her light-heartedness a balm to the evening's earlier wounds.

Fate, however, seemed determined to test Emma further when a gentleman approached Olivia, requesting the honor of escorting her to dinner. With a smile, Olivia agreed and allowed him to lead her away just as Emma noticed the other guests beginning to pair up for the procession to the dining hall.

Her heart sank further when she observed Alexander offering his arm to Colette. There went another opportunity, slipping away as easily as sand through her fingers. She could almost feel the heat of her parents' disapproval bearing down upon her, their expectations unmet yet again.

She stood awkwardly, hoping for some miracle of a partner, when her gaze drifted across the room to Lady Amberton. She was whispering something to George. His expression that was earlier unreadable immediately turned to stone. Whatever was shared between them concluded with a curt nod from him, and then, to her surprise, he began making his way toward her.

Oh, no! As he approached, there was a marked absence of the usual warmth or charm that occasionally played about his features. Instead, his demeanor was somber, almost lifeless.

"Miss Lovell," he greeted her formally once he had covered the distance between them.

Emma swallowed hard. The cold, distant manner in which he regarded her now made her feel as though she were no more familiar to him than a complete stranger. She curtsied politely, murmuring, “Your Grace.”

“May I escort you to the dining room?” he asked.

Nodding, she took George’s proffered arm, allowing him to lead her away. As they walked toward the dining room, an awkward silence stretched between them, each step feeling overly pronounced, echoing her dread.

In the dining room, he walked her to her seat, and instead of releasing her hand, he lingered and held her gaze for a moment. There was disapproval in his eyes, but there was something else that had her heart racing all over again and her breath catching. George had given her this look many times before.

“You may take your seat,” he whispered, seeming to lean ever closer to her, placing her under his charming enchantment.

“You have to release my hand first,” she murmured. It was as though her words had awakened him from some form of slumber. George straightened and cleared his throat, releasing her hand.

As Emma took her seat, her gaze drifted across the room and met Lady Amberton’s, who, to Emma’s surprise, was grinning at her. There was something curious and unreadable about her expression that left Emma feeling even more disconcerted.

Without another word, George took the seat next to her, his presence overwhelming her senses. Emma tried to focus on her meal but found herself keenly aware of every minute movement he made. It also did not help that he sat so rigidly.

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Across from them, her parents' glares bore into her. Her father's gaze was particularly intense, almost murderous. Each bite she took felt like a chore, and swallowing was an ordeal. Dinner, under such scrutiny and tension, turned into the most uncomfortable experience she had ever endured, while every other guest seemed to be having the best moment of their lives.

Emma glanced at Alexander at the head of the table, and when their gazes met, he raised the glass he was holding toward her before taking a sip. After which, he said, "Miss Lovell, I have it on good authority that Francois took great care in roasting this lamb—exactly as you like it."

Heavens! And I could not even taste it! Emma put on a bright smile, making sure her eyes sparkled. "Has my compliment reached him then, My Lord?"

"Indeed, it has." Alexander beamed. "It is not every day an honored guest recognizes his talent."

"And it is not every day one gets to walk away unscathed from a scandal," George whispered, and she immediately tensed.

Her fingers tightened around her fork, and she didn't dare turn to look at him. "What do you mean by that?"

"Nothing." George smiled and raised his glass. "To Francois, then! For helping us host such a memorable party." Everyone echoed the sentiment and drank, while Emma could barely raise her sherry to her lips.

“I should send him my compliments, as well,” Colette said as though to compete with the attention Emma had.

She felt George lean ever so slightly closer. “What is the matter, darling? Regretting the party has come to an end?”

Oh, he is cruel!

“Is your intention to punish me tonight, Your Grace?” she ground out through clenched teeth while maintaining her smile.

“Did you commit a crime that warrants it?”

Emma had to turn to look at him, and the mask he wore could put a seasoned actor to shame. His smile, although cold to Emma, would appear charming to everyone else. George raised a brow, waiting for her answer.

“No, I did not, and I suggest you examine your perception.” she replied confidently, because it was the truth. His eyes narrowed, however, and she knew nothing she would say would convince him otherwise. Turning, she took a slow sip of her sherry and ate her roasted lamb, trying very hard to taste and appreciate Francois’s work.

“My perception is intact, Miss Lovell.”

“Is that so? Why then can you not see that I would rather eat without conversing with you?”

“Trust me, that sentiment is shared.” He glanced at Lady Amberton. “However, someone is determined to thrust us in each other’s paths.”

“How fateful.”

“I wish it were fate.” There was a bitter edge in his voice that sent a shiver down her spine. Ignoring it, she forced her attention back to her meal. The relief that washed over her when the meal finally concluded was unlike anything she had ever felt.

As the guests began to disperse, moving off into the gardens to celebrate the last night of the house party, Emma felt a desperate need for fresh air and a respite from the oppressive atmosphere of the dining room. She did not wait for George to offer to escort her out to the gardens.

The air around her was filled with merriment as everyone seemed to be enjoying the final night of the house party. Emma found herself scanning the crowd, her eyes inadvertently searching for George despite her resolve not to. I am not looking for him, she silently insisted to herself, though a small, rebellious part of her heart seemed to disagree.

“Emma,” Alexander called, his face lit up with a warm, inviting smile when she turned in his direction. “Would you do me the honor of partnering with me for the country dance?” he asked when he reached her.

“Why, of course.” She took the arm he offered, ensuring her smile was as bright as the lanterns around them.

“Our music comes from the guests tonight,” Alexander noted as he gently led her toward the dance floor. Emma’s gaze followed his pointing finger, and she realized that the orchestra was indeed composed of various guests who had volunteered to play. “They decided to perform. In honor of the final night, you see.”

“How thoughtful of them,” Emma responded with a light chuckle, genuinely pleased by the spirit the guests displayed. It was a small solace, seeing others reveling in the moment, their joy so foreign to a mind such as hers. “You truly have hosted an unforgettable party, Alex.”

“I would not have done it without my family, and a dear friend such as yourself.”

Emma’s chest tightened. They truly had become friends, and she was glad her conscience had led her onto the right path. Despite that, her heart was breaking and the pain was only increasing. As the first strings of the country dance filled the air, Alexander’s expression turned somber, his eyes searching hers with concern. “Is everything all right, Emma?”

“With music, dance, food, and laughter, what could possibly be wrong, Alex?” she replied, forcing another chuckle, hoping her facade was convincing.

Emma released a silent sigh of relief when she saw a smile return to his face, reassured that her performance had allayed his concerns for the moment.

“I thought you looked a little pale.”

“It is a cold evening.”

His smile turned into a grin. “You are correct.” Emma allowed herself to enjoy the dance, and for a moment, she was able to forget her worries. When it ended, she noticed Alexander’s expression grow serious as they left the dance floor.

“Allow me to apologize for my clumsiness earlier,” he said, his tone earnest.

Something within Emma churned at the reminder of their earlier encounter in the maze, but she quickly masked her discomfort with a graceful smile. “Oh, I ought to apologize, as well.”

“There wouldn’t be a need for that,” Alexander quickly dismissed her concern. “We will just keep our clumsiness between us.”

Emma laughed, genuinely this time, the sound bubbling up from somewhere deep within her. It was a welcome release from the tension that had been building inside her. In that moment, there was no skepticism about Alexander’s intentions or his character.

Still, beneath the temporary joy, her heart ached over how George had treated her. How she wished she could undo the misunderstanding, to explain and perhaps mend things between them.

“Indeed, we will,” she agreed to Alexander’s suggestion.

“I suppose I should thank you for the marvelous time here then,” Emma added. “It is

a shame that all good things must end.”

“It will continue in London. I must say it was an honor making your acquaintance and friendship, Emma.” He gave her hand a pat.

“Likewise,” Emma returned warmly. In the end, despite all that had occurred, she still had her new friendships intact. She reminded herself of the sacrifice she had made by defying her parents’ wishes, choosing to protect Alexander from an unwelcome entrapment. He deserved more than to be a pawn in a marriage scheme, and certainly not a partner who would deceive him.

When she felt her emotions rising again, she gently drew her hand away and smiled. “Please excuse me, Alex. There is a matter I must see to.”

“Of course.”

With quick steps, she walked back into the manor, seeking a quiet place where she could regain her composure. She found sanctuary in a dimly lit salon. Closing the door softly behind her, she looked up at the moonlight filtering into the room through the glass doors that led out to a terrace.

Her gaze wandered and settled on a painting hanging prominently above the fireplace. It depicted a tranquil landscape, and she wondered if it was another of George’s acquisitions, a reminder of his presence everywhere she turned.

How did I arrive at this state? she mused, feeling the sting of tears threatening her composure. After what he had witnessed in the maze, perhaps he had every right to treat her with such coldness. Yet, he had no idea of the pressures she faced, the desperate measures she had been driven to consider to survive her family’s demands.

“Have you seen my daughter?”

Emma tensed. Panic washed over her as she recognized her father's voice just outside the salon, likely questioning a footman. "I believe I saw her go down that hallway, My Lord," came the footman's response.

Her heart pounding, she looked around the room frantically for where to hide. Seeing the terrace, she hurried toward it. As she pushed the door open and stepped out, she nearly stumbled to a halt abruptly at the sight before her.

George was seated on a bench on the terrace, his side to her as he puffed his cigar thoughtfully, seemingly lost in his own contemplations. The gardens stretched out before him, bathed in the soft glow of the evening light.

Emma slowly began to retreat, hoping to slip away before he noticed her presence. Just as she was about to fade into the salon, he turned up.

"Out here scheming to trap another poor soul, I see," he said, his voice cutting through the quiet night air. She froze.

CHAPTER 20

You are without mercy, George!

He turned toward Emma, his features half-shadowed by the night, the glow from his cigar casting a flickering light that made his expression even more inscrutable. Realizing that a confrontation was inevitable, Emma steadied herself.

"Should you not be up and fulfilling your protective duties then?" she asked, her voice steady despite the flutter of nerves. She refused to allow him to intimidate her or worsen the guilt already gnawing at her.

He rose slowly, extinguishing the cigar on an ash tray beside him. Standing fully, he

towered over her, the fire in his eyes nearly tangible, reflecting a mix of anger and something else she couldn't quite decipher.

“Would fulfilling my protective duties stop you from further machinations?” He challenged, his voice low and accusing.

He really did think the worst of her, Emma realized with a pang. Yet, she stood her ground, bolstered by the injustice of his accusation.

“There is only one way you can be certain of that,” she retorted, tilting her chin defiantly, refusing to cower under his scrutiny.

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“What were you doing in that maze?” His eyes narrowed, suspicion evident in his intense gaze.

“Haven’t you already drawn up your conclusions in that regard?” Emma countered. Wasn’t his evident scorn proof enough of his judgment?

“Did you truly fall?” He pressed further, ignoring her previous comment.

“I see you already know what happened then,” she responded dryly, her patience thinning. If he had made up his mind about her actions, what use was there in explaining?

“Is that what truly happened, Emma?” George asked, his voice heavy with skepticism.

“I owe you no explanations, George,” Emma replied firmly, feeling a surge of defiance. “Besides, you seem to have already made up your mind about me, and wouldn’t believe whatever I might have to say.”

“You don’t know what’s in my mind,” he argued.

“Do I not?” She quirked a brow. “I hardly think your actions any different from your thoughts, and your comments at dinner have told me a lot.”

“Oh, you are quite the expert now, it seems.” He took several steps closer until he was towering over her.

“Do not condescend to me!” He opened his mouth to say something more, possibly to

defend his stance, but Emma cut him off with a wave of her hand, her emotions getting the better of her. “You have no inkling of what it’s like, George. You do not know what my life is like.” She winced inwardly when she heard the slight tremor in her voice.

Her statement seemed to surprise him, because his expression flickered with confusion and something akin to concern. However, it was very brief before he regained his composure. “Whatever it is, it is no excuse for what you did,” he stated flatly, as if laying down a final verdict.

“What did I do, George?” Emma challenged. He seemed so certain—excessively so.

“Do you truly need a reminder?” he retorted, his tone sharp, his eyes locked intently on hers.

“You seem so certain that I did something. So tell me. I want to know what absurdities that creative imagination of yours has drawn up.”

“I have fair grounds for my absurdities.”

“Only fair?” Emma challenged. “That sounds hardly convincing,” she added with a cluck of her tongue, an insolent gesture that did not go unnoticed by him.

He visibly bristled at her words, the muscles in his jaw working silently as he composed himself. Despite the strain in their interaction, a familiar feeling of triumph washed over her, reminiscent of their past banters. Emma had missed those times—those were memories she feared she’d never relive.

George seemed to have written her off completely. If only he knew, she thought bitterly. When he did not answer her, she pushed. “Have you no explanation?”

“How about the fact that you are a fortune huntress with poisonous social ambitions, scheming to trap unsuspecting gentlemen?” he spat. “Is this less absurd and more convincing to you now?” His eyes burned with an intensity that she had not seen before.

“How dare you?” Emma’s ire surged forth, her voice rising as her control slipped. She felt her hand fly into the air, aiming straight for his face in a moment of unrestrained anger.

But George was quick; he caught her hand mid-air, his grip firm and unyielding. Yet his touch was not harsh. Instead, it held a desperate sort of tension, as if he was grasping at the last thread of civility between them.

Emma watched the rise and fall of George’s chest, noting the close proximity between them that she hadn’t fully realized until now. Her eyes traveled up to meet his, and the intensity she found there shocked her further. Without warning, his lips descended onto hers, claiming them with a fiery urgency that reflected the passion in his gaze.

George pulled her fully into his arms, and she leaned into him. The kiss quickly shifted from fervent to tender, softening into a warmth that melted her resistance, drawing her closer into his embrace. The hand he still held gave a gentle squeeze, anchoring her to the moment, to him.

But the reality of their situation—the accusations, the hurtful words—soon reasserted itself. Emma pulled back sharply, her heart racing, her mind reeling from the unexpected intimacy. She stepped away, putting distance between them as she tried to understand the abrupt turn of events.

He, too, took a step back, his expression a mix of confusion and distress. “What is this?” he asked suddenly, staring at her as if he was in shock. “Was this also a part of

your plan all along? To trap me too if you cannot get to Firman?" The accusation had her flinching as if struck, and Emma took several steps back.

"What?" Her voice was barely recognizable to her ears. She stared at him, disbelief and hurt swirling within her.

They stood there, the air dense and cold, as Emma fought to control her rising anger. "Trapping you, as you claim, would be the last thing I would ever consider, Your Grace," she asserted, her voice steady despite everything breaking inside her. "Because I know you would never do right by me. Or any other, as a matter of fact," she added, her words deliberate and cutting.

George looked visibly stricken by her response. Before he could say anything more, Emma turned on her heels, leaving him standing alone on the terrace. She walked away with her dignity intact, even as her heart ached with a sorrow too deep for tears. The night air felt colder as she stepped back into the solitude of the garden, leaving behind a part of herself with the man who could never understand her struggles or her heart.

"Confounded brush!" George exclaimed in frustration, tossing aside the brush with a flick of his wrist. It clattered across the desk, leaving a trail of green paint in its wake—a hue that matched the unintended smudge now marring the canvas before him.

He knew well that the brush was not at fault. It was merely an innocent bystander caught up in the storm of his emotions.

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Nothing was going right tonight. He had thought that immersing himself in painting after the party would help to calm the tempest within him. Instead, it only served to amplify his agitation.

Glancing at the ornate clock on the mantel in the library, he noted that it was well past midnight. Perhaps he ought to concede defeat and retire for the night, as the rest of the household had undoubtedly done. Yet he knew such an attempt would be futile. Sleep would not come easily, not with his mind in such disarray and his heart in turmoil.

His gaze drifted back to the painting. It was a disaster, mirroring the chaos of his thoughts.

Emma had burrowed deep into his consciousness, her image haunting him relentlessly. At this moment, he could not untangle his feelings—was it anger he felt toward her, or was it a desperate longing that he couldn't quite comprehend?

He replayed their kiss on the terrace in his mind, a moment of unexpected intimacy that had shattered his defenses. Oh, what he wouldn't give to relive that moment, to stretch it out indefinitely. The memory of her lips against his was now a sweet torture, a reminder of what could have been and yet might never be.

“You look like you need a bit of warmth right now,” a voice said, as a hand bearing a steaming teacup suddenly appeared before him. George looked up to see Alexander's concerned face as he offered the cup.

“It's summer. I'm not cold,” George grumbled dismissively, his mood hardly

improved by the offer. “What I need is some liquor,” he added, his voice carrying a tinge of bitterness.

“It’s Vervain. And exactly what you need,” Alexander insisted, pushing the cup closer to him with a firm nod.

Reluctantly, George accepted the cup and took a tentative sip, mainly to humor his friend. To his surprise, he found the herbal tea soothing, its warmth unexpectedly comforting against the chill of his internal turmoil.

“Better?” Alex pulled a chair up next to George’s easel and sat down, watching him with an attentive gaze.

“Not bad,” George shrugged, maintaining his gruff facade. But at Alex’s raised, dissatisfied brow, he conceded, “Fine. It’s good,” he admitted, allowing a rare, small concession.

Alex gave a light chuckle at George’s reluctant admission, but his expression quickly grew somber once again. He leaned forward slightly, his concern palpable. “What is the matter, George?” he asked gently.

“What could possibly be wrong?” George retorted, his tone laced with sarcasm as he took another sip of the tea, avoiding his friend’s probing eyes.

Alex studied him for a long moment, his gaze penetrating. “Is it Emma?” he finally ventured, hitting the mark with unsettling accuracy.

At the mention of her name, George sputtered and choked on his tea, caught off guard.

“Careful there. I didn’t bring you tea to have you choke on it,” Alex said with a slight

smirk, handing him a napkin.

“Your nosiness tonight is certainly trying to choke me,” George grumbled, his frustration evident as he set the tea cup down a bit more forcefully than intended.

“My nosiness is the only way to get you sharing what the matter is,” Alex countered, his tone gentle yet firm, indicative of his concern and determination to unearth the truth.

“So, what happened between you two?” he pressed on, leaning forward slightly, his eyes locked on George’s evasive gaze.

George sighed, having forgotten—or perhaps conveniently ignored—how tenaciously Alex could pursue the truth when he sensed something amiss. “It isn’t Emma. What makes you possibly think that it’s her?” he replied too quickly, his voice carrying a nervous edge that he immediately regretted.

Alex’s response was a measured silence, his gaze unwavering as he studied George, looking for clues in his demeanor. After a moment, he finally spoke, his voice low and steady. “She wasn’t herself the entire evening either.”

George’s mind churned at Alex’s observation. She ought to feel some shame and guilt for her actions if she possessed some decency within her, he thought bitterly. The image of Emma trying to navigate the evening, her usual vivacity dimmed, gnawed at him. The recollection of what he believed she had tried to do in the maze twisted at him once again, fueling a mix of anger and an inexplicable ache.

He still couldn’t fathom why the thought pained him so. And he wondered, perhaps hopelessly, if she felt any pain at all. He supposed not. Why would she? In his eyes, all she wanted was to secure a wealthy match and elevate her position in society, regardless of whom she might hurt in the process.

“You need to slow your steps for a bit, George,” Alex’s concerned voice filtered into his thoughts, breaking through his ruminations. “You’re running to look after everyone around you, and more often than not, you forget to stop and take a look in the mirror. You need just as much attention,” his friend added earnestly.

“Goodness, Alexander. One would think I completely neglect myself,” George snorted, though a part of him acknowledged the truth in Alex’s observation.

“Do you not?” Alex quirked a brow, a slight smile playing at the corners of his mouth, signaling he knew he had made a point.

“You always follow this,” his friend said, touching a finger to his own head. “And often neglect this,” he moved his hand to his chest now. “You need to listen to both, George. They are just as important as all the people you look after,” he finished, his tone serious, imploring George to take his words to heart.

George grew pensive at his friend’s advice. Was he really missing something somewhere? He wondered. Or maybe you’re just refusing to acknowledge it, a voice in his head pointed out, suggesting that his emotional turmoil might be clouding his judgment.

“Think I can get any more of that tea?” George asked abruptly, finding the conversation about his emotional neglect too close to home. The tea was indeed good, and he did need it. But right now, more than anything, he needed to change the subject of conversation. The implications of Alexander’s advice and the introspection it demanded were making him quite uncomfortable.

“I thought you said the tea was merely passable?” Alex challenged impishly.

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“I do not recall myself saying that,” George countered with a light smirk, playing along with Alexander’s teasing.

“What were your words again? ‘Not bad’?” Alexander returned in ostensible thought, his voice dripping with feigned innocence.

“I rather doubt you’d like a tea that’s merely ‘not bad’, George,” he added slyly, a mischievous twinkle in his eye.

Despite the heaviness in his heart, George laughed in spite of himself. Alexander always knew how to lighten the mood, even in the most turbulent times.

The following morning, George found himself standing in the doorway, his arms crossed as he watched Emma and her family prepare to leave. The carriage was outside, horses ready, as they said their goodbyes to Alexander, Olivia, and Jane. Each farewell seemed to pull at something within him, a mixture of relief and regret tangling inside.

His gaze involuntarily followed Emma. He watched as she hugged Olivia warmly, then moved over to Jane. Alexander stepped forward, kissed her knuckles in a gentlemanly fashion, and offered his hand to help her up into the carriage. Just as she was about to step in, she paused and turned back, her gaze sweeping the courtyard before landing unexpectedly on him in the doorway.

He saw her eyes widen slightly, the surprise evident as their gazes locked. The distance between them was filled with unspoken words and unresolved tensions. George held her gaze, rooted to the spot, his heart pounding audibly in his chest. As

she stared back, the air thick with myriad unspoken emotions, he couldn't decipher if the look they exchanged carried threads of hatred or longing, or perhaps a tortured mix of both.

CHAPTER 21

When the butler closed the door behind Emma, a sense of finality settled over her like a heavy cloak. It felt as if she had indeed left a crucial part of herself back at that castle, her thoughts heavy with what might have been.

She glanced around the small foyer of their London townhouse and sighed deeply, the familiar surroundings feeling strangely foreign after the emotional turmoil of the house party. The suffocating journey back had taken an entire day, and while the carriage ride had been quiet and tense, now, at least, she was grateful for a momentary respite from her parents.

As she began to ascend the stairs to her own room, she passed her mother's slightly ajar bedchamber door. The raised voices that sifted into the hallway halted her ascent. It sounded like an argument—a serious one.

Against her better judgment, Emma paused by the door, her curiosity piqued despite herself.

“Are we really going to do this right now, Tristan?” Her mother's weary voice floated through the gap. “We've barely dropped our traveling coats after a long journey,” she added, her tone laced with exhaustion and frustration.

“I do not care!” Her father's voice boomed back, filled with anger and impatience. “Another investment wasted. The money I spent on the journey to this house party... Her new dresses... All of it, wasted! Do you know what lengths I went to secure us an invitation in the first place?” He raged on, his voice growing louder with each word.

The voice of reason in Emma's mind urged her to walk away, to avoid subjecting herself to the painful words that were sure to follow. Yet, her feet remained rooted to the spot, and she continued to listen, unable to tear herself away from the harsh reality unfolding behind the slightly ajar door.

"You promised she would make a match this time. But here we are, right back where we started, Caroline," her father's voice boomed, the disappointment palpable in his tone.

Emma had sensed the brewing storm during the silent, tense carriage ride back to London, and now it was clear that her mother was bearing the brunt of it.

"I'd had hopes, Tristan. I'd tried my best," her mother responded in a small, defeated voice, the sound of it tugging at Emma's heartstrings.

"Well, your hopes and best weren't enough," Tristan retorted harshly. "How do you intend to take responsibility now, woman?" His voice was sharp, cutting through the tense air.

A soft whimper echoed through the room, and then there was silence—a heavy, suffocating silence that seemed to stretch endlessly. Emma found herself holding her breath, her heart pounding in her chest.

"First, you fail to give me a son," her father finally broke the silence, his voice laced with bitterness. "Then you give me a daughter, and now you cannot even marry off that waste of a daughter. What good are you then, woman?" His words were cruel, spoken with a venom that shook Emma to her core.

"I should have had a son, Caroline!" The Baron's voice erupted once more, his anger seemingly boundless.

And her mother gasped in horror at his words, the sound of it piercing the silence like a knife.

“A man of my stature should have had a son!” he continued, his face graying.

Caroline raised her head, her eyes filled with a blend of defiance and despair, and Emma could only wonder what words would follow. “Tristan?—”

“Don’t you dare,” he cut her off sharply, his voice cold and cutting. “Don’t you dare call my name. You have no right. You have lost it. As you have failed as a wife,” he added, his tone venomous, each word laced with accusation and contempt.

The harshness of his voice, the utter lack of compassion, painted a vivid picture of the daily trials Caroline endured. His words were more than just insults; they were verbal lashes, stripping away dignity and self-worth with brutal efficiency.

Emma could bear it no longer. The pain of listening to such relentless cruelty was too much. She turned away from the door, her heart heavy and her spirit shattered by the weight of her father’s scorn not just for her, but for her mother as well.

Instead of retreating to her bedchamber as she had initially intended, Emma decided she needed to escape the oppressive atmosphere of the house. She was still quite weary from the trip, but the need to be as far away from her parents as possible overrode her fatigue.

Descending the stairs back to the foyer, she asked for her coat. As Antoinetta appeared with the garment, concern etched on her face, she asked, “Is all well, Miss?”

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“I desire a walk,” Emma declared, her voice firm yet hollow, reflecting her need for respite.

“Then I shall join you,” her lady’s maid responded immediately, offering not just her assistance but her companionship.

Together, they walked along the cobblestoned streets of London, observing the hustle and bustle of the evening. Horses, carts, and carriages passed by, each engaged in the ceaseless rhythm of city life, delivering people and goods through the winding thoroughfares.

Antoinetta, who had always possessed an uncanny ability to read Emma like a book, did not pose any questions as they walked. She simply kept pace beside her, providing silent support. Her presence was a comforting constant in the whirl of Emma’s world.

Emma appreciated the silence that enveloped them. It was not the oppressive silence of her family home but a soothing, healing quiet that allowed her thoughts to settle and her heart to ache less fiercely. And as they walked, Emma felt a profound gratitude for Antoinetta. Without her quiet strength and unwavering support, Emma doubted she could survive the trials imposed by her own family.

As Emma’s gaze wandered through the dusky London streets, her thoughts meandered just as aimlessly until a particular figure caught her attention. From a distance, his posture and the way he stood—his back turned to them—struck a chord of familiarity in her heart. Her breath hitched with a mixture of hope and a sudden surge of excitement. Could it be him? Could it possibly be George?

Her heart skipped a beat in anticipation as she watched the man turn around. But as his features came into view, her fleetingspark of excitement quickly drained away. It wasn't George. The disappointment was palpable, sinking heavily into her chest.

This jarring moment brought a startling realization: this was the first time she had allowed herself to think of George since their departure from the house party. Until now, she had steadfastly refused to indulge in thoughts of him, too afraid of the pain and longing that might overwhelm her. The memory of their last encounter, the intensity of his gaze as she had climbed into the carriage, haunted her. Had there been real longing in his eyes, or had she merely imagined it in her desperate hope for something more?

With a heavy sigh, Emma and Antoinetta turned a corner, leaving the figure behind. Emma was painfully aware of the turmoil swirling within her—a tangled mess of dashed hopes and unresolved feelings. She felt adrift, unsure of her path forward and how to reconcile the conflict raging inside her.

George stood by the Firman carriage, his silhouette etched against the sprawling estate behind him. The crisp morning air had a bite to it, a sharp contrast to the warmth emanating from the carriage as Olivia, wrapped in her travelling cloak, approached him with a look of concern etching her features.

“Are you quite certain you do not wish to accompany us back to Town, George?” Olivia's voice held a note of worry as he assisted her into the carriage.

“Quite certain,” he replied, shaking his head with a firmness he hoped conveyed more assurance than he felt.

“You lot go on ahead,” George encouraged with a half-smile, trying to ease the palpable tension.

Olivia's eyes lingered on him, filled with unspoken words and a depth of concern that nearly swayed him. However, before she could articulate her thoughts, Jane, already settled within the confines of the carriage, leaned forward. Her expression mirrored Olivia's.

"George, are you entirely sure all is well? You need not be alone. We would gladly prolong our stay, should you require our company," Jane implored, her brows knitted together in sincere concern.

George couldn't help but notice the collective worry shared between the women in his life. "One would think me a mere child, given the excessive concern," he quipped, hoping to dispel the weight of the moment with light-heartedness. Their smiles, though identical and warm, failed to mask their lingering doubts about his well-being.

"I merely wish to savor a bit more of the country's fresh air before I subject myself to the suffocation of London," he added, his tone light yet tinged with an undercurrent of earnestness.

"As you wish, my man," came Alexander's voice, rich and reassuring as he finally appeared. Alexander had been detained, offering last-minute directions to his steward. Stepping briskly toward them, his presence was commanding, and his concern for George was evident in the sharp gaze he now fixed upon him.

"All good, then?" Alexander's question, pointed and filled with unspoken understanding, lingered in the cool air, expecting an honest testament from George.

"All good," George affirmed, his gaze locking with Alexander's in a moment of silent understanding. He then firmly shut the carriage door and stepped back, offering a final wave as the vehicle began its journey down the gravel path.

He lingered there, watching the carriage until it turned a bend and disappeared from

view, the sound of hooves and wheels gradually fading into the morning stillness. With a deep sigh, he turned and made his way back to the grand entrance of the castle.

As he walked, George's hand absentmindedly slipped into his pocket, seeking the familiar shape of his cigar box. Instead, his fingers encountered the unexpected texture of paper. He drew it out, and his brows relaxed as he recognized the letter—Emma's letter, intended for Alexander, yet never delivered by his own hand.

Against the tide of his better judgement, he unfolded the letter once more. Emma's elegant script leapt from the page, each loop and line a testament to her grace, yet now it seemed almost to taunt him. George's grip tightened, the paper crinkling in his clenched fist as a surge of emotion overtook him.

Compelled by a sudden urge, he dashed toward the staircase, his steps resounding through the hall as he ascended two at a time. "Stevens!" he called out forcefully, his voice echoing up the grand stairwell, seeking the immediate attention of his valet.

"Pack my bags. We are returning to Town at once," George declared with a tone of urgency as soon as Stevens appeared.

Within the hour, George was seated in his carriage, the horses galloping briskly as the familiar scenery of the village blurred past the windows. Yet, a particular sight caught his eye, prompting him to rap sharply on the carriage roof. "Halt here, if you please," he instructed the coachman.

He alighted with a swift grace and approached an old man's crafts stall, a spot he had visited once before. The old craftsman looked up, his weathered face breaking into a warm smile. "Ah, Your Grace, you honor me with a second visit," he greeted, his voice rich with cheerful reverence. His eyes darted around, then added, somewhat wistfully, "I do not see the lovely lady though."

“She has returned to her home, I’m afraid,” George responded, the words carrying a hint of his own regret.

And I’m following her, he mused silently, his eyes scanning the array of goods. His gaze settled on the Aztec painting he knew she would adore. As he reached for it, a rush of anticipation surged through him.

“I am certain the lady would love this,” the old man remarked with a knowing smile as George handed over the coins. There was a sly glint in the craftsman’s eyes—a look of mischief mixed with wisdom. A sparkle George couldn’t quite read.

CHAPTER 22

Emma was nestled among the shelves of the library, lost in the pages of a novel, when the butler's discreet cough announced his presence. She instinctively snapped the book shut and straightened her posture on the plush chaise lounge.

"Miss, you have a caller," the butler informed her, his tone formal yet infused with a hint of curiosity.

Was George back in town? The thought sparked an unexpected flutter of anticipation in her chest.

"The Duchess of Preston and the Marchioness of Gillingham await you in the drawing room," he added, pulling her from her brief reverie.

"Oh," Emma murmured, a note of surprise escaping her lips. It was her friends who had come to visit, not George. A peculiar sensation tugged at her heart, one she hesitated to name as disappointment. After all, she was genuinely pleased to see her friends.

Recalling Agnes's recent letter, Emma chided herself for not having responded yet, caught up as she had been in the whirl of events since her return to Town.

She rose gracefully, her gown whispering against the floor as she made her way to the drawing room. Upon entering, she was immediately enveloped in a warm, eager embrace from both Agnes and Frances.

“Oh, how we’ve missed you, dear,” Agnes exclaimed, tightening her hold.

“Why didn’t you tell us you were back in town, Emma?” Frances inquired, her voice a mixture of mock annoyance and genuine affection.

Agnes chimed in, her eyes twinkling with mischief, “I heard the news from My Lady’s maid, in fact. She said she heard it from one of your footmen.”

“I was going to…” Emma began, her words trailing off as she searched for an excuse that wouldn’t come, her cheeks warming under their expectant gazes.

The truth was, Emma wasn’t inclined for any sort of company; her disposition had soured considerably since their return from the countryside. Her parents, ensnared in their own discord, had hardly spoken to her. Her mother, ever the matron of blame, pointed fingers at Emma for every misfortune, while her father, a shadow in their home, seemed to be plotting silently—never one to let grievances lie dormant.

“Emma?” The echo of her name, voiced by her friends, snatched her from the dark spirals of her thoughts.

She blinked, refocusing on the worried expressions of Agnes and Frances. “Something is wrong,” Agnes noted astutely, her brows furrowed in concern.

“Do tell us, dear. Are you all right? What has happened?” Frances pressed, her voice laced with worry.

With a heavy sigh, Emma unfolded the events of the house party, detailing the strained interactions and the mounting tensions within her family. She omitted, however, the stolen kiss with George—a secret too tender to expose to even her closest confidants.

“I’ve never met a more aggravating man. The Duke is intolerable!” she exclaimed, her frustration reaching its peak.

Her friends absorbed her tirade in silence, exchanging knowing looks before their faces softened into identical, mischievous smiles. “Are you falling in love, Emma?” Agnes ventured with a teasing tone.

“What?” Emma gasped, taken aback by the suggestion. Her heart fluttered traitorously, but she quickly quashed the sensation.

“I am not interested in Firman in that manner. He is a very good friend, whom I admire greatly and feel honored to know, but I harbor no deeper sentiments for him,” she declared firmly, hoping her words sounded more convincing to her friends than they did to herself.

“Oh, we do not speak of the Earl, Emma,” Frannie declared, her eyes twinkling with mischief as she leaned closer, a conspiratorial smile playing at her lips.

“We’re talking about the Duke. Seymore,” Agnes clarified with a knowing nod, her tone filled with implication. “It seems to us you are developing quite the affection for him,” she added, her eyes narrowing playfully.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Emma retorted sharply, a flush creeping up her cheeks. The very idea was preposterous. She couldn’t possibly harbor any romantic feelings for George. Such a thing was utterly impossible.

Is it, though? That annoying little voice in her head dared to question. Emma squashed it mercilessly.

“Oh, but love is ridiculous, Emma,” Frannie continued, her voice lilting with amusement. “It robs us of all reason until we surrender to its enchantment. And what

a splendid enchantment it is,” she finished with a dreamy sigh.

Agnes chimed in, her gaze softening, “I believe that ‘ridiculous’ love has indeed cast its spell on you too, dear Emma.”

“I am not in love,” Emma protested again, more forcefully this time, the words sharp in her throat.

Frannie and Aggie shared a glance, a silent communication passing between them before they both looked back at Emma, smiles broadening. “Oh, but we recognize that look, Emma dear. Because we’ve all been there,” Frannie said gently.

“I just told you two that the man is insufferable! What part of the words ‘insufferable’ and ‘intolerable’ do you not understand?” Emma’s voice rose in exasperation, her hands clenching into fists at her sides. Yet, despite her protestations, a seed of doubt took root, leaving her inexplicably unsettled.

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Emma's mind drifted to that moment by the carriage, the silent exchange she had shared with George. She remembered the look in his eyes—intense, perhaps revealing more than he intended. At that moment, she had felt a yearning, a longing for something she was too frightened to even name, a feeling that still haunted her.

Yet, even if there was a sliver of a chance with George, she feared it was already spoiled by her actions. A sharp pang twisted within her, the pain of what might have been.

“Oh, we most definitely understand,” came her friends' voices, tinged with teasing, pulling her abruptly back to the present.

“We understand your...feelingsfor Seymore quite well,” Aggie declared, her voice rich with amusement.

“Or lack of them,” Frannie chimed in, her tone just as playful, an impish grin lighting her features.

“Nothing matters anymore,” Emma sighed deeply, the weight of her arranged future pressing down on her. “I am to wed the Marquess of Neads now,” she added, her voice tinged with bitterness.

“That will not happen,” Agnes asserted firmly, shaking her head with a conviction that startled Emma.

“Do not give me hope, Aggie,” Emma pleaded, the tightness in her chest intensifying with the stirrings of a fragile hope she dared not entertain.

“It is not false hope, Emma,” Frannie interjected softly, her hand reaching out to grasp Emma’s, giving it a squeeze that was both comforting and empowering. “It is belief.”

“So long as you believe, all hope isn’t lost,” Agnes continued, her voice imbued with a fervor that belied her usual composure. “And I will say it again. You are not marrying Neads,” she added with a vehemence that left no room for argument.

“Oh, I do not know where you two, and Antoinetta draw your optimisms from,” Emma sighed, her spirits lifted slightly by their unwavering support yet still clouded by doubt.

And her friends laughed, a sound so hearty and genuine it filled the room with warmth. “At the end of the day, we still have our Emma, and nothing will ever change that,” Agnes declared through her laughter, her eyes sparkling with mirth. Emma couldn’t help but join in, the laughter easing the heaviness in her heart for a moment.

“Don’t ever do that again, Emma,” Frannie’s voice suddenly turned solemn again, her laughter fading as quickly as it had come. Her expression grew serious, eyes locking with Emma’s in earnest concern.

“Do what?” Emma queried, her brow furrowing slightly.

“Keep things from us and shoulder all the burden alone,” Frances clarified, her tone gentle yet firm.

“We are here for you, Emma,” Agnes added earnestly, her gaze as intense as her words.

“That is what friends are for, is it not? To share in the good and bad

times. Especially the bad times. So do not carry it all alone. Let us shoulder your woes with you,” she continued, reaching for Emma’s other hand and squeezing it just as Frannie had done before.

Emma nodded, feeling the sincerity and strength flowing from their hands into hers. She found herself unable to speak, overwhelmed by emotion. Tears pricked at the back of her eyes and clogged her throat, a silent testament to the gratitude and love she felt for her friends. Despite the turmoil that swirled around her, she realized that perhaps all was indeed not lost.

George arrived in London earlier than anticipated. Finding the roads mercifully clear, he had switched to horseback halfway through his journey, eager to cover the distance with more haste. Upon reaching the city, he opted to make himself comfortable in Alexander’s townhouse in the heart of Mayfair, rather than retreat to the quieter, more isolated Seymore manor on the outskirts.

He felt a pressing need for the lively companionship of his family; the boisterous energy they brought with them was a balm he craved in times like these.

Upon arrival, George was hardly surprised to find he had outpaced his family, who traveled with a considerably larger retinue. As he stepped into the elegant foyer, he noted the quiet that pervaded the residence—a stark contrast to what it would soon become.

“Do you know where the Dewsbury residence is?” George inquired of his valet. George’s question, posed insouciantly, betrayed none of the internal questions it masked.

“Oh, most definitely. I know where the Baron lives,” his valet replied eagerly.

George told himself he merely wished to know where Emma lived out of simple

curiosity. Nothing more. It certainly wasn't because he had any intention of seeing her again.

Yet, as he stood there, watching his valet's meticulous movements, George knew he was not being truthful with himself. He did want to see Emma. However, the Emma he desired seemed vastly different from the one who had recently returned to London. In his eyes, she had become like so many others in society—a scheming fortune hunter. He bitterly recalled how she had nearly ensnared his best friend with her wiles, and how it had been his intervention that thwarted her plans.

These thoughts swirled darkly as he considered his next actions, longing and disdain battling within. Stevens handed George the address written on a small piece of paper just as the sounds of arrival echoed from downstairs. Slipping the paper into his pocket, George left his chambers to investigate the commotion.

As he reached the first landing, he was greeted by the sight of his family bustling in. Jane, upon looking up, clutched at her chest dramatically. “Good heavens, am I seeing a ghost?” she exclaimed, her eyes wide with surprise.

“George, you're here!” Olivia cried out, her excitement bubbling over. “How in the world did you get to town?” Alexander added, equally astonished.

“I flew,” George responded with a chuckle, amused by their reactions.

“I don't see any wings,” Olivia teased, her eyes dancing with mischief. “Or a flying carriage outside,” she added, her tone playful.

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“You must look beyond the surface to see it, Olivia dear,” George played along, a smile tugging at his lips.

“Oh, flying carriages, your imagination is too wild, child,” Jane chided her niece gently.

“It doesn’t sound too impossible, auntie,” Olivia replied, her expression growing almost dreamy. “Think of what voyages we could make with our very own flying carriage,” she mused aloud.

“Oh, don’t be ridiculous, dear,” Jane dismissed the idea with a wave of her hand.

“You are too boring, auntie,” Olivia retorted, giving an exaggerated yawn.

“Of course. That is why I host the best parties in England,” Jane returned proudly, her tone one of playful superiority.

“Second only to the Prince Regent’s,” Alexander interjected with a mischievous wink in Olivia’s direction.

“No dinner for you tonight for that statement, Alex,” Jane admonished, her tone mock-stern, drawing echoes of laughter from everyone gathered in the foyer.

“You would starve an Earl, auntie?” Alex clutched at his chest, feigning disbelief and shock.

“Yes, I will,” Jane retorted, her voice laced with playful determination, eliciting

another round of laughter.

George joined in their mirth, feeling a warmth spread through him. This was precisely why he needed his family. Their spirited banter and infectious joy were irreplaceable.

“Had a change of heart then?” Alexander prodded, his eyes twinkling with curiosity.

“And I decided to ride all the way,” George confirmed with a nod.

“I say, we must celebrate this change of heart,” Jane declared, clapping her hands together in excitement. “A dinner party would do perfectly,” she added, her enthusiasm palpable.

“Here we go again,” Alex muttered, earning a playful swat from Jane’s gloves.

“I agree. Hosting dinner sounds marvelous,” Olivia chimed in, bouncing on her feet with equal excitement.

“And we cannot have a party without our favorite guest, of course,” Jane continued, her excitement growing by the second.

“Pray tell, who is this guest of honor?” Alex inquired, his curiosity piqued.

“Why, Miss Lovell, of course,” Jane replied with a triumphant smile.

At that moment, George felt a sudden knot of dread tighten in his stomach. This was something he had not anticipated.

Not Emma. Of all people.

CHAPTER 23

Emma and Agnes had agreed to have tea at Frannie's home that afternoon. It was a perfect opportunity to escape the oppressive atmosphere of her parents' home for a while.

"Why, aren't you the cutest little creature," Emma cooed, cradling Frannie's one-year-old baby, Caspian, in her lap.

"Is he growing more teeth?" she asked excitedly upon noticing two tiny white dots on his lower gums beside the teeth already there.

"Indeed, he is," Frances replied, her voice brimming with maternal pride.

"And trying to eat everything in his path now, I see," Aggie chuckled as the baby grabbed Emma's handkerchief and began to nibble on it.

"You're a hungry little one, aren't you?" Emma tickled the baby, who responded with infectious giggles and babbles.

As the baby's joyous sounds filled the drawing room, Emma felt an inexplicable heaviness settle within her. The realization struck hard and cold: this was a happiness she would never know. She would never have a household filled with such warmth and laughter. The love and pride Frances exuded seemed as unattainable to Emma as the Northern Star. Her heart ached with the bitter truth of it.

Yet, despite the turmoil inside her, Emma's smile remained unwavering. She continued to play with the baby, her laughter joining his, and engaged in light-hearted conversation with her friends.

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She might as well savor these delightful little moments while she could.

“Oh, he’s always eating, believe me,” his mother gave an exaggerated sigh, rolling her eyes in mock exasperation.

“Of course he is. He’s a man, Frannie,” Emma chuckled, glancing at the baby with an amused sparkle in her eye. “That species are legendary for their appetites,” she added, her tone playful.

“BOTH appetites,” Agnes chimed in, winking at Frances, who nodded in agreement.

Emma felt a warm blush spread across her cheeks at the realization of what her married friends alluded to. Memories of George’s kiss, his touch on the balcony, suddenly flashed through her mind, sending a thrilling pulse through her. If she could relive that moment with him again, she would, she admitted to herself with a start.

“When you get married, you’ll understand what we mean, Emma,” her friends teased, their giggles filling the air.

Emma couldn’t help but join in the laughter, despite the gentle teasing at her expense. The baby’s babbles added to the joyous cacophony, as if he too thought the noise a perfect opportunity to contribute to the conversation. They all watched his animated excitement and laughed even more.

“You are going to grow up to be quite the charmer, aren’t you?” Agnes cooed affectionately, dropping a gentle kiss on his tiny nose.

The afternoon tea was indeed rejuvenating. The lively banter and the baby's delightful company provided Emma with a much-needed distraction.

But as with all good things, her time with her friends eventually came to an end, and Emma found herself facing the unwelcome prospect of returning home. She dreaded what awaited her there.

"Quickly now. Hurry, hurry," her mother, Caroline, chided the moment Emma stepped into the foyer. "I was just about to send word for you to return home at once," Caroline added, pulling on Emma's sleeve and hastily ushering her toward the staircase.

"What is going on, mother?" Emma asked, her voice tinged with both confusion and a rising sense of alarm.

"The Marquess of Neads is coming to meet you at last," her mother announced, the words striking Emma like a physical blow.

A wave of nausea threatened as her stomach twisted in dread. "We must get you changed and ready to receive him at once," Caroline insisted, her tone brooking no argument as she practically dragged Emma toward her bedchamber.

This sudden flurry of attention from her mother was both unprecedented and unwanted since their return from London. It was the sort of attention that Emma found oppressive and suffocating, not the loving, nurturing kind she longed for.

Half an hour later, Emma was dressed in a gown that felt like a costume of compliance. She stood stiffly in her father's study, the room feeling smaller by the moment as the Marquess of Neads circled her. The Marquess, a withered old man with a drooping bad eye and even worse breath, examined her as though she were livestock rather than a lady, making her skin crawl under his gaze.

Neads was here not so much to meet her but to inspect her, Emma realized with a sinking heart. He hardly spoke directly to her, directing all his queries and observations to her father instead. When he did address her, it was only to issue commands that made her feel more like an object on display than a person. “Turn around, girl... Raise your chin higher... Let’s have a look at your teeth...” Each command chipped away at her dignity, and Emma fought the urge to retch.

“Yes, yes. Those hips look wide enough to bear my sons,” the Marquess squinted through his one good eye, examining her as though she were a mare at market. Emma’s revulsion deepened, a visceral response to being appraised in such a manner.

The Marquess even went so far as to lean closer and sniff her hair, an act that breached all decorum and personal space. Emma instinctively recoiled, the proximity far too close for comfort and utterly disturbing.

As she pulled back, her gaze darted to her mother, searching for some semblance of support or intervention. Instead, she met Caroline’s eyes, which held a stern warning against any form of protest.

“Not bad... Not bad...” Neads muttered to himself, seemingly oblivious to the discomfort he inflicted. Emma felt a cold dread settle over her.

“How old did you say she was again, Dewsbury?” The Marquess addressed her father, his gaze remaining unsettlingly fixed on Emma.

“One and twenty,” her father replied promptly.

“Still young and fruitful. She would do, Dewsbury,” he concluded, finally turning back to address the Baron directly. The words, so casually uttered, made Emma’s skin crawl, a deep sense of objectification washing over her.

By the time the Marquess departed, Emma was left feeling diminished and dehumanized. Her father, sensing her distress yet seemingly indifferent to it, added insult to injury. He glared at her with a harshness that bordered on cruelty. “You will live a very happy life with the Marquess,” he declared, his tone challenging, almost daring her to contradict him.

Emma had barely stepped out of her father’s study, her emotions a whirl, when she encountered the butler, who promptly announced a visitor.

“Lady Olivia Winger is waiting in the drawing room,” he informed her.

Surprised yet relieved to have a friendly face to see, Emma hurried to the drawing room. Olivia’s presence was a welcome reprieve from the turmoil that had just unfolded. She returned Olivia’s warm hug with equal fervor, grateful for the comfort it offered.

After ordering some tea for them, Emma took her seat opposite her friend. “I trust you had a pleasant journey back?” Olivia inquired, her voice carrying a light, conversational tone.

“Exhausting, but otherwise uneventful,” Emma replied, choosing her words carefully to mask the true nature of her discomfort during the journey with her parents.

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“Oh, the English roads are not the gentlest, I’m afraid,” Olivia chuckled lightly, bringing a brief smile to Emma’s lips. “But every trip is worth it if I get to see you, my dear friend,” Olivia squeezed Emma’s hand reassuringly, her eyes sparkling with genuine affection.

Emma smiled warmly in response, a flush of gratitude coloring her cheeks. “I must confess, I wasn’t expecting you back in town so early.”

“Oh, Aunt Jane couldn’t stay away from the town parties for long,” Olivia winked conspiratorially, her voice lowering to a playful murmur.

“Oh, Lady Amberton is quite the life everywhere she goes, is she not?” Emma laughed, the tension from earlier dissipating slightly in the lightness of their conversation.

“We are privileged to have her,” Olivia responded, her tone laced with fondness and a hint of pride.

“Indeed,” Emma agreed wholeheartedly, recalling her own delightful encounters with the vivacious Lady Amberton.

“As a matter of fact, I came here for two reasons today,” Olivia announced, her expression turning slightly more serious just as their tea arrived. Emma reached out to pour the tea into delicate China cups, the subtle clink of porcelain a comforting background sound.

“We are hosting a small dinner party tomorrow evening, and I came to extend the

special invitation to you,” Olivia revealed, her gaze holding Emma’s. “And your family, of course,” she added, almost as an afterthought.

As Emma absorbed the invitation, her thoughts involuntarily drifted to George. Was he also back in town? The question nagged at her, but she restrained herself from asking Olivia directly, not wanting to appear overly eager or interested.

A part of her recoiled at the idea of attending the party. She wasn’t sure she was ready to face George again. As these thoughts swirled in her mind, Emma realized the true nature of her reluctance. She was scared. Scared of seeing him again, scared of the inexplicable and intense longing that surged within her at the mere thought of their reunion.

“George and Alex are looking forward to hosting too,” Olivia added, her tone encouraging, as if sensing Emma’s hesitation.

So he was also back in town, Emma thought, a flicker of something indescribable passing through her. Alexander would indeed relish the chance to host; he always did. But George? Emma harbored doubts. Not when the last words he’d spoken to her painted her as nothing more than a fortune hunter with poisonous ambitions—a painful reminder that stung anew.

This bitter thought cemented her resolve, and Emma swiftly made up her mind. She would not attend the gathering.

“Why, that sounds lovely,” Emma started, her voice faltering slightly as she searched for the right words to convey her regrets without offending. “But I do not think I can make it, for I already have plans for tomorrow evening,” she lied, hoping her excuse sounded plausible.

“Oh, but Aunt Jane is practically dying to see you again, Emma. She’s hosting

specifically for you,” Olivia implored, her eyes wide with sincerity. “I want you there too. More than anything,” she added, taking Emma’s hand and squeezing it gently, her plea almost palpable.

Faced with such earnest entreaty, Emma felt her resolve waver. “I suppose I’ll just have to cancel those plans then,” she conceded, unable to resist the genuine desire in Olivia’s eyes.

Her friend’s face lit up with joy at her acquiescence. “Excellent,” Olivia exclaimed, sitting up straighter in her chair, her earlier dismay replaced by delighted anticipation as she happily sipped her tea.

Odd anticipation coursed through Emma now that she had accepted the invitation, realizing that this meant she would see George again. Despite the intensity of their last encounter and his harsh words, a part of her, perhaps foolishly, yearned to see him again.

After Olivia had departed, leaving a swirl of excitement in her wake, Emma sought out her mother to share the news of the invitation. Since it had been extended to the entire family, she assumed their collective attendance was expected.

“The whole family is to attend,” she stated, trying to mask her own eagerness with a tone of casual information.

“You are not going,” her mother countered sharply, her words slicing through the room like a cold draft.

“I beg your pardon?” Emma responded, her voice a mixture of surprise and confusion. The room seemed to tilt slightly, her mother’s words upending everything.

“You heard me,” her mother continued, her tone flat and devoid of warmth. “Your

father and I will go alone. Our presence will suffice,” she added, her words final, leaving no room for negotiation.

“But mother—” Emma began, her mind racing for arguments that could sway her mother’s sudden and inexplicable decree.

“You have already been given to the Marquess of Neads, and your engagement will follow soon. You have no reason to make further appearances in society now. Least of all to Firman, and especially not to that DUKE,” her mother interrupted, spitting out the title with a venom that made Emma flinch.

“Surely you do not mean what you say, mother,” Emma implored, her voice tinged with desperation.

“Every word,” Caroline said sternly, her gaze hard and unyielding. “You have no one to blame here but yourself, Emma. If you hadn’t failed at the house party, this would not have occurred,” she finished, her words cutting deeply.

Emma stood, her hopes of mending whatever remained between her and George dashed cruelly by her own flesh and blood. The room seemed colder now, quite like the ice encasing her heart.

“So, are you looking forward to seeing Emma again?” Alex suddenly posed the question to George. It was the evening of Jane’s dinner party, and the two friends had retreated to Alexander’s study for a bit of solitude before their guests arrived.

“What is so special about Miss Lovell?” George attempted to mask his interest, maintaining a tone of indifference as he lit another cigar, offering one to Alex.

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“Oh, everything is special about her,” Alex responded with a knowing smile. “Especially to YOU,” he added, his gaze probing, as if trying to peer into George’s very soul.

George felt a tightness in his chest, a mix of anticipation and dread. What was Alex on to now? He wondered internally. He straightened slightly, adopting a more detached demeanor. “Miss Lovell to me holds the same place as every other woman in society,” he asserted, hoping to deflect further inquiry.

“That is a lie,” Alex stated flatly, cutting through George’s pretense with an almost surgical precision.

“A lie?” George echoed, his voice a blend of feigned surprise and a touch of defensiveness as he searched for the right words to steer clear of the interrogation he felt was imminent. Alex was known for his persistence and knack for uncovering truths people preferred to keep buried.

“I am not a fool, George,” his friend continued firmly. “I’ve watched your interactions with her throughout the house party enough to know,” Alex added, his tone indicating that he saw through the façade George had painstakingly built.

George felt the walls he had erected around his feelings for Emma begin to crumble under Alex’s unwavering gaze. His attempts at casual dismissal were failing, and he knew he had to tread carefully, lest he reveal more than he intended.

“Have you been stalking me?” George retorted with a sheepish chuckle, trying to deflect the probing conversation with humor.

“And besides, I saw the look you two exchanged by that carriage before she left the castle,” Alexander continued, undeterred by George’s attempt at lightening the mood. “You have feelings for Emma, George. Perhaps more than you care to acknowledge,” he concluded, his gaze fixed intently on George, as penetrating as ever.

Alexander’s words struck a chord, and internally, George conceded the truth. I do want her, he admitted silently to himself.

“It doesn’t matter,” George sighed out loud, trying to dismiss his feelings as irrelevant. “She is not the woman I thought she was,” he added, his voice tinged with disappointment as he puffed at his cigar, the smoke swirling around him almost abstractedly.

“What do you mean?” Alexander asked, his brow furrowing in confusion at George’s cryptic words.

Taking a deep breath, George confided about the kiss they had shared, and how he subsequently felt that Emma had set out to trap him as well. His heart felt heavy with mixed emotions as he recounted the details.

“Another trap, George?” Alex responded, his tone laced with ostensible disbelief. “I rather think this a foolish notion, man. Emma is nothing but kind and sweet,” he chuckled, trying to lighten the mood. “So sweet you couldn’t resist kissing her, in fact,” he teased, a broad grin spreading across his face.

But George found himself unable to share in this light-hearted jest. Not right now.

“You recall what happened in the maze?” George reminded him, his tone serious, bringing up a past incident that had left a deep impression on them both.

“Clearly,” Alexander nodded solemnly. “And I will say it again. It was an honest

accident. Emma never intended to trap me as you claim,” he reiterated, his voice firm with conviction.

“I don’t know why you are so blind to what is so evident,” George grumbled.

“I am not blind. You are only being ridiculously fearful, George,” Alex chided gently, trying to ease his friend’s worries. “Do not let the past shape your perception of the present. Let it go. This is not another trap,” he advised, his voice firm yet understanding.

“You think I’m saying all this simply because I was trapped once?” George countered, his tone rising slightly as he recalled the unfortunate incident that had marred his reputation. A lady had indeed succeeded in creating a scandal with him, but he had staunchly refused to offer for her, maintaining his innocence and choosing his integrity over societal pressure. It was a decision that had branded him with a notorious reputation, one that he wore like an indifferent cloak.

“I am only suggesting that it might be influencing how you view things now, and to not let it cloud your judgment,” Alex replied, his expression earnest, hoping to penetrate the defensive walls George had built around himself.

A part of George knew that Alex was probably right—again. But the truth about Emma, or at least what he perceived to be the truth, gnawed at him relentlessly. His suspicions clung stubbornly, mingling with an inexplicable desire that seemed to intensify despite his doubts.

“I cannot claim to know exactly how you feel. But I am confident that I have a good idea,” Alex continued, breaking the tense silence that had fallen between them. “And while I cannot speak for Emma’s sentiments, I can see that there is something there. So, listen to your heart for once, George. It’s calling you in the right direction. I know it,” he concluded, his voice carrying a conviction that was hard to ignore.

A pensive silence enveloped the room once more as George digested his friend's words, wrestling internally with his emotions and the decision before him. After a long moment, he reached into his pocket and withdrew his pocket watch, checking the time with a resigned sigh.

"We best join the ladies. Our guests will be here any moment now," George said, his voice carrying a note of finality as he closed the watch.

The truth was, George was eager for the awkward conversation to cease. As he and Alex joined Jane and Olivia in the drawing room, the announcement of their guests' arrival offered him a welcome diversion. Still, as he stood, preparing himself for the possibility of encountering Emma once again, he sternly reminded himself that what he felt was not anticipation.

He and Alex rose to greet the newcomers as Lord and Lady Dewsbury made their entrance. George's attention, however, remained fixed on the door, expecting Emma to follow her parents into the room. But she never appeared.

"Why, where is our dear Miss Lovell?" Jane inquired, echoing the curiosity that undoubtedly occupied every mind present. Her eyes darted to the door, reflecting a shared anticipation.

"I'm afraid our darling Emma is indisposed. She sends her regrets," Lady Dewsbury announced, her tone carrying a tinge of formal regret that did little to mask the undercurrent of tension.

"Oh dear," Olivia's response was immediate, her eyes filled with genuine concern and palpable disappointment.

George felt an unexpected knot tighten in his chest, and he was baffled by the intensity of his own reaction. Why should the news of Emma's absence stir such a

profound sense of disappointment in him?

CHAPTER 24

“I thought you said I had no reason to make any more appearances in society, Mother,” Emma remarked in a resigned tone as her mother presented her with an invitation to the first ball of the season. She glanced down at the card, noting the event was in merely two days.

“Well, you do not,” Caroline replied curtly. “But your father intends to announce your engagement to the Marquess at the ball. So, you have a reason to be at this one,” she added, her voice laced with finality.

Emma felt a wrench in her heart. She was to be paraded before the entirety of society as Neads’s newest acquisition—a prize to be showcased. “I see no reason for an announcement at the ball, Mother,” she protested. “The banns will be read after all. Shouldn’t that suffice?” Her voice held a faint hope, a desperate plea for some semblance of normalcy, or at least, dignity.

She knew her efforts to sway her parents were likely futile, yet she couldn’t suppress the urge to attempt any possible deflection to spare herself from such public scrutiny.

“Your father wants it to be a grand announcement,” Caroline stated, her tone dismissive of any objections. “And what could be grander than the opening ball of the social season?” She added, her eyes alight with the prospect of the spectacle to come.

“But—” Emma started, hoping to articulate her discomfort further, but her mother swiftly cut her off.

“Your father’s made up his mind. If you have any grievances, I suggest you confront him directly.”

“Do I not have a say in the announcement of my own engagement now?” Emma asked, her voice tinged with despair. “Is it not enough that I agreed against my will? Do I not deserve this choice at least?” She added, her frustration palpable in the quiet of the room.

“You lost any rights to a choice the moment you threw away your opportunity at the house party,” her mother responded sharply, her words cutting through the air like a knife before she turned and walked out of the room, leaving Emma feeling even more isolated.

“I don’t know what to say, Emma,” Antoinetta, who’d discreetly excused herself upon the Baroness’s entrance, now re-entered the room, her expression one of deep sympathy.

“There is nothing left to be said, Antoinetta,” Emma sighed, her voice heavy with resignation. She felt a profound anguish that seemed too deep for tears, a sorrow that sat like a stone in her chest.

“You must remain strong,” her friend encouraged, squeezing her hand with a gentle but firm grasp.

“I don’t know if I can,” Emma responded, her voice barely above a whisper, betraying the uncertainty and weariness she felt inside.

“You must,” Antoinetta reiterated firmly. “And I will always be here for you,” she added, her presence a comforting constant in Emma’s tumultuous life.

“I don’t know what I’d do without you, Antoinetta,” Emma admitted, her gaze

meeting her lady's maid's in the mirror. In this house full of constraints and cold ambitions, Antoinetta was her sole solace, her only breath of fresh air.

"You are Emma. I am confident you'd survive," Antoinetta smiled encouragingly, her faith in Emma unshaken despite the circumstances.

I am Emma, that should suffice, Emma thought to herself two days later as she studied her reflection in the mirror.

She was to leave for the ball with her parents any moment now, the evening that would publicly seal her fate as the Marquess's betrothed. As Emma adjusted her gown, Antoinetta came close, her expression serious yet gentle. "Remember, my dear, you still have a choice in this," she whispered, pulling Emma into a comforting hug.

Emma shook her head slightly, unable to see the choices Antoinetta believed still lay before her. Nonetheless, she nodded, managing a weak smile. "Thank you, my friend," she murmured, gratitude warming her voice for the support, even as her heart remained heavy.

"The carriage is ready," her mother announced abruptly as she entered the room, her tone brooking no delay. She took Emma's arm firmly, as if fearing Emma might flee if given a sliver of chance.

As they descended the grand staircase, Emma's thoughts raced wildly. Could I run away? The idea flickered through her mind like a forbidden whisper. She had nowhere to go, no one to turn to except to embrace a life possibly of servitude. Yet, in a fleeting moment, she wondered if such a fate would truly be worse than a loveless marriage to the Marquess of Neads.

Emma felt as though she was walking to the gallows rather than another glamorous

event in society. Every step felt heavier, every breath a bit shallower.

“Hurry up, women. We cannot be late on this special night,” her father called from below, his voice a mix of excitement and impatience that grated on her nerves.

There was no going back now. Not that she had been given a choice to begin with, Emma reflected bitterly as their carriage pulled away from the house.

It was the first ball of the season, an event glittering with the promise of joyful reunions and spirited dances. George, ever hopeful, scanned the crowded ballroom for Emma. He anticipated seeing her laughter-filled eyes and the lively tilt of her head as she engaged in the evening’s frivolities. But as seconds stretched into minutes, his initial anticipation slowly ebbed, replaced by a sinking feeling of disappointment.

He tried to steady his roiling emotions, to cage the feelings he was scarcely willing to admit even to himself. Yet, all attempts at composure abruptly ended when his blood ran cold at a sight by the ballroom entrance.

Emma had just arrived.

But the woman he saw now was hardly recognizable as the Emma he knew and had, admittedly, looked forward to seeing tonight. Not only was she on the arm of another man, but there was also a haunting emptiness in her gaze that George had never before witnessed.

This was not the defiant, impossibly proper, yet undeniably fiery lady he knew from their spirited encounters. Nor was she the scheming social climber he had once bitterly accused her of being. No, the Emma before him now was but a shadow of herself, a husk of the vibrant woman she used to be.

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And what compounded his shock further—she was on the arm of the Marquess of Neads. George's brow furrowed in confusion and a hint of anger. What in the world was she doing with such a man? He knew of the Marquess, of course, and none of what he knew was flattering. The man had a despicable reputation, known around the ton for his decrepit morals and vile personality.

As George watched Emma move through the crowd, a mere ghost of her usual self, tethered to a man unworthy of her, his heart clenched with an unexpected surge of protectiveness. What had transpired to lead her to this moment? And how could he—should he—intervene?

As he watched the Marquess draw Emma slightly closer to him—as if to proclaim his possession of her to the entire assembly—George's head began to pound with a mix of anger and helplessness. Neads had no right to parade her around like some trophy. The urge to challenge the man bubbled fiercely within him. He wanted to do something, anything, to extricate Emma from the Marquess's loathsome grip.

George longed to rush forward, to seize her hand and whisk her away from Neads, to shake her back into the spirited and defiant woman he knew her to be. He yearned to witness her fiery spirit directed at him once more, even if it was laced with annoyance or scorn.

Alas, trapped in the confines of a crowded ballroom, all George could manage was to watch from afar and seethe silently. That was until a sliver of opportunity presented itself.

He noticed Emma murmur something to Neads and then excuse herself, her

movements graceful yet tinged with a certain urgency as she slipped into the hallway. Seizing the moment, George discreetly followed her, his footsteps quiet against the plush carpets.

Emma navigated the labyrinthine hallways of the grand house with a familiarity that spoke of her distress, seeking solace away from the crowded ballroom. Suddenly, she veered off her path and slipped through some French doors into a secluded part of the gardens.

Grateful for the privacy the gardens offered, George quickened his pace, hoping to catch up to her and perhaps find a moment to speak freely. However, fate seemed to conspire against him, for just as he was about to reach her, Baron Dewsbury emerged from a nearby terrace, his presence an unwelcome interruption.

“What are you doing out here, girl?” the Baron nearly snapped, his voice sharp in the quiet of the night.

“I needed some air, Father,” Emma replied, her voice composed yet carrying an undercurrent of weariness.

George halted, concealed by the shadows, his heart pounding with frustration and concern as he watched the scene unfold before him. “Are you trying to run away, girl?” The Baron’s tone was filled with suspicion, his eyes narrowing as he scrutinized her every expression.

“Where could I possibly run off to?” Emma retorted, her voice carrying a hint of the spirit George knew well, yet it was dulled, as if weighed down by a heavy burden.

“You need to fix this demeanor of yours, girl. One would think you’re going to a funeral,” the Baron remarked sharply, his words cutting through the quiet of the evening.

Emma remained silent, offering no response to her father's harsh criticism.

"Your future is bright and waiting for you. You should be happy and grateful you finally got a man to look at you. One who is willing to make you his," he continued, his voice implying that she should consider herself fortunate for such an arrangement.

Something cold and unnerving gripped George as he listened. The Baron's words sent a chill down his spine, and a deep, unsettling feeling settled over him. What exactly did the Baron mean by those words?

"No one would wish to acquire a husband the way I did, father," Emma said, her voice small and resigned, a stark contrast to her usual vibrant self.

"What did you say?" The Baron bristled, his face turning red with either anger or embarrassment, perhaps both.

"That I have nothing to celebrate," she responded calmly, yet her words were heavy with unspoken sorrow.

There was no defiance in her tone, no spark of the fiery Emma he remembered. Only pure resignation. It was as though she had accepted a fate she felt powerless to change, and it pained George to hear such hopelessness in her voice.

Confusion swirled within him more fiercely than ever. The pieces of the puzzle were not fitting together. Was Emma truly getting married? And to the Marquess she had just entered with? God help him, he thought, a sense of desperation creeping into his thoughts. It cannot be to anyone. The very idea of her belonging to another man, especially under such dismal circumstances, was more than he could bear.

"Well, I do. I have everything to celebrate," Dewsbury declared with a sneer. "I am finally giving away a useless daughter and getting the compensation I deserve too,"

he added, his words dripping with disdain.

Fresh ire coursed through George at the man's disrespectful and hurtful words. He felt himself instinctively take a step forward, his hands curling into angry fists at his sides, his restraint teetering on the brink of collapse.

“Hardly useless if she’s the reason you are getting that compensation then, don’t you agree, Father?” Emma retorted, her voice sharp and clear. She finally met her father’s gaze with a bit of that defiance George knew her for—the defiance he had grown to love, though he was only now beginning to acknowledge this love without even fully realizing it.

George halted his advance, struck by Emma’s response. Perhaps he had underestimated her resilience. He paused and continued to observe from his concealed vantage point.

“You will watch your tongue, girl,” the Baron warned, his voice growing dangerously low as he took an imposing step toward his daughter.

Emma instinctively took a step back, maintaining her composure despite the clear threat in her father’s tone.

“Now, I want you to return to that ballroom and stand by your future husband like the Marchioness you are going to be. You will hold yourself with pride, and smile and be happy,” the Baron instructed.

“I shall return after getting some air,” Emma declared, her voice strained with the effort to maintain composure. Her words were abruptly cut off by a sudden horrified gasp that cut through the quiet of the garden.

George’s instincts immediately sharpened, his entire focus narrowing as dread coiled

tightly within him. And that was when he saw the reason for her alarm. The Baron, his face contorted in fury, had seized his daughter's arm with a vice-like grip, his fingers digging into her flesh. "You are mine, you insolent child! And I will do with you as I see fit. Do you understand?" he hissed, his eyes bulging with rage.

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“You are hurting me, Father,” Emma cried out, her voice laced with pain as she struggled to free herself from her father’s cruel hold.

That was the final straw for George. With his heart pounding in his chest and a righteous fury burning through his veins, he moved without a second thought. He strode forward, covering the ground between them with determined steps.

“You belong tome!” Dewsbury continued to bellow, oblivious to George’s approach until it was too late.

“She is a human being first before she is your daughter,” George interjected forcefully as he reached them, his voice booming in the quiet garden. With a swift, decisive motion, he grabbed the Baron’s wrist and yanked it away from Emma. “And she is certainly not an object to be possessed and manipulated as you please,” he added, his tone just as furious as the Baron’s.

CHAPTER 25

“What right have you to interfere with family business, Seymore?” Dewsbury snapped, his voice thick with contempt as he glared up at George.

George towered over the man, his jaw clenched as he fought to maintain control over his rising anger. “I refuse to stand by and watch such despicable abuse and disrespect. Even between family,” he responded. His words were measured and firm, betraying none of the fury that simmered within him.

“Playing the good Samaritan now, are we?” The Baron’s voice dripped with sarcasm,

his sneer intended to belittle.

“Don’t you have any skirts to slip into as usual and mind your own business, Your Grace?” he derided, his words meant to provoke.

“Father, that is enough,” Emma interjected sharply. Her presence, though physically smaller, seemed to fill the space with a defiant strength.

When the Baron turned to her, his face contorted in anger, George’s protective instinct took over. He stepped forward, placing himself between Emma and her father, effectively shielding her. “You shut up and let the men handle this one, girl,” Dewsbury barked at his daughter, his tone dismissive and harsh.

“You will respect your daughter, Baron Dewsbury,” George countered sternly, his voice low and threatening. He stood to his full height, an imposing figure of righteous indignation, and took a decisive step closer to the Baron.

Faced with George’s unwavering stance, the Baron involuntarily took a step back, his earlier bravado faltering under the intense scrutiny and firm opposition.

Good, George thought to himself, a grim satisfaction settling in as he saw the fear flicker in Dewsbury’s eyes.

“Or what?” Dewsbury retorted, his voice carrying a trace of uncertainty that hadn’t been there moments before.

“Or I will ensure you never breathe another air of dignity in society. I will make your life a living hell and break those ambitions of yours so you are seen as no better than those you disdain,” George warned, his voice cold and unyielding. The threat was not just a collection of words; it was a promise, a declaration of his resolve to protect Emma at any cost.

Baron Dewsbury sputtered, taken aback by the intensity and firmness of George's threat. He glared at his daughter once more, the malice clear in his eyes, but he found himself unable to articulate a response.

With a frustrated huff, he turned to leave, barking over his shoulder, "Come along, girl."

Emma did not move. Dewsbury began to walk away, but he paused when he realized that Emma was not following him. The absence of her footsteps echoed louder than any words.

"Did you not hear me?" The Baron turned sharply, retracing his steps with a scowl. "We return to the ballroom this instant," he commanded, his voice a harsh bark in the quiet of the garden.

"I am not going," Emma declared, standing taller beside George. Her voice, firm and resolute, carried through the night air.

George could feel the shift in her confidence. His presence had fortified her, given her the courage to stand up against the tyranny she had faced for so long. He was gratified by her bravery, proud that his support could make such a difference, however small.

"You dare defy me?" Dewsbury's voice was incredulous, his face a mask of disbelief and rage. He took a threatening step toward Emma, presumably to physically coerce her into compliance.

George moved without hesitation, stepping forward, positioning himself even more squarely between Emma and her father. The action was enough. Dewsbury halted, the resolve in George's stance evidently giving him pause. In that moment, the Baron seemed to shrink, his earlier dominance withering.

“You will pay for this,” Dewsbury spat venomously before turning on his heels to storm off into the night. His words hung in the air like a dark cloud, and George wasn’t entirely sure whom the future retribution was promised to—himself, or the defiant daughter beside him? Most likely both, he concluded as he watched the Baron’s retreating figure.

When George finally turned his attention back to Emma, meeting her beleaguered gaze, something profound within him shifted. The expression in her eyes was weary yet resolute, and it spoke volumes, dissolving the facade of misunderstandings that had previously clouded his judgment.

The answers to all his questions, not to mention his suspicions, were clear in the depths of her eyes. George realized with a sinking feeling in his chest that he had been mistaken about her all along. The realization weighed heavily on his heart, and as he stood there, the evening’s chill seemed to seep deeper into his bones.

“T–thank you,” Emma managed to whisper, her voice barely audible over the emotions roiling inside her after her father’s vehement departure. She shuddered to think what might have happened had George not been there to intervene.

“Emma,” he said softly, his hand gently grazing her arm. His touch was tentative at first, as if he feared she might crumble under even the slightest pressure. Then, with a decisiveness that seemed to gather both their resolves, he reached for her properly, pulling her into his arms at last.

Emma found herself collapsing into his embrace, the conflicts within her momentarily quieted by his comforting presence. Despite the chaos of the evening, being held by him felt right. She needed the warmth of his embrace; she needed him.

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His hand moved up and down her back, soothing. He was different tonight—unlike the man she left in Wiltshire. This George was the one she dreamed of... The one her heart was telling her to hold on to for the rest of her existence.

He pulled back and looked down at her, and when he cupped her face and brushed her cheeks with his thumbs, Emma realized she was crying. Very slowly, he leaned forward and kissed both her cheeks, then lips. A light inside her flickered—the one that had dimmed since her return to Town.

“Come,” George whispered as he released her from their embrace, guiding her to a nearby bench. Once seated, the cool night air seemed less chilling with his presence beside her.

When he settled next to her, Emma began tentatively, her gaze fixed on the ground, “I am sorry you had to witness that...”

“Do not apologize. Your father’s actions are not yours. You were only a victim.” He shook his head firmly, dismissing her apologies with a kind severity. Reaching for her hand, he turned her palm upwards and tenderly dropped a kiss into it, an act that felt like a seal over what she felt for him.

“Why are you marrying the Marquess of Neads, Emma?” George’s voice was gentle, yet the weight of the question was grave. She found it difficult to focus, her mind muddled by the warmth of his touch and the sincerity in his eyes. “The Marquess is not the best choice for a husband,” he added before Emma could muster her thoughts into words.

“Does it appear as though I have much of a choice in the matter, George?” Emma returned miserably, her voice a soft echo of defeat. She had resigned herself to her fate, too weary to entertain thoughts of resistance. The battle, it seemed, had been drained from her.

“There is always a choice, Emma,” George insisted vehemently, his tone sharpening. A fire ignited in the depths of his gaze—a fierce, determined flame that Emma had never seen before. His eyes locked onto hers, searching, almost imploring as he added, “You have a choice, Emma.”

His words stirred a flicker of curiosity beneath her resignation. Emma found herself wondering, perhaps for the first time with a glint of hope, what he meant by suggesting she still had a choice. His assertion beckoned her to unravel his intent, to find the kernel of possibility he seemed to see.

George wrapped his arms around her again, and she buried her face in his chest, inhaling his scent. If she could remain here forever, she would. “George.”

“Yes, Emma?”

“What do you mean by?—”

Her words were abruptly cut off by a sudden shriek and a collective gasp that ripped through the calm of the night.

“He has done it again. He has ruined another lady,” a woman’s voice exclaimed somewhere behind them. Emma’s head snapped up, her eyes wide as they met the sight of several matrons staring at them, their expressions a blend of scandalized and disapproving. The small crowd around them swelled rapidly, whispers buzzing and swirling through the night air like a gathering storm, each syllable heavy with judgment and censure.

George pulled away from her and rose, while she was unable to even move from the bench. Cold dread settled over her as the guests' whispers encroached like specters poised to devour her remaining dignity.

At the fore of their spectators stood none other than Emma's father, his presence marked by a wickedly triumphant grin that spread across his face like a stain. The sight of him sent a cold shiver down Emma's spine.

He summoned the crowd to find us. To trap me.

CHAPTER 26

George blinked, hoping the throng of matrons and ladies encircling them would dissolve into the ether. The scene was disturbingly familiar, dredging up memories he had long since buried. He pinched the bridge of his nose, praying with desperation that this was but a nightmare that would dissipate upon waking.

Yet, when he glanced down at Emma, seated on the bench, her face pale and stricken, he knew this was no mere figment of his imagination. The woman before him was not a ghost from his past but an unforgiving reality.

Murmurs buzzed through the crowd, growing louder and more insistent. At the forefront stood Baron Dewsbury, his lips curved into a smug, almost feline grin. The sight of the man made George's stomach churn. By God! This is no coincidence! The Baron had orchestrated this debacle, inviting witnesses to revel in George's disgrace with no care for his daughter's reputation.

George's hands clenched at his sides. Never had he encountered a more contemptible man.

"Where is she? What's happened?" A voice cut through the whispers. The crowd

parted as the Marquess of Neads pushed his way forward. He halted before George and Emma, his eyes darting between them. The air grew heavy, the spectators seemingly holding their breath.

The Marquess' gaze finally settled on George. "Damnation!" he muttered under his breath.

George's heart hammered in his chest. He had to find a way out of this wretched trap, not just for his own sake, but for Emma's as well. The crowd's judgment bore down on him, but he refused to crumble. Not now, not ever.

"How dare you, Seymore!" Neads yelled, his face reddening and contorting with fury. "Do you realize what I spent to obtain her?" His words were sharp, and the guests gasped.

George winced. The words were dehumanizing, reducing a person to a mere commodity. "Choose your words carefully, Neads," he warned, his voice surprising even himself with its steadiness, but he scarcely recognized the cold edge it contained.

"This is a hoax!" Neads continued, now directing his ire at the Baron. "I have been cheated. The entire English aristocracy is a hoax! Explain yourself, Dewsbury," he demanded, his voice trembling with righteous indignation.

Dewsbury's eyes flickered nervously, his earlier confidence waning under the Marquess' scrutiny. He let out a small, self-conscious whimper, his gaze darting around the crowd as if seeking an escape.

"Why did you not tell me Miss Lovell's affections are otherwise engaged?"

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The Baron opened his mouth as if to speak, but then he closed it and sent George a poisonous glare, blaming him for everything. Perhaps Dewsbury should have thought about the disgrace he would face before he sent half the town to witness this.

“H—how dare you disgrace my family, Seymore?” The Baron finally found his voice. George opened his mouth to respond, but before he could utter a word, Dewsbury’s tirade swept over them like a storm. “Have you not done enough damage to society in the past?” His voice rose. “Such despicable and insatiable appetite, you have. How many more souls have to pay the price of your depravity?”

“I refuse to be cheated!” The Marquess’ cut h the Baron’s diatribe, his eyes bulging as though he had been poisoned.

Murmurs came from the guests as they made way for the Duchess of Preston and the Baroness of Dewsbury. The Duchess quietly wrapped her arms around a shivering Emma, lifting her gently to her feet. Together, they guided her away from the burning curiosity of the crowd, the whispers trailing in their wake.

“You will amend this, Seymore!” Dewsbury said, seething. “Or I shall meet you. I shall demand satisfaction, for my family will not be a disgrace in society!”

“I thought the Baron could not shoot even if the target were right before him,” someone whispered nearby, and Dewsbury’s eye twitched.

“A brave proposition indeed,” another voice added with a derisive chuckle.

Dewsbury sputtered, his face reddening as he turned to the crowd, his eyes frantically

searching for the culprits. His indignation only seemed to fuel the quiet laughter of the onlookers.

The Marquess, with a huff of frustration, spun on his heels and walked away. "My Lord!" Dewsbury called after him, his voice pathetic and desperate as he hurried to follow.

The crowd gradually dispersed, leaving George standing alone like a statue. The consequences of one kiss—no several kisses—pressed down on him, and he could neither remember how to breathe nor could he feel his legs. The world around him blurred as time stretched into eternity.

Then, a cold hand touched his arm, jolting him back to reality. "Are you all right?" Alexander asked.

George did not respond. He turned on his heels, ignoring Alexander's concerned hollers echoing behind him. He had to leave this place if he was to survive this night. Instead of departing through the manor, he circled around the garden.

In front of the manor, the sight of a congested line of carriages aggravated him further. This would only hinder his desperate need to escape, and thus, he resolved to walk instead. Minutes away from the manor, the sound of galloping hooves reached his ears. George glanced over his shoulder to see Alexander reining in beside him on horseback, a second mount in tow.

"At least, take a mount," Alexander urged. "Our host was generous enough to lend me two."

George made no move to accept the horse, his mind too clouded with anger and confusion. He stared ahead.

"George," Alexander persisted, his voice firm.

Reluctantly, he slowed and took the proffered reins. Without a word, he mounted and spurred it into motion. He did not wait for Alexander, nor did he care where he was headed. He only knew the urge within him to be as far away from here as possible.

He galloped through the streets of Town, the lamp-lit avenues giving way to the wild outskirts. The rhythmic pounding of the horse's hooves provided a semblance of solace, though his mind remained in turmoil.

George did not expect Alexander to follow. His friend had no inkling of his destination, nor how long the journey might take. Yet he kept pace with him, matching his speed and determination. Something within him softened at this.

They rode out to a heather field on the edge of Town, the moon casting a silvery glow over the wild expanse. George dismounted and walked several feet ahead, still unsure where he was going.

"What is on your mind?" Alex asked, falling into step beside him.

George sighed and ran both of his hands through his hair. It would have been easier if tonight's events had not involved Emma. "I do not know," he admitted. "Perhaps there is too much for me to think about and sort through."

"Understandably so," Alex nodded, his expression thoughtful. "Within is your answer, George." He pointed at his chest. "Do not think excessively. Do not look too hard. I believe the answer is waiting for you right on the surface."

"What if that is not my answer?" George finally met his friend's gaze. "What if it is wrong?"

“There is no right or wrong here, George,” Alex said with a wan smile. “And you know it.”

“Do I truly?” George countered, a note of desperation creeping into his voice.

“You underestimate yourself,” Alexander said quietly. “Or perhaps it is something else you underestimate.”

The only thing he could concentrate on at this moment was fear. Fear wrought by this nightmare, one he had inexplicably found himself in and one he was forced to live every bitter moment of. Memories of that night, years ago gnawed at his senses. Tonight had been different, because he had pulled Emma into his arms. He did not regret that—he never could. Yes the consequences felt dooming.

“I don’t know what to do,” George confessed.

“Yes, you do,” Alex insisted.

George shook his head. He was unable to see a path forward.

CHAPTER 27

The moment the carriage pulled up before the Dewsbury residence, Emma's father yanked her out with a force that made her stumble. His face was a mask of fury, eyes blazing as he hissed and cursed.

"I have always known that you would end up a disgrace to the family!" he spat, his eyes filled with venom. "And here we are, are we not?" He laughed, pulling her through the doorway and into the drawing room where he pushed her onto the sofa.

Emma clutched the arm of the sofa to right herself as her mother entered the room but lingered by the door. Her mind flickered back to the grin her father wore earlier, the ecstasy that had lit up his face. The transformation was so abrupt, for he seemed a madman now. She had witnessed his tantrums many times, but never had she seen him thusly. Her mother's horrified expression only confirmed that Caroline too had never encountered such wrath.

"You have shamed my good name in society with your incompetence and indiscipline, and I will have you amend it all," her father roared, pushing a brass statuette from a console. It fell onto the carpeted floor with a thud.

Caroline took a step toward him, her voice trembling when she spoke. "Tristan?—"

"You shall be silent, madam!" he hissed, his eyes narrowing. "It is your incompetence which runs in her blood, shaming us all."

Caroline shrank back, her face paling. Emma wondered if it was his hurtful words or the sheer force of his anger that caused such a reaction. Perhaps both, she concluded, feeling a pang of pity for her mother despite her own troubles.

“Now listen here, girl,” he said, turning his furious gaze back to Emma. She shrunk into the sofa, trembling, her heart pounding. His eyes bored into hers, demanding compliance. “You will make this right, or you will face consequences you cannot even begin to fathom.”

Emma’s throat tightened, fear clawing at her insides. She wanted to cry out, to defend herself, but the words stuck in her throat. All she could do was nod, her mind racing to find a way out of the nightmare that had engulfed her life.

He father came to stand in front of her. When he smiled, a chill ran through her. Who are you? “I will make you do my bidding, one way or another,” he declared, his voice chillingly calm. “That rake of a knight you have been chasing will be nowhere in sight come morning. Men like him do not make things right. You are ruined now, and no one else will have you but the Marquess. Thank goodness he is just as desperate as we are.”

Something in his tone struck Emma, a painful realization dawning upon her. Had her father orchestrated this entire incident to force her into marrying Neads? The truth twisted her guts.

“You did this!” Emma’s fear was immediately replaced by fury and a sense of betrayal. She shot to her feet, her hands clenching at her sides. “You brought that crowd to the gardens knowing George and I were still there.”

A wicked smile spread across his face, confirming her worst fears. “Thank heavens you did not inherit your mother’s dim wit as well,” he said, his words a cruel mockery.

Emma's gaze flickered to Caroline, standing passively by, her eyes dull and lifeless. The sight of her mother's resignation only fueled Emma's desperation.

"Wasn't signing me away to the Marquess enough? Have I not agreed to marry him?" Emma's voice rose.

"Whether I am guilty of your accusations or not, it does not matter." Her father shrugged dismissively. "What is done is done. And that Duke will never marry you," he added smugly.

Emma's heart sank at his words, for they held an undeniable truth. George would never marry her. The weight of this realization pressed down on her, but she refused to succumb to despair. Anger blazed too brightly within her to allow room for misery, though she knew it would follow in due course.

"You have no heart," Emma said, breathless.

"I have a brain, something you and your mother evidently lack," he retorted.

"I have been foolish to think you were anything but a despicable man," Emma spat, her voice shaking with rage.

Her father's eyes narrowed, and before she could react, he rose to strike her. Emma shut her eyes, bracing herself for the blow, but it never came. In a blur of movement, her mother had stepped between them, taking the force of his strike.

Caroline staggered, her face contorted in pain, but she did not fall. Emma's breath caught in her throat as she watched her mother, the usually passive woman now a shield against her father's wrath. The sight filled her with a mix of horror and a fierce, protective love.

“How dare you!” Emma stood taller. “How dare you raise your hand against her!”

Her father’s face was still twisted with darkness, but there was a flicker of uncertainty in his eyes as he looked at Caroline. “Shebrought this upon herself,” he muttered, though the conviction in his voice wavered.

Caroline straightened and brushed a wisp of hair from her face. “No, Tristan,” she said softly but firmly. “You will not hurt her. Not again.”

Emma’s heart ached at the sight of her mother’s quiet strength, and she felt a surge of resolve. She would not be cowed by her father’s cruelty. She took her mother’s hand and stood beside her.

“You will not control my life any longer,” she said. “You may be my sire, but I will find my own way, with or without your approval.”

Her father’s face darkened further, but words seemed to escape him. Emma stood her ground, a defiant statue amidst the storm of his wrath. Another strike came, and again, Caroline intercepted it. She cried out in pain, clutching her shoulder where the blow had landed, sparing Emma's face from its intended mark.

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She darted to her mother, her heart clenching in fear and guilt. But Caroline, with a strength Emma had never seen before, thrust out a hand to push her away. “Get out of here, Emma.”

“But—”

“Leave quickly. Now!” Caroline insisted. “I will take care of things from here.”

Emma hesitated only a moment longer before she turned and fled the drawing room as instructed. The last image she saw was her father, towering over her mother. It took every ounce of willpower not to rush back and try to pull her mother away. She knew, deep down, that they were no match for him.

Trusting her mother to handle him, as promised, Emma ran up to her bedchamber. She sat rigidly on her bed, her heart and thought racing. The events of the evening played over and over in her mind, a cruel loop of disbelief and horror. Her hands trembled as she raised them to her face, brushing the tears from her cheeks.

She started when her bedchamber door suddenly opened, a jolt of fear coursing through her as she fleetingly thought her angry father had stormed after her. Relief washed over her, however, when Antoinetta stepped into the room.

Emma's words spilled out, recounting the scandal in a hushed whisper. “I know. I heard your exchange with your father. Everything he said,” her lady's maid admitted ruefully.

“He holds no shred of humanity in him,” Emma said. “I wish he is not my father.”

“I dislike agreeing with you on this matter, but I must,” Antoinetta responded. “I am sorry, Emma,” she added softly, her eyes filled with sympathy. She took both of her hands and squeezed them.

“I don’t know what to do, Antoinetta,” Emma sighed. “I never thought I would find myself facing ruin.”

“I shall bring you some tea to calm you,” Antoinetta suggested, rising. “You require it.”

Emma watched her go, then decided to change out of her evening attire. She slipped into a night rail, the simple act bringing a small measure of comfort. Returning to the bed, she sat once more, feeling as though she were living a life that was not her own. Despite the turmoil within her, no more tears came. She felt numb, as if her emotions had been stripped away.

Antoinetta returned with a tray of chamomile tea and milk, the gentle fragrance filling the room. She set the tray down and poured a cup, handing it to Emma with a look of encouragement. Then sat beside her on the covers as she’d done earlier.

“What do you think the Duke will do?” Antoinetta asked.

The room was silent, save for the crackling of the fireplace, and Emma’s mind drifted back to George’s words earlier that evening. He had spoken with such confidence, assuring her that she always had a choice. Yet here she was, feeling utterly devoid of options, her fate seemingly out of her hands.

George was the one who needed to make a choice now. The only option she had was to wait, and she found herself filled with a crushing sense of powerlessness.

“I keep thinking about how George never offered for that lady in the past. Why would

he offer for me now?" Antoinetta frowned, but she urged Emma to continue. "It is a reminder of the harsh realities of our society and how precarious my position is." She wrung the linen of her nightgown. "A part of me wishes to believe that George is a man of honor, that despite everything, he would do the right thing by me."

Antoinetta nodded. "I believe he is honorable. Perhaps the rumors we heard about him are untrue, and there is a reason he refused to marry the lady."

Emma sighed. "Perhaps, and perhaps not." The dejected part of her was gaining strength. "I might be ruined for good, and my future could lie only with the Marquess of Neads."

Antoinetta reached out and took Emma's hands in hers, squeezing them gently. "Emma, His Grace has always been a man of integrity. Do not lose hope. He may yet surprise you."

"I wish I could believe that, Antoinetta. But the past haunts me, and I fear the worst."

"Sometimes, the past does not dictate the future. We must have faith, even when all seems lost. You are braver than you think. Do not let your father's cruelty define you. You have the courage to break free from his grasp and carve out a life of your own."

"How do you have so much hope?" Emma asked in despair.

"I know honorable people exist, and I have observed your interactions with His Grace in Wiltshire. I am confident he will offer for you," she responded.

"There is a reason for his reputation, Antoinetta," Emma whispered. She desperately wanted her fear allayed, but she did not trust George. He had done everything in his power to get in her way during the house party. He believed her the villain, and although he knew the truth now, Emma did not have faith he will act rightly.

“Perhaps this time will be different,” Antoinetta said.

“People hardly change. Do not give me hope.” Emma shook her head.

Antoinetta reached into the pocket that hung at her waist and removed a small pouch, offering it to Emma. “Then may I give you a different suggestion?” she asked gently.

Emma took the pouch and opened it, revealing coins and banknotes. She looked up at Antoinetta, perplexed.

“It is money your grandmother gave me shortly before her passing, and my wages that I saved over the years,” Antoinetta elaborated, her gaze soft.

Emma's brow furrowed. "What are you suggesting?"

"With this money, you can run away and start a new life if the Duke does not offer for you, Emma. You would not have to marry Needs then. It is not much, but it will help you," Antoinetta explained.

"You were not jesting when you said I could run away if it all becomes too much?" Emma gasped in surprise. She felt a prickling behind her eyes as emotion tightened her throat. "Oh, Antoinetta, but this is your life's savings. I cannot possibly?"

"Yes, you can," Antoinetta insisted, her hand closing firmly over Emma's, forcing her to take the money. "Your happiness and freedom are worth more than these coins. I would rather see you safe and content than trapped in a life of misery."

"Antoinetta..."

"I shall come with you if ever it comes to you running away," Antoinetta said.

"You will?" Emma felt her chin begin to quiver, the promise overwhelming her.

"I'm only here because of you, Emma. No matter what, I shan't abandon you. Ever."

"Oh, Antoinetta," Emma was at a loss for words, her heart swelling with gratitude and love.

"But for now, let us have hope and faith in the Duke. I believe he will do the right thing," Antoinetta said, squeezing Emma's hand once again.

“I have no words to thank you, Antoinetta,” Emma murmured, pulling her friend into a tight embrace.

“You don’t have to, dear. It is but what an older sister ought to do,” Antoinetta replied, hugging her back with a warmth that spoke of their deep bond.

Emma’s tears gave way again, and Antoinetta cooed softly. “I’m here. Always.”

Emma sobbed, the release of emotions leaving her feeling both drained and relieved. Only after she had collected herself enough to be certain she would be all right did Antoinetta bid her goodnight.

Even after her lady’s maid’s exit, she found herself unable to fully stanch her tears. The loneliness and fear crept back in, and she cried herself to sleep that night, clutching the small pouch of money as if it were her savior.

CHAPTER 28

Emma raised her hand to her temple and winced. She might have slept the night before, but the pounding in her head was a declaration of how fitful it had been.

“Do drink more tea. You will feel better, I promise.” Antoinetta handed her the teacup again, and Emma reluctantly took it. A knock sounded at her bedchamber door then, and she inhaled—anticipating and dreading.

Her mother walked in. “May I have a word, Emma?” she asked with a tentative rise of her brows. Emma nodded, and they sat down together. “You did not come for breakfast,” her mother began gently as Antoinette excused them.

Emma ignored the comment, her concern for her mother overshadowing her own discomfort. “How is your shoulder, Mother?” she asked. Food was the last thing on

her mind, and she had no desire to discuss her lack of appetite.

“Oh, nothing a little liniment and some hot water has not already taken care of,” Caroline shrugged off her concern, trying to appear insouciant.

“I am sorry, Mother. I should have been hit instead.”

“Do not say that,” her mother admonished softly, reaching out to take Emma’s hands, squeezing them gently but firmly. “I should be the one apologizing to you, Emma. For failing you as a mother, I cannot begin to show you my regrets, child,” she added, tears welling up in her eyes now.

“I suppose you did the best you could,” Emma tried to reassure, her voice trembling with the effort to contain her emotions. Caroline had not failed her, but she had been absent and unsupportive at times when Emma had needed her most.

Caroline sighed, the sound filled with regret and sorrow. “I never thought your father would go so far as to strike you. You were very brave, standing up to him like that,” she said, pride and something akin to admiration in her eyes.

“You were brave too, interceding the way you did,” Emma replied.

“It is something I should have done from the very beginning, but I was too much of a coward to confront him like you did, Emma,” Caroline shook her head. “I thought that after everything, it was only right that I allowed him to have his way. That I owed him that much.”

“What do you mean?” Emma asked, growing perplexed.

Her mother fell silent, her gaze distant and pensive. After a moment, she spoke, her voice wistful. “You were not our first child, Emma.”

“What?” Emma was shocked, her mind reeling. Not once had she ever heard of this. Not even from the servants.

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“I had a son first, you see,” her mother continued, her eyes taking on a faraway look. “He lived for a few hours. He came and filled us with so much hope, but he took it all with him when he left us.”

Emma noticed her mother’s trembling, and she took hold of them. “I had a very difficult pregnancy,” Caroline said softly. “The physician warned us beforehand, but after the birth, we thought it would be all right—a miracle from the heavens. When the babe died a few hours later, your father blamed me. He blamed my weakness. Because of my frailty, he said I had failed to bear him a healthy son. For the longest time, I blamed myself too. I felt I owed Tristan that. So I let him get away with everything. I let him take compensation for my inability to give him the child he wanted.”

Caroline finished with a long, weary sigh, and Emma felt tears sting her eyes. She blinked rapidly, trying to hold them back. “You never told me, Mother. Why?”

“And burden you beyond your father’s demands?” Caroline snorted sheepishly, a bitter smile playing on her lips. “Besides, it was a shame I did not fancy sharing.”

“Oh, but it isn’t your fault, Mother. It was never your fault,” Emma squeezed her hand still in hers, her voice filled with fervent conviction.

“When I had you,” Caroline began again, her eyes distant with painful memories, “he was all but disappointed and angry that I didn’t bear him the son he’d hoped for. He swore to make both me and the child pay. Thus, I promised myself that I would protect you from his rage no matter what.”

Emma's heart ached at her mother's words, the weight of the past pressing heavily upon them. "Mother, you have done more than anyone could ask. You have protected me in ways I never knew."

Caroline's eyes glistened with tears as she met Emma's gaze. "I wish I could have done more. I wish I had been stronger. With every insult and pain he inflicted over the years, I reminded myself that it could have been you. Better me than you. All I had to do was be his obedient little wife and keep his ire on myself and away from you," Caroline's voice trembled as she spoke, each word weighed down with years of suffering.

Emma's chest tightened. "Oh mother, you should not have kept me in the dark about all this," she said, her voice breaking.

Caroline's eyes, red and weary, met Emma's. "That is why I wanted you to marry the Earl at whatever cost, Emma. I wanted you away from your father for your safety because he was only getting worse by the day," she explained. "Oh, do understand that I never wanted you to marry Neads, Emma. No mother would want her daughter with a man such as that."

"Now I know, Mother," she said softly, reaching for a handkerchief on the nearby side table. She dabbed at her mother's tears, her touch gentle and tender.

"Forgive me, Emma," Caroline implored.

Emma's vision blurred, yet she managed a comforting smile. "You only wanted to protect me," she said. "There is nothing to forgive, Mother."

Caroline pulled Emma into a tight embrace, her body shaking with quiet sobs. Emma buried her face in her mother's warmth, feeling the familiar scent of lavender and rosewater. She clung to her, the safety and comfort she had yearned for now within

her grasp.

Emma had felt abandoned, unloved, and betrayed for years. If only she had known that it was her mother's only way of protecting her.

A knock interrupted their embrace. "Enter," Caroline said as she pulled away, quickly drying her eyes. The butler appeared and bowed.

"A caller, My Lady," he announced with his usual solemnity.

Emma's heart gave a hopeful little skip.

CHAPTER 29

"The Marquess of Neads," the butler announced, and Emma instantly felt her heart sink.

What had she been hoping? For George to be her knight in shining armor and swoop in to save her from her fate? How delusional of her, she thought miserably as the old Marquess strode into the drawing room.

"Where is Dewsbury? I need to speak to him at once," the Marquess declared without preamble.

"If you will take a seat, my lord, the Baron will join us shortly," Caroline offered with a calm demeanor.

"Us?" Neads echoed with ostensible surprise and disdain. "Oh, do not think that I will allow you in on my business transactions with the Baron. I refuse to have women in my discussions," he turned up his nose at them.

Emma was as indignant as she was appalled. Her mother appeared equally displeased.

“Now where is your husband, woman?” Neads demanded.

Caroline’s eyes flashed with anger. “You are in my residence, underneath my roof, Lord Neads. You will accord me the respect I deserve and comport yourself accordingly,” she ground out, her voice steady and firm.

Emma was surprised by her mother’s vivacity, a surge of pride swelling within her. Perhaps this was her mother all along, and she had only employed a different facade under their circumstances.

The Marquess gave a displeased scoff before he carried on, “I will need to negotiate a different price with Dewsbury. Now that his daughter has been compromised, she is worth less.”

He spoke of her as though she was not in the room. Emma did not know what was more shocking—the fact that her father had sold her, or that the Marquess still intended to marry her after all the curses he had rained down on them last night.

Is he desperate for a wife?

“My daughter is not an object to be negotiated,” Caroline said indignantly, her voice resonating with righteous anger.

“You should tell that to your husband,” the Marquess spat.

Caroline’s eyes flashed with fury. “One more insult from you, Lord Neads, and I shall have you escorted out to find your bride elsewhere,” she threatened with such confidence that one would think she was truly in charge of the house.

The Marquess had just opened his mouth to retort when the Baron finally joined them. “We shall have a word away from the women, Dewsbury,” the Marquess demanded at once.

With an all but polite and friendly air, her father escorted the Marquess away to his study.

Caroline turned to Emma with an air of regret. “If that is not desperation, I do not know what is,” she remarked, shaking her head.

“I must confess, I had been hoping he would step down and forfeit the marriage after the scandal,” Caroline added, surprising Emma yet again with this admission.

“I had hoped the same, Mother,” Emma confessed, her voice tinged with sorrow.

“Neads is desperate, and no one wants to give him their daughter. At least, not a

pretty one," Caroline said, her tone filled with disdain.

"He insists on a girl with more than decent looks, you see. And all the ones available to him do not fulfill those conditions," she added, her eyes narrowing in contempt.

"Well, he will certainly need to compensate somewhere for his own looks; otherwise, I would almost feel sorry for his children," Emma said flatly.

Her mother could not help but smile at Emma's remark. "I am sorry, Emma. If only there was something I could do," she apologized once again, her demeanor growing more somber.

Emma's gaze traveled in the direction of the mantle clock. It was already noon, and George had yet to call. She wondered once again if he would ever show. If he did not, would she have to resign herself to her fate or resort to running away as Antoinetta had suggested?

The clock ticked away relentlessly. Her father remained locked in discussion with Neads, and George was nowhere to be seen. Emma began to pace the length of the drawing room, her footsteps echoing her anxiety.

"I want to believe that there is still hope, Emma," her mother said softly, watching her daughter's restless movements.

Emma forced a small smile, though her faith wavered. "I appreciate your encouragement, Mother," she replied, though the words felt hollow.

A door suddenly opened nearby, and Emma's gaze shot up, dread gripping her heart once more. This was it. Her father had finally sealed her fate. And George would never show up.

Instead of her father's study door, as she had feared, she saw a maid exiting one of the salons. Emma exhaled a shaky breath, relief mingling with her persistent anxiety. As she struggled to contain herself, the butler suddenly appeared. Before he could announce anything, George strode into the room.

Emma's breath caught in her throat. Her heart pounded fiercely as she took in his tall figure and determined expression. She felt a surge of hope so strong it nearly overwhelmed her.

"The Duke of, ah... Seymore," the butler stammered.

"I knew he would come!" Caroline shot to her feet, her excitement all too palpable.

Emma felt her legs grow weak with relief, barely able to support her weight. Tears of relief pricked at her eyes, threatening to spill over. She grasped the back of a chair for support, her emotions a tumultuous mix of hope and anxiety.

She could not be sure of George's reason for coming. A little voice in her head whispered doubts, and that anxiety washed over her once more. It was just as quickly snuffed, however, when George said, "I apologize for my lateness, but I had to obtain a license first."

Emma noticed for the first time the document he bore in his hand. Her heart leaped with a mix of disbelief and joy.

"Oh, thank heavens," her mother exclaimed, enveloping Emma in a hug. Emma found herself in utter shock. Had she heard him correctly? A special license? Was he truly here to offer for her?

More tears blinded her eyes as she struggled to blink them away. "I have the license for us to marry, Emma," George approached her as her mother pulled away.

Emma was at a loss for words, her heart pounding in her chest. As though he sensed her speechlessness, he gave her an encouraging smile and added, “Yes. I am here to offer for you, darling.”

“You were not pleased the last time you addressed me thusly,” she murmured.

He took her hand and raised it to his lips. “Much has changed since then, and I know the truth now.” He glanced at Caroline, his eyes sparking with disdain.

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Emma quickly shook her head. “My mother is innocent.”

He nodded once and looked down at her. “I am here.”

Emma’s heart swelled, but she did not have time to relish this new and unbelievable turn of fortune as a heavy dread settled in her stomach, furrowing her brows.

“It might be too late already,” she said. “The Marquess is in my father’s study. They have been in there a while, and they might have signed the contract already,” she added, praying fervently for some intervention from the heavens. A miracle even. A miracle to set her free.

“It does not matter, Emma.” George kissed her hand again. “The most important thing is if you will have me as your husband?” he asked, his sincerity evident in his eyes.

This question surprised her. Even more so, his earnestness. If this were all just a dream, then she wished never to wake up.

She nodded her response, and he raised one brow. “Miss Lovell speechless?”

She chuckled. “She certainly is, for an insufferable Duke is making an offer for her.”

“Is she inclined to accept?”

“Yes, George. She is most inclined to have him as her husband,” she said, her heart soaring with a happiness she had scarcely dared to hope for.

He beamed at her. "I will find a way to make Neads relinquish the contract. It shall not be a problem," he reassured her. "Now, which way to the Baron's study?" he asked.

The butler, who had stood witness all the while, wore a mighty grin on his face as he said, "This way, Your Grace."

George proceeded to her father's study, and Caroline rushed to embrace her. "You shall be well and safe, my dear. You shall be happy!"

"Yes, Mother!" After a moment, Emma exchanged a look with her mother and found they were thinking the same thing. "We should follow him." Caroline nodded her agreement.

They walked in to hear George declaring, "I am here to offer for Emma."

"That is preposterous!" Neads cried. "I have already signed the contract. Not to mention the numerous payments I have made," he added indignantly.

"I am afraid the ink is already dried, Seymore," her father said. Emma's heart sank at those words, though she was not surprised.

"Now listen here, Dewsbury, and listen carefully," George's voice dipped into a dangerously low tone, his demeanor shifting to one of steel, "I may not have a stellar reputation in society, but I doubt the English aristocracy care for such where the hierarchy is concerned. I am certain they will be all too willing to shun a baron out of society once a duke tells them to. You will be no more than a ghost, Dewsbury. And I shall relish every moment of making you and all your businesses invisible. Not just in England, but across the continent as well," George added, his voice cold.

Emma could have sworn she heard her father gulp nervously. He suddenly appeared

very small as George towered over him, the confidence draining entirely from his demeanor.

“Are we clear now, Dewsbury?” George asked, his tone brooking no opposition.

The Baron nodded. It was all he could do, really, Emma thought triumphantly.

“I will not have this!” the Marquess’s voice rang out, shattering Emma’s brief moment of satisfaction. She had almost forgotten his presence and the reason for it. “I acquired her first. I have an agreement with the Baron. Do we not, Dewsbury?” he added, turning to her father.

“I... well...” Tristan stuttered, his confidence visibly shaken.

“First of all, Emma is not an object of your possession, Neads,” George ground out. “And second, by all means, you may refuse to back down if you wish your sources of income equally drained, buried, and forgotten.”

Neads gave him a murderous glare before turning to her father. “You will return the initial sum I paid you, Dewsbury, or I shall be the one to render you a ghost in society before Seymore does,” he spat. With these final words, he turned and stormed out of the study, his footsteps heavy and echoing through the hall.

Emma sagged against her mother at last, relief washing over her. She could scarcely believe that she was finally free from the Marquess's grasp.

“Now, where were we?” George turned back to her father with a wicked grin. Tristan swallowed nervously, his eyes darting between George and Emma. “Ah, yes. I believe you were about to tear that contract to pieces and toss it into the hearth, Dewsbury,” George said, his voice deceptively calm.

“Ah, yes, yes,” her father stammered, quickly tearing the document and tossing it into the fireplace as instructed. The flames consumed the paper, erasing the last remnants of her unwanted betrothal.

“We shall be wed in a week,” George declared, turning to Emma with a bright smile on his face.

A smile that banished the dark clouds looming threateningly over her future. He took her hands in his and pressed tender kisses into her palms before saying, “Thank you for giving me the honor to be your husband, Emma.”

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Emma returned his smile, still trying to come to terms with all that had just transpired. She marveled at the turn of events, wondering if she was truly going to marry the man she had fallen in love with.

CHAPTER 30

“So?” Olivia jumped to her feet the moment George walked into the drawing room of Firman House after leaving Emma.

“So what?” George asked, though he had a feeling he knew where her curiosity was headed.

Jane held an equally curious glint in her eyes. “One of the footmen told the butler that the coachman informed him that you were going to the Dewsbury residence,” she responded. “We want to know what happened,” she added.

“Did you see Emma?” Olivia asked, just as impatient.

“One question at a time, ladies. I am but one man,” George chuckled lightly.

“He is laughing, Aunt Jane. So, I take it there is good news,” Olivia said, her eyes never leaving George’s face.

“I am indeed marrying Emma,” he finally announced.

Twin squeals of excitement erupted from the women. “Oh, I have never heard better news,” Jane exclaimed, hugging her niece in ecstasy.

George watched the women celebrate; their joy abundant. As he stood there, the enormity of everything finally dawned on him. He was to marry Emma, the woman who had captured him in ways he was still grappling to fathom.

“Fetch the finest wine we have,” Jane instructed a footman. “We must toast to this splendid news.” Her face aglow, and George smiled. “You have made us all very happy, George. Emma is a remarkable young lady, and you are fortunate to have won her heart.”

“I am the fortunate one, indeed,” George replied, unsure he had won Emma’s heart. She was in a state—due to the scandal—where her judgment was compromised. “Emma is everything I could have hoped for and more.”

Jane’s smile softened. “You must promise to cherish her always.”

“I give you my word,” George said solemnly.

Yes, this marriage was the result of a scandal, but George knew that he cared deeply for Emma and would do anything for her. Yet he found himself questioning his ability to protect her from society’s judgment. She was everything a man could ever dream of in a woman. He did not deserve her.

Suddenly feeling weighed down, he turned, leaving the celebrating duo, and made his way to Alexander’s study. As George oversaw most of the Firman estate affairs, he made more use of the room than its actual owner.

Shortly after he had settled into some ledgers and steward reports, a brief knock came on the door before Jane walked in.

“Are you done celebrating already?” he quipped, attempting a light tone.

“Not when the man of the occasion suddenly left the party,” she returned, taking a seat opposite the great oak desk.

George sighed, leaning back in his chair. “I needed a moment to collect my thoughts.”

Jane studied him, her eyes soft with understanding. “It is a great deal to take in, I imagine.” She sat in studious silence for a moment, her gaze searching before she finally asked, “What is on your mind, Seymour?” Whenever Jane called him by his title, he knew she was serious.

“I am a happy groom,” George returned lightly, attempting to deflect the question.

“For a happy groom, you seemed quite withdrawn after making the announcement in the drawing room,” she said.

“Aunt Jane?—”

“I know you, George, and I know something is bothering you. So do not lie to me.”

George fell pensive, his facade crumbling before her perceptive gaze. Finally, he gave in. “What if I cannot protect her from society’s scorn and judgment, Aunt Jane?” he said.

“You underestimate yourself,” Jane replied, offering him an encouraging smile.

“You sound like Alex,” George smiled wanly.

“Well, he must have gotten it from somewhere, now, do you not think?” she quipped. He chuckled in spite of himself.

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“I feel as though I have brought this upon Emma,” George continued. “Because of my inability to stay away from her, I have embroiled us in a scandal. She might have to face the consequences despite our marriage.”

“I do agree that society can be unforgiving,” Jane said. “But if you had stayed away from Emma, you would never have found your heart, much less followed it, and she would have likely ended up marrying that old Marquess. Would you have wanted that fate for her, George?”

“I would be damned before that ever happened,” he responded.

“Then that is all you need to know that you did the right thing and are more than capable of protecting her,” Jane reassured, her tone gentle.

George gave her a grateful smile. “Thank you, Aunt Jane.”

“Olivia is already making plans for the wedding breakfast,” Jane laughed and clapped her hands.

“Why, someone running faster than you in party preparations? Unbelievable,” George teased.

“She’s learning fast,” Jane chuckled. “I’m proud of her,” she added, and they laughed together, the sound filling the room with warmth. “I best leave you to those ledgers now.” Jane got to her feet.

“Splendid idea.”

“Do not tempt me to sit back down, George.” She scowled at him, but her eyes sparkled with amusement. George laughed once again. “Oh, and Seymore.” She paused at the door. “Do not allow fear to keep you from giving her your truth. In all its forms.” Her gaze softened as she said that.

Long after Jane’s exit, George found himself mulling over her last words to him. Perhaps he did owe Emma the truth. All she knew was what society had fed her. It was time she heard it from the source.

He would call upon her, he decided.

“Oh, I cannot remember the last time I had such a breathable meal without your father’s suffocation,” Caroline said as they shared a drink in the drawing room after dinner. Shortly after George’s departure earlier, her father had stormed out of the house in indignation and was yet to return.

“I cannot agree more,” Emma said. Considering she had skipped breakfast and found herself quite famished by evenfall, she had indulged quite a bit in the most sumptuous meal of mutton, potato soup, and cheese pudding.

“How do you feel?” Caroline suddenly asked.

“Well, I am not marrying the Marquess of Neads. I think that summarizes everything,” Emma let out a shaky breath, still unable to believe it all.

“Indeed,” her mother agreed happily.

“It feels unreal, Mother,” Emma sighed, her emotions a whirlwind of relief and disbelief.

“A most fortunate turn of events,” Caroline said dreamily. “Oh, Emma, I cannot

begin to tell you how happy I am for you. Seymore cares about you, and I know he will make you an excellent husband,” she added just as the butler appeared with the announcement of a caller.

“This late?” her mother said in surprise.

They were even more surprised when George was announced.

“Forgive my late and unexpected visit,” he said, bowing slightly as he entered.

“Oh no, not at all,” Caroline was beside herself. “Would you like a glass of port? Or perhaps some tea would be better?” she offered.

“I think I would prefer a walk in the gardens instead, My Lady,” George said, his eyes meeting Emma’s with a silent question. “Emma?” he offered, extending his hand.

“Oh, as a matter of fact, Emma was just talking about getting some air before you were announced,” her mother was quick to answer in her stead.

“A convenient coincidence then,” George gave Emma a look that told her he knew differently. She couldn’t help but return his surreptitious smile.

Emma accepted his proffered arm. “It is a beautiful evening,” she remarked as they walked through the garden.

“So much so that I could not stay indoors,” George agreed, his tone light.

“Is everything all right, George?” Emma asked, her voice tinged with concern. She could not help the sudden worry that came over her, wondering why he had called at such an hour. Surely his visit was not without a purpose?

“Quite all right,” he reassured her, but then grew pensive. Just when she began to despair of him speaking, he finally said, “I came to apologize to you, Emma.”

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Emma looked up at him, her brow furrowed in confusion. “Apologize? Whatever for, George?”

He stopped walking, turning to face her fully. The moonlight cast a gentle glow on his features, highlighting the sincerity in his eyes. “For the scandal, for the haste of our engagement... for everything that has caused you distress. For my initial suspicions of you. For my rudeness and interference.” He chuckled and ran a hand through his hair. “The list is quite a long one, I am afraid.”

“Your suspicions were not without grounds after all,” Emma admitted.

“And your actions were not without good reason either,” he said, taking her hands in his. “I owe you an apology, Emma. And I hope you will, in time, find it in your generous heart to forgive my many faults.”

Emma gazed up at him, scarcely believing that this contrite and humble man before her was the same George she had practically been at war with throughout the house party. His transformation filled her with a tender warmth.

“Why, you are making the lovely evening so grave, George,” Emma dismissed playfully, attempting to lighten the atmosphere. When she saw the gravity in his expression, her light spirits faltered.

“A few years ago, I was involved in a carefully orchestrated scandal,” George suddenly said, his voice heavy with the weight of the confession. “The honorable thing would have been to offer for that lady. But I refused to pay a price in a wager I held no part in. I told myself that she would have to deal with the consequences of her

own dishonesty, thus earning my less-than-respectable reputation in society,” he added, his tone tinged with regret.

“I do not care about those rumors, George,” Emma said, her voice firm and unwavering. She wondered why he was suddenly making a journey to the past. Was he perhaps trying to elevate himself in her regard? It was unlike him. And besides, she had never cared about his reputation in society. She never cared for those rumors, even if they held a shred of truth.

“Oh, but those rumors are true, Emma,” he said ruefully. “She found me alone and forced herself into my arms. We were discovered and her parents asked me to offer for her. I refused to do what was deemed honorable to punish her.” A shadow passed over his features. “Sometimes I wonder if I should have married her. The rumors had been quite difficult to bear.”

“They were a lie.”

“She never married, and I felt somewhat responsible at some point.”

Emma touched his arm. “This happened through no fault of yours,” she reassured him.

“Society does not care about the truth. The truth is never enough to ease the expectations and lessen the judgment,” he responded, his voice filled with a bitter resignation.

“If you had succumbed to those lies and expectations, George, we would not be here right now, would we?” Emma did not care if she sounded selfish at that moment. Because she felt it. She wanted to be. For this man, she did not mind being selfish.

“We wouldn’t,” he agreed with a languid smile. But Emma couldn’t shake off the

sudden uncertainty she picked up about him right now.

Was he perhaps regretting his decision to marry her? Was that the true reason for his apology and unsolicited explanation of the past?

She suddenly felt quite apprehensive as she asked, “Are you unsure of your decision to marry me, George?”

“Oh no, do not misunderstand me, Emma. I am quite certain I wish to marry you,” he quickly corrected, his expression earnest. “After all, this is inevitable. Since we were seen together,” he added, his voice carrying a hint of something that sounded almost like resignation.

Emma paused, her heart squeezing at his words. The way he phrased it—inevitable—made it sound as though their marriage was more of a necessity rather than a choice freely made out of love. She searched his face, looking for signs of genuine affection, needing to know his true sentiments.

Emma had been thrilled at the prospect of marriage to George, her heart alight with the hope of a union founded on affection rather than mere obligation. Yet, as the shadows lengthened across the garden where they strolled, she found herself yearning for a deeper connection, one that transcended duty.

“Well, in this instance, I must concede that your earlier misgivings about my intentions, and your vigilant care for Alexander, were perhaps not entirely misplaced,” she said, her voice a playful murmur as she sought to infuse a touch of mirth into the weighty conversation.

A sudden, harsh croak shattered the quiet, causing Emma to flinch. She turned towards the sound, her eyes wide with surprise. “Are you afraid of frogs?” George’s laughter rippled through the air, a sound both warm and teasing.

“That was far too robust for a mere frog. Surely, it was a toad, George,” she retorted, her cheeks coloring slightly as she defended her reaction.

“Same family,” he replied with an insouciant shrug, his eyes gleaming with amusement in the moonlight. This was the man from the house party, the one she hoped would always be there. “And yet, it still made you jump.”

Emma shot him a mock stern look, her lips twitching as she fought back a smile. Eventually, she relented, joining him in laughter.

His expression brightened, an idea clearly taking root. “You know, I have an estate in Dorset. A castle by the sea, with a pond on the grounds that is quite populated with both frogs and toads. I am quite certain you would find it enchanting.”

“The pond filled with frogs and toads?” she echoed, laughter bubbling up again. “Do you truly know what enchantment is?”

“I believe I do.” He grinned. “The seaside, Emma. I meant the seaside,” he clarified, his fingers tenderly squeezing her hand. In that gentle grasp, she felt a flicker of hope that perhaps his heart might one day echo the silent vows of hers.

“A castle by the seaside sounds magical, George,” Emma responded, her mind filled with a dreamlike wonder.

“We shall go there after the wedding,” he promised. “And perhaps I can show you how to fish for frogs,” he added, a playful edge in his voice.

"Fish for frogs?"

"Yes," George said, adopting an exaggeratedly solemn expression that only served to make him appear more comical. "I spent the better part of my early childhood scouring that pond for large frogs," he continued, his tone warming with the fondness of cherished memories.

Emma's curiosity piqued, and she tilted her head, "And what was your childhood like before you lived with Alexander's family?" she inquired, eager to know more of his life before their paths had crossed.

George's smile softened. "I barely spent any time indoors," he confessed. "My nurse always had a leading string on me when I was learning to walk because I would always wander off into mischief."

Emma laughed. "I was quite adventurous myself," she admitted. "I attempted to climb trees several times, much to my parents' horror."

"Really? And did that tame the adventurous spirit in you?"

A strict governess had indeed been brought in, but Emma's spirit had been indomitable. "Never," she declared proudly.

"As it should be, my darling." George gently took her hand and brought it to his lips. Their eyes held, lost in a quiet yearning.

But the moment was fleeting. "I must leave now," George murmured reluctantly.

Emma felt a pang of longing as he stepped away, her heart already missing the light of his presence. She wished she could pause time so he wouldn't have to leave. Alas, that was a power beyond her. George left.

As she climbed into bed later, she found that she still felt quite uneasy after his apology and abrupt confession of the past earlier. It was difficult to understand why she felt this way, but the feeling only intensified as the night bore on.

CHAPTER 31

Emma had been measuring the time since George's last visit by the tick of the clock, her anticipation and anxiety growing with each silent hour. Two days had felt like an eternity, each moment stretching taut without any word from him.

As she walked through the hallways of the house, lost in her troubled thoughts, she unexpectedly encountered her father. He had become a phantom within the walls of their home. He spent his days away, engaged in matters only he knew, and his evenings secluded in his study, the door firmly closed to the world, including his family.

Emma held her father's eyes, and the look he gave her was piercing and cold, filled with an unspoken venom that chilled her. He passed by without a word. Perhaps this is better than having him speak to me.

Just then, the butler appeared, his timing impeccable, breaking the icy atmosphere her father had left behind. "The Duchess of Preston and the Marchioness of Gillingham are waiting in the drawing room," he informed her with a respectful bow.

At the mention of her friends, a wave of relief washed over Emma. Her spirits, dampened by the heavy silence from George and the encounter with her father, lifted almost instantly. She had not seen her friends since the announcement of her

engagement to George was made public yesterday.

"Oh, I told you everything will be well, Emma," Agnes exclaimed, wrapping her in a comforting hug.

"My felicitations, dear Emma." Frannie whispered.

Emma, feeling a rush of gratitude for the presence of her dear friends, promptly rang for tea before gracefully settling into her seat across from them. Aggie could barely contain her excitement as she leaned forward, her words bubbling over. "It is all everyone can talk about in society," she declared, her eyes sparkling with delight.

"It still feels like a dream," Emma confessed. She still had very strong doubts and a sense of unease, but it did feel like a dream to marry George.

"Oh, a dream wouldn't feel this good, believe me," Frannie chimed in, her tone teasing. She leaned closer, her gaze affectionate and slightly mischievous. "Look at you, you're practically glowing, Emma."

"The bridal glow," Aggie chimed, sharing a knowing wink with Frannie. Their laughter filled the room, causing Emma to blush deeper. She was thankful for the timely arrival of the tea, which provided a welcome distraction as she busied herself with the cups and saucers.

Just as she was pouring the steaming tea, another visitor was announced, and Emma looked up in surprise. Olivia burst into the room with a flourish that only she could manage. "Oh Emma, I was practically itching to come see you, but Aunt Jane insisted I wait a day or more for you to be calm. I cannot believe we are going to be sisters!" Olivia exclaimed, her voice vibrant with excitement as she enveloped Emma in a warm, eager hug before perching next to her on the sofa.

"You're just in time for tea, Olivia," Emma responded as she exchanged greetings with Agnes and Frances.

"I just knew you and George would be perfectly matched," she proclaimed with a hint of triumph, her eyes scanning the faces of Frances and Agnes for confirmation. "At the house party, they were scarcely seen apart, you must know," she added with a flourish of her hand.

Emma felt a blush creep upon her cheeks, an involuntary testimony to her feelings. "Oh, you do flatter too much, dear Olivia," she demurred.

"I do not doubt it for an instant," Agnes chimed in with a sly smile, her gaze playful and knowing.

"And neither do I," echoed Frances, her agreement sealing the playful accusation.

"Have you all conspired against me then?" Emma laughed.

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"We merely wish for you to acknowledge what is plainly before your eyes," Olivia countered, her tone teasing yet tender.

"Infatuation?" Emma repeated, the word hanging momentarily in the air as her teacup halted in its journey to her lips.

"Oh, to be young and enamored!" Frances exclaimed.

Emma tossed a small velvet pillow at her friend. "You speak as though you are old and wise."

"I am wise!"

"So your husband has led you to believe!" Agnes laughed.

Emma felt a pang just then, recalling the affection she had seen the Duke of Preston display to his wife. She turned to Olivia. "Where is Lady Amberton?"

"Regrettably, Aunt Jane could not accompany me today; an unexpected visitor detained her," Olivia remarked as she reached for a biscuit, the blueberry jam glistening temptingly. "Nonetheless, she sends her warmest regards and eagerly awaits the opportunity to offer her congratulations in person," she continued.

Emma's response was a slight smile. "And what of the preparations for your dress and trousseau? When shall we commence the delightful task of shopping?" Agnes inquired, her eyes alight with the thrill of the occasion.

"Aggie, you would never forsake a chance to peruse the modistes' latest offerings, would you?" Frannie jested.

"Oh, why would she?" Olivia chimed, her eyes twinkling mischievously. "Any excuse to embrace our nature is welcome." Her wink was mirrored by Agnes.

"I never saw a more enthusiastic duo," Frances remarked with a fond shake of her head. Turning her attention to Emma, she continued with a warm smile, "I for one cannot wait to see what dress you choose, Emma. I think you will make the most beautiful bride."

Emma could only smile and hide what she felt within. An hour later, Olivia glanced at her empty teacup and sighed. "I'm afraid I must take my leave now," she announced, a hint of reluctance in her tone as she set the delicate China down with a soft clink.

"Oh, so soon?" Emma asked.

"Yes, I must make a trip to the bookstore," Olivia explained, her enthusiasm for her errand momentarily brightening her expression. "I'm reading a collection of books, and I need to go purchase the new volume before it becomes unavailable."

"We should have tea again," Frances and Agnes proposed in unison.

Olivia's face lit up with a grateful smile, and she was only too glad to accept their invitation. "You have such wonderful friends, Emma. I cannot wait to have tea again," she expressed warmly as Emma saw her out to the waiting carriage.

"They are one of my treasures, Olivia."

"I hope to be a part of that treasure."

“You already are.” Emma meant that, and Olivia hugged her.

Her mind wandered back to George. She’d wanted to ask Olivia about him, yet hesitated, wary of seeming too forward in her inquiries.

It is only two days, Emma. Did you expect him to write you a love letter daily or call upon you with flowers and poems? Perhaps she did—the foolish woman that she was.

"You best hurry on to the bookstore and return home in time for dinner before your brothers begin to worry," Emma said, her tone light yet purposeful, hoping to draw out some information from Olivia.

"Oh, there's only one of them at the moment," Olivia dismissed lightly with a casual wave of her hand. "George is out of town, you see," she added nonchalantly.

Emma felt a jolt of surprise but tried to keep her expression serene. "He’s gone down to one of his estates. Although I am not sure which," Olivia continued, her tone helpful yet oblivious to the storm brewing within Emma.

A wave of unease washed over Emma. Was George developing cold feet? Did he need space to reconsider his decision before the wedding? The uncertainty gnawed at her, planting seeds of doubt in her mind. What if he no longer wished to marry her?

"Oh, do not worry. He will be back in time for the wedding," Olivia reassured suddenly, as though sensing Emma's inner turmoil. Her words were meant to soothe, but they only partially succeeded.

Emma mustered a smile and bid Olivia goodbye, her thoughts a tangled web of anxiety and hope. As she walked back into the house, her steps were slow, her mind preoccupied with George's absence.

When she returned to the drawing room and retook her seat, she found her friends' eyes fixed upon her, their concern evident. Their gazes were searching, silently urging her to share what troubled her heart.

"What is wrong, Emma?" Frances asked gently, her voice a soft plea for honesty.

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"And do not even think about lying to us," Frannie added, her tone firm yet affectionate.

"We know that look only too well," Aggie supported, her brow furrowed with worry.

With a heavy sigh, Emma felt the weight of her apprehension and longing press upon her. She knew she could not hide from them, nor did she want to. These were her dearest friends, her confidantes. They deserved the truth, just as she deserved their comfort.

Emma clasped her hands tightly in her lap, her voice tinged with frustration as she finally spoke. "I haven't heard from Seymore in two days. And I just found out from Olivia that he is out of town," she confessed, her worry palpable.

Agnes leaned forward, her expression soothing. "Oh, I am sure he's probably traveled to take care of some last-minute business before the wedding," she reassured, her voice gentle and confident.

Emma shook her head, her unease deepening. "I cannot help but feel there is more to his absence, though," she murmured. "He didn't even send a note before leaving."

Frannie reached out, her hand warm and comforting on Emma's arm. "You are thinking excessively, Emma," she said firmly. "It's all right. You have nothing to worry about now."

"Do I not?" Emma retorted with a snort. "I cannot shake this unease I feel. After everything that happened, I find it hard to believe the dust could settle so easily."

So...simply and calmly."

Frannie's eyes softened with understanding. "Oh, you need to believe that this happiness you've found is well deserved, Emma," she encouraged.

"I do, but—" Emma began, only to be interrupted by Frannie.

"Then don't be a pessimist," Frannie said, her tone a mix of admonition and affection.

Agnes laughed, her light, musical tone filling the room. "It must be the bride's nerves," she concluded with a knowing nod.

"Already?" Frances quirked a brow, her curiosity piqued by her friend's new observation.

"Never too early, Frannie. Never too early for bride's nerves," Aggie nodded sagely.

Emma couldn't help but join in their mirth. After her friends' departure, she returned to the empty drawing room and sat. A dark presence came upon her and she looked up to see her father in the doorway. He seemed to drain the room of its previous light-heartedness. His gaze, cold and contemptuous, was fixed upon her.

"So, you think have won now, hmm?" he sneered, his eyes narrowing as they swept over the tea service still on the table. "Hosting tea parties in celebration and all."

Emma felt a knot of trepidation tighten in her stomach. She straightened her spine, meeting his gaze with as much calm as she could muster. "Do I not have a right to have tea with my friends?" she replied coolly.

"Enjoy it while it lasts. As you should your time with that excuse for a Duke of yours," he retorted, a sudden, inscrutable glint in his eyes intensifying her

apprehension.

Emma's heart raced. "What is that supposed to mean?" she demanded.

"I see all the time you've been spending with your mother lately has sapped you of your wits too," he spat, his words like venom. "Or perhaps you never had them to begin with." Not giving her a chance to respond, he spun on his heel and exited the drawing room, leaving Emma reeling from the cryptic and cutting exchange.

Emma sat frozen, his words ringing in her ears. Desperation clawed at her heart as she tried to reason his behavior, to convince herself that her friends' reassurances were true. But the sinister edge to her father's words, the sheer hatred in his eyes, left a lingering dread she could not shake.

Something was deeply amiss, and despite her will to see brightness in everything, Emma's instincts screamed that this was more than just bridal nerves.

CHAPTER 32

"Oh, I think you will look quite splendid in pale green lace," Lady Amberton suggested as they perused catalogues and color swatches at the modiste's, her voice brimming with enthusiasm.

As promised, Lady Amberton had called on Emma the next day, and her mother had suggested they go shopping together, an invitation the Countess was all too glad to accept.

"Do you not agree, Lady Dewsbury?" Jane turned to Caroline, her eyes alight with excitement.

"Oh, do call me Caroline, dear," her mother encouraged warmly. "And I most

certainly agree. She will look exquisite in pale green lace,” she affirmed, deftly thumbing through the catalogue. “I admire how you select such unique and refined palettes, Lady Amberton. You have quite the eye,” she commended.

“And call me Jane,” she responded with a pleased smile, clearly delighted by the compliment.

“Pardon our manners, Emma,” Jane suddenly turned to her with a look of contrition. “We are making choices as though it were our own wedding. What do you think of the pale green lace?” she asked, her eyes searching Emma’s face for approval.

Emma, who had been quietly taking in the scene, felt a warmth spread through her at their attentiveness. “I was actually considering it even before you spoke,” she confessed.

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The color had a lightness to it that Emma very much appreciated. Something about the pale green was calming, soothing her frayed nerves with its serenity.

Caroline smiled at her daughter, her eyes reflecting a mother's pride. "It suits you perfectly, my dear," she said softly.

Jane nodded in agreement, her expression one of satisfaction. "Then it is settled. Pale green lace it shall be," she declared, her tone final yet joyful.

As the modiste brought out the fabric, Emma's fingers traced the delicate lace. "Imagine how stunning you will look walking down the aisle in this," Caroline murmured, her voice almost reverent.

Emma smiled, the image of her wedding day slowly forming in her mind, yet her heart remained heavy with the uncertainties that lay ahead. Her thoughts kept returning to the unsettling exchange with her father the previous day, casting a shadow over her mood. She frowned.

"Are you certain you want this, Emma? Do not allow us to force it on you, dear. That is not what we mean to do." Her mother's gentle voice broke through her reverie, and Emma quickly smoothed her features, offering a reassuring smile.

"I am fond of the color and fabric, Mother," she said with more conviction.

"Oh, Olivia will never forgive us for coming shopping without her," Jane laughed.

"She can join us on the next excursion," Caroline suggested. "God knows we will

need more than one trip to complete the trousseau.”

“I am sure Frances and Agnes would love to come along as well,” Emma added, her spirits lifting at the thought of her friends’ company.

“Perfect,” her mother agreed.

“Oh, that would be merrier,” Jane clapped her hands in delight. “We have an entire party already,” she added, eliciting a chorus of laughter from the group.

As they returned home later, the butler met them at the door. “This was delivered for you just moments ago, Miss,” he said, handing Emma a folded missive.

Emma accepted the letter, her heart skipping. When she saw the return address from Dorset, she released a breath she hadn’t realized she was holding. Finally, George had remembered her.

Her hands trembled slightly as she unfolded the letter, her eyes eagerly scanning the words. But as she read, the color drained from her limbs. Shock and pain coursed through her, each word a cruel blow.

Dear Emma,

I write to you with a heart burdened by sorrow. After much contemplation, I find myself unable to proceed with our marriage. I fear I am not capable of committing to anyone, and it would be a grave injustice to bind you to a man whose heart cannot fully embrace the vows we are to take. I hope you can understand my position and find it in your heart to forgive me for this grievous disappointment. You deserve far more than I can offer.

With my deepest regrets,

George

These words swam in Emma's mind, each syllable a dagger straight through her heart. She stood frozen, the letter slipping from her grasp, her breath catching in her throat.

"Emma?" Her mother's voice was filled with concern as she crouched to retrieve the letter from the floor. Caroline looked up at her daughter, her eyes wide with worry. "Emma, what is it? What has happened?"

Emma could not speak, her throat constricted by a wave of emotion. She could only stare at her mother, her vision blurring. The future she had envisioned, the dreams she had cherished, shattered into pieces with George's words.

Her mother read the letter quickly. "Lord in heavens!" she exclaimed, her voice filled with shock. The next thing Emma felt was her mother's arms gently wrapping around her, guiding her toward the drawing room.

"What is going on?" Her father's voice rang out as her mother sat her limply on the sofa.

Caroline handed him the missive, and after what looked like a mere glance at it, he declared, "I knew it!" There was palpable excitement in his tone. "I warned you that something like this would happen. But you and your run-away Duke had to put on a show like some love birds," he added.

Emma slowly raised her gaze to meet his, and she had never seen such a concentration of smugness in one person.

"Tristan, this is not what she needs to be hearing from you at a moment like this," Caroline ground out.

“You be quiet!” he spat back, his attention snapping back to Emma, his eyes glinting with cruel satisfaction. He regarded her like a vulture eyeing its newly discovered carrion. “I suppose we go back to the beginning now. I am sure the Marquess of Neads will be more than happy to accept your shameful return to him,” he added happily.

Emma’s heart clenched at his words. Caroline stepped closer to her daughter, her eyes blazing with protective fury. "Tristan, this is not the time for your vindictive satisfaction. Can you not see what this has done to her?"

He sneered. "It is a lesson learned. She ought to have known better than to trust in such frivolous notions as love."

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Emma felt oddly detached from her surroundings, her mind reeling with disbelief. But the mention of the Marquess brought a sudden clarity, a sharp jolt that pierced through her shock.

“There has to be a mistake somewhere,” she exclaimed, leaping to her feet. “This letter cannot be real. George wouldn’t do this.” She shook her head vehemently, clinging to a desperate hope.

“You’re foolish enough to be in denial now?” Her father quirked a brow, regarding her as though she had lost her senses.

“I know George. He wouldn’t do this,” Emma insisted, though her voice wavered, betraying her uncertainty.

“Do you, now?” Tristan’s derisive brow arched even higher. “If you wish, you can compare this letter he wrote to the marriage contract he signed and see for yourself,” he suggested with a confidence that chilled her to her very bones.

Emma followed him to his study, her heart pounding in her chest. Her father retrieved the marriage contract George had signed and laid it before her. With trembling hands, she compared the penmanship.

It was identical. Her heart shattered, the truth sinking in like a lead weight. George had indeed written the letter.

“It is all right,” her father said with a chuckle, his tone dripping with mockery. “At least you have the Marquess who is willing to accept a compromised bride.”

“I am not marrying Neads,” Emma snapped, her voice sharp with defiance.

“Oh, but you have nowhere else to turn,” Tristan laughed, the sound echoing with cruel satisfaction. “You see, having a choice is a luxury you lost a long time ago,” he added, his words cutting through Emma like a knife.

The next twenty-four hours were the worst of Emma’s life. The heavens poured with such vengeance it was practically a reflection of her agony. Each clap of thunder seemed to echo her despair, each flash of lightning a reminder of her shattered dreams.

Emma stood by the window, watching the relentless downpour. Perhaps the storm was her ally in this dark time. If only it held the answers she sought so desperately.

Every instinct screamed at her to flee, to escape the suffocating confines of her father’s control. But she felt paralyzed, trapped by her own fears and the overwhelming weight of uncertainty.

The butler’s voice broke through her thoughts, announcing visitors. “In this storm?” her mother exclaimed.

Emma turned as Olivia and Lady Amberton walked into the drawing room, their faces etched with concern. They were closely followed by Alexander, his expression rigid and solemn.

“Oh, Emma,” Olivia said softly, her eyes brimming with tears. “We heard what happened.”

Emma tried to speak, but the words caught in her throat. She felt the overwhelming urge to break down, to let the flood of emotions pour out, but she held herself together by sheer will.

"I cannot believe George would do this." Olivia shook her head as she took a seat next to Emma on the sofa. Jane settled on the other side, each woman grasping one of Emma's hands, their comforting squeezes offering silent support.

"This is unlike George," Alexander said, his brow furrowed in deep thought. "He wouldn't do something like this. Not the brother I know," he added.

"I cannot understand his actions either," Jane declared.

Alexander's expression hardened then. "I shall go down to Dorset as soon as the weather allows. I am going to drag George back by his hair if I have to."

"No." Emma finally found her voice, a broken whisper that silenced the room. "You do not have to. I understand his reasons." She did not want anyone forcing George to marry her. It would only sink her deeper into sorrow and misery.

"But Emma, we must try. Even for the slightest chance that he's making a mistake in his decision," Olivia insisted, her grip tightening on Emma's hand.

"I agree with Alex and Olivia. George needs to return and fulfill his responsibility," Jane said vehemently.

The mention of responsibility only pained Emma more. That was all she'd ever been to George. All she ever would be. A mere responsibility, one he'd now discarded without a second thought.

"I am grateful to all of you for your concerns," Emma forced herself to meet their somber gazes, "but it is enough. Do not force him into anything. I am fine with his decision," she lied, the words tasting bitter on her tongue.

The sympathetic looks on their faces only deepened her sorrow. She couldn't bear to

see the pity in their eyes. With a deep breath, she rose from the sofa, her movements slow and deliberate, as though every step required immense effort.

“Emma, please—” Olivia began, her voice choked with emotion, but Emma held up a hand to forestall any further pleas.

“No, Olivia. It is better this way. Thank you for your kindness.”

With those words, she turned and exited the drawing room, her heart bleeding. Each step away from them felt like a step deeper into her sorrow. She reached her room and closed the door behind her, the silence pressing down like a suffocating blanket.

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Emma sank onto her bed, her body trembling with the force of her suppressed sobs. The tears came then, hot and unchecked. She clutched a pillow to her chest, muffling her cries as she gave in to the overwhelming tide of despair.

The image of George's charming face haunted her. She had dreamed of a life with him, and those doubts she had desperately wished were unfounded had been true. Perhaps she should have listened to the warnings her instincts gave her.

The following morning at dawn, Emma sealed four letters she had written. The first three were addressed individually to her mother, Frances, and Agnes. The last one was to the Wingers collectively. She placed her mother's letter on the fireplace mantle in her bedchamber, propped against a vase, and tucked the remaining three into her reticule.

She donned her cloak and met Antoinetta in the rear vestibule. The weather was still foul, but she did not care. "Are you ready?" Antoinetta asked.

"As ready as I will ever be," Emma replied, her resolve firm.

Together, they slipped out of the quiet house, the cold biting at their faces. Emma handed the letters to her lady's maid, her hands shaking slightly. They made a brief stop along the way, where Antoinetta met with a young boy.

"He will have the letters delivered safely. I trust him," Antoinetta explained after handing the letters to the boy along with some instructions.

Emma gave her a grateful smile and looped their arms. They stopped a hack and gave

him instructions to convey them to the outskirts of town. “Are you sure you do not wish to travel by the mail coach?” Antoinetta asked as they settled in their seats.

“I might be found that way,” Emma murmured, staring out the window. “I cannot allow anyone to find me.” A wistful smile touched her lips. “I might even change my name and become a governess. I have the education for it.”

“Oh, do not sound like a woebegone maiden, Emma.”

“Surely, I am allowed some humor however dreary it is.”

Antoinetta sighed. “We shall be fine.”

As they neared the outskirts of London, the carriage stopped suddenly, jolting Emma and Antoinetta in their seats. They stared at each other in horror, Emma’s mind racing.

“Why did we stop?”

“I do not know.”

The door opened suddenly, and her father’s face appeared. “Where do you think you are going?” Tristan’s voice was cold and menacing, his eyes blazing with anger.

Emma sat rigidly, her chest heaving with fear. “I am leaving,” she said, her voice steady despite the terror that was gripping her.

“You are doing no such thing,” he snarled, reaching and dragging her out of the carriage. His strength was beyond her, and she kicked against him.

Her father threw her to the ground, then did the same with Antoinetta. Emma brushed

the rain and mud from her face with the wool of her cloak and staggered to her feet. Her father was not the only menace in front of her, for beside him on horseback was...

Damned Neads!

“I will not marry him,” Emma declared. “I would rather die a thousand times than to be tied to a man I do not love!”

Her father’s face twisted with rage. “You foolish girl! You will do as you are told.”

Emma felt Antoinetta’s hand on her arm. “No, Father. I will not.”

The Marquess dismounted then, his cold eyes assessing her. “You have no choice, Miss Lovell. Your father has given his word, and you will honor it.”

Emma clenched her teeth. “I have my own word to honor, and I will not betray myself.”

Her father’s hand shot out, gripping her arm with bruising force. “You will come with us now!”

Emma kicked against his booted shin. “You would have to carry my dead body back to London!”

Antoinetta joined in kicking him. “Release her!”

“You overstep your bounds!” Tristan pushed Antoinetta, but his hold of Emma’s arm remained like a vice. He raised a fist, but before he could let it fly, the sound of a gunshot ripped through the air.

Emma froze, and so did her father. Time itself seemed to stop as her gaze darted around in frantic search. She was unhurt, she realized. No one appeared hurt.

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Hoofbeats followed the gunshot. Emma's heart pounded as she turned to see the source of the commotion. Like a mirage—no, a dream—George rode toward her, pointing a pistol up into the air. He had fired the shot, she realized, her breath catching in her throat. Behind him was Alexander, closely galloping on another mount.

What is going on? Why is George here?

CHAPTER 33

"Release my Duchess at once, Dewsbury, or I will make you regret your entire existence!"

Emma could hardly believe her eyes when George suddenly dismounted before them, his movements swift and purposeful.

Shock and disbelief flickered across her father's countenance as he reluctantly loosened his grip on her arm and took a step back. Emma instinctively massaged the mortified flesh, still reeling from the intensity of the confrontation.

"You cannot succumb to their threats so easily, Dewsbury," cried an indignant Neads, who also dismounted earlier, his voice trembling with outrage.

Alexander took a menacing step toward the old Marquess, his presence imposing and unyielding. Neads instantly shrank back, his confidence dissipating in the face of such a figure. Coward! Emma thought, her disdain for the Marquess only deepening.

The hate in Neads' gaze was apparent as he glared at them all, a hatred that mirrored the one in her father's eyes as he met George's equally intense ire. George looked as though he wanted to punch something to a pulp. Emma couldn't help but feel a slight apprehension for her father, despite everything.

George, with more self-control than she had credited him for in that moment, simply said to the Baron, "Take several steps away from her." Tristan obeyed, and George nodded. "Wise choice."

He immediately turned to her and made to draw her into his arms. Emma took a step back, shaking her head. "I don't understand," she said, her hurt and indignation warring with her shock. "Your letter made it clear you no longer wanted me. What is the meaning of this now?" she demanded, her voice trembling.

"Emma," George stepped closer, his eyes filled with sorrow. But she stepped away again, maintaining the distance between them.

"Explain yourself, George," she insisted, her voice rising as desperate tears pricked at her eyes.

At that moment, the rain fell heavier, as if the heavens were telling her to listen to him. The droplets mingled with her tears, masking the true depth of her confusion.

"Let us return home, Emma, and I will explain everything," George implored. "But I need to get you home first."

"I am not going with a man who does not want me anymore," she replied obstinately, her heart breaking anew. "You write to me with a thorough rejection, and you come to pretend to rescue me? What is the matter with you?"

"I never wrote a letter, Emma. Your father and Neads forged it," he declared, his tone

firm and sincere. "It was a near perfect forgery, too, for your mother showed it to me when I went to the house."

Shock gripped her once again. She looked to Alexander, who was now helping an unhurt Antoinetta to her feet. He nodded in confirmation, his expression solemn.

Her relief was so overwhelming that Emma's legs nearly gave way beneath her. She immediately felt George's arms around her, steadying her, his touch warm and reassuring.

"Emma, please," he whispered, his voice filled with anguish. "I would never abandon you. You must believe me." She nodded, while he led her to his waiting horse.

Once she was atop and he had mounted behind her, George turned to Alex. "Take care of her lady's maid, then bring the Baron and Marquess to me."

Now Emma noticed that George and Alex were not the only gentlemen around them. There were others on mounts circling her father and Neads, preventing their escape.

Upon hearing George's words, Neads ran forward, attempting to flee. One of the gentlemen reared his horse as if to trample the Marquess. He fell back, landing in a puddle.

Emma would have laughed were she in a different state of mind. She felt George lean close to her, his warmth enveloping her. "You are safe, my love."

Releasing a shuddering breath, Emma allowed herself to lean back against him, deciding to trust him.

They arrived at the Seymore House before Alexander's party, and George carried her into the house in his arms. The moment they entered the front hall, Jane and Olivia

rushed to them.

"Oh, thank goodness you are all right," the women echoed in unison, their relief so palpable that Emma felt a fresh surge of emotion tighten her throat. She realized then just how glad and relieved she was to see them.

"She needs warmth," George said urgently.

"Quickly, let us get you out of those wet clothes before you catch a cold," Jane ushered him toward the stairs, with Olivia close behind. He carried her to a guest bedchamber, but as soon as he set her down on her feet, Jane pushed him out and closed the door.

"When we received news of what was going on, George asked us to wait for him here, and to bring anything you might need," Olivia explained as she laid a frock out on the bed. "Because of the storm, Aunt Jane suggested we bring a change of clothing for you too."

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"Fortunately," Emma said, moving toward the hearth and rubbing her hands together. "After these showers, I'm freezing," she confessed a little sheepishly.

"I am sure you did not take note of how cold it is while you were fleeing," Jane said with a pointed look as she helped Emma out of her drenched cloak and travel frock.

Emma chuckled. "One hardly feels such things when they are desperate."

"Indeed." Jane smiled. "We are very happy George found you early."

Emma never thought she would appreciate dry clothing this much as she smoothed down the skirts of the pretty pale blue morning dress that was Olivia's. It was almost a perfect fit, except for the bosom, which was a little too tight.

"Come." Jane moved toward the door. "George is waiting."

They returned downstairs to the sight of George pacing the drawing room, his agitation evident in every step. The moment he saw her, his demeanor softened, and he rushed to Emma, taking her hand and leading her to sit in a chair.

He kneeled before her. "Emma, I am so sorry I left without so much as a note," he said. "The trip had been unplanned," he added, looking slightly sheepish.

Emma's mind whirled with confusion and relief. "I don't understand... How did you know to return when you did?"

"I actually arrived in town shortly before dawn," he responded, his eyes never leaving

hers. “And the moment I got in, Alex accosted me with questions I knew nothing of. He was ready to march me to the altar with a pistol to my back to marry you. Then he mentioned a certain letter...” He paused, his expression darkening with remembered frustration.

Emma felt a pang of guilt as she realized the chaos her father’s actions had caused. “I cannot believe my father went that far,” she thought aloud.

“I am not surprised,” George said bitterly, his jaw tightening. “After the news, I left for your house at once, but the Baron was already gone when I arrived. Your mother was in tears when she gave me your letter.”

Emma’s heart ached at the thought of her mother’s distress. “Oh dear,” she murmured, guilt washing over her. “I never meant to cause such trouble.”

“Your mother told me that a footman saw your departure and roused the Baron. Your father and Neads, fortunately, left a trail, and we followed it to find you,” George explained. “I knew Neadswas desperate for a handsome heir, but I did not realize the extent.”

George’s expression darkened, and he raised her hand to his lips. “I will make him pay for this. Your father I shall be slightly lenient with, but the Marquess shall disappear from society.” Emma felt her eyes widen, for she had never seen George make such a strong avowal.

She had just opened her mouth to speak when a commotion erupted in the front hall. Moments later, Alexander appeared, shepherding the Baron and the Marquess into the room. Their hands were bound behind their backs, and they walked with sullen reluctance. Emma could feel the hate coming from the men, their eyes burning with malice.

George's anger resurfaced, his jaw clenched tightly as he rose and faced the men who had caused so much pain.

"Emma?" Her mother's frantic voice echoed through the hall. Caroline rushed into the drawing room, enveloping Emma in a tight hug the moment she saw her. Emma felt the warmth and comfort of her mother's embrace, and a fresh wave of emotion washed over her.

"I am so sorry, Mother," Emma whispered, her voice thick with guilt and relief. "I could not go on with it. I could not imagine a life married to him. I had to go."

Caroline pulled back slightly, her eyes filled with understanding. "I understand, my dear. It does not matter now. You're backsafe and all right. That is the most important thing," she said, dabbing at her tears with a handkerchief.

George stepped forward, his expression softening as he addressed Caroline. "You've arrived just in time, My Lady," he said respectfully.

"Thank you for letting me know to meet you all here," Caroline responded.

George turned to Dewsbury and Neads. "Tell them what you did, Neads," he commanded, authority resonating in his tone.

The old Marquess glared at him for what seemed like an eternity before grudgingly speaking. "I wouldn't be the first man to forge a letter, and neither would I be last," he said, eliciting gasps of surprise and disapprobation from Olivia, Jane, and Caroline.

"Of course, I did not act on my own. Dewsbury here was just as involved in the forgery to make his daughter marry me," the Marquess added, now glaring at the Baron. "You incompetent fool! You couldn't even keep a leash on your own

daughter!"

"Watch your words, Neads!" George's eyes flashing with anger.

The Baron's face twisted with resentment as he spoke. "Well, I only helped write the letter because Neads was paying me to marry Emma, while you had no intention of giving me a shilling, Seymore."

"Congratulations, gentlemen. You have successfully brought an end to your time in society," George said, his voice low and dangerous. "I will warn you two for the last time," he continued, his eyes narrowing. "Henceforth, if any one of you so much as enters the same room Emma is in, you will pay a price heftier than what I intend for you now."

With that, George gave a curt nod, and two of the gentlemen Emma had seen earlier came to drag them away. Her father's face was pale, while Neads gaped like a fish in need of water. The room erupted with exclamations of disbelief and lamentations.

George turned to the assembled group. "May I have a word with Emma in private, please?" he asked, his voice soft now. He dropped to one knee in front of her once they were alone. His eyes held hers with a raw vulnerability she had never seen before.

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"First of all, I want to apologize again, Emma," he began, his voice trembling with emotion.

"Oh George, but you don't have to," Emma said, her heart aching at the sight of him so humbled before her.

"Do hear me out," he implored, and she listened, her breath catching in her throat. "When you expressed interest in my castle in Dorset, I realized it was in no condition to receive, much less house my Duchess, so I quickly traveled to put things in order and have some renovations commenced in time," he explained, his voice steady as he spoke. "I did not ever think that the Baron and Marquess would seize the opportunity of my absence and try to force a marriage before my return."

"You wouldn't have known," Emma reassured softly.

He pressed a kiss into her palm. "The castle is named Grayward, but I believe it should be changed to Emtan Castle, from your name."

Her lips parted and she blinked. "You cannot be in earnest!"

He laughed. "Oh, I am." He pulled her down into his arms, kissing both of her cheeks. "I am a man besotted, Emma. I want to name our castle after you and give you everything you can ever desire."

"Oh, George." Every painful memory disappeared in that moment, for Emma was finding where she belonged.

His expression grew serious. "After all that has transpired, we cannot trust the Baron with your mother. I took the liberty of arranging a house on the castle grounds for her to move into," he said, his eyes searching hers for approval. "That is if she will agree."

"Oh, I am sure she would love to," Emma answered on her mother's behalf, fresh emotion welling up within her at his thoughtfulness. She felt a wave of relief knowing her mother would be safe from her father's tyranny.

"Have I earned your forgiveness now?" He cocked one eyebrow as she asked.

"After all the trouble you went through, I shall contemplate forgiving you, George. But not yet," Emma teased as she made a show of pondering this.

George laughed. "Oh, but I need your forgiveness, Emma, as I need you to be my wife."

She playfully asked, "Why?"

"Because I love you," he replied, drawing her ever closer. "I love you, Emma," he repeated with such vehemence that she momentarily forgot how to breathe.

Am I dreaming again? she wondered in bliss, her heart pounding with a joy she had scarcely dared to hope for.

"I have loved you since the very beginning, Emma, and was only too cowardly to admit it, much less share," he added, his voice thick.

"You did not get in my way solely to protect Alex, did you?" she asked with a sly smile.

“You wish to see me entirely humbled before you, stripped of all my pride?”

“Yes,” she laughed.

“I wanted you for myself. Yes, I had to protect Alex, but every moment you spent in his company drove me toward bedlam!”

Emma laughed again. “Oh, poor, George. Who knew love could make you charming?”

“I was charming before. It is why you fell for me,” George said, a teasing glint in his eyes.

“I never said I love?—”

George silenced her with his lips capturing hers in a tender, sweet embrace. His kiss was soft and lingering, filled with a depth of emotion that spoke more eloquently than words ever could. Emma felt herself melting into him, her heart soaring with a joy she had never known.

She was free, at last!

EPILOGUE

Two days later

“It is my great honor to announce you man and wife,” the parson declared, his voice resonating in the elegantly featured drawing room of George’s house.

Unable to resist the overwhelming joy and love he felt, George turned to Emma and drew her close, captured her lips in a kiss, sealing their union with all the passion in

his heart. The room erupted in cheerful applause.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:14 am

Emma was laughing when George released her, blushing delightfully, her gaze lowered.

Jane, Olivia, Lady Dewsbury, the Duchess of Preston, the Marchioness of Gillingham, and Alex, all stepped forward to offer their felicitations.

“Congratulations, my dear!” Jane exclaimed, enveloping Emma in a warm hug.

“You make such a beautiful bride,” Lady Dewsbury added, her eyes glistening with tears of joy.

The Duchess of Preston and the Marchioness of Gillingham embraced Emma tightly, their excitement uncontained, and Olivia joined them. “We are so happy for you, Emma,” the Duchess said, her voice brimming with affection.

Alex grinned broadly, clapping George on the back. “Well done, George! And Emma, you look radiant.”

“I have your flowers to thank for that,” Emma chuckled as she waved the bouquet she was holding, which were from Alex’s prized plants.

“So, whose wedding is next?” Alex asked, looking around the room.

Jane smiled smugly, her gaze landing on Olivia. “I believe I know,” she said, her tone playful.

Olivia shyly lowered her head, a blush spreading across her cheeks.

“What is going on that I do not know about?” George asked, puzzled by the exchange.

Emma laughed. “It is Olivia’s secret, my love.”

Curiosity piqued, George could not help but smile. The gathering then moved to the dining room for the wedding breakfast. Baron Dewsbury no longer had a place in society—George had seen to it. He was not present at the wedding, either. Neads had left England.

As he helped Emma into her seat, he noticed Olivia exchanging a look with Lord Tannenbay. Turning to Emma, he saw her grinning. “Now you know the secret,” she whispered, her eyes dancing with delight.

“Yes, I see.” He grinned and returned his attention to his wife, feeling like the most fortunate man in the world.

George guided Emma through the grand hallways of Emtan Castle a week later, her eyes covered with a blindfold. The gentle echo of their footsteps on the marble floor were the only sounds that filled the air. George could hardly contain his excitement.

“Are we there?” Emma asked.

“Not yet,” George replied, pausing to kiss the top of her head, his lips lingering for a moment. The sweet scent of her hair filled his senses, and he felt a surge of love and tenderness. Then he continued leading her forward and into the gallery, finally bringing her to a stop in front of his newest acquisition.

Carefully, he removed Emma’s blindfold. She blinked up at the painting, her eyes adjusting to the light. When she saw the artwork, she squealed with delight. “Where did you find it?”

“I collected it on my way back from Wiltshire,” George confessed. “All I could think about at that moment was you.”

Emma reached out to touch the Aztec painting, her fingers tracing the abstract patterns with delicate reverence. She tilted her head, observing the intricate details with a mixture of awe and admiration. Then, turning to face him, she wrapped her arms around his neck, her eyes shining with happiness.

“Is the painting mine?” she asked.

George couldn’t help but tease her. “Who else could it belong to?” He pulled her closer, his hands resting on her waist. “I want to fill the castle with paintings for you, Emma.”

She laughed. “And children.”

He agreed, his heart swelling. “And children too,” he echoed before turning her around to face the painting and embracing her from behind. The world seemed to fade away, leaving only the two of them in that perfect moment.

His life was utterly complete, and he knew that Emma was the reason for it all. She completed him in every way.

The End?