



# Trapped with her Cruel Duke

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**Category:** Erotic, Romance, Adult, Historical

**Description:** "Your hand, your body, even your breaths belong to me now. So you'd better start acting like it."

Unladylike. Feisty. Out of prospects. After breaking a Marquess' nose in public, Lady Louise is doomed...Until the coldest Duke, owner of her father's rival club, claims her. And he's far more seductive than she can take...

Arrogant. Cold. Ruthless. Duke Christian would do anything to avenge his brother's disappearance. Even marry his enemy's daughter. So he enters a marriage of convenience with Louise...And she soon gets him obsessed.

But his new wife hates him. Or so she says, while she moans his name...

\*If you like a realistic yet steamy depiction of the Regency and Victorian era, then *Trapped with her Cruel Duke* is the novel for you.

**Total Pages (Source):** 99

## CHAPTER 1

“Your turn, My Lord.”

Christian kept his gaze fixed on his cards, but his whole body was attuned to the man at the neighboring table. The Earl of Northbridge belched loudly as he examined the cards in his hand, squinting in the dim light of the gaming hall. The three men around him were a tableau of expectation, waiting to see what might happen next.

Christian dealt his own hand while keeping a close watch on the pattern of play in the other game.

“My Lord? Are you prepared to continue?”

The Earl had little left to wager beyond his reputation. He had long since played out his purse, yet the others at the table seemed unwilling to challenge him on it.

He took another sip of his drink, already too drunk to play as sharply as he had but seemingly unaware of the decline of his faculties. Christian waited—he had always been good at biding his time.

The Earl slapped a hand on the table, and the others looked at him expectantly. “I have something new to wager.”

Christian trumped the card in front of him, letting his own game fall to the wayside as he concentrated on what the Earl would say next.

“And what is that, My Lord?”

“My daughter.”

Christian’s blood ran cold. He kept a stoic expression as he watched the other men in the room sit up straighter at the offer. Plenty of gentlemen knew of the Earl’s daughter—she had quite the reputation already. Not every lady could boast of having broken a marquess’s nose.

“You would bet your daughter, My Lord? How so?”

That was the man to the Earl’s right. An odious gentleman named Mortimer, who was thirty years too old to be considering marrying a young woman of twenty-one summers.

Christian curled his fingers around his cards and remained very still.

“She is a commodity in her own right, after all,” the Earl boasted, stretching out his legs and leaning back in his chair. The man acted as though he were speaking about the weather. “I know many of you have imagined taming her after that incident last year. Quite a prize.” He belched loudly again. “What is your offer? And do refrain from insulting me with a paltry sum.”

Christian felt sick to his stomach. The man was selling his daughter to a mere acquaintance over a hand of cards—and as a mistress, no less. No man in the room wanted her as a wife. They merely wanted to crow about owning such a lady.

Either the Earl had truly lost his senses or he no longer understood the ramifications of his actions.

No matter—his ignorance will play into my plans very well.

As Christian's game ended, he nodded to the men at his table. Rising, he gestured to a servant to refill his glass, and a decanter of brandy was brought to him as he listened intently.

"Well?" the Earl slurred. "I have already bet her dowry. What will you bet me for the lady herself? Iron fists and all." He chuckled as though it was a glorious joke.

Christian leaned against the sideboard, swirling his glass gently and waiting for his moment. The other men at the Earl's table were exchanging uneasy glances.

"Ten thousand," Mortimer piped up. He had the deck of cards in his hands and was shuffling them incessantly, his beady eyes fixed on the Earl.

Northbridge snorted. "That's less than her dowry, man. Be serious."

"Fifteen thousand," called a voice from the back of the room.

It seemed that their wager had sparked some interest, no matter how repugnant the terms might be.

"I'll take no less than twenty thousand," the Earl declared with his usual arrogance.

There was a murmur of dissent before Mortimer flicked the cards expertly to the center of the table. "Twenty thousand then, and custodial control of her trust."

Northbridge eyed him carefully, swaying slightly in his seat.

Christian saw the moment the man made his decision and took the opportunity to saunter over to the table just before he could agree, swirling the brandy in his glass, his eyes fixed on Northbridge. He stopped beside him, waiting for the Earl to notice him.

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Northbridge eventually turned to look up at him, his face contorting with thinly veiled disgust.

Oh, this will be immensely gratifying.

“What is it, Egerton?” the Earl muttered.

“It is ‘Your Grace’ to you.” Christian reached into the inner pocket of his coat and threw down the paper that had been burning against his skin for the entire evening.

Two nights ago, Christian witnessed another sorry display from this man. Northbridge had bet the deed to his townhouse at a game of piquet and lost it in as little as thirty minutes. Christian had gone to considerable lengths to buy it back for just this purpose. He watched the Earl’s eyes go wide as he recognized the paper.

“What the devil is the meaning of this?” Northbridge asked, looking up at him in disbelief.

“I’ll make a bet on your daughter, My Lord. Considering your debts, I’m not sure Mortimer’s bid will have much effect.”

There were scandalized murmurs all around the room now. Christian did not even flinch.

“If I win, you get back the home you gambled away. The home where your daughter and your wife now live. Will that do? It would be more than fair, considering you haven’t anything left to wager.”

There was a steady rumbling of voices around them now. The Earl was crimson with fury. Christian heard someone mutter, “Bad form,” from a few tables away, but he did not care for their opinion. He only wanted to retain the Earl’s attention and secure his agreement. If he could do that, he might just get what he wanted most in the world—the whereabouts of his brother and the truth of what had happened to him.

“How have you come by this?” Northbridge asked, picking up the deed and examining it for authenticity.

“I do not have long, My Lord. Are we playing or not?”

Christian took a long sip of his brandy. Mortimer was glaring at him but seemed to have thought better of his offer already. Christian sensed the amusement of the other men around the table.

The Earl had few friends left.

“Unless you want to be destitute,” Christian continued lightly. “Debtors’ prison has improved in recent years, or so I am told.”

The Earl spluttered with outrage, but he knew he had been outdone. With gritted teeth, he motioned to Mortimer to deal the cards for their game.

“You have my seat, Your Grace. The table does not favor me tonight.” The man opposite the Earl rose and left them to it.

Christian swiftly sat down, straightening his shirt cuffs as he leveled Mortimer with a hard stare, and the other two men rose and left them to their game.

“Écarté? As I say, I am pressed for time. First to five?”

“Very well,” the Earl agreed and waved a hand dismissively.

“May I?” Christian asked and received a nod as he dealt the cards.

The first round was uneventful. The Earl’s grip on his cards was tight, his eyes sharpening from their earlier stupor, but he seemed fairly certain of his gameplay.

Christian did not win every trick, but he learned his opponent’s tells fairly early on. Every time the Earl ran his teeth over his lower lip, he would play a trump, meaning he had run out of the suit in play.

As the game wore on, the Earl’s moves grew more erratic, and with each ill-advised discard, Christian’s hold on the game strengthened.

By the time they had played several rounds, the score stood at four to three in Christian’s favor. Northbridge, though brimming with bravado, looked noticeably paler than when they had started. Christian couldn’t help but wonder if the Earl might actually feel some regret for what he had done to his only child.

If that were true, he would not have bet her future on a hand of cards.

Christian kept his eyes fixed on his own hand as they continued to play. He knew the Earl was running out of options and waited until he saw his teeth skim over his lower lip, knowing Northbridge would discard as a next move.

Christian could feel the eyes in the room on them now. This type of high-stakes game was rarely played, and certainly not with such abandon.

The Earl glanced up at him as he discarded two of his cards, and Christian did the same. He watched the Earl’s mood sour further as he looked at the cards he had chosen. Christian eyed him warily. Was it genuine disappointment, or was the Earl

trying to fool him?

Northbridge played his final exchange, placing the queen of spades in the center of the table with a smug smile as if the game were already won. It was a good bluff; Christian had to give him credit for that.



## Page 3

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Northbridge looked up smugly, catching the eyes of his gang of acquaintances on the other side of the room and slowly leaning back in his chair.

“A good game,” he said loudly as many heads turned in their direction. “You almost had me there.”

Christian waited for five full seconds before he pulled the king of spades from his hand and placed it slowly over the queen. The room fell silent.

“Yes, My Lord. I did.”

The Earl’s face contorted in shock as he leaned forward, his cravat tightening around his neck as he swallowed convulsively. Christian didn’t move for a little while, enjoying the feeling of triumph that coursed through him. He had finally bested the man who had insulted him and his brother all those years ago.

I know he is to blame for what has happened to Marcus, and I will find out the truth. Nothing else matters.

Christian scooped up the deed to the house and rose to his feet. The Earl was a sorry sight, his face ashen and his eyes hooded. He would have a thick head in the morning—Christian could only hope that he wouldn’t forget their agreement.

“My club is holding a masquerade ball in two days. Bring your daughter there. And make sure you arrive on time. I do not wish to be kept waiting.”

## CHAPTER 2

Louise smoothed down her skirt for the final time as she listened to the patter of rain on the window.

For late March, it had been unseasonably cold, and she was glad of the fur that ran along the hem of her skirt. As a homage to the rumors about her, Louise had chosen to dress as the Ice Queen for the masquerade ball.

Not lacking wit, she had asked her father whether she should dress in armor to match her reputation as the Iron Harridan, but he had not taken kindly to the joke.

She picked up her mask, loath to wear it until they arrived, but she was satisfied with the final ensemble. The pale blue silk beneath the layers of chiffon dazzled with snowflake beading around the hem and bodice. Her pale blue gloves also perfectly matched the extravagant necklace that adorned her neck. The clasp at the back fastened the necklace securely, its jewels cascading down her skin in a graceful arc—fanning out at the base, finishing in teardrop crystals that caught the light.

Her mask, too, sparkled with jewels around the eyes, and the fur moved pleasantly when she walked.

She still could not understand why her father insisted that they attend this event. It was hosted by a rival club for whom he had intense hatred, and he famously detested any occasion where he needed to dress like a fool. Her suggestion that he attend as a jester also had not been received well.

Louise pushed the final pin into her hair, turned left and right to ensure that it was secured by the white ribbon running through it, and then headed downstairs.

She found her mother nervously standing in the entryway, waiting for her father to appear.

Lady Northbridge had chosen the guise of a peacock. She looked effortlessly elegant and much younger than her forty years.

They smiled at one another as Louise descended the last few steps. But just then, the Earl stormed out of his study with a face like thunder, pulling on his gloves as though an army were after him.

“Finally,” he barked when he saw them both waiting for him. “Why does it take an age for you to be ready, girl?”

“Perfection takes time, Papa,” Louise replied smoothly.

Her mother stiffened beside her.

Her father’s expression darkened, and he advanced on her menacingly, reminding her that it was unwise to provoke him when he was so on edge.

“There will be no foolishness this evening. I do not care what any man says to you—you will not behave in the manner you were accused of last Season. Is that understood?”

Louise bit her tongue and curled her fingers around her reticule, barely restraining herself from flinging the thing at her father’s head.

“Papa, I have explained multiple times that Lord Fortescue attacked me. I did not mean to hurt him. I believe the man simply has weak bones.”

“Whatever the cause, there will be no more of it, is that understood? This family’s reputation hangs by a thread as it is!”

“What do you mean by that?” Louise asked sharply, noting her father’s cheeks

reddening alarmingly as blood rushed to his face.

With an effort, he seemed to recover himself, taking in a deep breath as he straightened his gloves and offered his arm to his wife.

“Why are we going to an event at Orions, Papa?” Louise asked for the second time. “I know you cannot be anticipating it with great relish. Would it not be simpler to send our excuses?”

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The Earl closed his eyes as though centering himself. When he opened them again, the look on his face was almost guilty, but it vanished just as quickly.

“You should not be ungrateful for our attendance. Have you not been eager for news of Lord Marcus Wright? His brother is a founding member of the club, after all.”

Louise felt the same flutter of unease in her chest as she thought of Marcus’s disappearance.

“Has there been some news, then?” she asked hopefully.

“I know not, but the Duke will be able to tell us if there has. We should go, or else we’ll be late.”

With a long sigh, Louise followed her parents outside into the spitting rain of a brisk, hazy evening. The carriage was waiting for them, and as they climbed inside, she felt the familiar rush of anticipation for the ball ahead.

She was well aware that her reputation had not recovered from the incident with Lord Fortescue. She loathed the nickname the gossips had saddled her with, but she refused to be cowed into submission or hide in the shadows for defending herself.

Men could challenge each other to duels and be hailed as honorable, even if it cost them their lives. But a woman, attacked in a corridor by a drunken fool, was relentlessly mocked simply for standing her ground when he wouldn’t take no for an answer.

“You will behave tonight,” Lord Northbridge warned as though reading her thoughts.

She glanced at him from across the carriage. His dark eyes were boring into hers without mercy. “Of course, Papa. I know my place.”

“Quite right.”

“You still did not answer me—why are we attending?”

“Because I have accepted the invitation. That is all you need to know.”

Louise rolled her eyes and looked out into the gathering dark. It seemed preposterous that her father would accept an invitation from the Duke of Egerton. It was common knowledge that they hated each other.

Why do I feel as though this has some deeper meaning behind it?

The high pillars and golden lettering above the door of Orions Gentlemen’s Club gave a sense of glamour to the event. Two gas lamps flanked the doorway, and as she alighted from the carriage, Louise was gratified to see that she was one of the few ladies in pale colors.

I was already bound to stand out this evening—at the very least, I shall do so in style.

Her parents preceded her into a large room where the other guests were assembled. The air was thick with perfume, and the candles around the room cast a shimmering light over everything.

She could already see some of the attendees turning to look at her. She would never get used to being the center of gossip, no matter how unjustified it might be.

“Come to meet her new lover, I see,” came a voice from nearby.

She turned to see two women wearing black masks tittering together. She frowned as they caught her watching them and swiftly walked away.

Two men at the refreshments table inclined their heads toward her in a most unusual manner, and she was glad of her mask because it hid her confusion. She was used to scrutiny, but this felt like something else. She glanced at her father, who was glaring at everything with intense irritation, and her unease began to morph into real fear.

What has he done?

Among the crowd ahead of her, a very tall person came into view, and she was momentarily frozen to the spot as he approached her.

Coming toward her through the milling crowd was a wolf. His mask and appearance were utterly flawless. He wore a tailcoat of midnight blue, double-breasted brass buttons cascading down either side. His waistcoat was richly detailed with golden leaves, their stitched outlines gleaming in the candlelight, and the wolf mask over his face was white—a stark contrast to the rest of his ensemble.

This could be no one but the Duke of Egerton.

I certainly do not recall him being so tall.

Louise kept her expression neutral, ensuring the cold façade she had perfected in public was firmly in place.

The Duke’s eyes were just visible behind his mask. Even in the low light, they were a startling green, roving over her in a way that felt predatory. She recoiled at it and glanced at her mother, who appeared just as bewildered.

The Duke came to a stop in front of her parents, but for an indecent amount of time, his gaze remained on her. Eventually, when her father cleared his throat, he finally shifted his attention.



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The disdain the Duke harbored for her father radiated from him like a tangible force. Louise could almost feel it crackling in the air between them.

“I invited your daughter to attend this event, My Lord,” the Duke stated coldly. “I did not extend that invitation to her family.”

Lord Northbridge’s simple mask did little to disguise the deepening flush creeping up his neck in response to the Duke’s scathing words.

“Lady Northbridge may stay as Lady Louise’s chaperone,” the Duke continued, offering the Countess a curt bow. “But you, My Lord, are not welcome in my club.”

Louise’s gaze snapped toward her father. She did not doubt that an agreement existed between the two men. The thought was not a pleasant one, but her father’s expression gave nothing away.

After a brief hesitation, Lady Northbridge detached herself from the Earl and came to stand beside Louise. Lord Northbridge took off his mask. His mouth twisted into a snarl as several guests turned to stare at them.

“You may make a scene if you wish,” the Duke said as he lifted one hand, casually inspecting his fingernails. “But I would not advise it. I have excellent security who would be more than happy to show you the way out.”

The Earl opened and closed his mouth like a fish gasping on the shoreline, struggling for words that would not come. His eyes met Louise’s, and in that fleeting glance, there was something almost imploring—was it desperation or even a flicker of regret?

But the moment passed. His expression hardened as he quickly composed himself. Without so much as a glance at his wife, he spun on his heel and stormed out of the room.

Louise moved closer to her mother, feeling a comforting arm curl around her own. She could feel dozens of eyes on them now.

The noise of the ball seemed to have dropped to a low murmur as the Duke turned to her. He had a strikingly sharp jaw and a firm mouth that made his face seem all the sterner.

He stepped forward, giving another low bow to her mother. “My apologies, Lady Northbridge. My quarrel is not with you. I would invite you to partake in the refreshments and enjoy your evening.”

“I thank you for the invitation, Your Grace,” Lady Northbridge replied evenly as she curtsied to him. Her eyes darted to the door through which her husband had departed, her back and arms rigid with tension, but she made no comment.

As the exchange unfolded, Louise found her gaze continually drawn to the Duke. There was something magnetic about him that set him apart from other gentlemen. Every detail of his attire was immaculate, except for his cravat, which hung slightly looser than fashion dictated.

When she looked back up at him, she was not entirely sure what to make of the calculating look in his eyes.

She watched in fascination as his hand moved toward her, and she stared at it stupidly, wondering what he might mean by it.

“You will follow me, Lady Louise.”

The words were spoken in a low, reverberating voice that sent a shiver through her. Everything in her rebelled at the thought of blindly following this man somewhere alone. The room was filled with gossipmongers who already wished to tarnish her reputation further. Yet, she could not see a way to refuse with so many eyes on them.

“Come to meet her new lover, I see.”

The words she had overheard suddenly echoed in her mind, and the cold seeped through her like nothing she had ever felt before.

With no choice but to comply, she placed her hand in his and allowed him to lead her out of the ballroom.

“Right this way.”

### CHAPTER 3

The door clicked shut as Christian watched his guest walk slowly into the room.

She looked intrigued—or was she irritated? He supposed both were to be expected. He noted that despite the privacy they had, they both kept their masks on. His hand itched to remove hers so that he could look her in the eye and say what he needed to say.

He had heard about her reputation as the ‘Iron Harridan’ from his friends, who had discussed it at length during the last Season. She was no longer the innocent girl he had encountered in her father’s hallway. Her reddish-blond hair was pinned to her head with ribbons, a stark contrast to the rest of her ensemble. It was almost as though the Ice Queen herself stood before him in all her glory. She was startlingly beautiful.

This arrangement may not be such a hardship, after all.

“Do you know why you are here?” he asked.

She said nothing, watching him carefully before shaking her head.

“Your father has sold you to me.”

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The lady went utterly still, her lips pressed into a thin line. Her tongue then darted out to wet her full lips. The fire in her eyes was unmistakable, but Christian would not apologize for another man's weakness.

"If you are incapable of securing a mistress, Your Grace, then perhaps you should?—"

He raised a hand to silence her. "I am not looking for a mistress."

She turned to fully face him, and his eyes ran appreciatively over her curves. "Did you not offer a high enough price, perhaps?" Her voice dripped with derision.

"I am not looking for a mistress, and your father did not have a say in how much I paid. You are going to be my wife."

She laughed. It was a high, melodic laugh, and the force of it surprised him. That was not the reaction he had expected from a lady whose father had used her to settle a debt.

I would give anything to know what is going on in that head of hers.

"You may think me cruel, I am sure," he added, straightening his waistcoat uncomfortably, "but I mean you no harm. You are simply a means to an end. I need you in order to find my brother."

The laughter died on her lips, and her eyes flicked to his own. There was interest in them now and an urgent sort of hope.

Christian had always wondered if she and his brother were more than friends, but her expression gave nothing away.

“Given the fact that you are Marcus’s friend, I felt you would be agreeable to the idea. After all, it was either me or one of the other odious men who attempted to... purchase you. I have protected you from them, at least.”

“How thoughtful of you. Tell me, did you bargain long on the amount? I would be interested to know which amount Father considered. Fifty pounds would have probably discharged the troublesome burden of a daughter, I wager.” She smoothed the front of her dress. “I do not need your protection, Your Grace, nor did I ask for it.”

Christian walked further into the room and leaned against his desk, watching her silently. The pause seemed to unsettle the lady, and she shifted her weight from foot to foot, scowling at him.

“If you are planning to use me to get back at my father because of your ridiculous rivalry, then you?—”

“Careful, Lady Louise. If I were planning to use you, I would certainly lie about it. I have instead told you the truth. Do I want to get back at your father? Only if he had something to do with my brother’s disappearance. Do I hate you specifically? I would not say so. I have never given you much thought except for the strength of your arm.”

Her eyes hardened instantly, and Christian felt a thrill at the sight. Something about riling her was very pleasing.

“The strength of my arm has never been in question. The strength of a man’s character, on the other hand...” She ran her eyes from his feet to the top of his head.

Christian had to fight not to smile.

“I do not doubt it. I am sure I have greatly impressed you with my character, given the circumstances, but there is little to be done about it. A deal between gentlemen will be upheld. Your father has run out of cards to play.”

“Why?” She shook her head in frustration. “Why has he done this? And more importantly, why would you agree to it? It cannot simply be for your brother’s sake.”

“You do not wish for him to be found?”

“More than anything, but that is not up to me. You would ally yourself with a man you hate, who has sneered at you behind your back all your life? It does not make sense to me.”

“Would you prefer to be my mistress? Is that it?” Christian asked, pushing off the desk and taking a few steps toward her.

She stepped back a pace, her gaze flicking to the door. “I will not be a pawn in your games, Sir, no matter what agreement you may have in place.”

“The agreement is that you will become my wife, and you had better warm up to the idea if you do not wish to be destitute.”

“Warm up to the idea? And how am I supposed to do that? I am the Ice Queen, remember?” She turned on the spot, allowing him an even better view of her exquisite figure.

He stepped closer, and when she returned to face him again, she sucked in a sharp breath at his proximity. Christian waited to see if she would back away, but she stood her ground.

A single lock of hair had come loose and hung down beside her ear; it had been driving him mad since she entered the room.

“You cannot only be made of ice,” he murmured, slowly lifting his hand, capturing the strand between his fingers, and tucking it beneath one of the ribbons.

She froze, staring at him as though he were quite mad.



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Perhaps I am.

“And why do you say that?” she asked softly.

“Because you have managed to wrap my brother around your little finger. There wasn’t a week that went by that he didn’t visit your house for some reason or another. You led him astray and ultimately to his tragic end.”

They were inches away from one another now. As he lowered his hand, his fingers brushed her dress. The pleasurable shiver that ran through him at the brief contact was shocking in its intensity, and he looked down into bright blue eyes that were very much like ice.

“I did not lead Lord Marcus anywhere. We are friends, that is all.”

“Is that right? I had assumed you were keeping him at a distance, waiting for a higher-ranking match. I would be happy to oblige.”

She scoffed but still did not move away from him. “Your brother never wanted me, and I never felt anything for him. In any case, you cannot be sure that Lord Marcus is dead.”

“That is precisely what I wish to find out.”

“And you plan to do so by marrying me? What purpose can that serve?”

“Quite simple, Lady Louise. The Earl will become my father-in-law. Therefore, I will

have every excuse to question him about his activities before Marcus's disappearance. More importantly, by taking you as my wife, I can prevent him from receiving help from anyone else."

She frowned. "Help for what?"

"Come now, you are not such a simpleton that you cannot see the writing on the wall. A financially secure man does not sell his daughter to the highest bidder."

That tongue darted out once again to wet her full lips, her brow furrowed behind her mask. He found himself wishing to see her face, wondering what she might do if he ripped her mask away without permission.

"My father despises you. That will not change if we marry."

"But it will prevent another man from filling his coffers before I have a chance to discover the truth. You know what they say—desperate people have looser tongues. If I need to know something, he'll have to tell me, and I intend for us to wed without delay."

She stared at him in bewilderment. "You are a scoundrel, Sir."

Christian inclined his head. "If the shoe fits." His hand itched to touch her hair again. "The last place I know Marcus went to was your home. He told me he had something to discuss with your father. I had assumed he wished to propose to you. How ironic."

Her gown was brushing against the tips of his shoes. One step closer and there would be no space left between them at all. He would be able to wrap his arm around her waist, allow her exquisite scent to envelop him, and press his body fully against her, feeling the swell of her breasts against his chest.

Christian's breathing had quickened, as had hers, and he held her gaze, refusing to be the first to look away.

"Besides," he murmured, "there are few women of my acquaintance who do not wish to marry me... among other things."

Her eyes flashed. "Well, I certainly do not understand their reasoning. You have proved yourself to be despicable, proud, and arrogant, Your Grace. It is only too bad that you are not more like your brother."

Christian lost the battle with himself and raised a hand to touch her hair again. Quick as a whip, her hand came up as though to slap him. He caught her wrist, holding her firmly against him as he clutched her waist with his other hand and pushed her against the desk behind them.

She gasped, their bodies aligning perfectly, just as he had pictured it. The pale ribbons in her hair shimmered in the candlelight, and Christian felt the heat of her against him. He stroked her wrist with his thumb, watching the movement even as she tried to tug herself free.

As she tried to pull away, he used his larger body to pin her against the desk until she was leaning back, arching away from him, but her eyes never left his face.

"Whether you wish I were more like my brother or not, that means nothing." He pushed against her more boldly, and that perfect tongue came out to moisten her lips. They were plump and full in the half-light, a sheen on them that he was desperate to taste. "From now on, your hand, your body, even your breaths belong to me. I would suggest you accept it because I intend to own what is mine."

His voice was a low growl by the end, and he felt a shudder travel through her whole body. She was impossibly beautiful—sparkling eyes looking up at him like

diamonds. The jewels on her dress glittered, and she truly did embody an ice queen.

With an immense effort, Christian slowly pulled away, letting go of her wrist when he was sure she would not try to hit him again. She seemed stunned and overwrought, her breath coming out in sharp bursts.

He stepped away and straightened his clothes, ensuring he looked as untouchable as ever before rejoining the party. He bowed low, walked to the door, and turned back to find her utterly speechless.

“I am going to find out what happened to my brother, Lady Louise. You will be the means, and I will claim you as my own.”

## CHAPTER 4

## Page 8

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Louise took a few minutes to gather herself before leaving the study.

Moving to the mirror above the fireplace, she checked that she was not overly flushed and that her hair was still neatly pinned to her head. The memory of the Duke's fingers moving through the loose strands haunted her as she set the ribbon back in place. She shivered as she thought of how close he had been, his hot body pressed against hers.

The only other man who had come so close to her before was Lord Fortescue, and that experience had filled her with revulsion. But the same could not be said about the Duke. His smoldering gaze, partially obscured behind the wolf mask, had been menacing and thrilling all at once. It surprised her how much the danger in his countenance excited her.

She turned her back to the mirror, straightened her gown, and prepared to return to the ballroom. Before she did so, however, she looked once more around the room. It was the neatest study she had ever seen. Every item on the desk looked like it had been measured to fit. Nothing was out of place—just like the Duke himself.

Nervously, she moved to the door. They had been alone in the study for many minutes, and she was concerned that she would emerge to yet more gossip about her conduct.

When she stepped back into the main ballroom, a few curious eyes followed her as before, but her absence did not appear to have been noticed.

The tall form of the Duke was on the opposite side of the room. He was speaking to a

man wearing a bull mask, and he looked entirely at ease.

A new dance set was in full swing. Bright, sparkling masks glittered in the candlelight in the center of the room. It was a jarring picture after the quiet, pulsing heat of the study.

The room was uncomfortably hot, and the reality of what her father had agreed to weighed heavily on her shoulders. Louise glanced around the room in search of her mother and spotted her beside the refreshments table. She paused, watching Lady Northbridge's quiet stillness. An intense feeling of sadness filled her at the sight.

Her mother was lonely in so many ways and rarely happy. She looked lost, like a friendless child in a playground. Louise quickly headed toward her, noting the relief that filled her mother's eyes when she spotted her.

"Is all well?" Lady Northbridge asked hurriedly. "I was worried."

Louise pulled her mother to a more secluded corner, pretending she needed her to help with a button on her dress to avoid attracting attention.

"Papa has promised me to the Duke," she stated simply, carefully watching for her mother's reaction.

Lady Northbridge's eyes widened, and Louise was relieved to note that the news seemed to come as a shock to her.

"What on earth do you mean?" her mother asked darkly. "You cannot be promised to him. That is quite impossible."

"I am not mistaken, Mama."

“You must be,” Lady Northbridge insisted quietly. “Your father does not intend for you to become the Duke’s mistress, surely!” Her fingers fumbled with her skirts, her eyes darting around the room as though searching for an escape.

“Not quite.” Louise placed a hasty hand on her arm. “The Duke intends to marry me, or so he says.”

Lady Northbridge stilled and looked back at her, a change coming over her that made Louise’s heart sink a little.

“Marriage?”

“Yes. The Duke believes that Papa had something to do with Lord Marcus’s disappearance, though I have no notion as to how he came to that conclusion. I believe the deal for my hand is a way to manipulate Father into revealing the truth.”

The music seemed louder suddenly, the noise of the crowd dimming as Lady Northbridge’s gaze remained fixed on the Duke. Her eyes followed him as he walked around the room and spoke to some of his acquaintances. There was something in her gaze that Louise struggled to read—a new light she had not seen before.

Her mother took her arm and walked back toward the dance floor. “I confess, that changes things,” she whispered. “Are you certain his intentions are honorable? I will not give my only daughter to a man who would defile her.”

“It seems so. He said we would be married ‘without delay.’ I believe he intends for us to marry in haste.”

They stopped, and Lady Northbridge turned to Louise, the same tension in her eyes as she held Louise’s hand.

“I know this must be a shock to you, dearest, but there are worse fates in this life, believe me. This will give you a chance to get away from your father for good.”

Louise sucked in a sharp breath at that.

“I know you were close to Lord Marcus and you wish to know what has become of him. Perhaps this is the way. At least you know the Duke’s family is well-connected and well-liked. He may not be his brother, but he cannot be that bad.”

“He is nothing like Marcus. Marcus is sweet and kind. The Duke is cold. I don’t believe I saw an emotion pass over his face.”

Except lust.



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“You and Lord Marcus were never...?”

“Never. You know we were not, Mama.”

Lady Northbridge’s shoulders relaxed just a little. “Listen to me, Louise,” she said. “I know this isn’t what either of us wanted, and your father has much to answer for, but this could be your way out. If he’s making such reckless bets, he must be in serious trouble. All the more reason for you to distance yourself from our family. Who knows what he’s gotten himself into.”

Louise’s heart pounded as she watched the Duke’s tall form move around the room. Now and again, his eyes would flick up and meet hers as he walked. The connection she felt was palpable, even from halfway across the room. He may be marrying her for Marcus’s sake, but he wanted her for himself—she was sure of it.

Her fingers tightened around her mother’s arm as a memory teased the edges of her mind—a dark hallway in the dead of night, the faint glow of a fire beneath a door, and the hard smack of a fist as her mother cried out in pain.

Yes. Her mother had used the word ‘escape’ for a reason.

“I cannot leave you with him,” she murmured.

Lady Northbridge shook her head. “It is not your job to protect me, Louise. You must forge your own path. We all make our choices, and I made mine for better or worse. With the limited options available, this is the lesser of two evils.”

“But I do not know the Duke.”

“That is true of many marriages. You will get to know him. He does not seem like a cruel man. That is something.”

Louise’s heart broke, for her mother’s measure of a good man was whether or not he might use his fists.

“It is the fate of many women to be promised to men they do not love. Make the best of it. I know you will.”

With that, they turned to watch the whirling dancers for many minutes, standing silent against the backdrop of the room’s myriad colors.

The dresses and masks passed by in a blur. A butterfly followed a cat, then followed a swan. Everything was checkered in multicolor, feathers whooshing past in tandem, skirts swishing, perfume heavy in the close air. Louise’s mind was a whirlwind of confusion, yet the wolf mask cut through it all.

As much as she did not wish to admit it, her mother was right. Any agency she might have possessed had been stripped away, and she was now left with two options: marry the Duke or disgrace her father and run away. It was no choice at all.

Maybe I will find out where Marcus is. Surely, that is worth the pain of a loveless marriage.

Every day since Marcus had disappeared, she had prayed that he would return or send some word, but there had been nothing. If her father was involved, he would not give up the information freely. If she could increase the Duke’s chances of discovering the truth, then it was a price she was willing to pay.

Determinedly, she bid her mother farewell and walked around the dance floor toward the Duke. Once more, he was standing beside the man with the bull mask. His companion was equally as imposing but slightly thinner.

The Duke's eyes followed her as she walked toward him, and she found that she could not look away as his dark gaze locked with hers. There was a heat in his eyes that she had felt in the study—a reluctant awe, as though he wanted her despite himself.

When she eventually reached him, the man in the bull mask straightened and looked down at her with a disdain she knew all too well.

“The Ice Queen returns,” the Duke said blithely. “Lady Louise, may I introduce Gabriel Harding, the Duke of Stonewell.”

Stonewell gave a shallow bow, his mouth grim and unhappy. There was no warmth in his eyes whatsoever.

On the other hand, the Duke looked somewhat intrigued, and Louise steadied herself, swallowing down the pride that bubbled up her throat.

I can do this. If not for Marcus, then for my own freedom.

“I will consider your proposal.”

Stonewell snorted, and Louise shot him a vicious glare.

The Duke turned to face her fully and cocked his head. Behind the white wolf mask, his eyes were impossibly dark, glittering down at her as if he were the keeper of a secret he would not tell.

“Considerit, Lady Louise? You do not have a choice in the matter. It has been agreed, and your father’s debt will be paid. I am afraid that is all there is to it.”

Louise’s anger flared at the arrogance in his words and the nonchalance in his voice. He spoke as though he was discussing a prize bull he had purchased at auction, not a young woman’s future.

“I may have to marry you, Your Grace, but I do not have to bow to you. This is not over.”

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She turned to walk away when a strong hand encircled her upper arm. He stepped forward, looking down at her with an urgency she had not expected.

“Christian,” he murmured. “You are my betrothed, after all. Call me by my name.”

She wrenched her arm free and stepped away from him. “I imagine I will see you at the wedding, Your Grace.”

Iron Harridan by name, Iron Harridan by nature.

The little vixen had left the ball before he had even been able to dance with her or explain the arrangements he had planned. She certainly had a reputation for a reason. He had never met a woman with such fire in her.

Her early departure had necessitated the tedious task of coming to see her the following morning. That was how Christian found himself in his carriage, winding his way through the streets of London toward her townhouse—the deed of which was locked in a drawer at his club.

When he arrived, the butler admitted him and asked him to wait in the drawing room. After several minutes—which felt very deliberate on the lady’s part—she eventually entered the room.

Her hair was tied by red ribbon this morning, matching the deep color of her dress, and he found himself quite captivated by the full beauty of her face.

I will need to watch myself around the Ice Queen. Or I will end up like my brother.

“Good morning, Lady Louise,” Christian said pleasantly as her eyes narrowed. “I trust you slept well?”

“Yes, Your Grace. I had very pleasant dreams about chasing a wolf through the forest,” she replied coolly, her eyes full of challenge. “I hope your visit this morning will be brief—I have places to be.”

Christian stared at her, amazed to find himself fighting a smile again. The little vixen was not to be underestimated.

“Lady Louise, I shall not waste time with pleasantries. Circumstances require swift action, and our marriage will resolve things most efficiently. I assure you, I do not make this proposal lightly.”

He paused, searching her face for a reaction, then continued. “To spare us the delay caused by the banns, I have obtained a special license. It will allow us to marry within the week. Despite the unusual circumstances of our marriage, I assure you, as my Duchess, you would have my utmost respect, and this is—first and foremost—a partnership.”

Lady Louise was wringing her hands as he spoke, her eyes narrowing at every word.

“I am most grateful for your respect, Your Grace. But I do not understand the haste with which you would carry this out or why you would put yourself in this position.”

“I have asked you to call me Christian.”

“Yes, I remember.” She jutted her chin stubbornly. “If you are marrying me to punish me for being friends with your brother, then I would ask you to reconsider. Believe me, I wish to know that he is safe as much as you do.”

“I am not interested in punishing you, Lady Louise. I want to find out what happened to him. If I must go to extremes to do so, then so be it.”

He sniffed, taking a step forward as she eyed him warily. The door was open, but they were technically unchaperoned. He wondered if his hasty visit had surprised her.

Is she alone in the house?

“You must be eager to marry,” he said softly. “Why does it matter who you take as your husband?”

She raised her eyebrows. “Eager to marry? Wherever did you get that idea? I have never wished to marry, and certainly not under these circumstances.”

Christian shrugged a shoulder. “I had assumed... given your reputation, you would be keen to ally yourself with a strong match. I am that match.”

She scoffed loudly, and his anger flared unbidden.

He looked out the window at the gray sky outside and cleared his throat. “Well, it does not matter. We will be married in a week, and this discussion will be irrelevant.”

“Hardly, Your Grace. If we are to be married so hastily and under terms I find abhorrent, I wish to set some rules to ensure that I have some say in the matter.”

Christian blinked.

Good God, the woman has more arrogance than many men of the peerage.

“Is that so?” he heard himself say. “And what rules might they be, Lady Louise?”

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She glanced behind her briefly at the open door, but she did not falter.

“I assume you want an heir to continue your line?” Christian nodded his head in agreement. “And I have no objection to carrying children, but not during the first year of our marriage.”

Christian frowned, his mind flooded with images of how they might produce a child. The thought of his fingers running through that glorious hair came back in graphic detail, but this time, her hair was spread over a white pillow as he looked down at her sprawled beneath him.

He cleared his throat, shaking his head to dispel the image. “I cannot promise that.”

“Well then, I will not be able to agree to your proposal, Your Grace.”

The smile he had been fighting turned into a loud laugh, and her face hardened as he bowed to her. He did enjoy riling the lady, but his smile quickly faded at her steely gaze.

“Call me Christian. I will not ask again. And we have discussed this already, Lady Louise. You are not in a position to refuse. I will see you—and all of your rules—at the wedding in a week. I believe our partnership will prove most interesting.”

## CHAPTER 5

Two days before the wedding, Christian eyed himself in the mirror and nodded to his valet, Beckett, who dutifully left the room.



Christian spent an inordinate amount of time getting dressed in the morning—far longer than any of his acquaintances. His closest friend, Gabriel Harding, often teased him about taking as long as a woman might.

Everything has a place and a purpose.

He brushed a white speck from his shoulder, turning from side to side to ensure everything was perfect before straightening his shirt cuffs for the third time.

He was pleased with the new fob watch that had arrived that morning. The gold chain gleamed in his waistcoat pocket.

His cravat would never sit correctly, and he moved it from left to right, trying to get the thing to settle. Whatever Beckett did, it never looked centered to his exacting eyes.

Knowing that Gabriel would be calling shortly, Christian gave himself a final once-over before making his way downstairs. He was grateful to find a steaming cup of coffee waiting for him on his desk, as well as the newspapers from that morning.

Since Marcus's disappearance, he checked the small advertisements every morning, wondering if his brother might have left him a clue in a line of ink. But there was nothing, just as there had been no sign of him for all these months.

Taking a seat with a heavy sigh, he set about going through his correspondence and missives from his tenants. It was well over an hour before a soft knock sounded at the door and a footman announced that the Duke of Stonewell had arrived.

Christian was grateful for the break. He realized that he had quite forgotten to drink his coffee, having concentrated heavily on estate matters. As Gabriel entered the room, he requested that some more be brought.

Although Christian knew he was always dressed to perfection, achieving that high standard took him an age. Gabriel, on the other hand, always looked immaculate, even when he had just rolled out of bed. The man could appear elegant in his shirt sleeves, and today was no exception.

His dark hair was swept back from his face, his brown eyes heavy-lidded and tired. They were so dark they appeared almost black, and his grim expression and stubbled jaw made him look particularly menacing this morning.

“What time did you get home last night?” Christian asked curiously.

“Get home?” Gabriel snorted. “I have come straight from a soirée, old boy. Nights at the card table with Arkley never end early.”

Christian stared at him. Gabriel had not slept, but he looked utterly flawless. He clearly hadn’t changed before coming here, yet he appeared smarter than Christian did.

Christian scowled at him, and Gabriel gave him a knowing smirk.

“New watch?” Gabriel asked pointedly.

The man misses nothing.

“Yes,” Christian replied defensively. “Not all of us spend our fortunes in gambling hells.”

“You insult me, Sir. I also spend it on boots and horses.”

Christian snorted as Gabriel took a seat across from him and crossed his long legs. He leaned back and observed him with a hard stare that Christian knew too well.

“How are you feeling about your impending nuptials? This week has flown by. I swear you only told me a few hours ago, yet we are two days away from the great event.”

“How would you expect me to feel?”

“If it were me, I would be giddy for finally triumphing over that pompous oaf. Northbridge must be livid. I imagine it has dealt a blow to his standing at The Devils. His debts must be well known to all by now—I do not think there is a nobleman in London to whom he does not owe money.”

Christian shot him an exasperated glare. “I have been clear about this, Gabe. This is not simply about revenge. I need to know what happened to Marcus.”

Gabriel leaned forward, his hands spread wide before him. “But why now? It’s been six months since Marcus’s accident. What do you think you will uncover?”

Christian opened a drawer in his desk and pulled out the letter he had received. “Read this,” he said, thrusting it to Gabriel, who took it and ran his eyes over the scrawled lines within. “The constable on the case has written to tell me that they found the site of the accident but no body. Therefore, Marcus might still be alive. I only dared to hope before, but if he was not killed in the crash, what other explanation is there?”

Christian felt an echo of anger course through him as he stared at the letter. It had arrived the morning he had chosen to pursue Lady Louise at any cost, determined to find out the truth once and for all.

A soft knock suddenly sounded at the door, and a servant entered the room, bearing a coffee tray. Christian waited for the servant to finish pouring the coffee before continuing.

“The only man who can explain what happened to him is Lord Northbridge, I am certain of it. For many days, I have been maneuvering pieces into place to entrap him and find out the truth. He is growing more desperate as time goes by. Even now, I own the deed to his house. He has nothing, has lost everything, and will be destitute. He must confess the truth if he wishes to retain a shadow of his former position.”

Gabriel raised his eyebrows. “How did you obtain the deed to his house?”

“He lost it at cards.”

Gabriel rolled his eyes. “Is there anything the man hasn’t lost at cards?”

“Quite. I certainly won’t be giving it back without an incentive, if at all. I shall dangle it above his head so that he believes he might escape with his dignity, but he will not. When I wed his daughter, my control over his future will be complete.”

“And you’re sure he had something to do with Marcus’s disappearance?”

“I am.”

There was a long pause, and Christian could feel the weight of his friend’s gaze on him. He frowned as he placed his cup back on the saucer.

“Blast it all, what? I told you about this plan weeks ago.”

“You did,” Gabriel murmured, staring off into the distance.

“He will not be able to marry his daughter off to anyone else after tomorrow. I shall own him, for better or worse. There is nothing else he has to offer anyone. He certainly cannot pay his debts and will have to beg me if he wants to regain control of his fortune.”

The fire crackled in the background as Christian waited for Gabriel to speak. His friend was not a man who rushed into a discussion without thinking it through—Christian could almost hear the gears turning in his head.

“Why her?” Gabriel eventually asked.

“You know why. She is the quickest route to her father.”

“You have ruined him already. You said it yourself, he has nothing left to lose. You have already won. Why complicate things? I saw the way she looked at you. She hates you, man. Do you really think marriage is the next step? You could do as much damage by tugging her and leaving her in the gutter.”

Christian recoiled at those words. It was an involuntary reaction that he could neither control nor deny. Gabriel did not miss it.

“Hmm. What is she to you, then?”

“What?” Christian balked at the very notion. “She isn’t anything to me. You can hardly blame a man for being revolted by the idea of ruining a woman on account of her father’s conduct. That was cold, even for you.”

Gabriel shrugged. “The apple never falls far from the tree. You might be marrying someone just as bad as Northbridge.”

“Even so. Half the ton wish to tame her; I shall take great pride in being the man to do it.”

“If you can,” Gabriel said darkly. “You do not know what you are getting yourself into—that is my worry. You made this choice for Marcus, and it is a noble one, but you will be married. That is not a trivial matter that one can simply undo when one is

finished. Suppose you find out that Marcus is dead and that Northbridge was not involved—that it was an accident. Then what?”

“Then Lady Louise and I shall live separate lives. Many other couples do. I hardly need to marry for love.”

Christian’s voice was sharper than he had meant it to be, and Gabriel raised his hands defensively.

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“Very well. Do not say I didn’t warn you when the Iron Harridan turns on you.”

“If our marriage goes as planned,” Christian said steadily, “she will have no opportunity to do so.”

### CHAPTER 6

“Perhaps there is a passageway that you can escape through. You could simply disappear just as Lord Marcus did.”

Louise sighed. “We do not know if Lord Marcus has disappeared. I can only hope he is safe somewhere, or else this marriage will be truly useless. If he does eventually reveal himself, I shall wring his neck!”

She looked down at Sybella, her closest friend and most loyal supporter. Sybella was kneeling beside her, tweaking the train of her gown with a miserable expression on her face.

Louise averted her gaze from the dress, unable to believe this was truly happening.

“Besides, where would I escape to in Hanover Square?” she protested.

“I do not know, but one should never cast aside other options. I would have given anything to run from my own marriage. If there is a chance for you to escape, I shall see you seize it.”

Sybella’s blue eyes were downcast, her skin pale as it often was these days. Her



husband was dead, and it felt strange to hear her speak of her marriage in such cold terms. Louise did not know what to say in response, but Sybella continued before she was able to.

“You could not look more beautiful if it makes any odds. I have never seen you so radiant.”

Louise looked at her reflection; her unhappy expression reflected that of her friend as she looked over her dress. It was a simple gown, ivory in color with very few details, and her hair was pinned in place by tiny pearl pins.

“Perhaps it is the rage beneath my skin,” Louise muttered bitterly. “It burns hot, thus making it glow.”

Sybella snorted as she rose to put the finishing touches to her hair.

On the way to the church that morning, Louise had spotted some snowdrops peeking out from the base of a tree and had plucked three of them to place in her hair. Snowdrops represented spring and the hope of a new season. She could not think of a more suitable flower to have close to her today. She pulled in a long, deep breath, drawing on her strength as her nerves returned in full force.

“I still cannot believe your father has subjected you to this humiliation,” Sybella muttered as she tucked the flowers between the tight strands. “I would commandeer a horse and kidnap you myself if I felt it would do any good.”

“I will always be grateful for you, Sybella, but there is nothing to be done. I can hardly sneak out unnoticed, and I would never escape in any case. If the Duke did not bring me back, my father would. Besides, I have had enough of gossip for a lifetime.”

Sybella turned away to put the remaining pins into a small ivory box on the

sideboard. She was a lady herself, and yet she had taken one look at Louise that morning and dismissed her maid, insisting on helping herself. She was the truest friend Louise could have hoped for, and suddenly Louise found herself struggling to keep the tears at bay.

She had never felt so trapped or confined in her own skin.

When the marriage was first spoken about, it did not seem real. Now, standing above the very chapel where she would be wed, the reality of her situation bore down on her like an anvil on each shoulder. Bile rose in her throat, and she swallowed convulsively.

Her fingers were trembling, and there was a terrible fluttering in her chest that was becoming increasingly intense. She wanted to scream, to rip her dress off her body and run as fast as she could through the streets.

But I can do nothing. I am not in control of my fate, nor will I ever be.

The door opened, and her mother entered the room. Lady Northbridge looked elegant in a gown rather too dark for what should have been a happy occasion. Louise hoped it was a silent protest against what her father had done—a continuing act of defiance.

Lady Northbridge closed the door and put her hand on her chest, her eyes filling with tears as she looked at Louise. Sybella curtsied to her and then hurriedly left to give them some privacy.

Louise extended a hand, and her mother took it immediately.

“You look beautiful,” Lady Northbridge said thickly.

“I do not feel beautiful. This is not the wedding day I pictured.”

Lady Northbridge raised her eyebrows. “I rather thought you had never pictured marrying at all.”

“Quite so. None of this is what I want, Mama. Does that not matter?”

Lady Northbridge took her daughter’s other hand and held it in a vice-like grip. She stared down at her earnestly. “Listen to me, Louise. There are many things in life that one can control and many things that one cannot. You can shape your life with the Duke. I truly believe that. It is better than remaining forever at home with me and your father. Believe me.”

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“And what will become of you?” Louise whispered. “I do not wish to leave you, Mama. I do not wish to leave you with him!”

“You are a strong woman, Louise. You always have been. Strong-willed and capable. If you wish to visit me, you can persuade your husband to allow it. Do not do as I have done. Do not allow him to control your life and your future.”

Her mother turned her toward the mirror. “Come now, get some color in your cheeks. The eyes of the ton are ever watchful. You must be resolute and sure, regardless of what you feel inside. Nothing is certain, my darling girl. Nothing in the world.”

Louise felt tears prick her eyes again as her mother moved behind her to fasten the last of the buttons on her bodice.

Everything seemed to have moved so fast, and yet it felt like an age since the masquerade ball. The image of the Duke’s tall frame coming into view had been at the forefront of her mind in the days leading up to this moment.

There was no denying that she was intrigued by him. She had thought about him often over the following days, but his arrogance overshadowed every quality he might have.

If all he wants from me is to manipulate my father into revealing what happened to Marcus, what will become of me when he gets his answer?

A long life of misery spread before her like a dark road she did not wish to set foot on. The Duke represented a side of Society that she loathed, filled with arrogant men

who believed they controlled the world around them. Yet, Marcus Wright was part of Society, and he was the dearest man she had ever known.

How can two brothers be so utterly different from one another? I have never had thoughts about Marcus like the ones I've had about the Duke of late.

Before she could say anything more to her mother, the door opened again to admit her father. He was red in the face and perspiring—usually a sign that he anticipated an argument or was ready to initiate one.

Louise paid him no mind. She was uninterested in how he felt and what he wanted today.

“Are you ready?” he barked. “We cannot keep the Duke waiting.”

He did not comment on her appearance. Indeed, he barely looked in her direction at all.

“Papa,” she said, turning around and drawing back her hands. Her mother sucked in a sharp breath beside her. “I always swore I would never beg a man for anything, but I am begging you now. Please do not make me marry him. I do not wish to be his wife, and I cannot think of a man less suited to me.”

Her father made a predictable wave of dismissal and shook his head. His skin was mottled with patches of dark red, and his neck bulged unpleasantly over the edge of his cravat.

“You have a duty to this family and must uphold your responsibilities.”

“A duty to this family or your purse?”

Her mother laid a hand on her arm as her father advanced on her.

“Do you intend for us to lose our home? Is that what you want?”

Louise’s gut clenched at his admission. Deep down, she had known they were in dire straits, but nothing like this.

“So, you have gambled our home on a deck of cards, is that it?”

“Louise,” her mother whispered.

“I have made an arrangement that will save our family from ruin,” her father spat. “You are the daughter of an earl—your sole purpose in life is to make a good marriage and honor your father. Do not think that I will not cast you out if you make a fool of me today.”

Louise narrowed her eyes at him, her teeth grinding together. She wanted to snap at him, strike him. She wondered how the gossip columns would react if she broke her father’s nose.

“You’re going to force me to marry this man, knowing he will never make me happy? You’re willing to condemn me to a life of misery so that you can continue living in the comforts you yourself have thrown away?”

“You will be silent!” he snarled, and she recoiled at the rage on his face.

He looked deranged, ready to fight her until the bitter end. Still, she wanted to rail at him, to continue to shout and scream until the whole of London heard her.

If only she could run and disappear into oblivion.

And then what? Where would I go? I would be utterly alone.

Her mother's hand loosened on her arm as her shoulders sagged.

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Her father immediately offered her his arm without a word of apology or thanks. The action felt inevitable, as if he had already been anticipating her refusal and had countless threats prepared, ready to ensure that the wedding took place as planned.

Her father's back was facing her, expectant and tense—arrogance personified.

Louise steeled herself. “No.”

The Earl turned back, his eyes widening as he stared at her in disbelief.

“I will not walk down the aisle with you,” she continued, stepping closer to her mother. “Mama can give me away. If you don't allow it, I will run, and you will never see me again.”

There was a stunned silence as the Earl glanced between Louise and her mother in disbelief. She knew as his only child, her request would hurt him, or at least his pride, but that was exactly what she wanted. He was the one forcing her to do this—she would carry it out on her own terms.

After a long and painful pause, the Earl turned to his wife. His gaze was a frightening reminder of the man he could become—dark, brooding, and filled with suppressed rage. But it was all worth it, for her mother's expression was defiant grace.

While Louise's request might have hurt her father, it had emboldened her mother.

Without a word, Lady Northbridge held out a steady hand to her daughter. Louise took it, stepping forward as a servant opened the door for them to go down to St



George's.

"Are you ready, dearest?" Lady Northbridge asked.

Louise took a deep breath. "I am."

## CHAPTER 7

Christian stood at the head of the aisle, surprised by the nerves clawing at his gut.

He glanced around the church, taking in the beautiful space where he had stood many times before for the weddings of his peers.

The congregation before him, although hastily assembled, was larger than he had expected. Scanning the rows, he spotted his close friend, Isaac Cecil, at the end of a pew. As he watched, Arkley's sister, Sybella, emerged from the back of the church and came to sit beside her brother.

To Christian's left stood Gabriel, serving as groomsman. His jaw was set in stubborn defiance as they waited for the bride to arrive. He had barely spoken all day, and his disapproving silence said more than any words ever could.

The low hum of conversation ceased as the organist began to play. Christian's spine stiffened, his breath catching as two figures appeared at the foot of the aisle. The guests rose, murmurs of surprise rippling through them.

It wasn't Lord Northbridge beside his daughter—it was his wife.

Christian's fingers flexed behind his back as he watched them approach. The absence of her father was a deliberate snub that reflected upon him as well. His gaze darted to the balcony above the entrance. Had she barred her father from attending the

ceremony?

Is this her final act of defiance?

But when his gaze finally met hers, everything else fell away. Her coppery hair had been pinned back with a line of pearl pins that shimmered in the light streaming through the windows.

The defiance in her bright eyes pierced his soul such that it had his blood thrumming in seconds.

All that fire, just for me.

When she finally reached him and bid a soft farewell to her mother, he found that his breath was coming more quickly than he would have liked.

Louise Dawson was magnificent. Exquisite in a way that many ladies of the ton could only dream of. The paleness of her skin, contrasted with her hair, was something that he would never grow tired of looking at.

He took her hand and slowly led her toward the priest, who was standing at the altar. He was a squat little man, barely an inch taller than Lady Louise. His small spectacles perched precariously on the tip of his nose.

“You look very different from the Ice Queen I met before,” Christian said softly as they approached the altar.

“You look the same,” she shot back.

He smiled at her tone. “Tell me, do you intend to blame me for your father’s mistakes for the entirety of our marriage?”

“That depends, Your Grace. Will you continue to punish me for them?”

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They stopped before the priest, and Christian gave her a sideways glance, a strange sensation building in his chest that he could not name.

“Dearly beloved, we are gathered here today to join this man and this woman in holy matrimony...”

Christian tried to concentrate on what was taking place around him, but it was damn difficult. He could feel her soft hand in his, the pale beauty of it contrasted by his darker tones. Somehow, that image made what he was about to do all the more real.

What would Marcus say if he were here? Would he approve of what you have done to his closest friend?

Christian swallowed, shifting his weight and keeping his eyes focused on the priest, trying to ignore the whirlwind of thoughts spinning around in his head.

They turned to face one another, and his stomach churned as he met her gaze. It reminded him of their first encounter in Northbridge Manor.

I have finally won. Her father has no power over me any longer. So why do I feel so guilty?

“Repeat after me...”

Christian spoke his vows as he was expected to, keeping his back straight, his gaze fixed on his bride, ensuring that no one in the congregation would see his inner turmoil.

But by the time Louise had spoken her vows and the priest pronounced them man and wife, Christian was struggling to keep his composure.

They turned to face the congregation, every eye on them as they each raised a hand to tumultuous cheers. Christian could not help but notice that Lady Northbridge had tears in her eyes—for good or ill, he did not know.

The Earl of Northbridge now stood beside his wife, clapping along with the rest of the crowd as though he had a right to be there.

In order to distract himself from the many pieces he had in play, Christian turned to look at Lady Louise.

Or rather, the new Duchess of Egerton.

She looked up at him, her expression guarded. Christian let his eyes rove over her lovely face for a few seconds before he leaned down, intending to claim her mouth with his. However, he paused when he saw her hesitate and kissed her reverently on the cheek instead.

The brief contact sent a spark of unexpected desire through him, startling in its intensity. He quickly straightened, shaken by the sensation and unsure what it meant.

As they began the walk back down the aisle, the cheers of the congregation filling the church, a surreal numbness spread through him. The weight of what had just happened settled on his shoulders like a heavy cloak, the faces of the crowd becoming a blur as his thoughts spun.

What have I done?

The wedding breakfast was held at the Duke's townhouse. Louise could barely

believe she was standing here as a newly married woman.

How quickly a life can change.

Her father had barely acknowledged her. As soon as her parents had taken their seats, and before the rest of the guests had even arrived, her father had a full glass of wine in his hand.

Louise tried to ignore the betrayal she felt deep within her, but she was unsuccessful. She longed to be alone, to escape all of these people, but there was little chance of that.

The Duke led her to their seats at the center of the table, and she sat down beside a beautiful olive-skinned woman whose gaze was kind and warm.

“It is strange to meet you for the first time at the wedding breakfast, my dear,” she said warmly.

The Duke loudly cleared his throat. “Duchess,” he said to Louise. “May I introduce my mother, the Dowager Duchess of Egerton?”

Louise looked up at him, utterly taken aback by his use of her new title. She had not been prepared for that, and the title was foreign and somewhat unsettling to hear.

“It is an honor to meet you, Your Grace,” she offered quickly, giving the Dowager Duchess a weak smile.

The Dowager Duchess returned it warmly, but the Duke’s manner toward his mother was cold and rather stiff. Louise found herself wondering why that might be. But the Dowager Duchess was very pleasant to her—she did not seem to object to her son’s choice of wife, at least.

Looking around the room and hearing the excited chatter of the guests, Louise felt as though she were having a strange dream.

Surely she couldn't be married to a man who talked to her so little on their wedding day, could she?

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“I would dance with my wife,” the Duke said, pulling her out of her thoughts, before he extended his hand toward her.

He pulled her out of her seat and led her around the table toward the dance floor. Louise was sorely tempted to snatch her hand away, irritated at being manhandled. But she resisted, aware that every eye in the room was on her.

My new husband is an arrogant arse.

The Duke clicked his fingers, and the musicians in the corner of the room leaped into action and began to play. The opening bars of a waltz floated through the room, and he wasted no time in pulling Louise against him.

She tried to remain calm as his hand found the small of her back, but she had not been prepared for how his proximity would affect her. Their time in the study loomed large in her mind, and she kept her gaze fixed on a point just to the left of his right ear.

“I wondered if you would try to escape,” he mused softly as they moved around the dance floor.

Other couples had come to join them now, and Louise glowered at him as he moved her effortlessly between the others.

“I considered it, believe me,” she muttered.

He chuckled, and the sound reverberated through her like low, rolling thunder,



leaving her breathless and aware of every inch of space between them.

“Must you stand so close to me?” she asked irritably.

He raised his eyebrows at her and gave her an arrogant smirk. She scowled as he pulled her even closer to him. She could feel the heat of his body through his immaculate clothes.

“I am sorry, I did not think I could affect you.”

“You cannot,” she stated tightly. “It is difficult to dance with you on top of my feet.”

“You insult me, Madam. I am a wonderful dancer.”

“And so humble.”

The smirk remained in place as he spun her around. Louise was annoyed to find that he was quite right—the Duke had the best poise and the smoothest movements out of every person on the dance floor.

“Your mother seems kind,” she murmured.

His back stiffened, although the mask remained firmly in place. “You think so?”

“I do. On first acquaintance. Are you close?”

“We are mother and son,” he said curtly, and she frowned at the pain that flitted across his face. “She is likely happy that you went through with the wedding. I am sure she is as invested in finding Marcus as I am.”

Louise tried to pull away from him, but his hand tensed, pinning her to him. The

Duke was tall, and she felt his body grow hotter as she noted a hardness pressing against her belly.

She looked up at him, only to find him smirking yet again.

“My apologies, Duchess, but you are quite extraordinarily beautiful. I am only a man.”

“You are despicable.”

But to her dismay, her body was melting against his, enjoying the contact despite all her efforts.

“I believe it will soon be time for us to withdraw.”

As he said those words, the music came to an end, and they twirled to a stop in the center of the dance floor. Louise looked about her as the other couples returned to their seats. Her heart hammered in her chest as the Duke’s gaze met hers, his green eyes filled with want and an infuriating need that her heart echoed.

“Sybella needs me,” she blurted out, panic rising in her throat at the thought that he might take her away and lay claim to her.

What if he ignores my rules and simply takes what he sees as rightfully his?

She needed air. She needed space. Seeing Sybella’s worried face at the table behind her, she motioned to her and ran out of the room, leaving Christian standing alone in the center of the dance floor, calling after her to no avail.

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“You’re losing your touch, it seems,” Gabriel drawled as Christian returned to his seat.

The Duke of Stonewell had somehow procured a glass of whiskey despite wine being the only drink at the table.

“Where did you get that from?” Christian asked irritably.

“I asked your butler. He was most obliging. I demanded the highest quality. I do hope it’s expensive and you’re running out of it.” Christian glared at him, but Gabriel only raised his glass in a toast. “To your bride. May she make you as miserable as you seem to make her.”

“Are you trying to be insufferable?”

“Of course. I did say I would gloat if things did not turn out in your favor.”

Christian sighed, aware of his mother’s eyes on him. He did not wish to talk to her, and he suddenly felt exhausted. The day had necessitated a great many fake smiles and endless idle chatter with acquaintances. He just wanted to be alone with his thoughts and digest what had taken place.

He looked around at the assembled guests and stood up.

“Thank you all for coming,” he said as loudly as possible, as many faces turned toward him. “The hour is getting late, and my bride and I need to rest. We are grateful for your kind words this day, and I wish you a safe journey home.”

He knew many would see it as a snub, but he couldn't pretend to be the perfect host for another second. He longed for silence and a bit of peace. Most of all, he wanted to find his bride and ask her what she meant by humiliating him in such a way.

I said this marriage would not be boring. It seems I was more right than I thought.

When the guests eventually began to disperse, Christian bid a brief farewell to Louise's parents. Lady Northbridge gave him a stiff smile, but there was warmth in her eyes. Lord Northbridge looked ready to hit him, and Christian felt a deep sense of satisfaction at having beaten him at his own game.

As the guests began to file out, he saw Sybella leaving the room and swiftly turned around, spotting Louise trying to slip out of a rear door beside a confused-looking footman.

He crossed the room before she could do so and caught her wrist. It was humiliating enough to chase down his wife in front of the entire wedding party, and he was losing the small amount of patience he had left.

"Enough of your games—it is time I spent some time alone with my wife."

He pulled her through the door and dragged her down the narrow corridor. It was flanked by family portraits dating back hundreds of years, and their eyes seemed to follow him as the steady sound of his footsteps echoed off the walls, followed by her protests.

"You will unhand me, Sir," she hissed viciously, yanking back her hand to try to loosen his grip.

Christian's fingers wrapped around her entire wrist without difficulty, and she had the strength of a kitten. She barely managed to slow him down.

He pushed her into a side room, a small parlor rarely used by him or his mother. He shut the door and turned around to find her breathing heavily. The same lock of hair had come loose, and his fingers itched to tuck it behind her ear.

“May I remind you,” she said angrily, “that I set a rule you must abide by. I do not want a child for the first year of our marriage. If you want a woman in your bed, you can take a lover and be done with it.”

She moved to slip past him, but the fragile thread of his patience snapped. Whether it was her insinuation that he was no better than the other men of his class or the suggestion that he might desire another woman, he could no longer tolerate her provocations.

He gripped her upper arms and pushed her back against the door. She let out a small gasp of shock but, to his surprise, went pliant beneath him almost instantly, her eyes fluttering shut as though overtaken by her desire.

He shuddered at the thought of how he might be with her in bed—running his fingers through her hair, watching as her body melted against his. He was hard in seconds. He wanted to rut against her and claim her right then and there, her rules be damned.

“We have been married three hours, and you have already insulted me twice, Your Grace.”

“Stop calling me that,” she spat, then closed her mouth.

He smirked down at her. “If you do me the same courtesy, I shall. I am not going to take a lover when I have a wife to take my pleasure from. I am not like all the other men of the ton who use women and disrespect their wives as quickly as they are joined with them.”

“Do you expect me to thank you for the courtesy?”

He lost the battle with himself. He ground his hips against hers, knowing she could feel his hard length between her legs when she let out a low moan.

“You can set all the rules you like, Louise. But by the end of this week, you will beg me to take you.” His hand moved slowly down her waist as he spoke, and her breath came harsh and jagged in his ears. “You’ll long for my touch. You’ll crawl and beg me to take you.” He moved his lips to her ear, grazing the shell, barely able to contain his lust. “Get ready for me, Duchess, because in seven days, I’ll come to claim what’s mine.”

He ran his tongue along the line of her jaw and groaned as she let out that addictive, little moan again. He ground his hips against hers for the final time before stepping away and putting his hand on the door handle.

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He held back a smile as she shot him a withering look with all the fury he had come to expect from his Iron Harridan.

“Try to resist me until then, Your Grace. I look forward to your surrender.”

### CHAPTER 8

Louise barely slept the previous night.

The Duke had kept his word and had not come to her room. She had not seen him again after he left her, for which she was grateful.

His mother had called on her to make sure that she had everything she needed, and she seemed to be an accommodating and kind woman. The resemblance between them was striking. His mother's dark hair and olive skin were reflected far more in him than in Marcus.

I wonder why they do not get along.

Louise was dressed early the next morning and was eager for something to occupy her until she went downstairs for breakfast. She looked around her room for something to distract her, but it was rather bland in appearance. Her heart soared at the sight of some daffodils in a vase on the mantelpiece, but when she approached them, she discovered that they were made of silk.

Feeling out of place and rather downcast, she decided to unpack her trunk herself. At least it would keep her mind busy with something other than thoughts of the Duke.

With a resolute shake of her head, she flung open her case, determined to tackle the task at hand and do something productive.

One by one, she began pulling out her dresses, smoothing the fabric as she placed each item on the bed. After a few trips back and forth, she paused, eyeing the heavy trunk with a sigh, then crouched down beside it. Bracing herself, she attempted to drag it closer to the foot of the bed, hoping to make the process a little easier.

She managed to lift it a fraction of an inch, but it was far heavier than she had expected. Frowning and uncertain what could have added to the weight, she removed the rest of her clothes from the trunk, only to discover a thick layer of books beneath them.

Her heart swelled as she took in the titles.

All of them were linked to botany and the study of plants. She pulled them out and laid them on the floor beside her, smiling for the first time in days.

“Bless you, Mama,” she said softly.

It was beyond doubt that this was her mother’s doing. Louise had loved plants since she was a child. She had found joy in studying them and had taken to drawing them later.

These books belonged to her father, and as she imagined her mother placing them one by one into the trunk, she felt a sense of satisfaction that her mother had defied him so blatantly.

She took her time arranging them around the room. She put most of them on the mantelpiece, but there was one called *The Language of Flowers* that she put beside her bed.



She could not wait to dive back into them, beyond grateful that her mother had given her this gift without her even having to ask.

She went down for breakfast in much higher spirits than when she woke up. But her good mood lasted until she walked through the door and found the Duke waiting for her with a peevish expression.

“Thank you for joining me,” he said pointedly.

She opened her mouth to enquire if she was late and then decided against it. She thought that a man like him would probably value punctuality.

I shall be late for everything from now on.

“Good morning, Your Grace,” she said automatically as she took her seat, then flushed crimson as she remembered the circumstances of him calling her that the day before.

“Good morning, Your Grace,” he echoed. A muscle in his jaw ticked, and she could tell the title annoyed him.

There was a plethora of food on the table, including boiled eggs, cold tongues, and a plate of kippers. It looked absolutely divine. She suddenly realized how hungry she was.

Louise began to eat her buttered toast as the tea was poured. The Duke’s eyes stayed on her the whole while, and she cleared her throat several times, trying to suppress her blush.

I have never blushed so easily in my life as with this man.

“Tell me, why are you so certain that you will not give me an heir in the first year of our marriage?”

Louise glanced nervously at the servants in the room, but the Duke appeared unbothered by their presence.

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“I can understand not wishing to lie with me until we get to know one another better, but a year seems excessive,” he continued. “Does the Ice Queen perhaps hate children?”

“On the contrary, Your Grace?—”

“Christian!” She started as he slammed his knife on his plate, his gaze dark and ominous. “I will not ask again.”

She clenched her teeth, watching a vein bulge in the center of his forehead, but his eyes were smoldering with desire.

“Ch-Christian,” she stammered, jutting her chin as though in protest. To her surprise, his shoulders relaxed. “On the contrary—Christian—I adore children, but I have something that I wish to finish before embracing motherhood.” She glanced again at the servants as she lowered her voice. “Were you serious about not taking lovers?”

Christian’s lips quirked up as he took a bite of his toast. “Despite my animosity toward your father, I am not planning to punish you for his sins, whatever you may think about the subject. I will not disrespect you, and I expect the same courtesy in return.”

He leaned back in his chair and dabbed his lips with his napkin before placing it beside him and rising from his seat. Louise looked up at him in astonishment.

He couldn’t have waited so long for me to come down. Has he finished already?

The door on the other side of the room opened, and his mother walked in. Now, it was his turn to look surprised as she came to the table and sat across from Louise.

“Good morning, Mother,” Christian said dutifully. “At the risk of sounding indelicate, why are you here?”

The Dowager Duchess scoffed. “It is breakfast time, is it not?”

“Indeed, and I can count on the fingers of one hand the last time we broke our fast together.”

“Well, perhaps I merely wish to spend some time with your wife. Is that so hard to believe?”

Christian rolled his eyes and walked out of the room without another word.

Louise watched him go, noting the tension in his shoulders that had not been present when they were alone. Something about his mother displeased him a great deal.

“Good morning, my dear,” the Dowager Duchess said as she helped herself to a cup of tea.

Louise smiled at her. “Good morning. Did you sleep well?”

“I did. And you?”

“Fitfully, I confess, but I am in a new home, sleeping on a new mattress. I suppose that must be the reason.”

“Indeed, it must be,” the Dowager Duchess agreed, giving her a knowing look. “What do you think of your new husband?” she asked.

Louise frowned at her. “He is not what I expected,” she admitted.

The Dowager Duchess gave another little smile that Louise found hard to decipher.

“I know you were close to my youngest son.” The Dowager Duchess’s eyes became sad as she spoke of Marcus. “Do you have any notion of where he is? Christian believed that marrying you might lead to a clue, but I cannot understand how.”

Louise sighed heavily. “I cared for Marcus greatly, Your Grace, and I wish I could give you the information you seek. But I do not know where he is. I simply pray that he is safe and well.”

“He always spoke fondly of you. He was at your house so often when you were younger. I wondered if you might... but no matter. You have chosen my other son, who is rather different from Marcus.”

Louise remained silent, unsure how to respond to that comment.

“He can be a hard man to know,” the Dowager Duchess continued softly. “But do not despair. The kind man I raised exists somewhere behind the façade he presents to the world.”

Louise pondered that statement as she considered the Duke’s cold façade. There was certainly more to him than she had expected, but she knew him to be arrogant and self-conceited—no assurances from his mother would change that.

But perhaps his cold façade is just as false as my own.

“Thank you, Your Grace,” she said gently. “I hope to meet that man someday.”

### CHAPTER 9

Christian donned his top hat and tails and headed to Orions for the afternoon, determined to put his new wife out of his mind.

He needed to speak to his solicitors about the deed to the Earl's townhouse in any case, and it would give him a good excuse to escape for a few hours.

Leaving her alone so soon after the wedding was probably a bad idea, but he rather relished the notion of irritating her further. She was even more beautiful when she was fuming.

After a short carriage ride, he walked into his club. As soon as he caught the familiar scent of leather, fine wine, and cigar smoke, his mind settled, and he headed to the office he shared with Gabriel and Marcus.

Gabriel was one of the founding members of Orions and was instrumental in its establishment. He also recruited many of the wealthier members and, despite his rather standoffish nature, was skilled in diplomacy. He sorted out more scraps and arguments than anyone else at the club and was famous for his calm head in crises.

Therefore, when Christian walked into the office and found him buried in ledgers and scribbling on a wide scroll of parchment, his spirits lifted considerably.

"Good afternoon, old man," he said jovially as Gabriel looked up at him.

"Are you speaking to me again?" Gabriel asked archly. "How predictable."

“What? When did I stop speaking to you?” Christian protested.

“I thought I had insulted you by disapproving of your bride. How is the marriage bed? Just as you left it?”

Christian shot him a long, disapproving glare.

Gabriel rolled his eyes. “Turned coy, have you? I always knew a lady would be your downfall.”

“Do go to the devil,” Christian muttered without much heat.

“Whatever has you in such a lather?”

“I am not in alather.I am visiting my club, and my closest friend is being tiresome,” Christian scoffed. “Is Willis here?”

Gabriel returned to his ledger. “He is. I saw him at the Bridge table not an hour ago. He’s not in a fit state to advise, though. I think he rather over-imbibed at lunch.”

“No matter. I can discuss the deed with him, at least.”

Gabriel paused his writing and looked up at him with a glint of interest in his eyes. “The deed to Northbridge Manor? What do you intend to do with it?”

“Never mind. Will I see you later? Armitage is being an ogre again, and I could use your presence to dissuade him from any more roughhousing.”

“What a bore the man is. Yes, I imagine I can throw my glove into the ring.”

Christian collected the deed from his desk drawer and headed to the door before

Gabriel called him back.

“How is your Duchess? You must give me a little clue, at least. Is she just as terrible as I suspected?”

Christian felt the same irrational spike of annoyance at any criticism of Louise. “Did I not already tell you to go to the devil? I shall do so again.”

And then he closed the door to the sound of Gabriel chuckling heartily at his expense.

Christian found Willis, his solicitor, in the card room. It was a smaller parlor than the others in the club, but it was one of his favorites. Smoke coiled around the ceiling, and a raucous game was going on at one of the smaller tables made up of the younger patrons.

Many of the Bridge players looked at them reproachfully as another loud trick was played. Christian suppressed a smile as Willis turned to shout at them, only to see him approaching and shut his mouth.

Willis stood up, his pot belly hanging over his trousers and his heavy mustache bristling as he smiled and took Christian’s hand. “I was remiss in not speaking to you after the wedding, Your Grace. I do hope I didn’t offend you. Blasted work.”

“Not at all. I was glad you could come.”

“Were you seeking me out or just showing your face about your excellent establishment?”



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Christian chuckled. Willis was one of the most cheerful men he'd ever met and one of the busiest. He had come to London without a penny to his name and now represented some of the finest clients the ton had to offer. Christian considered himself lucky to be among them.

"Might I bend your ear for a spell? There's a glass of brandy in it for you."

The solicitor's skin was already flushed from too much drink, but he clapped him enthusiastically on the shoulder and nodded. "Anything for my favorite client. I shall return, boys. Dummy me in, won't you!"

There was a chorus of groans from the Bridge table he had just abandoned, but he paid them no mind as Christian led him to two chairs before the fire. As they sat down, Christian produced the deed and handed it over.

Willis was a pleasant man, but he had little patience for small talk when it came to business, so Christian got straight to the point.

"I have won the deed to the Earl of Northbridge's townhouse. I know the man doesn't have two pennies to rub together. I wanted to ask if I would be able to entail it to my wife."

Willis, who had begun reading the document, looked up at him and raised his eyebrows. "You are speaking about the former Louise Dawson, the Earl's daughter?"

"I am."

“Whyever would you do that?”

Christian gripped the arms of his chair, keeping his temper in check. It would not occur to many men, Willis included, to give any property to a woman, but he was determined to do it.

“Her father sold her to me, Willis, without so much as a backward glance over a hand of cards. She would have been left homeless if he had lost in any case. The man has no interest in caring for his family. I intend to ensure that she has some capital behind her should anything happen to me. He is mired up to his neck in debt—I would not wish her to be touched by that.”

“And yet you married her following an agreement over a hand of cards.” Willis’s bushy eyebrows lowered.

“That is none of your concern. I intended to protect the lady. The game became an auction within the same room. I have long since wanted to knock down the Earl a peg or two. I achieved that, and now I wish to do right by her.”

Willis clearly wasn’t happy about the circumstances, but he made a sort of gurgle in the back of his throat that Christian interpreted as acquiescence.

“Very well.” He squinted at the document. “It is easy enough for me to draw up a marriage settlement. We could create a trust for her entitlement, including the deed to the townhouse, to protect the assets from mismanagement or claims by third parties like her father’s creditors. We could also arrange for the townhouse to be passed on to her, or rather your children, should anything happen to her.”

Christian’s stomach clenched at the reminder of how long Louise intended to leave him without an heir. The mere thought of not being able to touch her for a full year was horrible enough. When Willis frowned at him, he schooled his features into a

neutral expression and nodded.

“A trust would be ideal.”

“Do you wish to restrict the Earl’s access to the property in the meantime?”

“No. I would not wish to disrupt Lady Northbridge’s life. She is close to her daughter.”

“Very well. I’ll take this with me tonight, have a copy drawn up, and return it tomorrow. I’ll have the settlement with you by the end of the week.”

Christian felt the tightness in his chest ease, and he held out a hand. “My thanks to you. You are, as ever, quite indispensable.”

“Hmm. Well, I shall bill you accordingly, of course, and I still haven’t had my brandy.”

Christian huffed a laugh and beckoned a servant over, bidding the older man goodbye as he ordered a large measure of brandy for himself.

As he left the cardroom, he detected a familiar scent in the air, and all the tension came thundering back within a few seconds.

A woman was approaching him, her hips swaying in a subtle way he knew well. A dark, shimmering blue gown hugged her comely figure, and her blonde hair was arranged in a complicated style about her head. Christian’s hands clenched into fists instantly, and the reaction surprised him.

What he had told Louise was true—he had no intention of taking a lover. Yet, having the evidence of his past misdeeds thrown in his face the day after his wedding was

irritating, to say the least.

Lady Cynthia Carruthers was a beautiful widow who frequented the club. Her figure and sensual charm had once attracted him like no other, but now it left him feeling cold.

“Good afternoon, Your Grace.” Her eyes ran over his figure very slowly.

How did I ever find this woman attractive? In comparison to Louise, she is positively plain.

“Good afternoon, Lady Carruthers,” he greeted stiffly. “It is good to see you at the club again.”

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In truth, he had not seen her for several weeks, but the last time they had spoken, she ended up in his bed. He now felt very guilty for it, as though he had betrayed Louise in retrospect.

“So formal, Your Grace... Are you feeling well?”

Her hand slid up his arm, and he moved away without a conscious thought. He gripped her wrist, and she looked up at him in shock. But then her pupils dilated with desire.

“You must be aware of my wedding, Lady Carruthers.”

She giggled. “I am, Your Grace. A marriage without love. Everyone knows it is so.” She stepped closer to him. “You and I both know what you really need from a woman, Christian.”

He recoiled at the sound of his name on her lips, revulsion climbing up his throat as he glanced at the patrons sitting nearby.

“I know we have shared something in the past, but we will not be doing so again. Is that understood?”

The lady’s eyes darkened with anger, and her painted lips curled into a sneer of intense displeasure. “Really? I would not have thought, with your lineage, you would have any issue with lying with a woman who was not your wife.”

Her eyes flashed, and Christian’s grip on her wrist tightened such that she winced.

Without another word, and aware of the many men in the room, he pulled her roughly into the corridor and toward the main entrance of the club.

Jarvis, his burly steward, looked up from the desk opposite the entryway and came out swiftly, prepared to do what was needed.

Christian pushed Lady Carruthers toward him—not too roughly, but not gently either.

“Next time you try to disrespect my Duchess, I will not be so forgiving, Lady Carruthers. Is that clear?” His voice was ringing with fury now.

She scoffed in his face, her fingers curling into her skirts, her nails digging into the fabric. “That Ice Queen would not know how to care for her husband, Your Grace. And we both know if you turn your back on me, you shan’t be seeing me in your bed again.”

Christian glanced at Jarvis, whose expression was utterly blank, but there was no denying that this was an embarrassment he could have done without.

“If you cross this threshold at any point in the future, I will ensure that the precious reputation you hold so dear is ruined for all time. Jarvis, see this lady out, please.”

He caught her trying to take a swing at him just before Jarvis encircled her wrist lightly with his thumb and index finger, and she stilled instantly.

“This way, please.”

Jarvis did not need to ask her a second time.

Christian turned to go back into the club to attend to any business he might have neglected, but then he hesitated. He heard the lady’s protests as she was manhandled

out the door and waited until she had made it a good way down the street before having his carriage called.

He was desperate to see Louise now—that was the truth. Lady Carruthers had unsettled him and made him feel a strange sense of urgency, as though he needed to reassure himself that Louise still belonged to him.

I have only been married one day, and already I am hurrying home to my wife. Whatever has become of me?

## CHAPTER 10

Louise was happily ensconced in the garden with the Duke's gardener, Neilson.

He was younger than she had expected, only five-and-thirty or so. His face was already weathered by the sun and much more tanned than her own. His hands, too, were leathery from the constant time outdoors, but his knowledge of plants was extensive.

The garden, like in many townhouses in London, was long and narrow. But the Duke boasted more space than most. Many of the trees had been pruned back, and several rose bushes lined the pathways between the beds, but many lay unused.

“And how long has this bed been empty for?” Louise asked, indicating a long, thin plot parallel to the back of the house.

“Many months, Your Grace,” the gardener answered, looking around him with a sigh. “The Duke does not spend a great deal of time in the garden. Until I have my instructions, I keep things ticking over, but I would not plant anything new without his say-so.”

“Well, I shall have some say in it from now on. I would be grateful for your opinion on what could be added here.”

He raised his eyebrows, scratching his head and almost dislodging his cap. It was clear that not many members of the household had asked for Neilson’s thoughts on the garden for many months.

“I’ve always felt a gooseberry bush or two would be a good addition, Your Grace.”



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“Very good!” Louise said happily, picturing making her mother a gooseberry pie from her very own garden when she came to visit. “I would love to see some strawberries, too. We could add them to the walled garden, where they will get the most sunlight.”

Neilson looked surprised, but then a wide grin spread across his face. “I think that would be nice, Your Grace.”

“And what of the rest of the garden? March is a good time to plant. Potatoes, perhaps? I am sure the cook would not object to some of our homegrown produce coming to our table.”

“No indeed, Your Grace.”

“Excellent. Pass me a spade, please.”

He blinked at her. “I wouldn’t wish for you to ruin your clothes, Your Grace.”

“Nonsense. Mud will wash away. I adore working in the gardens. Let us prepare the bed, and we can discuss some flowers for the borders. There is much potential here.”

And she truly meant it. The garden was beautiful.

To her surprise, as she turned to grab the spade and get to work, she saw the Dowager Duchess crossing the lawn toward them.

“Good afternoon,” Louise greeted, slightly worried that the older woman would

frown upon her getting involved in gardening.

However, although she showed no intention of joining her, the Dowager Duchess appeared more intrigued than scandalized by Louise's behavior.

"Good afternoon, Duchess," she said with a warm smile. "Good afternoon, Neilson."

The gardener dutifully doffed his cap and continued working.

"You are fond of plants, Duchess?" the Dowager Duchess asked Louise.

"I confess, I am. I adore being outside in the gardens. It is my favorite thing in the world."

The Dowager gave her a soft smile and nodded, her eyes twinkling.

"This garden is beautifully designed," Louise said happily.

"Thank you. I do not get to enjoy it much these days."

"Did you design it, Your Grace?"

The Dowager Duchess nodded. "I did. I used to spend a great deal of time in the garden when I was younger. Plants hold no judgment and make no noise. It was a suitable retreat from the rigors of Society."

Louise examined her carefully as she spoke, detecting a subtle pain in her voice that she couldn't quite place.

"It is glorious. I love the roses along the hedge line. I was speaking to Neilson about adding gooseberry bushes, and I would love to plant some marigolds and hollyhocks

in summer.” Louise pointed further down the garden. “The cherry trees will be in bloom in a few months. It will be lovely to have their blossoms sprinkled about.”

The Dowager Duchess laughed—it was a very pleasant change from her rather severe expression. “You really are fond of plants.”

“All types, yes. I had planned to write an encyclopedia. It is something I have been working on and researching for many years.” Neilson had stopped working and was now listening intently. “In fact, I promised Marcus that...” Louise paused, glancing at her mother-in-law guiltily.

The Dowager Duchess inclined her head. “Promised him what?”

“That he would be the first to read it. I have bored him many times with my love of flowers. I intended to reward his patience with a preview.”

The Dowager Duchess smiled at her fondly, before her expression became sad. “You have leave to do as you like with this garden, Duchess. I would be happy to see how it is transformed under your guidance.”

“I do not want to impose. I would welcome your input; this is your garden, too.”

“Oh yes, but I am too old to wander about and dig holes while I’m on my knees. I would happily watch you transform it. I believe you will alter many things for the better, now that you are with us. I am sure, even though he is not here, Marcus will enjoy the results when he returns to us.”

“He does love being outdoors,” Louise said wistfully, looking out at the long expanse of lawn before her.

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“Wife, I would have a word with you.”

Louise started at the voice so close behind her and turned to find the Duke standing between Neilson and his mother. His dark gaze was fixed on her with all the brooding intensity it once had behind the wolf mask.

Without waiting for her reply, Christian turned on his heel and stalked into the house. Much to her irritation, Louise felt compelled to follow him.

Christian was still angry after his encounter with Lady Carruthers, and his mood had not improved upon seeing his wife.

Her skirt was six inches deep in mud while she brandished a spade, joking and laughing with his mother as though they had known one another forever.

She never laughs like that with me.

He had been approaching them, trying to reconcile this happy woman with the angry Ice Queen he had encountered at the ball. And then she had mentioned Marcus, and a tendril of something ugly and vicious unfurled in his chest.

It felt like jealousy—an emotion Christian had never experienced in his life.

Without waiting to see that she was following him, he walked to his study and poured himself a generous measure of brandy, not realizing that she was only five steps behind him.

He turned to find her standing before him, her hands on her hips, looking deeply unimpressed.

“If you want to have a ‘word’ with me because I got myself dirty, I am fully aware that?—”

He raised his hand. “I could not care less about your appearance. I can buy you a dozen dresses if you wish to play about in the mud.”

She lowered her arms, looking confused. “Then what is it you wish to say?”

His fingers clenched around his glass as he took a long sip.

Am I really going to lower myself to?—

“What was the nature of your relationship with my brother? Did you lie to me when you told me there is nothing between the two of you?”

Louise’s eyes went wide. “What?”

Christian slammed his glass on his desk, watching the amber liquid slosh over the rim, and then walked toward her. He gripped her waist roughly and pulled her against him.

“Is he the reason you will not let me touch you?”

Her hands came up to rest on his forearms as she leaned away from him. “You will release me, Your Grace. You have this all wrong!”

He pulled her against him again, hardening in an instant as she shuddered in his arms. Her eyes widened when she felt the evidence of his arousal.

“So, you want me to touch you?” he asked, his voice a low growl. “Because I’ve been thinking about it ever since you talked back to me at the masquerade ball.”

“You are mad,” she huffed, trying to free herself again, but he was too strong for her.

“Then you have driven me mad,” he said softly.

Louise let out a choked cry as he pushed her back toward the desk and her back connected with it. He thrust his hips forward, and she let out a gasp as he lowered his face to hers, their lips a hair’s breadth apart.

Her breath mingled with his as one of his hands remained on the small of her back and the other trailed down her waist. His eyes never left hers, and she was unable to look away.

Control this. Push him away.

But her body would not obey her mind. She could only wait and watch as he slowly trailed his hand down her thigh and inward toward her core.

Her jaw was slack with shock, but her body burned bright for him even now. Her skin was alight with need, and despite her uncertainty about what might happen next, she could feel a pulse of heat building within her that was impossible to deny.

His lips brushed hers as he spoke again.

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“I told you that you would beg me, woman,” he muttered. “So, beg me.”

“I would never,” she said weakly.

“Is that so?”

His lips moved to her neck, the touch like a rose petal brushing over her flesh, but it made her heart beat erratically all the same. His fingers curled inward, and she shuddered, a moan escaping her lips as a lightning rod of pleasure juddered through her.

“Beg.”

Her hands moved around his arms and shoulders to settle on his back, her body already a slave to his will even as her mind attempted to rebel against him. He brought his lips back to hers, and their eyes met and held as he hovered above her. Louise felt the exquisite touch of his hand through the folds of her dress, and she couldn't bear it any longer as her lips parted on words she had always sworn she would never say.

“Please...” she breathed. “Christian.”

With a deep groan, he lowered his lips to hers, moving her so that she was pinned between his body and the desk.

Letting out a cry, she threw out her hand behind her as he bent her backward, supporting her lower back as he removed his hand from between her legs and pushed

it roughly into her hair.

She felt the ribbons come loose instantly as her long locks cascaded about her face and he pushed his fingers into the strands.

Maintaining a punishing grip, he ground his hips against hers, and she gasped in surprised pleasure at the wicked sensation it elicited. As the sound left her lips, his tongue thrust into her mouth without mercy.

She moaned as he tightened his grip on her hair, controlling the kiss, not allowing her a single quarter of movement. His knee moved between her legs, and he thrust his hips against her thigh. She broke free of him, panting in the silent room, wishing she had the strength to push him away but knowing she did not.

As both her hands fell behind her for support, he lifted her onto the desk, moving between her spread thighs and taking her mouth again. He pushed his tongue inside, sending wicked shivers through her, and his fingers threaded through the long strands of her hair again.

Her fingernails dug into his shoulders, and he chuckled against her neck as he licked his way back to her mouth. She was under his command, for good or ill, and her mind gave up the battle as she gave in to the pleasure.

## CHAPTER 11

Louise shuddered against the Duke as he nipped the base of her jaw, her mouth falling open helplessly.

The shocking feeling of his hand between her legs had been so surprising that she could hardly believe it had happened. His body was hot against hers as he continued to kiss down her neck. She could have remained in his arms forever, but as his hand



began to slide down her body again, her fingers tightened on his shoulders, and with an enormous effort, she pushed him away.

Drawing in deep, gasping breaths, she attempted to control her desire. She had not even known she possessed such a desperate need until that moment.

“This should not have happened,” she said quickly, sliding away from him, using the desk to support her weight and attempting to smooth down her skirts as she did so.

Christian straightened, watching her retreat with a quizzical expression. Somehow, despite what they had just done, he looked, for the most part, flawless. She felt a rush of embarrassment and desire in equal measure when she saw the redness around his mouth from her frenzied kisses.

How could I allow him to touch me that way? He sees me as nothing but a means to an end.

“And why not?” he drawled, turning his back to the desk and leaning against it. His broad shoulders bulged as he crossed his arms over his chest—the picture of aristocratic affront.

Why can't I keep my eyes off this man?

“Remember, Duchess, you have limited time. In seven days—or is it six now?—I shall claim you for my own.”

Louise scowled at him as she attempted to fix the mess he had made of her hair. The ribbons that had tied the long strands in place were behind him on the desk, and she eyed them warily, not wishing to get any closer to him to retrieve them.

“It looks better loose,” Christian noted, his heated gaze running down the length of

her hair over her breasts and back up again.

He twisted his torso around, his fingers plucking the ribbons off the desk before holding them out to her expectantly. A foreign rush of nerves shot through her at the idea of being close to him again.

There was tension in the air, just as there had been during their first meeting. She felt drawn to him, like the needle of a compass—pulled by some higher power, always returning to the same place. It was a dangerous and unfamiliar feeling.

But Louise was not a coward. She took a small step forward, snatching the ribbons from his fingers and clutching them tightly in her fist. He gave her a coy smile that set her blood on fire again, and she swiftly made for the door, eager to be out of his company and cool her heated blood.

However, Christian stepped forward before she could do so and gently took her arm, stopping her in her tracks.

“What did you promise Marcus?”

Confused, she looked up into his green eyes, which held an emotion she was not used to seeing from him—uncertainty.

“What do you mean?”

“I think, as your husband and his brother, I deserve to know. You were speaking about it with my mother in the gardens. What were you referring to?”

Louise hesitated as an irrepressible need to reassure him rose in her chest. It was strange to see Christian unsure of anything. Since their first introduction, he had been the epitome of an arrogant aristocrat, ordering everyone around him to do his bidding with practiced ease.

She sighed. “It was something I wished to do.”

Christian slowly let go of her arm, his expression oddly blank. “Something you wished to do?”

“To complete, that is,” she huffed, irritated by how flustered she became around him. “I have a love of plants. I have been interested in them all my life. They are my true passion, and I have bored Marcus to tears with my talk of the encyclopedia. I intend to catalog and document all the different species in this country.”

She glanced up at him, wondering how he might view a woman wishing to do such a thing, but he simply looked baffled.

“I believe it will take me about a year to finish writing it, but if I am with child and later a mother, I will have no chance to do so.”

“To be up to your knees in the dirt?” Christian asked pointedly, his eyes traveling down to her skirts, which were still soaked from the dewy earth in the gardens.

Louise felt her cheeks redden yet again and nodded, not wishing to reveal how much she adored being outdoors and exploring nature.

The Duke took a small step forward, towering over her, his bright eyes searing and filled with promise. “You know, wife, there are things that we can do that will not result in a child. Do you not wish to find out what they might be?”

His voice was low and seductive once more as his hand came up to curl around her waist. The pulse of heat she felt between her legs was a white-hot spark that threatened to travel through the rest of her body. It electrified her senses one by one until all she could feel was him.

With a shuddering gasp, she stepped away, shaking her head as the rest of her hair slipped and cascaded down her back.

“I am sorry. This is the only part of my future that I can control, and I intend to do it until I am ready to say otherwise.”

Christian’s face shuttered at those words, and he clasped his hands behind his back, all the heat in his eyes fading as though it had never been.

“I see. You’re sure that is the only reason?”

“What other reason would there be?”

Does he believe I do not want him? The evidence to the contrary is fairly damning.

“I’m going to ask one last time. Was there more between you and my brother than you have admitted to me?” he asked, his voice cold and distant.

Louise had not stomped her foot since she was five, but she did so now, clenching her fists and glaring at him furiously.

“I have told you, Your G—” At his hard stare, she stopped and cleared her throat. “I have told you before, more than once. There was nothing between me and Marcus but friendship,” she snapped.

Immediately, his posture relaxed, and he bounced on the balls of his feet, looking pleased with himself.

“Good, because I will not allow you to lust after other men, just as I will not lust after other women.”

Louise faltered. She was still desperate to leave the room and be free of his influence for a few minutes, but there was something about his insistence on fidelity that surprised her.

She would hardly wish for Christian to become an adulterer, but the finality in his voice and his repetitive broaching of the subject were odd.

“Why are you so set on that?” she asked eventually, curiosity getting the better of her. “Many marriages are arranged for convenience’s sake. Lovers are commonplace, are they not?”

Something shifted in his expression at that question. A light left his eyes as he pressed his lips together, his jaw clenching several times before he shrugged a

shoulder as though brushing the topic aside.

“I have my parents to thank for that.”

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Louise closed her eyes briefly at her stupidity, biting her lip so hard she almost broke the skin.

What an idiotic thing to ask him when I know full well that he and Marcus were born out of wedlock.

She nodded, unsure what else she could say without apologizing profusely for her ignorance. As she moved to the door, feeling embarrassed, he raised his hand, stopping her again. This time, when she looked at him, his face was devoid of emotion.

“Tell me,” he asked quietly, “did Marcus ever tell you that he had a lover? Or a lady that he admired and was close to?”

Louise thought back to the last few occasions she had seen Marcus at her home. He tended to be in high spirits as a rule, but she did recall that he had not been so cheerful during his final visit to the house before his disappearance. But he had never mentioned anything about a woman he cared for. They had never even broached that subject.

“No,” she said finally. “No, he never mentioned anything of that sort. I remember him saying that he wished to fall in love, but not that he had done so.” Hope bloomed in her chest. “Do you think he could be alive?”

Christian was all hard lines once more, the softness of the moment he had held her in his arms quite gone.

“That is what I wish to find out, and I intend to do it.” He fixed her with a forceful gaze. “When I am no longer distracted, that is.”

Louise understood that he was dismissing her, and with a new blush staining her cheeks, she left the room and made her way back to her bedchamber.

She reached the top of the steps and closed the door behind her, before leaning against it, feeling off balance and astounded by her body’s reaction.

She never would have believed that any man could make her feel that way. And with such brief touches, he had lit a fire beneath her skin.

She looked down at the ribbon in her hand and smoothed her fingers over it, fooling herself that she could still feel the warmth of his skin against hers.

She rang the bell for her maid and then went to sit at her dressing table, wondering what Christian’s investigation into his brother’s disappearance had uncovered.

I wonder whether he will tell me what he finds out. After all, he did call this marriage a partnership, a means to finding Marcus—Surely, I should be privy to his discoveries.

After a short while, her maid entered the room. Her innocent questions about how Louise’s hair had come loose made a blush rise in Louise’s cheeks, and she had to make up some vague excuse before the maid set to work.

Once she was presentable again, Louise went downstairs under the guise of going to the gardens, but, in reality, she was curious about Christian’s whereabouts. When she asked the servants, however, she discovered that he had returned to his club and was not expected to come back until that evening.



Irritated that he had left her to her own devices once again, Louise decided that she would make good use of her time and catalog some of the flowers in the gardens.

March was one of her favorite times of year because all of the best blooms were still to come. She went back to her bedchamber and collected her sketchbook, before heading back down to the gardens, which were lush and green, bathed in gentle spring sunlight.

It truly was a magnificent space, and she felt a fluttery anticipation at the thought of shaping it into her own vision.

She spent a happy few hours drawing some of the roses and speaking to the gardener about what might work at various places among the empty beds—of which there were plenty.

It occurred to her, as she stood looking out at the perfect lawns down the narrow line of the gardens, that a year was going to pass by awfully quickly, and she had a great deal of work left to do.

When she returned to the house and changed for supper, she was surprised to find that it was only herself and the Dowager Duchess in attendance.

“Is the Duke not joining us?” she asked, trying to keep the disappointment out of her voice.

The Dowager Duchess shook her head as their plates were placed before them. The older woman ate like a bird; she had a very tiny portion before her, but she was eyeing it with obvious relish.

“I do not think so, my dear. He tends to stay at his club more often than not. Although,” she added with a hint of admonishment, “he did not have you to come

home to before.”

She gave Louise a small smile as they both picked up their knives and forks and began to eat.

I doubt that my presence will make him hurry home.

Louise sat silently across from her mother-in-law as the fire crackled in the grate, the walls flanked by motionless servants. The silence was oppressively loud.

## CHAPTER 12

The following morning, Louise was awake before the rest of the household. Her mind was fixated on the fact that time was slipping away. A year now seemed no time at all to complete her book, and she was more eager than ever to finish it.

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With that in mind, she rang for her maid earlier than usual and dressed before the rest of the household had risen. She descended the stairs to the gardens, wondering what time Christian had arrived home the night before. She was ashamed to say that she had waited up for him, hoping to hear him return, but she had fallen asleep before he did so.

The house was cold, and there was a light frost on the ground outside. She glanced up at the sky, knowing that her parents were visiting today and hoping for sunshine. Her mother loved sitting amongst the flowers, and despite the cold, she hoped they would still be able to do so.

She pushed open the outer door, hearing the crunch of frost as she stepped out. The sun's weak rays had already melted the ice on the opposite side of the gardens, but the gravel beneath her feet glistened beautifully as she moved over it.

Clutching her notebook to her chest, she walked to the rear of the gardens. She had been curious about what might be growing there but had not yet had the opportunity to look.

She found many pots but not a great deal of growth. There were some canes in a few of the pots, ready for things to climb them. A strong smell of wild garlic emanated from the base of the garden wall. She already had hundreds of ideas bouncing around in her head, wishing to plant as much as she could.

“You’re awake early, Your Grace.”

She spun round to find Neilson behind her, his wiry frame leaning on his spade, his

cap askew, his eyes twinkling.

“Good morning, Neilson. I did not see you arrive.”

“I was in the walled part of the gardens, Your Grace, seein’ to the wood.”

“Tell me, is there a reason this part of the gardens is so empty?”

Neilson straightened, looking about him with an assessing eye. “I suppose it wasn’t used much, Your Grace. The Dowager Duchess often had vegetables and the like planted, but not for years now. It’s rarely used, if I’m being honest. Needs tendin’ to and no one to decide on what to cultivate. Are you thinkin’ of plantin’ somethin’?”

“I am. Would it not be pleasant to have vegetables growing here? We could plant leeks and carrots, with some tomatoes, in early summer. It would be nice to see this part filled with growing things, do you not think?”

“Very well, Your Grace. I’d be happy to begin as soon as you give me instructions.”

“Good. I shall plan it and tell you what I think, but I would like your opinion on it. You know this garden well. What type of soil do we have here?”

Neilson raised his eyebrows, seemingly impressed, and scratched his head. “Loamy—back part’s mainly clay. It would be good for vegetables, as you say, Your Grace. I’ve added quite a bit of manure to the beds over the years, and some sand, too.”

They both moved to inspect the beds. Most of them were well-tended and free of weeds, but they were empty of anything interesting.

“Well, that is good news. I shall order some seeds directly.”

Neilson looked rather perplexed that she was taking such an interest, but Louise was happy to go against the grain.

Perhaps I have grown too used to being the Ice Queen.

“You remind me of His Grace’s mother,” Neilson said thoughtfully. “She loved the garden too, though she didn’t spend quite so much time trudgin’ about in the soil.”

Louise looked down to find her skirts were stained with mud again. The frosty grass had soaked them through, and she laughed at how foolish she’d been to come down in such a fine gown.

“Louise.”

She looked up, startled by the voice so close, only to find Christian standing before her. He looked utterly out of place in the gardens, his hair perfect, his coat and waistcoat just so, the chain of his fob watch gleaming in the sunshine.

“Good mornin’, Your Grace,” Neilson mumbled and then beat a hasty retreat back to the rear of the gardens.

Louise watched him go and then turned back to Christian, her irritation rising as she saw him look disapprovingly at her skirts.

“What are you doing up at this hour?” he asked, his voice sharp and cold.

“I might ask you the same question, seeing as you did not return until dawn.”

He smirked, raising an eyebrow at her. “Did you miss me?”

“I hardly needed to miss you. I have plenty of things to occupy myself

with,withoutseeking your company.”

She had meant it to sound light, but his expression had annoyed her, and the words came out dismissive. His face was hard to read, but his lips pressed together into a line she was coming to recognize as a sign of his irritation.

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“I see. Well, breakfast is ready when you have finished conversing with the flowers.”

“I’ll have you know that conversing with the flowers is much more enjoyable than speaking to most people in Society.”

“Because they do not answer back?” he asked sardonically.

“Because they listen,” she murmured softly.

She made to walk past him and head into the house, but he didn’t move. She rolled her eyes as she was forced to brush against his body through the thin strip of grass between the beds. A bolt of desire shot through her as his hand came up to steady her, and her gaze met his as she eased her way by.

“Your parents will be here this afternoon,” he said in a low, intimate voice.

“Yes, thank you. I am aware,” she answered shortly, trying to disguise the need he elicited in her.

The sun came out later that morning, and it was a warm enough day for them to have tea outside.

Christian could hear the low murmur of voices as he reached the doors to the gardens. Lord Northbridge was speaking to Louise, his hand folded behind his back in a strict manner. For a man who hadn’t a penny to his name, he was remarkably good at appearing respectable.

Christian stepped out into the warm spring air. Both Lady Northbridge and Louise had shawls around their shoulders, but Lady Northbridge was admiring the gardens with much enthusiasm.

He wondered whether his mother-in-law shared his wife's love of plants and resolved to stay out in the gardens for as long as possible to ensure the ladies were entertained.

Lord Northbridge glanced behind him as Christian emerged, a familiar disdain flashing across his face before he gave a polite nod. Louise, to Christian's surprise, seemed rather relieved by his appearance, and he moved quickly to her side, before bowing to Lady Northbridge.

"Good afternoon, Lady Northbridge, Lord Northbridge. You are most welcome."

As they all moved to the table set out on the terrace at the edge of the lawn, he caught a glimpse of their reflections in the large glass windows looking out over the gardens. The Dawsons were all pale, classically English in their looks, whereas his darker Italian heritage was on obvious display. Christian looked at Louise's father just in time to see him studying him with a sharp glare.

"And is your husband treating you well?" the Earl enquired, his eyes still fixed on Christian.

Louise stiffened, her bright blue gaze darting to Christian before she pursed her lips. "Of course, Papa," she replied as the servants came out of the house, bearing tea trays laden with cakes.

Christian watched as the teacups were placed before each of his guests and the tea was dutifully poured. A cake stand piled high with beautiful delicacies was put in the center of the table, with two milk jugs on either side.



He waited patiently until the servants departed and then looked at the Earl with an expectant look. “How did you expect me to treat her?” he asked. “I have not yet had the opportunity to gamble her away on a hand of cards.”

Louise made a choked sound in the back of her throat as he picked up his teacup, very deliberately keeping eye contact with the Earl as he did so, waiting for the inevitable explosion.

To his dismay, the Earl seemed utterly unperturbed by his comments, but Lady Northbridge blushed profusely. His feelings of satisfaction were quickly soured by guilt.

“I am most glad to hear it,” the Earl said pompously, leaning over the table, plucking amacaronoff the stand, and popping it into his mouth. “One can never tell.”

The weighted comment made Christian’s blood boil, and heedless of the ladies present, he could not hold back from making his feelings known.

“My Lord, you appear to have forgotten yourself. Just because I have married your daughter does not give you the right to insult me in my own home!”

“You have glorious gardens, Your Grace,” Lady Northbridge interjected loudly as her husband opened his mouth to snap back. “Such magnificent cherry trees. I am not used to seeing such large specimens in London gardens.”

Christian kept his eyes on the Earl for just a little longer before focusing on his mother-in-law. “It is all my mother’s work, I assure you. Although my Duchess has plans to expand the gardens, I believe.”

Louise leaned forward as though to elaborate on some of those plans, but her father interrupted her before she had a chance.

“I hope you have not forgotten yourself, Your Grace,” the Earl barked. “We have business to attend to, or did you think I simply came to have tea with you?”

Occasionally, Christian would get so furious that his anger would plateau out. He had always been aware of the Earl’s arrogance, but now that he knew him better, he sensed something more lacing his interjection.

The Earl of Northbridge was frightened. He was sitting in the presence of someone who had complete control over him, and it was clear that he wanted to affirm his authority—it was the only card he had left to play.

Christian was not inclined to allow him to get off so easily.

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“Business, My Lord? I do not know what you speak of.”

The Earl’s cheeks turned red, but he did not lose his nerve. “You recall that you are in possession of something that is mine, which I would like you to return.”

“Ah, of course, yes,” Christian said, setting down his cup. “No. There is no business to speak of in that regard. I shall take care of my wife and her mother just as you asked. I expect nothing more from you on the matter. It is my pleasure to do it.”

Lord Northbridge’s eyes darted around the table briefly, but neither Louise nor her mother met his gaze. There was a painful silence as he recognized that he had been outplayed.

Now he knows I never planned to return the deed to him.

Christian leaned forward, picked amacaronfrom the stand, and popped it into his mouth, perfectly mimicking what the Earl had just done.

Slowly, the Earl sat back in his seat, dejected horror written all over his face. He fell silent, looking out over the grounds with a faraway look in his eyes.

Just as Christian was about to steer the conversation to lighter topics, the butler emerged from the house with several letters on a silver tray for Christian.

Careless of the Earl’s sour mood, Christian briefly sifted through them. “Thank you, Fenwick. Put them in my study.”

The butler nodded, before scurrying away.

Just then, Louise stood up rather abruptly and suggested that she and her mother take a turn about the gardens.

As the ladies moved off, Christian kept a watchful eye on his wife, noting the way her hips swayed as she stepped down onto the lawn. He glanced at the Earl, who seemed utterly disinterested in his wife and daughter, his gaze dark and angry.

If he wanted to befriend me, he shouldn't have hurt my brother. It will not be long before I can get everything I need from him. All his assets are in my possession now.

## CHAPTER 13

Louise and her mother walked slowly through the gardens, admiring the shoots that were popping up from the soil.

“That camelia is beautiful,” Lady Northbridge said wistfully as they passed a plant on their left that was entwined around the fence.

The trunk was dry and wiry. To the uneducated eye, it might look almost dead, but there was a riot of flowers all over the branches. The pale pink petals looked like a baby's blanket in the weak spring sunshine.

Louise waited until they were a good distance from the table before she slowed her steps.

“How have you been, Mama?”

Her mother looked down at her, a flash of pain crossing her face, her eyes strained and tired. “You should not be worrying about me, Louise. You are married now. You

have too many obligations to ponder on your old life.”

“Mama, you know that is not why I am asking. How has Papa been since I left?”

Lady Northbridge tutted under her breath and then gave a small cry of delight as she spotted something on the path ahead of them.

“Oh look, Louise, a robin! He must be searching for worms in the soil. He will have his breakfast today, no doubt.”

“Mama.”

Lady Northbridge’s excitement faded. Her eyes followed the bird, which was hopping across the gravel path and pecking at the hard stones, its little wings fluttering madly as it searched for food.

Louise waited. Her mother’s whole body was tight with tension, her teeth worrying her lower lip, the skin dry and cracked.

“You must not concern yourself with me,” Lady Northbridge insisted. “I am quite well.”

“I will always be concerned about you, Mama. There is nothing you can do to prevent it, and you know I would never have chosen to leave you. I simply want you to be safe.”

“I am,” Lady Northbridge insisted. “Truly. He has been preoccupied of late. He spends much of his time at the club or in his study. I have barely seen him. It suits us well. We pass each other very rarely, and that makes things easier.”

There was a stiffness to her expression that Louise found hard to interpret. It felt as

though her mother was keeping something from her.

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Would she tell me if Father was hurting her again? Perhaps she thinks she is protecting me from the truth.

“And he has not said anything about his agreement with the Duke?” Louise asked.

Her mother stopped, watching a large bumblebee lazily drift past on the breeze. “He never speaks to me about his dealings with other men. All I know is that your father made the arrangement with the Duke in haste. He insisted that the wedding take place as soon as possible. When I asked him for the reason and told him that I did not feel it was the right course, he would not hear any objection.”

Louise thought back to her wedding day and her father’s agitation as they waited in the room above the chapel.

“He said if I did not marry the Duke, we would lose our house, Mama.”

“I know,” Lady Northbridge said gravely. “There is every chance that your father has done something exceedingly foolish, but I have no evidence to prove that. All we can do is keep a watchful eye and be on our guard.” Her hand came to rest on Louise’s arm. “And it is not only you who has suffered a great change, dearest. I have missed your presence in the house. I hope the Duke is treating you as he should.”

Louise watched the little black bee zoom up into the trees and away into the cloudless sky.

“He is not what I expected him to be, but the reason for our marriage remains the same. I think that he cares a great deal for his brother and that finding out what

happened to him is the only reason he entered into this arrangement.”

Her mother eyed her for a little while, a soft smile playing on her lips. “Yes, I am sure that is the only reason.”

Louise frowned. “You think there is another?”

“Perhaps not intentionally, but the man’s eyes certainly do not stray from you for any great length of time.” There was a teasing note in Lady Northbridge’s voice now. “I think perhaps he realized the other benefits of having you for a wife.”

Louise scoffed derisively. “He has no interest in me, Mama. Neither of us wanted to be married. I shall be quite content to spend my life among the flowers. The Duke has a beautiful country estate—think of the time I could spend walking the grounds. Perhaps we shall be as you and Papa are. We can spend most of our time apart. I will not have to tolerate his presence overmuch.”

Once again, her mother only smiled as they continued along the path, the swishing of their skirts disturbing the gravel as they walked between the beds.

“And how is your book coming along?” Lady Northbridge asked. “This space has a lovely design to it, but it is hardly the size you might need for your research.”

“I am hoping that I can persuade Christian to take me to Kew Gardens, or even some of the events held by the Royal Horticultural Society.” Louise glanced behind her furtively. “Thank you for the books you put in my trunk, Mama. I have been up very late reading some of them. They have been incredibly useful.”

Lady Northbridge beamed. “I am so pleased. I knew your father would never read them. Should you need anything else, you need only ask. I hope you know how proud I am of all the work you have done. And please continue with your sketching. Your



drawings of the flowers in our estate are so beautiful.”

Louise’s heart swelled at the praise so rarely bestowed upon her by her mother. It occurred to her that they rarely had time alone like this, often occupied with their duties.

Wandering in the gardens and speaking about the flowers was not something they did often, and she felt a pang of unhappiness that she might have missed the opportunity to do it more now that they were no longer living under the same roof.

Finishing their circuit of the gardens, they made their way back to the table. Louise could only admire Christian’s unapologetic attitude toward her father. The two men sat in stoic silence, and the Duke was making no attempt at small talk. The disdain he held for her father was even stronger now.

Unwilling to sit in silence for the remainder of the afternoon, however, Louise took her seat and pointed to the primroses in an urn at the edge of the lawn.

“I may paint those this afternoon, Mama, as you have requested more sketches. I adore their color.”

Her father grunted loudly. Then, he reached across the table, his thick fingers picking up another scone as he gave her a withering look.

“You are a duchess now, Louise. It is high time you pulled your thoughts away from such trivialities as plants and concentrated on being a good wife. Your duty is to produce an heir. We can only hope you will not fail at that like the other women in this family.”

Everyone at the table went utterly still.

Christian shot the Earl a vicious glare. He noticed poor Lady Northbridge's cheeks turning crimson at the insulting words spewing from her husband's mouth.

"You forget yourself, Sir," he snapped, his voice like a whip between them. The Earl paused, looking up at him in shock. "I have made it very clear that you will not disrespect me in my own home. I did not believe it was necessary to extend that rule to my wife, but I shall do so now. Never speak of her pursuits in such a manner again."

The Earl's response was simply to laugh as though it were a great joke. His reaction sickened Christian to his core, and he was reminded of that moment at the betting tables, where the Earl had callously bet his daughter to the room at large.

The man was utterly heartless.

Christian uncrossed his legs, about to rise to tell him to remove himself from his home, but Louise got there first.

"How dare you!"

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His eyes darted to his wife. Her face was red with rage, her eyes flashing with anger he had ever seen from her.

“I do not know why I ever believed that you would be different now,” she spat. “There was a part of me that thought if I complied with your wishes and did your bidding, you might treat us more gently. But I was mistaken.”

She stood up, her hands clenched into fists, her body leaning slightly over the table, her eyes spitting fire as she addressed her father. The venom in her voice was startling, days of repressed fury pouring out of her.

“You will leave this house, Papa, before I throw you out. Mama, you will stay here, and I will ensure that you are escorted home when you are ready.”

There was a stunned silence around the table, and Christian clenched his jaw to keep himself from smiling. The Iron Harridan had spoken, and her will would be obeyed.

The Earl was still buttering his scone, staring up at his only daughter as though she had gone quite mad.

“Did you not hear me?” Louise bellowed.

The only sound now was the wind in the trees. Lady Northbridge was watching her daughter with an expression of awe.

The silence stretched, and then the Earl was moving. He pushed his chair back so hard that its metal frame ricocheted backward and bounced over the flagstones of the

terrace. His dark eyes were blazing with suppressed fury, but as he glanced at Christian, he seemed to rein in his temper with a gargantuan effort.

“Your Grace,” he said stiffly but did not bow, “I shall see myself out.”

He spun on his heel, stalking away and back into the house.

Christian watched him, wondering if he should call Fenwick to escort the man to his carriage to drum home the point, but he decided against it. Glancing at his wife, he felt a rush of pleasure as their gazes met, a smile of satisfaction passing between them.

## CHAPTER 14

After a time, Christian rose and left the ladies to it, heading to his study to check the letters that had been delivered.

He was accustomed to a great number of invitations, but since his marriage, they had exploded to an unmanageable degree. He enjoyed Society to a point—it served a purpose, after all—but he did not appreciate having his time monopolized by gossips and simpering well-wishers.

I have a club to run, which I must go back to as soon as possible.

He entered his study and spotted the silver letter tray on his desk. He frowned as he approached it.

Was there not a larger number than this when I reviewed them earlier?

Dismissing the thought, he assumed that Fenwick had gone through the pile and sorted the wheat from the chaff as he often did with his correspondence.

Sitting down at his desk, Christian sifted through the pile, paying careful attention to each letter. For many months now, he had given up hope that there would be a letter from his brother, but he checked them eagerly just the same.

Lowering the envelopes to his lap, he turned in his chair to look out at the gardens. His study was in a side wing of the house, and he could just see the edge of the table where Louise and her mother were sitting.

I did not expect her to show such fire against her father.

Christian was ashamed to admit that when he had made the deal to marry Louise, he had barely thought of who she was at all. Other than their interesting conversation at the masquerade ball, he had believed her to be fairly unimportant—a pawn to her father and a means to finding out the truth about Marcus's disappearance.

Now, he regretted dismissing her so easily. The Earl was a formidable man, three times the size of his daughter, yet she had told him in no uncertain terms to leave their home.

Our home.

That concept seemed foreign to him. His stomach clenched as he acknowledged, not for the first time, that this marriage was forever. Louise lived with him now. He would see her every day for as long as they lived.

He looked down at the letters, unfolding the top one with more force than he had intended and nearly ripping it in two.

It was yet another invitation, but this event he would definitely attend. The Barringtons' ball was one of the most exclusive events of the Season. Christian and Marcus had to prove themselves several times over to receive this particular

invitation. He would never dream of declining it.

He picked up his quill and wrote a short RSVP, before setting it aside with the letters to be sent out later that day. Many of the other letters were missives from his banker, but there was also a thick envelope from Daniel Willis. Christian opened it swiftly, finding inside the draft trust agreement for Louise. He reviewed it with some interest, his blood thrumming pleasantly in his veins at the thought that his wife would forever be protected from her father's misdeeds.

About half an hour later, a gentle knock sounded at the door.

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“Enter!” he called as he pulled on his coat, ready to leave for his club.

Louise came in, her face flushed from the chill outside, her eyes bright and curious. They skimmed over him as she pushed open the door, and then she glanced nervously at his desk. Christian hid a smile—what he wouldn’t give to repeat those few moments where he had held her in his arms.

Another time, I am already late.

“My mother is leaving,” she said stiffly. “I wanted to ask if I could send her home in your carriage.”

“Of course,” he replied. “It is your carriage, too—you do not need to ask.”

She nodded.

Christian expected her to leave, but instead, she stood there, clasping her hands behind her back, her eyes darting around the room.

“I wanted to thank you,” Louise said.

Christian tugged at his coat for the final time, raising an eyebrow at her curiously. “What for?”

Louise hesitated.

Am I really going to thank this man for helping me, when he is one of the most

arrogant men in England?

“For defending me against my father. You did not have to do that.”

Christian scoffed, and she held back the urge to roll her eyes at his superior attitude.

“I will not be insulted in my own home. You are an extension of my position here, I will not listen to him ridicule your pursuits either. Besides, you did not need me to defend you—you did a good enough job of that yourself.”

He rounded the desk, pocketing a letter as he did so, and she felt a surge of unease at him leaving again.

Is this what this marriage will be like? Me waiting for him to return from his club at all hours of the night?

“Are you leaving?” she asked, irritated by the imploring tone of her voice.

Christian did not seem to notice, turning to face her and nodding as he straightened his sleeves. The jacket he was wearing was cut so close to his body that it looked like a second skin.

“I need to return to Orions, yes.”

“I know so little about it. My father has spoken many times about The Devils... Is Orions so different?”

Christian snorted. “It is superior in every sense of the word. We have the finest membership in London and alongwaiting list.”

Louise crossed her arms over her chest. “But what is it that makes it so superior? I do



not understand how one can be so different from the other.”

“Apart from your father’s mismanagement and gambling, you mean?”

Louise balked at his tone and opened her mouth to argue, before closing it again in dismay.

“Hedidgamble your life on a deck of cards,” Christian added, but his voice was softer this time.

He wasn’t crowing about it, simply stating a fact.

I suppose there is no use in denying that my father has gambled away half of his fortune. Everyone in London seems to be aware of it.

“Well then, explain it to me. You are a founding member, are you not?”

Christian leaned back against his desk, impossibly tall and handsome. It seemed as though he were contemplating whether to give up his valuable time to answer her questions. Louise found that she wasdesperatefor him to stay and spend more time with her—it was infuriating.

“Orions was set upbecauseof your father.”

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Louise frowned. “What? Why?”

“Do you remember many years ago when I met you in Northbridge Manor? We had just had a particularly unpleasant interview with him.”

“Of course, I remember,” she declared. “That was the first day I met Marcus.”

Christian’s jaw clenched as his hands came to rest on the desk, his knuckles white against the wood. Louise waited for him to continue.

“We asked your father for an invitation to his club, and he refused. I told Marcus that we did not need The Devils to be members of an exclusive club; we would start one of our own. And we did. The decision was made in the carriage on the way back home—I suppose I should be grateful to your father. I have made a lot of money because of his prejudice.”

“And do you have many members?”

“Hundreds. Most of them are peers and members of Parliament.”

“And is it as hard to join as my father’s club?” she asked peevishly.

“Marcus and I vet every new member if that is what you mean. But the men who come through our doors are not merely judged on good breeding, wealth, and wit. They are required to have a certain something about them—I hate to be bored, you understand, and I only allow interesting fellows to join Orions.”

Louise chewed on her lip to keep from laughing. “Are you suggesting that my father is not interesting?”

“It hardly matters,” Christian proclaimed, his words clipped and cold. “He will never be a member.”

“Are you still planning to destroy The Devils?” Louise asked, a twinge of unease in her gut. His arched eyebrow made her temper rise once more.

“Not necessarily destroy it,” he replied solemnly, “but certainly continue to outshine it. I intend for Orions to rival any club in the city by next year.”

Louise stepped forward angrily. “You do realize that if you destroy my father’s livelihood, it will hurt my mother too?”

Christian bowed his head. “Naturally. But I am afraid, Duchess, that your father has already destroyed a great deal of his livelihood without any help from me.”

“You would see my mother on the streets?”

Christian pursed his lips. “Might I remind you that I saved both you and your mother from many lecherous men when I married you, Duchess? Lord Archibald Mortimer was sniffing around, and he is a prig and a curmudgeon. He would have thought nothing of turfing your mother out if it meant getting his hands on her townhouse. Moreover, if I had not made this deal with your father, some fool might have bought your hand, only for your father to lose the money on a roll of a dice.”

“You are being purposefully obtuse,” she spat.

Christian’s answering laugh made her blood boil. He stepped forward and pulled his gloves out of his pocket, tugging them on with practiced ease. They were unmarked

and appeared brand new—flawless, just like the rest of him.

I wonder what he would do if I untied his cravat out of pure spite?

“Careful, Duchess,” he said in a rumbling, intimate voice that sent a shiver through her. His eyes bored into hers without an ounce of apology. “You are playing a dangerous game, and you do not know all the rules. Your father has backed himself into a corner of his own making, and I am merely preventing him from escaping from it.”

He pushed the leather button at the base of the glove through the narrow buttonhole, never tearing his gaze away from her face.

“I would argue that you should be doubly grateful to me,” he continued. “Your father is in my debt and therefore has little power over anything. I know what a bad man can do to a family if left unchecked.”

Louise searched his face for any clue as to what he might be thinking or feeling, but the mask was back in place. She longed to learn more about his life.

“Is that what happened to your father? Did you manage to check him too?” she blurted out before she had fully thought through what she would say.

Christian grimaced as he stepped away, giving a final tug to his coat, his eyes trained on the floor.

“We are not here to speak about my father,” he said gruffly. “If yours behaves himself, I may be willing to be lenient. He has nothing to fear if he does as he is told. I am sorry for your mother, but she knows better than anyone the sort of man she is married to. We both know one has little agency in escaping such things.”

His eyes flashed at her then, anger and hurt roiling in their depths. Louise opened her mouth to apologize, but before she could do so, he walked out of the room, leaving her behind, with only the scent of his cologne for company.

## CHAPTER 15

Louise left the study a minute or so later, her body heavy and sluggish as she processed what Christian had said.

He seemed so hurt.

She called for the carriage while trying to shake off the feeling. As she approached the entryway, she found Lady Northbridge already waiting for her.

“Is the Duke quite well?” her mother asked. “He seemed furious when he left.”

Louise waved a hand dismissively. “He has gone to his club to attend to some business.”

The two women embraced, and Louise plastered on a brave smile. “You will come to visit again?” she asked.

“Of course, I will,” her mother assured her. “Perhaps I will be able to come without your father. I do not believe he lightens the atmosphere.”

“You may be right.”

“Good luck with your encyclopedia,” her mother said fondly. “Be sure to send me any drawings you cannot use. I save them all.”

As her mother departed, Louise was reminded again of all the species she had yet to catalog and all the work she would need to do to finish the book within the year.

Resolved to return to the gardens and start at once, she turned to head out, only to find the Dowager Duchess standing in her path, watching her carefully.

She curtsied. “Good day,” she greeted, a little taken aback. “My apologies, I did not see you.”

The Dowager Duchess said nothing, but then she raised her hand, indicating a small parlor behind her, the door to which had been left ajar.

“Would you come and sit with me for a moment? There are some things I want to discuss with you.”

Louise respectfully followed her into the parlor. It was a beautiful space with pale green walls and gold etchings on the wallpaper. The furniture was a dark red, contrasting with the pale carpet, and a merry fire heated the room to just the right temperature.

The Dowager Duchess took a seat on the small settee on the side, and Louise lowered herself onto the chaise longue opposite. It was an extremely uncomfortable thing that needed reupholstering and fresh springs. She shifted in her seat, wondering whether the Dowager Duchess had led her there deliberately.

“My son has left again, I see,” the Dowager Duchess muttered, glancing at the door as though Christian might be eavesdropping.

“He has. I know his club is important to him.”

“Indeed, but he must be reminded of what else is important too. You are his wife. You should take precedence over his business.”

Is this a test?

Louise shrugged a shoulder, saying nothing and waiting for the other woman to continue.

“How much do you know about our family history, Duchess?”

“Please call me Louise,” Louise insisted, hating the title when her mother-in-law said it almost as much as when Christian did.

“You must call me Sabine, then,” the Dowager Duchess said, giving her a long look that was not quite a smile.

“To answer your question, Sabine, I know very little about your family history. Only what Marcus told me. He spoke a little about his struggles to be recognized in the ton and the prejudices you have faced.”

Sabine nodded her head. “You should know then that Christian and Marcus were both born out of wedlock. I was a maid in the late Duke’s household. His first wife was unable to bear him children. Something blossomed between us that we couldn’t ignore. Whatever Christian believes, we loved each other dearly.”

“I can believe it, I assure you.”

Sabine sighed. “Christian never forgave his father for what he considered an insult to all of us. He has never forgiven me for the ‘struggles,’ as you put it, that he and Marcus have faced. The ton does not take kindly to bastards, Louise, no matter how quickly my late husband claimed them.”

And Christian would have always been seen as a maid’s son, not truly worthy of the title of Duke at all.

“I do not regret it,” the Dowager Duchess continued, her defiance strong in her voice. “I would do it again if I was given the choice, no matter the stain it would cast on my marriage. My only regret is that Christian seems to despise love. To him, love ripped his family apart and will always be something violent that taints the world around



him.”

Louise shifted her weight on the chaise, eager to stand up and walk about the room. She had not expected Sabine to be so open with her. Christian had alluded to his past, as had Marcus, but both men had avoided elaborating on it, and she could understand why.

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Is that what our marriage is going to be like? A business arrangement for all time—loveless and devoid of any real feelings?

She knew that Christian had not had any desire to woo her or to truly take her as his wife. She was a way for him to learn what happened to Marcus, and she believed that he would stop at nothing to get the answers he needed.

I never wished to marry him either. This is hardly a surprise, so why does it make me feel so wretched?

Louise would have been content to remain a spinster for the rest of her days, studying flowers, working on her book, and never entertaining any thoughts of marriage. But now that she did have a husband, she hated the idea that she would be condemned to a life like that of her parents.

She glanced at the Dowager Duchess's stoic expression.

"I do not wish to upset you with this knowledge, you understand," Sabine continued, her hands twisting in her lap as she met Louise's gaze. "I wish you to find happiness in your own way. But I have lived a life of secrets under a shroud of lies and deceit. That is no way to begin a partnership, and you deserve to know the truth."

"Thank you, Sabine. I appreciate you telling me, and I am sorry that you have suffered the prejudices of my class all your life."

Sabine's smile was gentle. "I have made my choices, and as I said, I would not change them, not even after losing my husband and knowing all that I know now."

It was past eleven, and Louise had been sitting in her room, waiting for Christian to arrive home for almost two hours. The fire was dying down to its embers, but she was not even dressed for bed.

“I am not going to take a lover when I have a wife to take my pleasure from...”

Christian’s words had been floating around in her head for most of the night. When he had told her that he would be faithful to her, it had hardly mattered. She had been angry with him and unconcerned about how he spent his time.

Now, having seen the desire in his eyes and felt the strength of his arms around her as his tongue stroked hers, she could not put the thought out of her mind.

Many men have mistresses at their clubs. It is well-known and spoken of quite openly in some circles. What if Christian is with another woman right now?

The thought was maddening. She did not want to care what he was doing behind closed doors—she should not have cared.

And yet I do.

She rose from her chair and paced in front of the fire as she put a hand on her stomach, feeling the pulse of nerves grow ever stronger the more minutes ticked by.

She glanced at the clock for what must have been the hundredth time, her irritation spiking all the more when she recalled what his mother said to her earlier. If he did not believe in love, what was to prevent him from spending every waking moment at his club at the expense of all else?

Her hands clenched into fists as she made her decision.

I will not wait for my dear husband to grace me with his presence. If he thinks I shall sit at home and be the dutiful wife, he is sorely mistaken.

Ten minutes later, she was climbing into the carriage beneath the watchful eye of a weary-looking footman.

“Orions, please,” she ordered sharply as the rain lashed against the side of the carriage, and she pulled her skirts through the door as it clicked shut behind her.

The sky was black as pitch, and the sound of the rain pelting the roof above her head was almost deafening, but she would not be dissuaded from her course.

Her resolve did falter a little, however, as they made their way slowly through the streets. Shadowy figures passed by the carriage in the darkness, unidentifiable shapes moving through the gloom, some of them too close for comfort.

As she stared out, she saw a hulking man standing in a shop’s doorway and looking up in the rain as he pulled off his jacket and shirt, hollering into the night, the whites of his eyes visible.

Nervous and frightened of anyone who might take an interest in the carriage, she lowered the blind, the small candle above her head the only source of light as she waited for them to reach their destination.

It seemed to take an age before she heard some shouting above her and the carriage door was wrenched open. The footman stood in the deluge, soaked to the skin as she swiftly climbed out.

“Go somewhere warm and eat something while you wait for us,” she instructed, and the driver and footman trundled away.

As Louise turned to the club, she found herself unprepared for the sight of the door before her. Not so many days ago, she had arrived here for the first time at her father's whim, utterly unaware of the course her life would take from that moment.

She leveled the door with a hard stare.

I am no longer Louise Dawson. I am the Duchess of Egerton, and I am here to see my husband.

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As she approached, the door was opened by a large, burly man sporting a livid scar down one side of his face.

As soon as she stepped inside, the warm scent of leather invaded her nostrils. The lights were low, a comforting glow making everything seem soft and inviting, but her courage faltered when she found that it was just her and the giant standing in the foyer.

“I have come to see the Duke of Egerton,” she announced as loudly as she could.

The hulking creature walked behind the desk and, to her surprise, gave her a grin. He was missing at least two teeth.

“Good evening, Your Grace.”

Louise was twice amazed. The man spoke with an upper-class accent that rivaled her own.

“His Grace is in his office at present, meeting with an associate. I will have someone show you into the main room, and I will inform him that you are here.”

“Thank you,” she said, feeling raindrops trickling down her back. “Mr....?”

“Jarvis, Your Grace. It’s this way,” he murmured and pointed to her left, where another door was half open. She could see cigar smoke in the air and hear the crackle of a fire.

“An associate, you say?” she asked, unable to entirely mask the suspicion in her voice.

“Indeed, Your Grace. I will make sure that he knows you are here, waiting for him.”

Louise scoffed. “Please do. I imagine he will be thrilled to hear it.”

## CHAPTER 16

Louise was led into a room filled with men. A few women of her class, perhaps wives and mothers, were also seated at intervals throughout the room, but it was a masculine and pompous environment.

She was approached by a servant almost immediately as she took off her coat, and she ordered a glass of sherry while she waited. She was painfully aware of several eyes turning to stare at her and hovered awkwardly in the doorway, unsure what to do.

The room itself was decorated exquisitely, and no expense had been spared on the furnishings. A few card tables were scattered throughout the room, their dark green tops and mahogany surrounds giving the space a sophisticated air.

It was a long room, reaching back through an archway where more tables were visible. Men sat in armchairs, reading newspapers or conversing quietly. Louise released a slow breath when her drink arrived, and her fingers clutched at the glass desperately as she tried to appear as though she belonged there.

Lifting her chin, she walked between the tables, trying to affect the same disdain that Christian radiated wherever he went.

One table in particular caught her eye as she passed it. There was a man at the head of

it, with a set of cards in his hands, which he was examining with his quizzing glass. She moved to the arched doorway ahead of her, and when the man seemed to think she was out of earshot, he leaned toward his companion.

“The Iron Harridan has arrived, Sir. The Duke has allowed her out to play, it seems.”

His companion snorted loudly, glancing over at Louise. She met his gaze steadily. He did not look in the least embarrassed to have been caught gossiping about her.

I wonder what Christian would say if I told him to throw him out.

She continued on, but the second room was far worse than the first. Many of the patrons glanced over their newspapers at her as she walked by, and several began to whisper. The sounds grew louder as she reached the fireplace and took a seat for lack of anything better to do. She curled her fingers into the skirts of her gown, nervous about the new rumors being spread about her.

“I wondered when she would show her face,” said a portly man at a chair a few feet from her. The volume of his voice was not appropriate for conversation in such a closed space. “Her father still owes me fifty pounds from the last time he played the tables at White’s. I wonder if the Duke is shouldering the burden of paying off Northbridge’s debts.”

Louise seethed quietly and sipped her sherry, her fingers clenching into a fist.

Did no one have any ounce of respect anymore? Was she forever to be tarnished by her father’s vices?

“He overlooked the burden of taking her on in the first place,” said the man’s companion. “I hear Fortescue had bruising for weeks after she assaulted him. It was bad form, and she deserves everything she gets. The Northbridges should count



themselves lucky to have the Duke's patronage."

Louise stood up abruptly. Both men stopped speaking, and she walked slowly toward them, holding her glass loosely in her hand.

I'd recognize that voice anywhere.

"Good evening, Lord Mortimer," she said evenly. "What a pleasure to see you again."

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Lord Mortimer eyed her warily, his neck turning a dark shade of red as the other man—was his name Armitage?—attempted to sink into his chair.

“I am so pleased to see you here tonight,” Louise continued. “My husband has told me a great many things about the game you played with my father some weeks ago.”

Both men stared at her in astonishment, but she had been the subject of gossip and slander for long enough. The rage burning beneath her skin could not be quelled by propriety.

“It is interesting to me, therefore, to hear you speaking so ill of my family,” she said softly, keeping her voice low, her eyes on Lord Mortimer. “I understand you had offered a princely sum for my hand. Strange, then, that you believe my family name is worthless.”

Lord Mortimer cleared his throat several times, his eyes dark and angry.

“Is there anything amiss?”

Louise spun around to find the Duke of Stonewell, the man behind the bull mask at the masquerade ball, standing before her. He was not looking at her, however. His cold glare was fixed on Mortimer and Armitage.

“Are you making a nuisance of yourself again, Armitage?” he drawled. “Because you have already been given a warning.”

“I was having a private conversation with my friend here, and the lady interrupted us.

That is hardly my fault,” Armitage spluttered in outrage.

“Private conversations aren’t usually held within earshot, are they?” Louise asked, sipping her sherry. “I do not think you quite understand what it means to hold your tongue.”

Armitage and Mortimer leaned forward in their chairs to protest most violently, but the Duke of Stonewell cleared his throat and stepped between them and Louise.

“Duchess, perhaps I might introduce you to my sister before you come to blows with the whole of the club,” he offered stiffly and held out a hand to show her the way.

Louise shot Mortimer another baleful glare before following the Duke.

I suppose I have not helped my reputation by speaking my mind, but I will not be slandered by idiotic men who see themselves as superior to me.

The Duke of Stonewell followed her out of the room and led her to a smaller antechamber where the smoke was not quite so thick. In the corner of the room sat a young woman about Louise’s age, her long dark hair tied around her head with a multitude of ribbons and sparkling pins. She looked up as they entered and smiled politely as her brother approached her. She rose, and Louise was struck by how tall she was. She was strikingly beautiful, and the smile on her face was broad and genuine.

“Charlotte, this is the Duchess of Egerton. Duchess, this is my sister, Lady Charlotte Harding.”

The two women curtsied to one another as Charlotte glanced at her brother quizzically.

“What is the matter?” she asked, a slight frown creasing her brow. “You look as though you have swallowed a wasp.”

The Duke of Stonewell’s stern expression did not change much, but he shot his sister a withering look before turning to Louise. “I am sorry for what they said, Duchess,” he said stiffly. “But you cannot confront our members in such a manner without good warning.”

Louise’s heart pattered wildly at being admonished, but then the Duke continued.

“We need to ensure that we have the right security to eject them at such moments. If you give me notice in advance, I can be fully prepared to throw them out for their impertinence.”

There was a hint of humor in his voice, but his mouth was stern and angry, his eyes cold. Louise wondered if he ever smiled at all. Many men of his age had laughter lines and faint wrinkles around their mouths, but his face was smooth.

He really was quite intimidating.

“Was someone being rude to you?” Charlotte asked, looking just as irritated as her brother. “Who was it? We must tell Christian.”

“I will tell him,” the Duke insisted. “I have brought the Duchess here so that she can be out of their company for a time. Please entertain her while I see what is keeping Christian.”

He stalked out, his sister watching him with thinly veiled exasperation.

“I do not know why he is surprised by members of this club being high-handed and rude. He is just as bad as them.”

Louise laughed at that.

Charlotte grinned at her. “Were they terribly rude to you?”

“It was not so bad. My reputation precedes me, I think.”

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“Ha! You should spend some time with the women in my circle, Your Grace. I can assure you, your reputation is deemed a triumph, not something to be derided.”

Louise searched Charlotte’s face for any hint of sarcasm. “Is that so?”

“Absolutely. Men will always be horrified when a woman defends herself. I thought it was marvelous.”

“I did break his nose.”

“Yes, and seeing as Lord Fortescue enjoys looking down it so much, I hope it has made his entire perspective crooked.”

Louise was laughing so hard now. She had not interacted with the Duke of Stonewell often, but his sister seemed to be the absolute opposite of him—she lit up the room.

The two ladies settled in their chairs, and Charlotte eyed Louise’s glass.

“Is that sherry? What an excellent idea.” She called over a waiter to order herself a glass and then sat back in her chair, studying Louise with some interest. “If you don’t mind my asking, what is being married to the Duke of Egerton like? I have known him for some time.”

“And...?”

“Oh, Christian is one of my favorite people in the world, but I would not wish to be married to him.” Charlotte paused, swallowing hard. “Not to say... Sorry, that was

rather crass.”

Louise chuckled. “Not at all. It is rather refreshing to hear another lady speak her mind. It has been... interesting, so far. I suppose you know the circumstances of our marriage?”

“A little. But it is not my business. My brother says you are terribly sensible and will straighten Christian right out—and he is rarely wrong.”

Louise hesitated, strangely touched by those words. “Thank you... I think.”

“Must you make a nuisance of yourself in my club?”

Louise turned to see Christian striding into the room. His hair looked less perfect than usual, a lock falling over his forehead. She stared at it, a surprising pulse of heat rushing through her.

I wonder what he is truly like when that cold, prim façade falls away and he allows himself to let loose.

But then what he had just said registered, and her irritation flared.

“I have not been making a nuisance of myself,” she said icily. “I have been explaining to the members of your club why they are not permitted to ridicule me.”

Christian’s eyes narrowed. “Ridicule you?”

“Yes, me and my father.”

Christian glanced at the door, his face darkening. “Who were they?” he barked.

“It is clearly no matter, considering I was making an nuisance of myself.”

“Good evening, Christian,” Charlotte said hastily, looking between them with deep amusement. “I very much approve of your wife.”

Christian turned to her with such irritation on his face that Louise recoiled at it, but Charlotte simply met his gaze with a wan smile.

“Excuse me, Charlotte, I would like to have a word with my wife.”

And without any warning, he gripped Louise’s arm and dragged her out of the room.

“Let go of me this instant,” Louise protested as Christian led her through the club.

He avoided overly occupied rooms, finally veering down a narrow corridor and toward a private room. It was a room that he and Gabriel had used when they first opened the club and needed a place where no one could find them.

He dragged her inside and closed the door behind him.

She wrenched her arm free, huffing. “Is this any way to treat your wife?”



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Christian rounded on her, the anger he had kept at bay until now bubbling to the surface. “What on earth are you doing here, Louise? It is past midnight. I was about to head home when Gabe told me you had turned up unannounced.”

“Am I not allowed to enter your club?”

“I would prefer that you did not travel across London in the dead of night to do so, certainly. Anything could have happened to you!” he shouted.

“So, I am to remain in the house until you give me permission to leave it, is that it?” she snapped.

“Of course not, that is not what I said!” He lowered his voice. “Was there a reason you came?”

“Other than the fact that you left me alone in the house tonight? That we have been married for less than two days, and you have left for your club on both of them?”

“This is my business!” he argued.

“And I am not?” she thundered. “No matter what you choose to believe, Christian, you have taken a wife, and you cannot ignore me forever.”

He advanced on her, his expression morphing into a scowl as she took a step back. She was frightened, but she seemed determined to stand her ground.

My fiery harriidan will not be tamed easily.

She backed away further until her legs hit a high-back chair that faced the fire. Her body stiffened, and she threw her hands back, gripping the armrests tightly.

“And how am I ignoring you, wife? Did you miss me?” he asked, watching the anger blaze anew in her eyes.

Louise scoffed derisively. “I am alone in the house, Christian. Would you expect me to be happy with my own company forever?”

She truly is magnificent when she is furious with me.

Christian stepped forward and raised his hand, his fingers hovering over her hairline. He fought the urge for as long as he could, but eventually, he could resist no more and took a long, deep breath. Her scent surrounded him, like rosemary in the breeze—intoxicating and bewitching at once.

She shuddered as he closed the distance between them, his eyes roving over her body, lingering on her perfect breasts as they rose and fell with every harsh breath.

“Would you believe me if I told you I missed you too?” he asked, his hand skimming over her arm and up toward her neck.

Louise tensed as he tucked a loose strand behind her ear.

“Do not ruin my hair, Christian,” she warned. “It took my maid hours to style it, and I am not walking out of this club looking like...” She flushed beautifully, and his heart soared at the sight.

“Looking like what, Duchess? As though you have been ravished by your husband?” he purred. His hands moved down to her waist and pulled her against him roughly, making her shiver. “Are you sure you do not want them to see you flushed and

undone at my hand?"

Their noses brushed as he rested his forehead against hers. Louise was breathing heavily, her hands slowly moving from the armrests to grasp his forearms. Christian felt the satisfying bite of victory as her fingers tightened around him.

I must have her. I cannot hold back any longer!

Slowly, his hand moved down her body.

"I can feel you shaking," he said, his voice hoarse. "Just say the word, and I will take you right here. You will experience all of the beauty that can exist between us without the risk of producing an heir, I assure you."

"Y-You will unhand me," she stuttered, leaning backward as his hands came up to support her.

A fierce longing welled up within him then. He wanted her to confess how much she desired him. Her body and her eyes showed it, but her expression was forever shuttered and cold—it was maddening.

"You'll have to tell me you do not want me, Duchess," he said, leaning back to look at her. Her eyes were such a glorious shade of blue.

Only the crackling of the fire broke the silence. Christian waited, the weight of her hands branding his skin, the pulsing heat between his legs impossible to endure.

"Tell me," he demanded, uttering the words like a prayer.

When she remained silent, her eyes dark with lust, his patience snapped. He gripped her tightly, pulling her sideways and walking her backward until her back hit the

wall.

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She let out a small cry of shock as he gripped her wrists in his hands and pinned them above her head, before he crushed his lips to hers and pressed his body against hers.

Louise let out a beautiful moan of surrender as she melted against him, going pliant and supple just as she had done before. Christian groaned, keeping one hand on her wrists as the other trailed down her body to grip her thigh.

He lifted her leg and thrust his hips forward, knowing from her shuddering cry that she could feel how much she was affecting him. He wanted to ruin her, consume her, and show the world that she belonged to him.

He thrust his hips forward again, his hand moving down her thigh and toward the sweet heat between her legs. But just as he did so, the promise he had made to her echoed in his mind like a warning. With a groan of frustration, he released her, slapping his palms against the wall and pushing himself off her.

He turned away and breathed deeply, trying to compose himself, ashamed that he had been moments from taking her against the wall.

What kind of man must she think me to be when I cannot even control myself or keep my promises?

“Christian?”

“You should leave,” he snapped, straightening his clothes, his breeches painfully tight against his groin.

“Wh-What?”

He whirled around and closed the space between them once again. There were fading red marks around her wrists and a fire in her eyes.

“If you do not leave this room this instant,” he gritted out, “I will not be able to keep my word. I will take you just as I want you—right here, right now—and the whole club will know what we have been doing.” He sucked in a sharp breath, inhaling her scent and closing his eyes against the need raging inside him. He wrenched himself away from her. “I will escort you out.”

## CHAPTER 17

Louise followed Christian out of the club in silence.

She noticed that there were far fewer stares this time, with her husband by her side. The members seemed to recognize that they could not misbehave or be quite so rude in his presence.

They will simply talk about me behind my back as they did before.

She smoothed her hand over her hair as they walked, ensuring that it was not disheveled, a dark heat burning beneath her skin. She had never felt so desperate for another person before. His touch set her skin on fire in a thousand new ways she had never expected.

She had rarely witnessed desire between a woman and a man. Her mother and father were demure and private in one another’s company, and over the years, her father had become scathing and cruel. She tried hard to think of a time when they had displayed some form of affection, but she came up empty.

If Christian had not stopped, I am not sure I would have either.

The knowledge was alarming. Louise had always been proud of her self-control and her steely command of her faculties. There had been many instances since the incident with Lord Fortescue where she had held her tongue in the face of biting remarks about her character.

But when it came to lust, all decorum seemed to evaporate. It was almost as though Christian was making her reckless.

She glared at his back, remembering the heat of his body against her, the vicious pleasure she had felt when he pressed her against the wall and pushed his tongue into her mouth.

She cleared her throat, glancing around as though the truth of their time together was written all over her face.

They emerged into the foyer, where the faithful Jarvis was standing as though he had been waiting for them.

“My carriage, please, Jarvis,” Christian ordered briskly.

“Already waiting for you, Your Grace,” Jarvis murmured.

Christian nodded, before turning to Louise. He looked untouchable, cold, and authoritative once more.

“I cannot leave right now,” he said. “I have some business to attend to.”

He glanced behind her at the door they had just come through and shifted his weight from foot to foot.

“Was this the associate you were meeting with?” she asked, unable to mask her curiosity.

Christian raised his eyebrows, but instead of dismissing her question as she had expected, he took a small step toward her.



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“I was meeting with the constable investigating Marcus’s disappearance,” he revealed softly.

Louise felt a shiver of unease run through her. “Is there any news?”

Christian studied her for a few seconds before he sniffed and cocked his head. “Nothing. The constable wrote to me recently to tell me that they had found Marcus’s carriage, but they had not discovered a body. I was trying to ascertain if he views the case as closed or if they will continue the search.”

“And will they?”

Christian paused. “They will not.”

Louise’s shoulders slumped. This could only mean one thing...

She was desperate for Marcus to be safe, but her hope was dwindling.

“Come,” Christian said darkly, “we must get you home.”

He clicked his fingers, and a servant materialized with her coat. Christian took it and held it out to her. Louise frowned at him but did not argue, turning to allow him to drape it over her shoulders. His hands lingered on her for just a moment.

The rain was coming down in sheets as she looked out the door; the dim light from the oil lamp highlighted the deep puddles and oozing mud on the street.

As the sound of horses' hooves approached, Christian walked out into the deluge, careless of the fat raindrops soaking him through in seconds. He waited for the carriage to arrive and waved away the footman who opened the door for her.

"Are you making sure that I leave?" she asked.

"I did tell you what would happen if you remained," he growled. "Perhaps I should come with you in the carriage."

"And what would you do if you did, Your Grace?"

Christian stepped up to her, raindrops running down his sharp cheekbones, his eyes flashing. "Perhaps we should find out."

Louise sucked in a breath, uncertain yet thrumming with desire. She was about to climb into the carriage when she heard a faint sound that she could not place.

Despite the rain, she turned around, hearing Christian's sigh of exasperation as she listened carefully.

There it was again. A mewling little noise, like a child in pain, but half as quiet. She looked around for its source, conscious of the silent street and the ominous shadows moving in the distance. It was not wise to linger in the street at almost one o'clock in the morning, but she could not help it.

Suddenly, she thought she saw something moving across the corner of the step. Edging closer, she saw a tiny bundle on the edge of the step, soaked to the bone, its little eyes peering up at her plaintively.

"Oh my goodness, Christian. Look! It is a kitten," she gasped, crouching down, careless of the mud staining her skirts and holding out a hand. "Come here,

sweetheart.” She clicked her tongue. “Come on, sweetie,” she whispered. “It’s all right, I won’t hurt you.”

She remained in a crouched position for several minutes. The rain soaked through every layer of her clothing, but she refused to move. She was utterly drenched. She crept forward as Christian let out an exasperated growl.

“Would you get in the damn carriage, Louise? This is ridiculous.”

But she would not be deterred. Asher hair slowly came loose and fell about her shoulders, she remained where she was, waiting for the animal to trust her enough to approach her.

Eventually, after what felt like hours of coaxing, she was finally able to get close enough to it to pick it up.

It was impossible to discern what color the kitten was. It was shivering violently, mewling every now and then in fear, and its fur was so soaked that it simply looked black.

“Now, what will you do with it?” Christian asked in a frustrated tone. “You are not taking that back to the house. I like things in order... and free of fur!”

Louise cradled the kitten in her arms. “What would you have me do? Leave it here to die?”

“The creature is hardly our concern. I imagine its mother abandoned it—it might be ill or the runt of the litter.”

“Do not listen to him,” Louise cooed at the little furball in her arms. “He doesn’t know how special you are, does he?”

When she looked back at him, Christian was watching her with a strange expression, but he shook it off and glowered at her.

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“Louise, you arenottaking that thing home with you.”

“Then we shall remain in the rain until dawn,” she replied stubbornly, sticking out her chin and hugging the kitten close to her chest.

“Can’t you be reasonable, wife?”

“I cannot believe you would leave this poor creature to fend for itself on a night like this.”

“All right, fine!” he hissed, his eyes darting to the doorway, where Jarvis was watching their exchange with amusement. “But if thatthinggets under my feet, it will be out of the house within twenty-four hours. Is that understood?”

Louise climbed into the carriage, deliberately choosing not to answer him.

“Thank you, Your Grace. We are both most grateful.”

“You realize that if I die from fever after standing in the cold all night, it will be that kitten’s fault.”

“Then you had better go inside,” she said smartly and pulled the door closed behind her before the carriage took off.

She felt the warm lump in her arms snuggle deeper into her coat, and despite her soaking-wet dress, she tried to ensure that it was warm, feeling it quivering beneath her fingers.

She glanced back as the carriage slowly moved through the pouring rain and was surprised to see Christian still standing outside, showing no inclination to go back into the club. He had an odd expression on his face, as though he were trying to work something out.

Louise sat back in her seat and stroked the kitten in her arms, a smile that she could not explain playing on her lips.

## CHAPTER 18

By the time Louise arrived home, she was shivering violently. The carriage had offered little protection from the cold, and she kept the kitten close to her breast as she walked into the house.

Fenwick was standing by as she passed her hat and gloves to a footman, but she struggled with the cat in her hands.

“Fenwick, would you assist me, please?” she asked.

The butler stepped forward and held out his hand for her gloves, his face contorting in consternation when he was handed a small ball of wet fur. He stared at the cat and then at Louise. It almost looked as though he were hiding a smile.

“I found her in the rain on the steps of the club. I could not just leave her behind. Could you tell my maid to draw me a bath, please? I am chilled to the bone.”

Louise felt a sharp pang of guilt for giving such an order at a late hour, but she was so cold she did not think even her bed would warm her. The butler, however, did not look in the least bit annoyed by the request, nodding to a maid who scurried away.

“I shall have a bowl brought to your bedchamber, Your Grace,” he said, his fingers

gently stroking the kitten. It was mewling unhappily again, and as Louise took it back from him, she frowned.

“A bowl, Fenwick? What do you mean?”

“I believe the kitten may need a bath too, Your Grace. It is rather cold.”

Louise smiled at him. The butler’s eyes twinkled as he watched the cat. It was clear from his expression that he had no objection to the new addition to the household.

“Very good, Fenwick, thank you.”

“Shall I have some fish sent up? I believe there is still some from supper.”

Louise’s smile grew. “Do you like cats, Fenwick?”

“Very much, Your Grace. My mother had cats all her life. This one looks very small. It cannot be more than a few months old.”

“Some fish would do very well, thank you.”

Louise ran up the stairs, and she felt sharp claws dig into her arm as the kitten looked around it with interest. Although it had been asleep in the carriage, it was now wriggling violently, trying to explore. She put it on the floor after she entered her room and watched its tiny legs move across the floorboards, its claws clicking against the wood.

“I hope you like your new home,” she said fondly as she removed her sodden dress, goosebumps rising on her skin.

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The kitten wondered about the room, sniffing everything in its path. A few maids eventually entered with buckets of steaming hot water and began to fill the tub. Then, one of them placed a small bowl on Louise's dressing table.

"You are not going to enjoy this very much," she said to the cat as she picked it up and brought it over to the dressing table. "But it is better than the rain, I assure you, and you will at least be warm."

Without further ado, she sank the kitten up to its neck in the water, which was gently steaming, but it quickly darkened with grime. With a flannel cloth, she began to clean the mud and filth of London from the kitten's body, slowly revealing a tabby cat with beautiful markings down its back.

The kitten mewed pitifully, but Louise was determined to ensure that it was entirely clean. As she wiped the crusty gunk from the creature's eyes, it started to look less like a goblin and more like an animal. Louise smiled as the kitten stopped shivering and relaxed in the water.

"Your bath is ready, Your Grace," her maid called.

Louise nodded and stepped back so they could undress her. She watched the kitten play with the cloth she was now wrapped in.

Once she was submerged in the water, Louise closed her eyes, letting her head rest against the tub's edge. She opened them to find the kitten tucking into a little plate of white fish, looking much livelier.



“I’ll have to give you a name,” she mused as her maid returned with the soap and proceeded to wash her.

As she relaxed in the water, the cloth moving gently over her back, she couldn’t stop thinking about Christian.

He had shown a great lack of restraint in the club, given how close he had come to breaking his promise. Louise was ashamed that she had longed for him to take her right then and there, the consequences be damned.

The magnetic pull she felt toward him was ever-present. Even when she had seen him in a wolf mask, he had fascinated her—before she even knew who he was. The way he had pinned her wrists above her head, making her utterly helpless, had shocked her.

For such a ruthless man, he can certainly be seductive. Whenever he touches me, I cannot help but melt into him. It is infuriating!

Eventually, the hot water warmed her muscles, and she was not as chilled as she had been. As she stepped out of the tub, her maid draped her robe around her, and she pulled it tighter around herself before walking over to a chair at the side of the room.

Pulling her shawl off the back, she tied it in a loop and placed it on the floor. She beckoned to the kitten, who immediately came over and settled on the soft fabric. It was so tired its eyes closed immediately, and she watched it drift off to sleep, happy that she had done something good that night.

As the maid approached with a towel to dry her hair, the door swung open and Christian walked in.

“Thank you, I will take it from here,” he said sharply.

The maid glanced at Louise and then at him hesitantly. Christian held out his hand for the towel, which she dutifully gave him, and waited for her to leave. He then closed the door behind her and turned to Louise, raising his eyebrows.

“It is still alive, I see,” he remarked, glancing down at the kitten with some disdain.

“You will be appalled to learn that your butler loves cats and has sent up some fish for it to eat,” Louise said primly.

Christian furrowed his brow as he approached them. He seemed enormous compared to the tiny animal, but the kitten was content to nestle in its new warm bed.

Louise started as Christian began to dry her hair with the towel, taking the full length of it and squeezing the water out of the long strands.

She remained perfectly still, watching the look of concentration on his face as he saw to the task.

With a gentle touch to her shoulder, he turned her around so her back was facing him. She drew in a shallow breath as he gently pulled her robe down and proceeded to dry her neck and shoulders.

“Did you wish to speak to me?” she asked, her voice a little hoarse.

The movements of the towel paused briefly and then resumed. “I did. I met a man tonight in my club who I wish to introduce you to. He is a botanist and was most intrigued by your encyclopedia.”

Louise’s excitement grew as she imagined Christian seeking out an academic for her to speak to.

“Did you know he was a botanist when you introduced yourself?”

“I may have,” he answered playfully. “He is an odd sort of fellow. But people who enjoy plants generally are.”

Louise could not help laughing at that. “People who enjoy plants are far cleverer than those who enjoy people. Plants are beautiful companions.”

“Until they die,” Christian said wryly, “or poison you.”

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“How strange your mind is,” she mused. “I wonder how you get anything done with suspicions like that.”

There was a brief silence as he continued to dry her shoulders, and then, as her heart began to beat wildly in her chest, he turned her again so that she was looking up into his stoic expression.

“When can I meet him?” she whispered.

“That is not important right now,” he said, the back of his hand trailing over the line of her collarbone, making her shudder.

His lips curled into a knowing smile as he brushed his fingers over her skin. Louise was convinced that he could hear her heart. Her skin felt so hot she could barely draw in a full breath.

His hand moved to the damp hair hanging down her back, and he brushed it over her shoulder, running his fingers through it reverently.

“Why is it not important, Your Grace?” she asked without thinking.

His fingers instantly tightened around her hair, his lips thinning in displeasure. “Call me that again, Your Grace, and see what happens.”

“It is hardly my fault. It is a force of habit,” she protested.

But as he stepped closer to her, the words died in her throat.

“My name,” he said, his voice softening as his fingers came up to the hem of her robe, “is Christian, and I would have you say my name tonight... I would have you scream it.”

Louise’s mouth fell open in shock as he began to peel the robe off her body.

Prevent this. Stop him!

But she did not—could not. The feel of his fingers as they brushed against her flesh was maddeningly addictive, and with the kiss earlier that night, she could not resist him any longer. Her mind was consumed with what his body did to her, as, even now, she felt the familiar pulse of need deep in her core.

Slowly, he pulled her robe aside, baring her body to him inch by inch. Louise was trembling now, wondering if his arrogant gaze would soften at the sight of her nakedness.

Christian could barely believe she was allowing this, but as he slowly moved the fabric aside, she did not attempt to stop him.

His wife was exquisite, her voluptuous figure stunning in its perfection as he ran his eye over her tight waist and pert breasts. His mind was running wild with everything he wanted to do to her, but he also knew he had made her a promise.

He allowed his eyes to admire her for a little while longer, breathless at the shape of her waist and the roundness of her hips. Then, having looked his fill, he pulled the robe back over her shoulders.

“You are glorious,” he murmured as the worry in her eyes slowly faded. “I am honored to be able to behold such a beauty.”

“And which do you prefer, this or the Ice Queen?”

He chuckled. “You will not speak of yourself in that matter, my Duchess. You cannot be an Ice Queen when you are made of such fire.”

His hand cupped her jaw, and he leaned forward, placing a tender kiss on her lips before pulling back.

“Earlier, I told you there were many things that a man and a woman could do without the risk of producing an heir,” he said as his eyes twinkled in the firelight. “Will you allow me to show you some of them? I will not break my promise and take you tonight, but I cannot be parted from you for a moment longer.”

Louise was panting as he stepped closer, and she trembled against him as he ran his hands over her waist.

“One word from you, and I will leave you be,” he said, kissing down her neck as her fingers gripped his shoulders. A low moan escaped her throat as he pulled her hips against his. “One word and I will leave you to your bed.”

There was a pause, as though Louise were debating what she would allow him to do. But as his fingers curled into the fabric of her robe, she spoke two words that almost undid him completely.

“Show me.”

Christian did not need to be asked twice. With a growl of desperate desire, he lifted her off her feet and spun her around, before lowering her onto the bed. She stared up at him in wonder.

“You are beautiful, Louise,” he said as he tugged his coat off his shoulders. “I cannot

believe that I resisted your charms for so long.”

She let out a cry of surprise as he leaned over the bed, gripping the sides of her robe and pulling it open to bare her body to him once again. He lowered himself over her, running his nose over her neck.

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“You smell like lavender,” he murmured. “It is intoxicating.”

Then, he took her lips in a searing kiss. His hand ran over her side as his fingers caressed her slowly, giving her time to get used to his attention.

She gasped, and he thrust his tongue into her mouth, their lips colliding and connecting in an endless dance as his hand slowly trailed down her body.

He pulled back, trying to see if there was any hesitation in her expression.

“Are you sure?” he asked, stilling above her.

She nodded, her eyes glassy.

Christian lowered his hand, running it down her stomach and her mound until his fingers slid into the juncture of her thighs.

Louise’s hands were clenched in the covers, her breasts rising and falling rhythmically as she panted beneath him.

“I shall show you how I can give you pleasure without breaking my word, Louise, and it will be my pleasure to watch you come undone at my hand.”

Slowly, he began to move his finger against her wet heat, circling the sensitive nub with minimal pressure at first. Louise closed her eyes and let out a quiet moan, her legs falling open as the tip of his finger prodded her entrance.



Her eyes opened as she looked down at him.

“All right?”

“Yes,” she said quietly. “Keep going.”

She moaned as he slid his finger into her, and he felt her walls clench around him. She swallowed, her hands gripping the covers harder as her back arched off the bed, her breasts rising into the air—a perfect image that he knew he would never forget.

He withdrew his finger and slid it back into her, curling the tip as her body quivered with pleasure. Moans escaped her lips as he began to thrust into her, gently at first and then faster as her body came alive for him.

Unable to resist any longer, Christian lowered himself between her legs, withdrawing his finger and lapping at her entrance instead.

Louise covered her face with her hands, her legs opening further as he pushed his tongue against her repeatedly until she was screaming in ecstasy.

Christian continued to pleasure her, watching as she reached her peak with a stuttering, jerky movement that he wished to see again and again.

He collapsed to the floor, staring at the marvel that was his wife. She had come alive for him, her body writhing and singing beneath him just as he had imagined it.

I never knew taming the Iron Harridan would elicit such exquisite pleasure.

## CHAPTER 19

Louise lay in the bed, staring at the ceiling and trying to catch her breath. Her body

was pliant and soft, the curve of her back smooth against the cool sheets.

She looked down her still naked body to Christian, who was leaning against the bed, his head turned away from her.

Slowly, she pulled her robe around herself again and sat up. Christian rose also and turned to her with a soft smile, holding out his hand. She took it, and he pulled her out of bed, before tenderly wrapping her robe around her.

“Are you well?” he asked.

Louise watched him carefully, sensing a change in him that she wasn’t certain what it meant. “Quite well. Are you?”

He kissed her cheek. It was strangely formal, and she felt a shiver that had nothing to do with pleasure run down her spine.

“I amverywell, I assure you,” he said casually and went to the chair beside the bed to fetch her nightgown.

Louise watched his lazy movements. Without his coat on, he looked disheveled and informal, but his expression made her uneasy.

He seems dismissive suddenly, as though he already got what he wanted and now he will move on.

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He returned to her, holding her nightgown, and she felt an odd desire to cover herself. As if he heard her thoughts, he slowly peeled her robe off her shoulders and pulled her nightgown over her head.

As the fabric slid over her head and his face was revealed to her again, the distance in his eyes had waned, and she was flooded with relief.

“That was wonderful,” he said, his tone genuine. “I told you we could still give each other pleasure without breaking your rule.”

Louise smiled faintly. “Will you sleep here?” she asked. But as soon as the words left her lips, she knew the question had been a mistake.

Christian’s easy manner evaporated, and he stepped back, glancing at the window.

It was almost four o’clock in the morning, but it was still dark outside. The street below, usually rumbling with movement, was utterly silent. Louise shivered as a chilly draft seeped through the window.

“No, I shall return to my room.” The words sounded forced, and the smile he gave her was not the easy, genuine one he had given her only moments ago. “I hope you enjoyed yourself.”

Does he know how dismissive that sounds?

Christian straightened, leveling her with a thoughtful stare. “This marriage is what we intended it to be,” he added. “It will be nothing more than a respectful agreement.

Pleasure can still be involved, but we don't have to act as if we are in love. It is not as though that will exist in our future, is it?"

Louise felt cold to her core. It was true—they did not love one another, but she felt as though he had used her and cast her aside when he was finished. Anger flared in her gut.

"And sleeping in my bed means you are in love with me, doesn't it?" she snapped.

He laughed it off as he picked up his coat and draped it over his arm, smoothing it until it was perfectly straight.

"It would set a precedent neither of us is interested in." She opened her mouth to say more, but he raised his hand to silence her. "No buts, Duchess. I expect you to obey me in this."

And with that, he walked out the door, leaving her uncomfortably flustered in the quiet room.

As sadness bubbled to the surface, she began to regret everything they had done together. But as the embarrassment threatened to overwhelm her, she heard a faint meow coming from the floor and looked down to find the kitten circling her feet. She bent down to pick it up and held it close to her chest, feeling the softness of its fur.

She climbed into bed, and the kitten made a little nest for itself on the pillow beside her. She stroked its fur until it was settled and then pulled the sheets over them both.

Not entirely alone, after all.

The next morning, Louise woke up with a headache.

Her maid came to dress her, but there were many delays due to excessive fussing over the cat. Despite her melancholy, her maid's excitement at having a pet in the house did bring a smile to her face.

It was early, and she had not slept very well. As the first light of dawn had crested the horizon, its faint rays had woken her from a fitful sleep, and she'd lain awake, watching the sunrise.

I knew Christian was detached, but I never expected such clinical precision when we lay together for the first time.

She sighed as the buttons on her gown were fastened, and she picked up the kitten and took it downstairs. Christian was not up yet, and she breakfasted alone, pleased to have a respite from his company.

She was frustrated with herself, unable to stop thinking about the night before and how much she had enjoyed it. As she cut some sausage for the kitten and put it in the small bowl beside her, she felt a familiar pulse in her groin at the memory of Christian's tongue on the most intimate part of her body.

I did not know that men could do that or that it could feel so wonderful.

Pushing away the thought, she forced down some toast and listened to the bustle of the servants around the house. It sounded as though a bell rang, and she quickly rose from the table to leave before Christian could come down and disturb her.

As she left the breakfast room, she checked the corridor for any sign of him, finding that she had an intense desire to avoid him today. With the kitten cradled against her chest, she made her way to the library. She opened the door to the silent solitude of books and closed it behind her with a sigh of relief.

There was a large armchair before the fire, and she made for it, sitting with her feet up and the kitten in her lap, watching the tiny creature navigate the undulating terrain of her skirts.

She lifted the kitten and looked into its large green eyes. “We must find a name for you, I think,” she said thoughtfully.

The kitten mewed, the black tufts of fur on the tips of its ears quivering with the sound.

“Perhaps I should name you Christine,” Louise mused. “Christian would be most displeased.”

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She chuckled to herself, rising from the chair to pick out a book that might distract her until she could come up with another excuse to avoid Christian at lunch. A part of her hoped he would seek her out, but she knew it was folly to even think of it.

“It will be nothing more than a respectful agreement.”

“Respectful,” she scoffed as she sat back in her chair, frowning at the fire. “What is respectful about barging into my room in the middle of the night and then leaving without so much as a backward glance?”

She opened her book and began to read, but the words blurred together, and she could not get her mind to concentrate on the story. She tried again for ten minutes before sighing with exasperation.

Pulling one of the ribbons from her hair, she placed the kitten on the floor and had her chase the ribbon around the armchair for some time. Its tiny legs struggled to keep up, but it was a feisty creature and clearly had a strong will to survive.

A knock sounded at the door, and a maid entered, a happy laugh escaping her lips as she saw the kitten play.

“Good morning, Your Grace,” she greeted in a pleasantly lilting voice. “A great number of parcels have arrived for you today.”

Louise frowned, bending to retrieve the kitten before she followed the maid into the corridor. They made for the main entrance hall, where, sure enough, there were ten or so large parcels wrapped in soft cloth and tied with slim ribbons.

Louise gently handed the kitten to the maid and looked them over, confused as to where they had come from. They were all addressed to her.

With rising excitement, she pulled the cloth off one of the larger parcels and found a box inside. When she opened the lid, she was met with an exquisite gown of dark red, embroidered all over with gold thread. It was the finest dress she had ever seen—her father would only ever buy her new clothes when he needed her to look presentable for an event.

There were so many boxes that she was quite overwhelmed. The next one she opened contained a far plainer dress, with a simple design and loose stays for ease of movement.

“It is for gardening.”

She spun around, almost tripping over her feet upon hearing the deep voice behind her. Christian was standing there, watching her with an expectant expression, his eyes just as dark as they had been the night before.

A shiver of awareness ran through her as he looked her up and down briefly, but the heat in his eyes was unmistakable.

Then, she remembered she was furious with him and put her hands on her hips.

“You have bought all of these for me?” she asked.

Christian straightened his coat. “There may be one or two items for myself.” His ears turned a little pink, and her eyes widened in surprise.

I have never seen him in anything but the latest fashions. Is he embarrassed that enjoys perfecting his appearance?



“Are you not going to thank me?” he asked archly, and she scowled at him. A slow smile spread across his lips, and she rolled her eyes at his audacity.

“I am very grateful. This gown is beautiful, but what is this all about?”

Christian stepped forward. His hair was styled casually this morning, his cravat slightly askew.

“I am a man of my word,” he said, inclining his head. “I told you I would purchase some dresses for you so that you did not have to wear anything too fine in the gardens. These are the said dresses.”

He reached into his pocket and pulled out a folded letter, which he handed to her. She looked it over—it was an invitation.

“You can wear one of them to the Barringtons’ ball tonight. Do not be late,” he instructed firmly.

Clearly, being late for one breakfast means I cannot be trusted to manage my time.

Christian’s frown deepened as the maid almost lost her hold on the kitten, who was squirming and straining to reach him.

Louise took the kitten in her arms, the note crumpling between her fingers as she tried to juggle them both.

“What is that thing still doing here?” Christian asked heatedly.

“Where did you expect me to put her? Out on the streets?” Louise shot back.

“Oh, it is a male, Your Grace,” the maid blurted out, then snapped her mouth shut,

looking at Christian warily.

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Louise turned to her in amazement. “A male?”

“Yes, Your Grace. I grew up on a farm. We had several cats that were used to keep the rats away. It’s a male, for certain.”

Louise looked down at the little bundle in her arms and laughed. “Well, that is wonderful. I finally have a name for him.”

Christian rubbed an exasperated hand over his forehead. “Have you, indeed? And what are you going to call it?”

“Jack,” Louise said with a grin. “His name is Jack Frost, seeing as he is owned by the Ice Queen.”

## CHAPTER 20

Christian sat in an armchair before the fire and stared at the kitten.

He was a tiny, little thing with dark markings down his back and large, wide eyes that darted around every room with interest.

Christian glared at him.

The kitten was moving across the floor beneath him and sniffing everything in its path. Its claws pattered incessantly as it went to sit by the fire, the heat of the flames warming its back.

Christian glanced at the door, which he had deliberately left open to keep the stairs in sight. Despite his instructions, Louise was late. He frowned, wondering what on earth was taking her so long.

“I told her not to be late,” he muttered to Jack, “and here she is, with minutes to spare. I should confiscate you to teach her a lesson.”

At that moment, the kitten decided that he felt too hot beside the fire and wandered over to the chair. Christian eyed him warily and then cursed as the creature scaled his leg with needle-like claws, dragging its tiny body onto his knee.

The kitten studied him for a few seconds before padding down his thigh and nestling against his stomach. Christian gripped the armrests as he stared down at the purring creature irritably.

“I believe you are supposed to stroke it, dearest,” said an amused voice as the Dowager Duchess appeared in the doorway, watching him curiously.

“Why do cats constantly sit on those who do not like them?” Christian complained. “It took me an hour to get ready this evening—I do not want hair all over my coat.”

“Then why have you not removed him?” his mother asked.

Christian looked down at the little furball. Its back rose and fell rhythmically, its gentle purring oddly soothing. His hand moved of its own accord, and instead of lifting the little creature and placing it on the floor beside him, he found himself scratching it awkwardly behind its ears.

The kitten snuggled further against him, and his mother laughed.

“I think perhaps you do not dislike him as much as you claim.”

Louise would not like it if I were unkind to him.

“I suppose he is rather sweet if he could stop shedding hair over everything he passes.” Christian plucked a stray hair off his sleeve as his mother stepped into the room.

She stroked the cat far more naturally than he did and then went to stand beside the fireplace, watching him carefully.

Christian glanced up at her, feeling the atmosphere in the room change as she folded her hands in front of her.

“Has there been any news?” she asked softly, glancing at the doorway.

“About Marcus?” he asked. The Dowager Duchess nodded. “I spoke with the constable yesterday evening.”

“And?”

“He is rather reluctant to continue the investigation. I explained in the strongest terms that that was not his decision to make. The man is a little weasel and wishes to be done with it. He is convinced that Marcus is dead, I am sure.”

Tears welled up in his mother’s eyes, but her expression was resolute.

“It has been six months, Christian. Do you truly believe that any other outcome is possible now?”

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“I must believe it,” Christian insisted. “I would know if he was dead. I would know it in my core. The constable said he found his carriage but did not find a body. Surely, that must mean that Marcus somehow escaped.”

“But where was he going? What reason did he have for taking the carriage out of London? That is what worries me.”

“I will find him, Mother. I know it.”

“I pray you are right. I would give anything to have both of my sons home with me again.”

Christian moved to rise, but then he remembered the small furball in his lap. He picked it up and walked over to his mother.

“You know I will do everything I can,” he said earnestly.

His mother gave a single nod in response, her lips thinning as she fought back tears. She was a proud woman, and he rarely saw her let emotions get the better of her.

Someone cleared their throat.

Christian turned around, the kitten held loosely in his fingers, and his breath caught in his lungs.

Louise was standing in the doorway, but she was no longer the Ice Queen he had once met. She wore the gown that he had purchased for her, and as he looked her

over from head to toe, he had never regretted a purchase so much in his life.

How am I going to stand at her side all night, unable to touch her, with her looking like that?

She was dazzling, and as he continued to stare at her, he felt his breeches tighten.

The dress was cut low, showing a dark crease between her breasts. The dark red fabric complemented her hair to perfection, as did the red feathers placed at the back of her head. A ruby necklace that he recognized as his mother's adorned her neck, and the golden embroidery on the bodice glimmered in the candlelight.

Christian realized belatedly that his mouth was hanging open, and he closed it abruptly.

"At last," he bit out, trying to mask his desire. "I have been waiting for over twenty minutes. I believe I asked you to be punctual."

"You said, 'Do not be late,' Christian, yet you neglected to tell me when you wished to leave. That is hardly my fault."

Christian stiffened as his mother chuckled behind him. He handed her the kitten as punishment, but she looked very pleased to take charge of it, which only annoyed him further.

"I see you have made friends with Jack," Louise noted, sounding pleased.

"I have done nothing of the kind," Christian replied bitterly. "He climbed up my leg against my will, and I shall evict him from the house if he does it again."

He tugged at his tailcoat, his fingers flexing against the dark fabric. He had worn a

deep red ensemble that evening, and it became clear to him now that it had been a subconscious decision to match his wife. He glanced at his reflection in the mirror above the fireplace and frowned at his cravat, which, despite his valet's attempts, always seemed askew.

He tugged at it, tucking it more neatly around his neck, before turning to his wife. He crossed the room toward her, his frown still in place.

"You make a most handsome couple, I must say," his mother said warmly.

"Thank you, Sabine," Louise replied brightly.

Christian offered her his arm, irrationally vexed that the woman he had married for convenience's sake seemed to have befriended his mother.

"Are we leaving, or will you prattle on for the whole night?" he huffed.

Louise rolled her eyes at him before she took his arm, and he led her out of the house.

As they approached the waiting carriage, Christian nodded to the driver. The footman opened the door, and they both climbed inside.

The small confines of the carriage only made things worse for him. Being mere inches from Louise, her scent surrounding him, his length hardened almost immediately.

He took a deep breath to try and calm himself, but that only made him ever more conscious of her scent. Louise looked utterly unaffected as the carriage took off, staring out the window, her eyes catching the light from the oil lamps, her skin aglow with a soft golden hue.



“Were you late on purpose?” Christian asked peevishly.

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“Certainly,” she replied, surprising him. “I enjoy any excuse to rile you up, did you not realize that?”

Her raised eyebrow and sarcastic expression did not help his state in the least, and he looked away, grinding his teeth and trying to get a grip on himself.

“What were you speaking to your mother about?” she asked.

“Marcus,” he replied shortly. “There is no news of your best friend, so you needn’t ask me any more questions about him.”

Louise had the nerve to laugh at him, and he shot her a withering look which only made her laugh louder.

Louise could not understand Christian’s jealousy of Marcus, but she was not too proud to admit that she enjoyed it. Never had a man been so possessive of her that even the mention of another would send him into fits of anger, but it seemed she had found just that with Christian.

She watched the tell-tale vein in his temple throb.

“I am sorry that you have not heard more,” she said, her amusement fading. “What is the next course of action?”

He scowled. “I do not know.”

“If his carriage was found empty, are they making inquiries in the surrounding area to

discover what might have occurred?”

Christian’s frown eased a little. “I told the constable to do as much, but he seemed so apathetic. I believe he was more concerned about returning home for his supper than finding my brother.”

“Is there no one else we can ask? Can you not pay a man to find him for you?”

Christian scoffed. “I will find him, and then you can be reunited and spend all your time together. Is that what you prefer?”

“I certainly prefer him to you—I have made no secret of that,” she quipped.

He scowled at her. “Marcus is far from perfect,” he muttered.

“And you are, Your Grace?” Louise taunted.

She knew better than to needle him in such a manner, but he was in a funk, and it was ruining her good mood. She loved dancing and had been looking forward to enjoying herself.

Christian turned to face her, his green eyes shimmering in the low light of the lamp overhead. “I have never claimed to be such, nor would I.”

“I am most pleased to hear it,” she said, laying the fan on her lap. “I have explained my friendship with Marcus to you already. I do not understand why you find it so provoking.”

“I do not find it provoking. I merely think that it is unseemly for a lady to be so well acquainted with a gentleman who is not her husband. It is hardly surprising that I assumed there was more between you.”

“As you said, I was biding my time for a high-ranking match, and here you are,” she replied venomously, her anger spiking again at his prior implication that she would use Marcus for personal gain.

Christian’s sour mood improved at her irritation, and he relaxed back in his seat. The atmosphere in the carriage changed completely as his gaze darkened with heat, and Louise swallowed thickly.

“I do not remember you complaining when you begged your Duke to touch you, Your Grace,” he said silkily.

Louise’s cheeks flushed as he leaned across the small space between them, his handsome face inches from her own.

“Indeed, I recall you coming apart for me,” he continued, “on two occasions.” His hands came to rest on either side of her hips. “It makes me wonder how I might finally achieve what I set out to do.” She shivered as his lips quirked up, his eyes glittering in the dim light of the carriage. “How to make you scream my name in ecstasy. I might make a study of it.”

With a jolt, the carriage came to a stop, and Christian leaned back. A smug smile spread across his face as he ran a hand through his hair and smoothed his coat.

Louise snapped open her fan and fluttered it in front of her heated cheeks as he chuckled across from her. The lilting music of the ball drifted into the space between them, and she could hear the chatter as the other guests arrived.

“After you, Duchess,” Christian said softly.

Louise exited the carriage as quickly as she could before she found herself begging him for a second time.

CHAPTER 21

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 1:48 am*

Louise had attended several balls, but nothing quite like this.

Her family had never been exalted enough to receive an invitation to the Barringtons' ball, and she looked around eagerly as they walked into the room.

The grand ballroom was filled with the crème de la crème of Society. Anybody who wished to make a name for themselves or who already had was in attendance.

The atmosphere inside was lively, a warm ambiance created by the candlelight all around the room. Louise was doubly glad of her beautiful gown, for only the height of fashion was permitted on such an occasion.

Ladies walked ahead of her in every color imaginable. The air was thick with smoke and laughter, and a quadrille was already in full swing.

Louise glanced up at Christian and struggled to breathe. He was the picture of aristocratic arrogance, looking around the room as though everyone in it existed to do his bidding. To her dismay, she observed that fact with something akin to fondness.

He does look impossibly handsome this evening. It is so unfair.

Christian's arm tightened around her own as they moved through the room. There were a lot of people staring at them or glancing in their direction and then whispering together.

When she had first been labeled as the Iron Harridan, Louise had experienced a great deal of scrutiny, but this was different. Here, people did not look upon her with

disdain. They were curious about her, and many appeared in awe of the Duke, who held himself as though he belonged there.

What he must have done to fight for his position, given what his mother told me...

Louise could not imagine how unpleasant it must have been for Marcus and Christian in the beginning—they must have been shunned by more than just her father.

As they reached the edge of the dance floor, the Duke of Stonewell materialized before them. He was dressed as strictly as the other men in the room but had far simpler clothing than Christian. It was clear that the two gentlemen had different tastes in fashion. Christian wore the latest style of everything, experimenting with different colors and looks, whereas the Duke of Stonewell was far more conservative in his appearance.

“Stonewell,” Christian greeted as the two men bowed to one another. “Have you been here for long?”

“Hours. You are very late.” It was clear that Gabriel meant it in jest, although he did not smile at all.

Christian glared at Louise as though his friend were serious.

She sighed wearily and smiled at Gabriel. “Is your sister here tonight?” she asked.

“She is. I believe she is dancing.” Gabriel turned around, his sharp eyes surveying the figures on the dance floor. He nodded at Charlotte, who was speaking merrily with a very tall, red-headed man.

“Waldron is still in pursuit, then,” Christian remarked.

Gabriel's face darkened. "Not if I have anything to say about it."

Louise glanced at the man Charlotte was dancing with. He seemed perfectly harmless, but her brother appeared up in arms about it.

"I think I shall go to the refreshments table," she said. "It is rather stuffy in here."

She released Christian's arm, expecting that he would stay and talk to his friend and allow her her freedom, now that she was a married woman. Instead, he immediately moved to follow her.

"It is only a short walk away, Christian. You should stay and speak with the Duke."

Christian did not reply but simply took her arm again and guided her toward the table. Perplexed, she glanced up at him and caught him glaring at a rather severe-looking man who was eyeing her with interest.

Now that she had observed Christian for some time, she realized that he was glaring at almost every man in the room as though he might call them out.

I never would have thought I would enjoy a man's jealousy, but there is something about the way he looks at them that makes me feel protected. I cannot explain it.

They reached the refreshments table, which was laden with drinks and food of every kind. There were pies, pastries, cheeses, and cold meats. Along the back were large bowls filled with jellies and what looked like an enormous blancmange. Tarts and pastries overflowed on plates on every side beside a plethora of wine, punch, and champagne. Louise was surprised that the table didn't collapse.

"What would you like?" Christian asked, his gaze fixed on a gentleman on the right-hand side of the table, helping himself to some cake.



“I simply wished to fetch myself a glass of punch. I did not need you to accompany me—you have left your friend all alone in the center of the room.”

“He will survive, I am sure,” Christian said as he summoned a footman, who poured her a glass of punch. When it was placed in her hands, Christian took her arm again, and she looked up at him with a frown.

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“Do you not wish to get anything for yourself?”

“Punch is too sweet for me. Besides, we should look for Charlotte when she finishes dancing—the two of you can get to know each other better.”

Louise pursed her lips as she drank the punch. It was excellent and not so cloyingly sweet as the one at less opulent occasions.

“Are you expecting me to run off with every man in the room? Because you are acting like it.”

Christian glanced down at her in surprise. There was a note of irritation in her voice, but she looked more baffled than anything.

Does she not see that every man in the room wants her? She is the most beautiful woman here, and I will be damned if they forget that she belongs to me!

Never in his life had he felt such rabid jealousy. It was as though every eye in the room was upon them. Even when he tried to convince himself that Louise would not stand up with anyone else, he wanted to watch her to make sure that she did not even look at another man in his presence.

“I am acting as your husband. It does not hurt to remind them who you belong to. I shall do it as many times as is required.”

He cleared his throat as they made their way back to Gabriel, who, to Christian’s eternal irritation, was watching him with an amused glint in his eyes. He had known

Gabriel for a long time, and that was the closest thing to a smile his friend had ever achieved.

“Enjoying yourself?” Gabriel asked Louise, who had already finished her punch and was looking around her.

“It is a beautiful ballroom. Have you been to this event before, Your Grace?”

“I have,” Gabriel replied. “For many years. It is one of the finest events of the Season. I believe it gets better every year.”

Christian took the opportunity to glance around him. He was usually on edge at such functions, believing that every step he took was under scrutiny. But, strangely, with Louise beside him, he felt calmer, more able to enjoy himself than he had before.

There are benefits to having a wife that I had not foreseen.

Glancing down at her, he noticed that she was examining the pillars at the far side of the room. They had been placed at intervals, with cascades of flowers hanging from them. The colors were vibrant and beautiful. He recognized tulips in and amongst them but could not identify many of the other flowers.

He heard Louise counting under her breath.

“What are you looking at?” he asked.

She raised her gaze to his and sighed. “Wherever Lady Barrington sources her flowers, she has exquisite taste. Those are Gallic roses and must have been grown in a hot house to produce such wide blooms in March.”

Christian felt a burst of pride at the awe in her voice. He did not have extensive

knowledge of flowers or anything to do with them, but her diamond-blue eyes certainly came alive when she broached the subject.

“And what are Gallic roses?” he asked, noting that Gabriel’s steady gaze never left him.

Louise smiled up at him, and his breath caught in his throat. It was a genuine smile. She seemed touched by his interest, which made a strange, happy feeling bloom in his chest.

“The Gallicas are the large pink blooms at the base of the bouquets. They are also known as the ‘Apothecary’ rose. Their petals have medicinal properties and can often be found growing in the gardens of apothecaries for just that reason.”

“My God, you have married an intellectual,” Gabriel said blithely, but his tone was not unkind.

Christian’s admiration of his wife’s knowledge was quickly doused, however, when she positively beamed at Gabriel, and a muscle in his jaw began to tick.

“Have you already cataloged the Gallic rose in your book?” he asked hurriedly, trying to mask his irritation.

“Not yet. I was waiting until later in the year when they would naturally be in bloom. I still do not have an accurate sketch of one, so I would need a subject.”

Louise’s gaze suddenly landed on something on the other side of the room, and her face brightened immediately.

“Oh! It is Lady Sybella,” she gushed. She turned to Christian and arched an eyebrow. “Am I permitted to go and speak to my friend, or should I remain here at all times?”

Christian was appalled to feel heat creeping up his neck. He was aware that his behavior was somewhat ridiculous, but he had not expected Louise to call him out on it, and certainly not in front of Gabriel.

“I am not preventing you from doing anything,” he said, even as his eyes scanned the path she had to take for any young men who might accost her. “Go and speak to Lady Sybella if it pleases you.”

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Louise handed him her empty glass without hesitation and made her way through the crowd. Christian's eyes did not leave her until the two women embraced.

"My God, I never would have thought it," Gabriel muttered.

Christian glowered at him, but Gabriel merely gave him a smug look.

"Do you deny it?"

"Deny what?" Christian grumbled.

"That you can hardly take your eyes off the chit."

"Don't call her—" Christian broke off, reining in his temper as Gabriel bounced on the balls of his feet in apparent glee. "She is not achit. She is my wife, and I would ask you to remember that."

"How could I possibly forget? Lately, she is all you speak about."

"That is not true."

"It is. You are a fool if you think otherwise. I never would have thought that the Iron Harridan would tame the Duke of Egerton."

"Would you be quiet?" Christian hissed, placing the empty glass Louise had handed to him on the tray of a passing servant. "If nothing else, I hope that her nickname will fade now. She has done enough to distance herself from it."

“She is on your arm—that has to count for something. It certainly makes her more intriguing. Perhaps I should ask her to dance.”

“I will cut off your toes if you try,” Christian gritted out.

Gabriel snorted loudly. “I am going to find Arkley,” he drawled. “He is far more agreeable than you, at present. I shall leave you to your observations.” And then he disappeared into the crowd.

“Go to the devil,” Christian muttered.

But despite his friend’s taunting, he was unable to move far from his charge.

He hung back, watching Louise speaking to the ladies around her, strangely jealous that eventheyreceived her attention while he did not.

## CHAPTER 22

It was glorious to see Sybella.

They had only been apart for three days, but with the myriad activities and adjustments Louise had experienced following her wedding, she was thrilled at the sight of a friendly face.

“Your Grace,” Sybella said humbly as she pulled her into her arms. “I do not believe I will ever get used to that title.”

“Please use it sparingly,” Louise insisted. “I am still just Louise to you.”

“You are aduchess,” Sybella said proudly. “No matter the circumstances, that carries weight.” She ran her eyes over her friend. “You look well, despite everything. How is

marriage treating you?"

Louise glanced behind her at Christian. "I am not sure on that point," she said, turning back to Sybella. "But I am very lucky to have loyal friends. I am so pleased to see you."

Sybella smiled. "And I you. I have thought of you often in the last few days and was hoping you would attend the ball."

"My father has always wished to receive an invitation to this event—he would be green with envy that I am standing here."

"As well he might be," Sybella muttered bitterly. "You are here because of and in spite of him. Never forget that." She stepped a little closer to Louise and lowered her voice. "Have you heard from your mother?"

Louise's heart swelled at her friend's concerned expression. Sybella was the only person she had confided in about what she had witnessed between her parents.

She glanced around furtively, ensuring that no one was eavesdropping.

"She is well, I think. She packed a great number of books on botany and the like in my trunk, for which I was very grateful. She always puts me ahead of her needs, and I intend to repay her for it. I have so much work to do on my encyclopedia; it feels rather overwhelming, at present."



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Sybella's eyes lit up. "How far have you progressed?" she asked, a familiar intensity in her expression.

She was Louise's greatest supporter in all of her endeavors, and Louise felt a thrill at their shared excitement.

"I think I have a good number of plants from our country estate that I have labeled and cataloged. I worked on those for much of last summer and did a great deal of research in the winter when we stayed with my aunt. All of my samples are dried and pressed, and I hope that some of my sketches may even be used in print."

"It will be marvelous. Just think, you, a published author!" Sybella lowered her voice further. "Again," she added with a conspiratorial smile.

Louise had published several poems that had seen some success in recent months. She had to use a man's name for any publisher to consider her, and she knew she would have to use another for her encyclopedia. She longed to be recognized for her interest in plants, but she knew it would be impossible.

"My mother told me about a woman named Mary Delany. She was a great friend of the late Duchess of Portland," Louise said. "Apparently, she studied plants all her life and created paper mosaics of them."

"A woman?"

"A woman," Louise confirmed triumphantly.

They shared a joyful smile at the progress their fellow women were making before Sybella's eyes were drawn to something over Louise's shoulder.

Louise turned around, and her smile widened when she saw Lady Charlotte Harding approaching her. She was one of the tallest ladies in the room and was rather flushed from dancing.

"I thought that was you, Your Grace," Charlotte said enthusiastically. "I saw that Christian had arrived and was so hoping to see you again."

As she stepped toward them, she tripped over the hem of her gown and fell forward with a startled cry, landing against both Sybella and Louise. Their arms shot out on instinct, and all three women righted themselves quickly while laughing.

"I do beg your pardon," Charlotte muttered, coloring even further. "I declare that in any room, there would always be something for me to trip on."

"Did you hurt yourself?" Louise asked.

"Only my pride."

"Lady Charlotte Harding," Louise said quickly as she caught Sybella's eye. "May I present Lady Sybella Cecil. Lady Sybella is an old friend of mine, sister to the Duke of Arkley."

"How do you do?" Charlotte offered with an easy smile.

"Who was it you were dancing with?" Louise asked curiously, recalling her brother's irritated expression.

"Oh, his name is Lord Anthony Waldren. I have no designs on him, but my brother is

rather against our supposed connection. They do not like each other, but it is entirely on Gabriel's side—he does not get along with anyone. I like to irritate him by letting Waldren pen his name in my card now and then.”

There was a teasing light in Charlotte's eyes, and Louise decided that she liked her immensely.

As Sybella and Charlotte began to speak about the ball and the opulence all around them, Louise took in the crowds around her and the hum of chatter in the air. Lady Barrington certainly knew how to organize an extravagant event. Her ears grew hot as she listened to the others talk, and somehow she knew that Christian was watching her. The knowledge warmed her blood in the strangest way.

Why do I like that he is so envious of other men? Does that not make me rather self-conceited?

And yet she could not help but feel proud that he wanted her so much. She had no illusions that it was anything more than lust, but it was a thrill, nonetheless, to have a man as handsome and sought-after as Christian so fixated on her.

As she turned back to Charlotte and Sybella, she caught some movement to her right and tensed as an older man came into view. His name was Lord Emming, and she had only met him twice before, but that had been twice too many. She groaned softly as she caught his eye and he approached her with a supercilious smile.

Lord Emming bowed, startling Sybella a little as he stopped before them.

“Your Grace,” he said with to Louise. “A pleasure.” His eyes ran over her figure lecherously, and she took a tiny step back from him as he licked his lips. “I wished to congratulate you on your marriage.”

He stepped closer still, ensuring that she had to take another step away from her friends.

Louise felt isolated despite being in a room filled with people. The man was a lecherous creature, and she had felt the same about him when they first met.

“Thank you, My Lord. I trust you have been well since we last saw each other. How is Lady Emming?”

He chuckled softly, the sound echoing through the air between them. “Oh, my wife is always in excellent health.” His eyes dipped down to rest on her bodice, and she attempted to keep the grimace from her face.

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“I am glad to hear it,” she replied, glancing at Sybella, but her friend seemed too engrossed in her conversation with Charlotte to realize that she needed rescuing.

“Tell me,” Lord Emming asked smoothly, “how is marriage treating you? I imagine it is everything you have wished for.”

His tone could not have made his meaning any clearer. Louise was disgusted by the suggestive heat in his gaze and found herself considering the ramifications if she were to break two noses in one year.

“I would not wish to speak for my wife,” came a welcome voice from behind her, “but I would say it is treating us both very well, indeed.”

Louise felt the tension leave her shoulders as Christian’s imposing figure appeared behind her. He did not touch her, but his body was so close to hers that she could feel his warmth against her back. She turned to him with a relieved smile, only to find the same furious expression on his face as he glared at Lord Emming.

As for Lord Emming, he had backed away several steps, and his smile was far less warm, his eyes fixed on Christian.

“I would expect nothing less,” he commented casually, as though he were a completely different person.

“I am sorry to steal her away from you, Lord Emming,” Christian said in a tone that suggested he was not sorry at all. “But I have someone I wish to introduce her to.”

He gave a hint of a bow before gently resting a hand on Louise's back. They turned away from Charlotte and Sybella and made their way back across the room and toward the terrace.

"Thank you," Louise said genuinely. "I was trying to find an excuse to get away from him."

"The man is famous for his lascivious ways. Did he touch you?" Christian's voice was dark and ominous as he asked the question.

Louise could not help but giggle as she glanced up at him. "You cannot possibly be jealous of Lord Emming, Christian," she scoffed. "He is impossibly old."

Christian said nothing, but his eyes were still scanning the room.

"Who was it you wished to introduce me to?" she asked curiously.

Christian's shoulders relaxed at the question. "Do you remember the botanist I mentioned? He is here, which rather surprised me. He must have friends in high places. You have the chance to meet him tonight. He is outside, spending time in the gardens as we speak."

They made their way through the milling crowds as another lively set began behind them. Louise longed to dance but was touched by the attention Christian paid to her study of plants.

The large glass doors were wide open, letting in a cool breeze from the gardens. It was a long space flanked by small pillars along the edges. There weren't many people outside due to the chill in the air, but one man was leaning against the balustrade, staring out at the dark trees beyond.

Christian made for him, and Louise was shocked by how young he looked. He could not have been thirty, with a beard cut close to his face, wide brown eyes, and very pale blonde hair that looked almost white in the moonlight.

“Lord Fiorelli?”

The man turned around, his eyes narrowing as he realized he was no longer alone. He looked between them as though coming back to himself and then straightened.

“Your Grace,” he greeted with a low bow. “It is a pleasure to see you again.”

“May I introduce my wife, the Duchess of Egerton? She was most desirous to meet you, and she shares your love of plants.”

The man’s expression shifted immediately from faint politeness to genuine interest, and he bowed to Louise, which she answered with a curtsy.

“Is that so?” he asked. He had a strong Italian accent and bronzed skin a shade or so darker than Christian’s. “I have met many ladies with refined tastes since I came to London. It is my pleasure to meet another.”

“My wife is writing an encyclopedia,” Christian cut in before Louise could speak. “It is something she has been working on for some time, and my dearest wish is that she can complete it as soon as possible.”

The inflection in his voice was not lost on her, and she fought back a blush, knowing full well why her finishing the book would be of benefit to him.

“Lord Fiorelli, it is wonderful to meet you,” she said swiftly. “My husband tells me you are a botanist?”

“Indeed, I am, Your Grace. I studied at the University of Bologna in Italy but traveled to England as soon as I was able. I have wanted to see your glorious English countryside since I was a boy. I study entomology also and am fascinated by the relationship between the Painted Lady butterfly and the common thistle.”

“Ah, how fascinating. The Asteraceae family and Painted Lady butterflies are mutually beneficial to one another, are they not? I read that the butterflies often use thistles and sunflowers to lay their eggs.”

“Exactly!”



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“I have a section in my book dedicated to thistles, in fact. I adore them. I was hoping to procure a sunflower so that I might draw it.”

“I would be happy to send you a cutting of one of my own, Your Grace. I am staying with my cousin, and I have several growing in the hothouse at his estate. He has told me that they are quite taking over, but I have no interest in reducing their number. I am hoping that I might introduce some butterflies to the space and see how they fare.”

“Oh, that would be wonderful!” Louise exclaimed, glancing at Christian with excitement as he watched on with a rather bemused expression.

Christian stood back and watched Louise with fascination. He had witnessed her speak about plants before and did not think he would ever grow tired of seeing the spark in her eyes when she expanded on the subject.

He glanced at Lord Fiorelli, who was nodding his head enthusiastically and absorbing her every word. Christian frowned, noting for the first time how young the man was. Even as they spoke of something as innocent as butterflies, Christian wished he had not introduced them to each other.

Does she have to smile so much?

He listened to their conversation idly, aware that Louise’s knowledge of plants was far-reaching and broad. Even with a man as learned as Lord Fiorelli, she held her own, asking pertinent questions and even elaborating on whatever he spoke of, eliciting an expression of quiet awe from him that set Christian’s teeth on edge.

It was growing colder, and after almost thirty minutes of vigorous discussion, Christian was becoming restless. He glanced back at the swirl of the dancers in the main room. They had been at the ball for a few hours only, but he was already eager to leave.

Not so long ago, he would have gone to the card room or entertained himself with Gabriel or Isaac and spent many long hours drinking brandy. Now, looking at his exquisite wife, the swell of her breasts, and her narrow waist, he simply wanted to drag her into a room and quench the lust that was thrumming through his veins.

Am I truly considering leaving one of the most exclusive balls of the Season just to be with my wife? Apparently!

He allowed the conversation to continue for another ten minutes, interjecting at intervals with an agreement or a question but counting down the seconds until a pause would come and he could interrupt.

Finally, Lord Fiorelli was hailed by a man who came onto the terrace, and he excused himself with much regret, assuring Louise that he would write to her soon and send her a plethora of specimens and seeds for her collection.

Louise was flushed and vibrating with excitement by the end of their conversation, and Christian was itching to draw her attention back to him and him alone.

“Thank you!” she gushed as she watched Lord Fiorelli leave.

Does the man have to be so handsome? Surely, there is some flaw in his character that I do not see.

“I have never met a man like him before. He is so knowledgeable. And he spoke to me as though I were his equal.”

“And why should he not? Your knowledge rivaled his own in certain areas,” Christian replied firmly.

“I am no expert, Christian. All my knowledge comes from reading, not an education in entomology and botany.”

“That makes it all the more impressive. You have applied yourself in your own time, whereas Lord Fiorelli’s education—as grand as it may have been—must have been bought and paid for. You should not underestimate the effort and dedication you have shown in furthering your knowledge in such a way.”

Her eyes twinkled at that, and he could tell that she was pleased with what he had said. His posture relaxed just a little now that her eyes were back on him, and he intended to make them stay that way.

“Duchess, I believe it is time that we left.”

She raised her eyebrows at him. “So soon?”

He took her hand and lifted it to his lips, pressing a kiss to the back of it.

Louise pulled in a long breath as he did it, never breaking eye contact, and she could not have missed his meaning as he straightened and said with determination, “Immediately.”

## CHAPTER 23

Louise bid her farewells to Charlotte and Sybella, who had both danced a great deal and were in high spirits.

Christian seemed in great haste to leave, and she could not understand why. Many at

the ball would remain until the early hours, and she had not been able to dance at all, much to her disappointment.

As they made their way down the steps to their carriage, Christian's body was practically vibrating with energy, and she hesitated as he opened the door for her before the footman had a chance to.

“Are you quite well?” she asked, looking at him in confusion.

“Get in the carriage.”

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The clipped and cold response startled her, and she felt concerned as she wondered if she might have displeased or embarrassed him in some way. She climbed inside as he gave a brief instruction to the driver, and then the door slammed shut behind him and they set off.

“What is it?” she asked, frowning at him.

“Take down your hair,” he instructed.

She frowned all the more at that demand. “Even if I wished to, I could not. There must be thirty pins holding it in place, and I cannot enter the carriage in one state and leave it in another.”

Christian was moving before she could process it, and his body was suddenly hovering over her, his face inches from her own.

“You do not have a choice in whether you will leave this carriage in a different state. You have spent the entire evening flirting with another man, and I shall remind you who you belong to.”

Louise made a high noise of protest, even as lust roared through her at his proximity. “I have done nothing of the sort and I wholeheartedly reject your accusation.”

“I do not care. I shall make it all the same.”

She shuddered as his hand grabbed the folds of her dress and drew the fabric up and over her knees. His hand slid beneath it, and his fingers ran up her inner thigh.

“You admired him, admit it.”

Louise let out a shuddering gasp.

Christian’s eyes smoldered as he moved his fingers further up her thigh, pulled at her underclothes, and drew them down her legs.

“You are mad,” she said breathlessly. “I admire his knowledge of plants?—”

But Christian did not let her finish her sentence. He lowered his head, his lips covering hers as he groaned in pleasure. Louise gasped again as his fingers brushed against the heat between her legs, and she let out a sharp cry as he pushed his tongue into her mouth, massaging hers with a low moan.

Pulling back, he stopped moving completely, watching for her reaction.

“I would have you this moment if I had not made that damned promise, but I will remind you who you are married to.”

“I know who I am married to, you brute.”

“Yes, and that brute is going to have his way with you. Tell me, Duchess, do you want me to continue, or do you want me to stop? I will respect your wishes despite the torture you have put me through tonight.”

“Torture?” she asked, desperate for him to touch her again. His fingers were hovering just out of reach, and she felt an alarming urge to ground her hips against them and force him inside her again. “I have spoken to a manyouintroduced me to. Did you wish me to say nothing and ignore him completely?”

“He was very handsome.”

“Was he, indeed? Well, you seem to have noticed his looks more than I.”

His other hand pulled the rest of the fabric down her knees until her thighs were completely exposed.

“You are mine, is that clear?” he asked, pulling her closer to him so that her hips were hovering over the edge of the bench, held suspended by his hands. “You belong to me.”

Louise melted against the seat at his words, overwhelmed by the same need to please him. She thought of that forceful kiss in the private room in his club, the desperation she had felt for his touch.

Will I let him have me now? Will I be so reckless when I myself have told him we must wait?

“Tell me you do not want me, and I will release you. We shall sleep in separate rooms, just as we should,” he said softly, his voice laced with intense desire.

Louise closed her eyes, pushing her hips against his body in a silent entreaty for him to continue.

The low chuckle he gave at that was music to her ears, and no more words were needed as he lowered himself to the floor before her.

Christian was almost mad with lust. He had watched every man in the ballroom stare at his wife as though she were theirs for the taking. He had counted five men in total whose gazes had lingered on her for minutes, and if he had not reined in his anger, he would have been in duels for the next three weeks.

He could not bear it and intended to stake his claim on his wife once and for all.

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“You will need to be silent,” he murmured as those blue eyes tracked his every movement. “I said once that I would like you to scream my name, and I would be happy for you to do so, but there are servants not far away. See if you can remain quiet for the remainder of the ride, and I shall do my best to prevent it.”

Then, he leaned forward and slid his right hand further up her thigh until he felt her wet heat against his fingers.

“Feel this, Duchess, and remember who commands your pleasure.”

She started as he pushed one finger inside her and straightened to watch her face. She was leaning back in her seat, her head resting on the soft cushions as she moaned.

He slid his finger inside her, almost to the knuckle, and then curled it upward, eliciting a moan from her. He withdrew it and thrust it back in, holding back his groan of ecstasy as her walls rippled around him. He continued stroking her for several minutes until her hips were thrusting upward repeatedly and she was almost lying on the seat.

Her hands were braced against the carriage walls, and her eyes followed him as he withdrew his finger completely and placed it in his mouth, sucking on it while she panted beneath him.

With a coy smile, he lowered two fingers this time and slowly slid them inside her. She let out a strained cry as her back arched off the seat.

He moved over her, their chests pressed together as he thrust his fingers inside her



again and again, her low moans growing louder as her legs fell open for him.

“Turn over,” he ordered as he pulled his fingers out, and she looked up at him in surprise before she followed his command.

He ran his hands over her waist until he found the laces on her bodice and began to untie them. She was breathing harshly as each fastening loosened, but there was no protest in her movements.

He untied every lace until her corset was loose enough for him to reach what he truly wanted.

Flipping her over, he pulled down the top of her bodice, exposing the white linen of her shift, and then roughly pulled it down, exposing her breasts to his hungry mouth.

Louise raked her fingers through his hair, before gripping it hard and making him groan. He sucked each nipple into his mouth, licking it with his tongue and biting gently as she shuddered and convulsed beneath him.

“Who do you belong to?” he growled.

“You,” she panted. “You.”

He bit down harder as she groaned without restraint, her legs falling open wantonly. He lowered himself again, pushing his head beneath the folds of her dress and lapping at her entrance. She tugged at his hair and started to thrust her hips upward with every lash of his tongue.

Christian opened his breeches desperately, stroking himself to the fastest climax he had ever experienced. He had never been so overwhelmed with need or pleasure, and he groaned loudly as she cried out above him and shuddered, her hips bucking as

pleasure overtook her.

He watched her breasts rise and fall as she caught her breath and slowly sank back onto the seat. Their eyes met as he rose from between her legs, and the soft smile on her lips made something deep within him stir to life, as though it had lain dormant for many years, waiting for her to awaken it.

## CHAPTER 24

Louise scowled at Christian's smug expression as she attempted to straighten her clothing before their arrival. She had no choice but to ask him to re-lace her bodice, which was almost entirely undone.

It took him several attempts in the small confines of the carriage, and he exclaimed several times that he could not believe how tight it needed to be.

She was ruffled and disheveled and felt as though all of the servants would know immediately what they had been doing.

"Can you at least assure me that I look respectable?" she huffed as he sat back in the opposite seat, watching her with amusement.

"You look debauched. Does that help?"

"Christian!" she hissed.

He raised his hands defensively. "You are quite presentable for my servants, Louise. We are husband and wife, after all. They can hardly expect me not to ravage you on every occasion, particularly not in that dress. I believe I shall buy you more red gowns. They suit you like nothing else."

He ran his thumb over his lips seductively, before sucking the tip into his mouth as though enjoying the taste. Louise felt a shuddering echo of pleasure as she fidgeted in her seat.

She had thought that her first experience of pleasure had been beyond her imagination, but feeling two fingers inside her was beyond description.

She felt sated and languid, leaning back in her seat without a care in the world. Christian seemed to be in the same state, and as they rode back home, Louise was surprised by the contentment she felt in his company.

They stepped out onto the pavement outside their home a few minutes later. The night had cleared, and the stars were visible above them as they ascended the steps. Christian offered her his hand, and she took it without question, his face breaking into a pleased smile as she did so.

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“Ah, that reminds me,” he said softly, reaching into the inner pocket of his coat. She followed the movement of his arm curiously as he produced a slightly squashed Gallic rose and handed it to her. “For your collection.”

He said nothing more as he led her into the house, but her fingers closed around the rose with a growing sense of affection and deep gratitude.

He must have removed this from one of the vases at Lady Barrington’s. That is remarkably... thoughtful of him.

As they stepped onto the porch, the butler opened the door for them, and Louise removed her gloves, handing them to him before she noticed the expression on his face. Only then did she realize that something felt strange about the house—a new kind of atmosphere that was difficult to describe.

“Your Grace, Lord Marcus is here,” the butler announced quickly, and both of them spun around to face him.

“What?” Christian barked. “Marcus is here?”

“In the library, Your Grace. He arrived half an hour ago.”

Christian took off running.

Louise followed, feeling his urgency and excitement as he bolted through the house. They rushed to the library and burst inside, only to pause in the doorway, staring in astonishment at the scene before them.

Marcus was sitting before the fire, quite whole and apparently unharmed. The Dowager Duchess was leaning over him, her hand on his shoulder, and the kitten was sitting in his lap.

Louise sucked in a sharp breath before she let out a cry of delight. She handed the Gallic rose to Christian and ran forward.

“Marcus!” she cried. “Oh, I cannot believe it!”

Marcus gave her a broad smile as he rose to his feet, passing the little kitten to his mother.

Forgetting all decorum, Louise embraced him tightly, feeling his frail body beneath her arms. He was horribly thin compared to the last time she saw him. She pulled back, studying his face eagerly, aware of his mother’s eyes on her.

“Whatever happened? Where have you been?” she asked.

Christian cleared his throat quietly as he came forward. She looked back at him to see his eyes darting between them, but when his gaze finally settled on Marcus, some of the tension left his shoulders. In a convulsive movement, he lurched forward and pulled his brother into his arms.

The two men embraced fiercely, holding on to one another with a tight grip neither of them seemed willing to relinquish. Eventually, Christian pulled back, his eyes soft and uncertain. He glanced at Louise and then his mother before returning to Marcus.

“I thought you were dead,” he said, the anger clear in his voice. “What on earth happened to you?”

Now that he no longer had his brother’s body to support him, Marcus looked

alarmingly unsteady on his feet.

“Will you sit down?” he asked wearily. “I will explain it all.”

A footman brought a chair to them, and Louise sat beside the Dowager Duchess as Christian lowered himself into the armchair beside his brother. They were all silent for a long moment. Marcus appeared to be catching his breath, and Christian waited patiently, staring at him as though he might disappear at any moment.

“I am sorry,” Marcus sighed. “Mother has told me how worried you have all been.”

“Where were you?” Christian demanded. “How did you appear out of nowhere without a warning?”

Marcus gave him a reproachful look, and then his eyes flicked to Louise as he raised his eyebrows.

“You are astonished? Imagine my feelings when I discovered that the two of you are married! And to each other, no less!”

Christian’s jealousy, which had gone away during the carriage ride, returned in full force. It only grew as Louise laughed at his brother’s comments, and he had to remind himself of what was important.

Marcus has returned. My brother is alive! That is all that matters. I cannot begrudge them the friendship they have had for years... but she has never laughed like that with me.

He met his brother’s solemn gaze and pursed his lips. “Yes, we are married,” he confirmed. “But that discussion must be left for another time. You must tell us how you arrived here. It was not so very long ago that the constable told me they had

found your carriage but no body. It seemed as if you had vanished like smoke in the wind.”

Marcus leaned back in his chair, the bags beneath his eyes looking all the more pronounced in the glow of the firelight.

“I had an accident,” he said quietly. His whole being seemed reduced, as though he had endured a great deal and was fighting against it still. “I was lucky that it happened close to a village. One of the villagers found me and nursed me back to health. I would not have survived without them, and I am in their debt.”

Christian frowned, waiting for him to say more, but Marcus fell silent.

“So, no one else was involved in your accident?” Christian asked suspiciously.

“If you’re implying, again, that my father would do something like this,” Louise said sharply, “I will repeat that he is not like that. He may be a gambler, but he is not a criminal.”

Christian seethed at the apologetic look she gave Marcus.

“And where were you going?” he demanded. “Why were you so far from London?”

Marcus rubbed a hand over his face as the kitten started mewling incessantly in his mother’s arms. Christian watched as his mother passed the kitten back to his brother, as though she could not think of what else to do. As soon as the tiny creature was in Marcus’s arms, it settled instantly.

Christian saw the change in his brother too. His shoulders relaxed as he stroked the cat, and the hard lines around his mouth softened.

“I am surprised you did not receive my letter,” Marcus said finally. “It should have arrived a few days ago.”

Christian and Louise exchanged confused glances.

“A letter?” Louise asked, sounding just as surprised as Christian was. “What letter?”



Marcus shook his head, stroking the kitten as it settled happily in the crook of his arm and went to sleep.

“It does not matter now,” he insisted, looking up at them, a wan smile on his face. “Tell me about your marriage! I still cannot believe it. Are you happy, my sweet?” he asked Louise.

Christian’s blood boiled as his brother held out a hand, which Louise took without hesitation.

How dare he call her his ‘sweet’ when she is mywife.

He ground his teeth, trying to focus on the fact that Marcus was finally home, instead of the rabid jealousy burning through him.

It was one thing to worry about the nature of their friendship when he had never seen them together, but now he could see the easiness between them—the gentleness of their manners when they addressed each other.

It is infuriating. I can hardly bear to be in the same room!

“You should rest,” Louise urged, moving her hand to Marcus’s arm, and Christian had to hold himself back from wrenching it away and banishing his brother from the room. “We have so much to discuss, but it is very late, and you must be exhausted from your journey.”

“I shall instruct the cook to prepare double the amount of breakfast tomorrow,” the Dowager Duchess said with concern. “My boy is all skin and bones.” She paused suddenly, looking at Louise as her cheeks pinkened slightly. “My apologies, Louise. The household is yours. It is merely a force of habit.”

Louise shook her head. “We are entirely in agreement, Sabine. I would also ensure that we have plenty of food so Marcus can regain his strength.” She looked down at him. “I am so pleased that you have returned to us. I was certain something terrible had befallen you.”

Her eyes were glistening with unshed tears, and in any other circumstance, Christian would have been touched to see them. He should have been touched that his brother had a friend who cared so much about him, but he could not bring himself to feel anything but rage.

Straightening his spine and pulling in a long breath to cool down his ire, Christian stared at Marcus until his younger brother turned to face him.

Where were you going? Why was your carriage so far outside the city?

“Tomorrow,” he uttered ominously, watching Marcus recoil a little before he nodded in resignation.

They both had much to discuss, and Christian would be able to find out the truth from his brother quicker when his wife was not fawning all over him.

## CHAPTER 25

After breakfast the following morning, Marcus was looking much better. Christian was still concerned by the pallor of his skin, however, which seemed grayer than it had been.

The atmosphere at breakfast was joyful but charged with emotion. Christian wanted to know what had happened to his brother and could barely stand the small talk during breakfast. He wanted to drag the man into a room and find out the truth.

He had awoken with a deep sense of unease in his gut and a terrible anger toward his brother that he could not place. He was unsure whether he was angry with Marcus for disappearing and leaving him worried sick for months or for having a bond with Louise that he could only dream of.

He rather suspected it was the latter, and that was the most irritating thing of all.

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After breakfast, Christian called Marcus to the study, but both men knew it was not an invitation—it was an order. Christian frowned at him when he entered with the kitten in his arms, a strained smile on his face.

“I have rather taken a liking to him. Do you mind?” Marcus asked pitifully.

Christian shrugged a shoulder, still trying to tame his emotions. It was so strange to have his brother wander into his study as though he had never been gone.

“Do as you like, but that kitten is a menace.”

Marcus pulled the kitten closer to his chest, just as Louise had done the first night she found him.

“Do not listen to him,” he whispered in Jack’s ear. “He does not know how special you are, does he?”

Christian stiffened, noting the similarities between his wife and his brother.

Would she be happier with him? They are so similar in many respects, and the joy on her face when she saw him was beyond anything I have seen from her.

His gut clenched at the memory as he motioned for Marcus to sit down.

His brother lowered himself carefully into the chair across from his desk. The effort to support his whole weight with his arms was painful to witness.

Marcus placed Jack on his lap, and the kitten trotted up his thigh and nestled against his chest.

“Did they not feed you in the village?” Christian asked. “You are half the size you were, and you barely ate anything at breakfast.”

“My appetite is still not what it was. I could not eat for a long time due to my injuries, and the village did not have a great deal of food. I could not expect them to serve such a banquet as you have. I am grateful for the breakfast—I ate more than I thought I could.”

“Hmm.” Christian sat down, fixing him with a hard stare. “I do not wish to tire you out completely, but I will have the truth even if I have to drag it out of you.”

“What do you want to know?” Marcus asked.

The question surprised Christian. It seemed a decidedly odd thing for him to say.

What do I not wish to know would be more accurate.

Christian eyed him warily, noting the almost guilty expression on his face.

Something is not right about all of this. He is keeping something from me, I am sure of it.

“I thought this had to do with Louise’s father,” he admitted, steepling his fingers in his lap.

Marcus looked up. “Northbridge?” he asked hesitantly.

“The same. I assumed it had to do with Louise—that you were in love with her—and

therefore, the Earl wished to prevent the match.”

Christian held his breath, blood pounding in his ears as he watched his brother’s expression carefully.

Injecting a casual calm into his voice, he continued. “If that is the case, I am sorry I have stolen her from you, but I hope you don’t plan to lead her into adultery.”

Marcus appeared somewhat startled by that statement.

“Idolove Louise,” he admitted carelessly, as though he were speaking about the weather. The simple phrase made Christian’s heart stop. “But not like that. You have nothing to worry about on that score, I assure you.”

Christian was still not entirely sure he believed his brother, but his heart rate slowed, nonetheless.

At that moment, the door burst open, and Louise marched into the room, coming up short when she spotted both brothers.

Jack jolted awake with a pitiful meow, and Louise walked over to him, stroking him gently to soothe him back to sleep. Christian’s fingers gripped the arms of his chair so hard that they ached.

She is stroking that kitten in Marcus’s lap! Order her to stop it at once.

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He bit his tongue, watching as Marcus looked up at her adoringly as she cooed over the tiny animal.

Eventually, after an eternity that had him edging forward in his seat, barely holding himself back from leaping across the desk and removing her from his brother's side, she stepped back.

"I was thinking that we might promenade today," Louise said excitedly to Marcus, who raised his eyebrows but seemed equally keen on the idea.

"Promenade?" he asked softly, glancing hesitantly at Christian.

"If you have the strength for it," she added. "I know you are still recovering from your ordeal, but I have missed you. Just think—we would not need to be chaperoned this time, since I am married now!"

Christian thought he might crack a tooth, for his jaw was clenched so tightly. He stood up, clearing his throat pointedly, and Louise turned to him, the warmth in her eyes fading as she arched a shapely eyebrow at him.

"Is there a problem, husband?" she asked. "Am I not allowed to have friends outside of our marriage?"

Christian rounded his desk, aware of Marcus's eyes following his every move. He stopped in front of Louise, who stood her ground and looked up at him with an expectant defiance on her face, which made him itch to throw her over his shoulder and drag her to his bedroom.

“As long as you remember who you belong to,” he said huskily.

Louise scoffed. “I do not belong to anyone.”

Christian leaned in so that he could whisper in her ear, noting the flush on her cheeks and the low gasp that escaped her mouth. “Remember that the next time you moan my name, mysweet.”

Now it was Marcus’s turn to clear his throat as he unsteadily pushed himself to his feet, the kitten held loosely in his hand. “Ahem. Well, I think?—”

“You may go,” Christian said without looking at him, staring at Louise and daring her to challenge him.

“I do not need your permission to spend time with my friends,” she stated haughtily, before taking Jack from Marcus’s hand and stalking out of the room, leaving the two brothers staring after her in amazement.

Christian turned back to Marcus, who was watching him with an odd expression.

“Perhaps a walk outside would do me some good,” Marcus insisted. “The atmosphere in here is rather overwhelming.”

Louise marched into her room and rang for her maid.

She held Jack against her stomach, stroking his soft fur and wondering what the cook was making that might be suitable for his supper. She looked down at his little face and smiled, scratching him beneath his chin as she considered Christian’s reactions to her interactions with Marcus. He seemed just as jealous as he had been at the ballroom, which amused her as much as it made her angry.



Christian had never shown the slightest interest in her friendship with Marcus until today. It seemed that just because they were married, he now felt he had to stake his claim on her wherever she might be.

I have never thought of Marcus in that way, and yet Christian looks at me as though I have always had designs on him!

She mulled over that thought as her maid arrived to help her dress for the promenade. She had so many dresses to choose from now that she found it positively exciting to sift through her collection. It vexed her that Christian had learned her tastes so well and so quickly. Everything he had bought her, she adored.

She chose a striking gold and green dress for the park, liking the way it reminded her of the flowers she had drawn the night before.

As her maid put the finishing touches to her hair, Louise's eyes fell on the reticule in the corner of the room and the notebook filled with her drawings. She smiled happily. There was no reason she could not take it with her and spend some time showing Marcus her progress with the encyclopedia.

Her hand came up to her stomach as she considered what might have happened had he not returned to them.

I am so glad that he is safe.

But Marcus was not himself. It was not just that he looked far thinner than the last time she had seen him. He would not meet her eyes, constantly glancing away, making excuses, and refusing to tell her what had happened to him.

She was determined to find out the truth today. In the comfort of the park, with all the flowers and plants around to distract them, she hoped she could coax him into

conversation and get titbits of information from him without him realizing her intentions.

She looked at herself in the mirror and turned to the side, pleased with her appearance. Her emerald-green gloves complemented her dress, and the dark green reticule holding her notebook was quite the thing. She could not wait to show Marcus all of her drawings and hear his thoughts on what she wished to add to the encyclopedia.

She nodded at her maid in thanks before she left her room and headed downstairs to meet him.

Christian may think he has given me permission to promenade with my closest friend, but I am a married woman now, and I shall do as I wish!

### CHAPTER 26

The weak March sunshine hit their faces as Louise and Marcus stepped down from the carriage. It was turning into a beautiful day, and several ladies and gentlemen were already strolling through the park ahead of them.

Horses trotted amongst the crowds, curricles wound their way along the paths, and the air was alive with chatter and laughter. Marcus offered her his hand as she stepped onto the pale gravel, and they headed out together.

Hyde Park stretched before them, lush and green and inviting, and Louise smiled at him broadly as they began to walk. Not so long ago, she had walked these very paths with him under the watchful eye of her mother. Now, they could wander without scrutiny.

“Which direction would you like to go in?” Louise asked. “We could walk to the gate on the far side or perhaps go to the lake?”

Marcus’s hair fluttered lightly in the breeze as he looked around them, closing his eyes briefly and inhaling deeply.

“I believe anywhere would be perfect, as I have my friend by my side, but perhaps the water. I enjoy the stillness of it.”

Louise did not comment on his strange mood but squeezed his arm gently as they made their way down the path.

Ladies in their finest clothes passed her by, many with chaperones, and groups of silly girls giggling together sped past, laughing merrily at the jokes of their friends.

“This was an excellent idea,” Marcus said finally. “I have not been out in too long.”

“If you are tired, tell me, and we can stop and rest.”

“I believe it is good to move my limbs. My muscles have been very much weakened since my accident. I cannot bear the sight of my legs—they are as thin as twigs.”

Louise laughed softly. “Nonsense, we merely need to fatten you up. I believe your mother will make sure that they serve double the portions at every meal from here on out.”

Marcus’s smile was warm. “You may be right.”

They continued along the path, Louise’s mind a flurry of thoughts, wondering how best to broach the subject of his absence. Marcus seemed so changed somehow, as though there were a weight on his shoulders, and she did not wish to make him unhappy.

As they continued on their way, they passed a large tree to their left that towered above them, and she found her gaze drawn to its branches.

“That is a cedar of Lebanon,” she noted happily, gesturing to the enormous branches that stretched above her head. “It is one of my favorite trees. It symbolizes protection, strength, and wisdom.”

“Why is it your favorite?” Marcus asked in that same distant tone.

“I think it is the size of it more than anything. It is so lush and green. It looks as

though it could protect you, don't you think? If I were to become lost in its branches, I believe I would feel very safe."

Marcus chuckled. "It is beautiful. How is your encyclopedia coming along?"

Louise thought of the night before when Christian had pulled the Gallic rose out of his coat pocket. His expression had been more earnest than she had ever seen it. The memory sent a confusing rush of affection through her, and she pulled out her notebook in order to distract herself.

"It is going well. I have cataloged a great number of flowering plants now. I am very interested in vegetables, too, and I have been speaking to Neilson about creating a vegetable patch in the garden. I think he believes me quite mad."

"Neilson?"

"Christian's gardener," she clarified, handing him her notebook.

They released one another as he took it, and he began to leaf through the pages as they continued walking.

"Oh, of course," Marcus said. "How my mind forgets things these days. Neilson's father worked with the late Duke to design the garden, I believe. However, my mother was rather fonder of the country estate. She planted a secret garden there behind a little door concealed by ivy. It has a blanket of bluebells every year that are quite exquisite."

"Did she really?" Louise exclaimed. "I had no idea. I suppose I shall see the country estate someday soon."

Marcus glanced at her. "Of course, you shall. It is yours now, after all."

“It is your brother’s estate, Marcus. I will simply reside in it.”

Marcus gave her a sideways look but said no more. He leafed through the remainder of her notebook and made a pleased sound as he handed it back.

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“They are quite stunning, Louise. I always knew you would excel at so many things. Your drawings are beautiful.”

“Thank you,” she said, glowing with pride at his praise.

They continued walking, Marcus staring straight ahead of them at the groups of people wandering in the distance. A small boy was playing in the grass on the path’s edge, repeatedly spinning a tiny wooden top. Louise watched him, wondering what toys her children might have one day.

I wonder if Christian will be as distant a father as he has been a husband.

“I confess I was stunned when Mother told me about your marriage.”

Louise frowned as a twinge of guilt shot through her. She did not love Marcus in any romantic sense, but she still felt that she had betrayed him by marrying his brother without his knowledge.

“I can imagine it might have come as a shock,” she said hesitantly.

“A shock! Ha! You, who have always told me you had no intention of marrying, not to mention the fact that I have barely seen the two of you exchange two words until today.”

Louise scoffed. “It is hardly of any import—it is not a real marriage.”

Marcus looked down at her, frowning deeply. “Whatever do you mean? Mother told

me you were married in St George's in front of the whole ton."

"Well, yes, but your brother does not truly want me for a wife."

Louise came to a sudden stop in the middle of the path as those words left her lips. A wave of uncertainty and sorrow washed over her as she realized the truth of her statement.

Our entire marriage was arranged for Christian to discover the truth of what happened to Marcus. And here he stands beside me... What use am I to Christian now?

"Louise?" Marcus prompted, sounding perplexed. "What do you mean he does not want you for a wife?"

She eyed him carefully, unwilling to divulge the nature of Christian's deal with her father just yet, uncertain herself how she felt about it even now.

"Only in as much as any marriage is an arrangement in Society. His priority is his club, and mine is my book. That is all there is to it."

Marcus was quiet for so long that Louise's stomach flipped unpleasantly.

"Louise... are you jesting?" Marcus asked as they approached the wide expanse of the lake at the edge of the park. A swan glided across the surface before them, graceful and serene over the rippling water.

"Of course, I am not jesting," Louise said reproachfully. "He has no need of a wife—he has told me so several times."

Marcus let out a long sigh. "Well then, perhaps he is jesting," he muttered. Louise was about to ask what he meant by that, but he continued before she was able to. "How



are your parents, by the way? How is your mother?"

They looked out over the calm surface of the water and the ducks quacking lazily on the bank to their right as pigeons circled and fluttered about their feet.

"They are the same as ever," Louise replied warily. "Papa is relieved to be rid of me, I have no doubt, and Mama is doing well."

Marcus's arm loosened a little around hers, and he let out a soft sigh. "I am glad she is well," he whispered.

Louise looked up at him quizzically.

"But how did your father allow you to marry a founding member of a rival club?" he asked.

Louise hesitated and decided that vague details were better than an outright lie.

"I believe my father had little choice. He has been struggling financially, and my marriage to your brother offered him some security."

Marcus's gaze darkened. "Gambling again?"

"The same. I thought he had improved of late, but it seems he was merely racking up debts in a different quarter. Christian told me that my father offered me as a prize in a bet, and he intervened to prevent someone less suitable from claiming me."

"By God!" Marcus sounded revolted. "I pray that is not true. How could he do such a thing?"

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“The same way he can do many foolish things—desperation and the belief that he will win at all costs. My father is a stubborn man. No matter what Christian says, I do not believe he would have made the bet if he thought he would lose.”

“I would have called the man out if he had attempted it.”

Louise heaved out a sigh. “Anyway, that is all in the past now. Let us not speak about such unpleasant things on such a beautiful day. What about you? How are you feeling?”

“Stronger than I have in an age if I am being honest. Six months felt like years. I have never been bedridden before—it is not an experience I intend to repeat.”

“Were you badly injured?”

“I took a rather nasty blow to the head. The village nearby was very small, and they did not have a doctor on hand who could attend to me. I remained in bed for almost two months without moving a great deal. Thankfully, the cuts and bruises I sustained did not become infected, and after a while, I was able to sit by the fire. I have been reminded of how special the small comforts of life can be.”

“And you did not lose your heart to a young woman who came to attend to you in the village?” Louise asked teasingly.

She expected Marcus to smile, but his face twisted slightly, a hint of disgust passing over it briefly before it settled into a more neutral mask.

“Nothing of the kind, I assure you. The lady of the house was a widow with three young boys. None of them were able to read, and once they found out that I could, I was charged with reading them stories night after night. It was a very pleasant pastime.” He turned, looking down at her fondly. “But I confess I was very eager to come back home. I have missed you.”

“And I you.” Louise grinned. “I was sure something terrible had happened to you. I woke up this morning forgetting that you had returned, and felt a deep sorrow in my heart—then I remembered, and I have never felt so happy.”

“I do not know what I have done to deserve you, but I am glad you are part of my family now,” Marcus said sincerely. “The thought of you marrying another man and moving away had not occurred to me until now, but I will forever be related to you because of my brother. You are truly my sister, and that is a comforting thought.”

Louise blinked up at him. “I suppose I am. Well, that is a reason to be happy about the marriage if nothing else.”

Marcus frowned at that, but Louise did not wish to talk about Christian any longer. It already felt as though she spent all of her time trying to push thoughts of him away, and now she was reconnecting with her best friend.

“When do you expect your encyclopedia to be finished?” Marcus asked, sounding genuinely interested.

“I imagine several months from now. Christian and I have agreed that I can take a year before... before I finish it,” she finished lamely. “I have much to do.”

“You will finish it in good time, I have no doubt. You are tenacious when it comes to such things.”

“And just as I promised,” she added happily, “you shall be the first person to see it.”

Marcus grinned. “I am truly privileged, in that case.”

“Indeed,” came a voice from behind them. “You are very much privileged, it would seem.”

Louise turned around to see Christian and the Duke of Stonewell standing before them, and Christian’s expression was one of carefully suppressed rage.

## CHAPTER 27

After Louise and Marcus had left for their promenade, Christian sat in his study and seethed. Every thought in his head drifted to them walking hand in hand around the park, the whole of London laughing at him because she had so fooled him when, in truth, she was in love with his brother.

He was pulled out of his thoughts, however, when something fell from his desk. Turning away from the window, he saw Jack lying on his desk, pawing at his quill and trying to push the inkwell over the edge.

“Would you desist!” Christian said with exasperation, picking the kitten up from his desk and looking at the devastation in his wake.

Jack had chewed on a bundle of parchment, tiny teeth marks now showing on the edges of the document the solicitor had sent Christian.

Christian glowered down at the kitten, who looked up at him balefully and mewed loudly.

“Why are you eating paper?” he asked reluctantly. The kitten was far more adorable

than he had initially given it credit for. “Are you hungry?”

To prevent Jack from destroying any more of his affairs, he left his study and headed to the library, where he rang the bell. He placed the kitten on the rug beside the fire, where he proceeded to leap on a spider that was scurrying for cover under a chair.

A footman soon arrived, and he looked down at the kitten in an arch manner that Christian could wholly sympathize with.

“Could you please have some food brought for this creature?” Christian asked irritably. “It is driving me to distraction.”

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“Of course, Your Grace,” the footman replied dutifully before leaving the room.

“You are a menace,” Christian growled down at Jack, but the words died in his throat as he realized the kitten had disappeared. “I am not crouching on the floor to look for you, so you had better come out this instant.”

He waited, but there was no movement beneath the chair.

Lord knows what Louise will do to me if I lose the damn thing.

Groaning, he bent down and knelt on the rug, lowering himself so that he could look beneath the chair. The kitten was sitting right in the center beneath the low-hanging fabric, staring at Christian as though he had forced him to hide there.

Christian sighed, extending his arm underneath the chair to try and retrieve him.

“Whatever are you doing, old man?” a voice drawled beside him.

Christian knocked his head violently against the wooden base of the chair as he tried to retreat.

“Goddammit,” he growled as he drew back and looked up at Gabriel’s very amused face. Gabriel was holding a plate of fish in one hand.

“Traditionally, one does not barge into a man’s library without a warning,” Christian muttered as Jack, having smelled the fish, trotted out happily.

Gabriel put the plate on the rug, and the cat began to eat the fish with relish, his little purrs filling the room. He watched him with what could almost be adoration on his face.

“I did not wish to disturb your game,” he replied.

“It was not a game. The creature is intentionally tormenting me.”

“I can see that. Very fierce, indeed,” Gabriel mused.

“Not that I do not always enjoy your company,” Christian said as he rose to his feet.

“But what are you doing here?”

“I came to see if you had followed up on the list I gave you of our members’ outstanding payments. I know you prefer to deal with such things yourself, but you have been somewhat distracted of late. I had intended to offer to take the burdensome task off your shoulders so you can concentrate on your wife.”

Christian scowled at him. “Yes. I sent the letters this morning, as a matter of fact. I am sure they will pay up forthwith—they usually do.” He brushed his hands over his knees, frowning at the dust that had accumulated there, and looked up at his friend as an idea occurred to him. “Seeing as you are here, however, we are going to Hyde Park.”

Gabriel raised his eyebrows. “Whatever for? I do not wish to catch anyone’s eye. Promenading is almost as bad as a ball, and I have had my fill of tedious conversations for the week.”

“You will not be required to speak to anyone. But you will be accompanying me.”

“And where is your lady wife? Can you not take her with you?”

Christian's neck flushed slightly as Gabriel's dark eyes danced with humor.

"My, my, we are under the thumb. Why has she gone to Hyde Park, if I may ask?"

Christian stalked past him and out of the library, instructing a servant to watch the kitten while he was away. Gabriel followed at a leisurely pace, watching him with amusement as he put on his gloves and hat, which the butler had obediently brought over.

"She is with my brother. Are we going or not?" Christian snapped.

"You cannot go alone? Are you afraid you might look desperate for her attention?"

"You are insufferable this morning, I see," Christian grumbled.

"Hmm. All right, I will go with you," Gabriel relented with a long-suffering sigh. "But you owe me a favor. If I get approached by any ladies, you will buy me a case of that whiskey I had at your wedding. I declare it is the best I have had in an age."

"You can have a bottle of it if that happens, but I am not buying you a case. Besides, I shall protect you from the marriage mart."

Christian marched out of the house, knowing his friend was following him from the gentle chuckle that drifted through the air.

Has Hyde Park doubled in size?



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Christian looked around him in frustration. There seemed to be twice the number of trees he could recall and far too many places for couples to be seen and not heard. His agitation was growing, and he was desperate to find his wife.

Gabriel looked unfairly put together, looking around them with a steady eye. They were drawing a fair amount of attention, and Christian was once again relieved that he was married. He would definitely have to buy Gabriel that bottle of whisky he had demanded—there were already a number of ladies looking curiously in their direction.

“There!” Gabriel said suddenly. “By the lake.”

Christian turned to look, and his heart kicked against his ribs as he recognized Louise’s curvaceous figure and his brother’s thin form beside the water’s edge.

He set off at a fast pace while keeping her in sight, and Gabriel had to jog to keep up with him. As they approached them, Christian’s blood began to boil at the way she easily laughed with his brother. Her eyes were focused on Marcus, and he could hear her speaking about her book with great enthusiasm.

“And just as I promised, you shall be the first person to see it,” she said, looking up at Marcus admiringly.

Marcus grinned, his white teeth flashing, looking unfairly handsome despite his poor health. “I am truly privileged, in that case.”

Privileged and in a position that is superior to her own husband’s!

“Indeed,” Christian bit out, his temper rising. “You are very much privileged, it would seem.”

Louise and Marcus turned toward him in surprise, and two things happened simultaneously—Louise’s eyes flashed with anger, and Marcus rolled his eyes, which only made Christian’s irritation spike all the more.

“Christian!” Louise gasped in surprise, before curtsying to Gabriel, who bowed in return. “Duke,” she said easily. “I did not know I would be seeing you both today.”

Her eyes darted from Christian to Gabriel and back again, and Christian tried to keep his face as blank as possible.

You are a fool to have come here. What did you expect to happen as a result? You simply look infatuated.

Gabriel bowed before stepping forward and extending his hand toward Marcus. “Lord Marcus, I cannot tell you how glad I am to see you among us again.” His voice, which was often cold, held an unfamiliar timbre.

Marcus smiled at him warmly as the two men shook hands.

“I am most pleased to see you well and returned to the bosom of your family,” Gabriel added.

Marcus nodded. “I, too, am glad to be home, Your Grace. Has Orions fallen apart in my absence?”

“Very much so,” Gabriel joked. “I have several documents that I need you to review. We cannot be trusted with anything.”

Marcus snorted. "I am looking forward to returning as soon as I can. I have missed the place."

"You have been missed," Gabriel said. "Ensure that you are fully recovered before coming back."

Then, he stepped aside, the affection and kindness in his expression fading away as his usual strict mask slid back on.

"I did not know you were coming to the park today, husband," Louise said, her expression cold.

"No. I had not intended it, but Gabriel insisted that he needed some exercise," Christian answered blithely.

Gabriel made a noise in the back of his throat at that.

"Well then," Louise said icily, "we should make sure that he gets some."

With that, she held out her arm to Christian, and he took it without question.

They walked a little way ahead of Gabriel and Marcus as the two men began to converse about Marcus's absence and how things had been at the club.

"You are being ridiculous," Louise hissed, perfectly summing up Christian's feelings about himself and triggering his anger all the same.

"Of what are you speaking? Is it so unusual for a man to wish to spend time with his wife?"

"It is unusual for him to follow her when she is spending time with his brother. I have

told you there is nothing between us. Do you not believe me? Considering that this marriage is nothing more than a convenient arrangement, I am amazed you are here at all.”

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Christian tensed. “Marcus may have returned to us, but we still do not know the circumstances of his disappearance.”

“Which he can tell you about. You no longer need me or my father for that purpose. It would be best if we spend as little time as possible with one another from now on, just as you originally intended.”

“You forget, my sweet, that you and I have an agreement. And I am eager to honor it.”

“We are only four days into that agreement,” Louise protested.

“Indeed,” Christian muttered, the certainty of his next decision settling deep within him as he looked down at her beautiful face. “And I am pushing it forward. I am tired of these games, Duchess. I expect you in my chambers tonight, and I will be most displeased if I am kept waiting.”

## CHAPTER 28

Louise fiddled with the edge of her nightgown, her nerves bubbling to the surface as she stared at her bedroom door.

A part of her was incensed that Christian had pushed forward their agreement, but a darker, more secret part was excited by the prospect of him finally claiming her.

Looking down at her bare toes, she shivered from the low temperature of the floorboards and approached the door as though it were a dragon she must slay, wrenching it open in one movement.

The corridor outside her room was dark and empty, but there was the gentle patter of a servant's footsteps in the distance and the clinking of cutlery from the kitchens as the remnants of their supper were cleared away.

Louise had barely been able to eat anything that evening. Christian's dark gaze had not left her as she sat beside his mother and Marcus, making small talk.

Marcus had not stopped glancing between her and his brother throughout the meal, and her cheeks were crimson red by the time she had excused herself and hurried to her room.

She reached Christian's door and lingered outside, her hand twitching as she contemplated what she was about to do.

She froze as she heard the sound of soft footfalls on the other side of the door. Louise scowled, sensing Christian's presence as the handle turned and the door swung open.

Christian leaned one arm against the doorjamb, looking down at her, his green eyes twinkling.

"How nice of you to join me," he said softly, his pose so casually seductive that Louise had to draw in a long, deep breath to calm herself.

He had dispensed with his jacket, and the line of his torso was visible beneath his waistcoat and shirt. His shirt was undone at the neck, exposing a golden triangle of flesh.

Louise adored the color of his skin, although she would never admit that to him. She was ashamed to say that she had enjoyed the contrast between her pale skin and his tanned one the last time they had been in bed together. She felt a frisson of anticipation run through her at the thought of seeing it again.

“Won’t you come in, Duchess?” he asked.

Louise slowly walked inside. As she passed him, the scent of oranges and pine trees wafted to her, and she held herself back from closing her eyes and breathing it in.

It is he who has gone back on our deal. I shall not succumb so easily.

But as she turned around, her resolve wavered.

Christian looked unfairly handsome, his dark hair swept back from his face, his full lips curled into a small smile. His expression reminded her of when they had first met. Even without a mask on, he looked like a wolf about to devour her.

“Wine?” he prompted, walking to the fireplace, where she spotted a bottle with two glasses on either side of it.

“Are you in need of courage, Your Grace?” she taunted, stalling.

“I thought perhaps you might prefer a nightcap of some sort.”

Louise could not deny that she was a bundle of nerves now. Standing before the foot of his bed and watching him move about the room in so relaxed a manner was putting her on edge.

“A glass of wine would be much appreciated, thank you,” she replied and watched his large hand clutch the bottle as he poured two glasses and handed one to her.

“I wondered if you would stay up to speak with my brother after supper,” he admitted as she grabbed the wine glass and took a healthy sip. “Whatever he was speaking to you about in the park today was clearly very amusing.”

“Would you believe me if I said we were discussing you, Your Grace?”



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“I let the first one slide because you arrived on time just as I requested, but if you call me Your Grace again, I shall snatch that wine glass from your hand and ravage you right here on the floor.”

The deep rumble of his voice made heat throb between her legs, and she swallowed at his intense gaze.

“We were speaking about my encyclopedia if you must know,” she said peevishly.

“Ah yes, my brother will be the first person to read it,” Christian muttered irritably.

“I promised him many years ago.”

Christian took a small step forward while sipping his wine, his eyes never leaving hers. “And how long have you been working on it?”

“Almost a year to the day. And nothing has changed concerning our deal, I might add. I am still going to work on it for another year before we have a child.”

His lips quirked up at the corners. “I remember.”

“But you would go back on your word now? You are three days early.”

“Two and a half,” he corrected. “And it is hardly difficult to see why. I have watched you shamelessly flirting with my brother since he returned?—”

“I have done nothing of the sort!”

“—and I am not inclined to watch you laugh with other men and simper and forget about your husband. When you need a reminder of who you belong to, I will always oblige.”

Louise scoffed, before taking another sip of her wine, but she ended up draining it completely. Christian’s long fingers stretched toward her, hovering in the air expectantly as she handed him the empty glass. She felt strangely bereft when he took it, as though it had acted as a shield between them.

Christian put both glasses on the table beside the fireplace before very deliberately running his eyes over her.

“I believe I told you before how beautiful you are. I wish you would wear your hair down on every occasion. I much prefer it that way.”

“I shall do as I please,” she retorted.

Christian chuckled. “I do not doubt that, Duchess. I have never seen you do anything you did not wish to do.”

“Save for marrying you, you mean?” she snapped.

His expression instantly turned into a scowl as he marched forward and gripped her arms tightly in his hands.

“Are you trying to vex me?” he growled.

“Always,” she shot back. “And you know very well that neither of us would have chosen the other as a spouse, so do not act as though this is?—”

But she was unable to finish her sentence.

He pulled her forward so forcefully that she was almost lifted off her feet, and suddenly his lips covered hers and his slick tongue plunged into her mouth, massaging hers as she let out a low moan.

Christian bit her lower lip so hard that she gasped and pressed her against him, before burying his hands in her hair. His fingers ran through the long strands as he groaned.

Pulling back, he lowered her to her feet once more. His eyes were smoldering in the half-light, all traces of humor gone. Louise panted slightly as she looked up at him.

“You are here, in my chambers,” he said tightly, “and you are my wife. That is not going to change. Whatever came before is over. You will submit to me. You will belong to me, body and soul, from this moment on. Is that clear?”

Louise found herself nodding helplessly as he took another small step toward her, looming over her as she tilted her head back.

“I want to hear it, Duchess. I want to hear you tell me that you belong to me and that no other man will ever come near you again.”

She nodded again.

“Say it.”

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“Yes, Christian,” she breathed. “I belong to you.”

He let out a small sigh, as though the words had settled something inside him, and then he took her hand and led her to the side of the bed. They stood there for a few moments as he took a deep breath. Some of the tension had left his shoulders, and as he turned to look her in the eye once more, some of his anger had faded away.

“I have been thinking about the last time,” Christian mused, his voice lilting now, having lost its intensity. “I think I rather did things backward.”

Louise frowned. “Backward?”

“Mhm. It does not seem fair that I have seen you in all your glory when I did not even shed a single layer of clothing. Quite ungentlemanly. Now, I would have you sit back and enjoy the show.”

The arrogant, little smile he gave her made her blush furiously as she lowered herself onto the bed, anticipation thrumming through her.

Christian stepped back as though he were on a stage and gave a theatrical bow. Louise could not help but laugh gently at him.

He gave her another smile and then slowly began to unbutton his waistcoat.

I do not know why I torture myself like this.

Christian wanted to strip his Duchess bare and claim her immediately, but he had not

missed the way her hands trembled or the way her shoulders rose to her ears as she entered his room.

He wanted her to be comfortable, and if that meant taking things slow, then so be it.

He slowly took off his waistcoat and draped it over the back of a chair. Louise huffed out a small laugh.

“What is so amusing?” he asked softly.

“Even when you are undressing, you cannot throw away your clothes. You must always be neat. Everything in its place.”

Christian cocked his head as he pulled his shirt from beneath his breeches. “It is practical. I should not wish to dirty all my clothes on the floor.”

“You are exact in everything you do. Your study is the tidiest room I have ever seen.”

Christian nodded his head in agreement, absurdly pleased by her observation.

“I thank you, Duchess. You are correct. I like things in order. Although I shall have you know, Jack has put paid to my desk. I had to tidy it twice over, with that kitten knocking my things to the floor.”

Louise smiled at that bit of information, but it faltered quickly when he pulled his shirt lazily over his head, exposing his chest to her hungry gaze.

Christian boxed regularly, rode his horse about town, and fenced better than many other men of his acquaintance. He knew that he looked very fine.

Still, seeing the lust in her eyes was something he had not anticipated. He adjusted

himself through the falls of his breeches and watched her eyes track the movement.

“Are you going to help me with my boots?” he asked. “They are damnably tight.”

She leaned back on the bed, and her robe fell open, exposing the soft planes of her stomach beneath her shift. Christian swallowed.

“No,” she said mischievously, “I think I would enjoy watching you struggle.”

Christian rolled his eyes, and just to be contrary, he went to join her on the bed. He sat beside her and bent down to pull off his left boot with some effort, but once it was neatly placed beside the bedpost, he lifted his right boot to her.

She grabbed it with a put-upon sigh and pulled it off his foot, exposing his stockinged feet beneath. He rather enjoyed having her undress him, but her body was still tight with tension, and he wanted her pliant and soft in his arms once more.

His patience running thin, he stood up again and took off his breeches and drawers in one motion until he was entirely naked.

Louise stared at him, dumbfounded, her eyes fixed on his hard length, which was unapologetically jutting out toward her.

“Now it is your turn, Duchess,” he said huskily. “I would have my fill of you, too.”

Louise slowly stood up, and he stepped back and watched with a hammering heart as she removed her robe. She would have never had the opportunity to learn the art of teasing, but she seemed skilled at it regardless. Her movements were achingly slow, ratcheting up his need beyond anything he had ever felt before.

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As she pulled her nightgown over her head, baring her glorious figure to him once more, he sighed contentedly.

“Exquisite,” he whispered, and she blushed prettily.

He stepped forward and placed his hands on her waist.

“I will have you tonight just like this if you will allow me.” He watched her eyes travel upward to meet his. “Will you?”

Louise shivered, amazed by how ready she felt for him to do just that. She was desperate for him to do as he pleased with her, but her nerves were warring with anticipation, muddling her mind such that she could not speak.

She could only nod her head.

Without any delay, he gently pushed her back toward the bed, where she sat down. She looked up at him as he lowered her to the mattress and lay beside her.

She could feel his hard length poking her thigh, and she closed her eyes as his hands roamed over her body, cupping her breasts reverently.

“I would have you ask for this, Duchess. I would have you beg me to touch you, and I will give you pleasure you have never experienced before.”

Louise took a shuddering breath as his fingers pinched her nipple, and she let out a moan as he took her other nipple in his mouth. He sucked on the hard tip as his hand

trailed down her belly, flirting with the place she needed him to touch the most but never quite reaching it.

Then, he pulled himself on top of her, and she groaned as she felt his arousal press against the heat between her legs.

“Beg me,” he demanded, and this time, she could do nothing but obey.

“Please,” she whispered. “I want you to take me just as you wish.”

He smiled and lowered his face to hers, sucking her lower lip into his mouth and kissing her gently before moving down her body.

His hands ran down the outside of her thighs and then pushed her legs up as he lowered his head and lapped at her hot entrance.

She remembered this sensation from the carriage, but now, watching him do it while he was naked was a new and delightful pleasure she had not expected.

She could not suppress her moans as his tongue pushed inside her, lapping desperately at her folds, the sensual drag of his teeth sending shivers through her.

She plunged her hands into his hair shamelessly and ground her hips against his mouth, allowing him to worship her with his tongue until she felt a shocking pressure as he slid his thumb inside her.

Her back arched off the bed as she cried out. Christian moved back, sliding his thumb in and out of her as she moaned and writhed beneath him.

“I have never wanted anything more than to watch you come apart for me,” he purred as he replaced his thumb with two long fingers.



He moved slowly and steadily, gently adding pressure, waiting for her cues to keep going as she shuddered beneath him.

“All right?” he asked when both fingers were inside her to the knuckle.

“Yes,” she gasped as he curled them upward, and her hands came down to clench the bedsheets beside her hips.

He continued his ministrations for some minutes, using his fingers, his thumb, and his tongue to make her fall apart beneath him.

She could barely breathe by the time he pulled himself up from the bed and stood back, staring down at her with blazing need in his eyes.

“Are you ready for me, Louise?” he asked, her name on his lips, sending a fresh pulse of delight through her.

“Yes, Christian. I want you,” she said, reaching for him.

Christian gripped her hand briefly before kneeling on the bed. He pushed her knees back so that her thighs were pressed against her chest, and she felt pressure at her entrance as he notched his length there.

“Tell me if it hurts, and I will stop.”

The care with which he said those words made tears well up in her eyes as, inch by inch, he gently slid inside her. She gripped the sheets again, feeling the blunt pressure building.

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There was a burn and a sharp pain as he slowly moved inside her, but he went so slowly that she could breathe through any discomfort. She looked up at him in wonder as she felt their hips finally connect.

“My God,” Christian groaned, squeezing his eyes shut, “you are perfect.”

He pulled back and slowly slid into her again, and Louise closed her eyes, panting underneath him as each thrust lit her from within until she could not tell where he began and where she ended.

After several tentative thrusts, he grew bolder. His hands came down on either side of her shoulders as he hovered above her and then thrust his hips forward.

They both cried out as their pleasure began to build, and Christian groaned as he pounded into her over and over again. He bent down to take her mouth, kissing her at the same rhythm as his movements, making her whole body come alive with a desperate yearning for completion.

“Oh!” she cried out desperately, pulling away. “I cannot?—”

“I want to feel you, Duchess. I want you to grip me tightly as you find your release.”

At those words, she screamed, arching into him as she crested a wave of desire she had never experienced before, her walls tightening around him just as he had asked.

Christian growled low in his throat, but then he let out a quiet curse as he hastily withdrew, spilling his seed on her stomach as he stroked himself.

He let out a long, contented sigh and then collapsed on the bed beside her.

## CHAPTER 29

After a few minutes, Christian rose and made his way to the edge of the room.

Louise watched, a little perplexed, until she noticed the basin of steaming hot water that had been placed beside the ewer. She lay still, admiring him for a few minutes as he placed a cloth in the water and wrung it out. He looked magnificent then, strong and muscular, the candlelight dancing beautifully across his golden back.

He turned around and walked back to the bed, a gentle smile playing on his lips. Louise was still catching her breath as he leaned over her with the cloth in one hand and gently wiped between her legs, the feel of it soothing and warm all at once.

After ensuring that she was clean, he saw to himself, and Louise could not help but watch his every movement. His smile grew as she watched him, and she knew he could feel her eyes on him.

It was a pleasant moment as they both came down from the lofty heights of their shared pleasure, but his attention confused her, nonetheless. She attempted to read his expression in the dim light of the room, but she was unable to discern what he was feeling.

He looks as though he truly cares for me. Is that just an illusion?

Christian withdrew shortly after and put the cloth back in the basin. Louise was desperate to know how things would develop from now on. She rose from the bed, making her decision as she did so.

If he wishes to treat me as his wife, I shall act as one.

She pulled back the covers, revealing the crisp white sheet beneath, and slid inside. He leaned against the bedpost, quite naked, raising his eyebrows at her as she pulled the covers over her body.

“If you think I am walking back to my room and dressing again, you are mistaken. I am sleeping here, beside my husband,” she stated, with more confidence than she felt.

Christian’s low chuckle calmed her nerves as he walked to the other side of the bed and blew out the candle. The room was dark, illuminated only by the fire and the moonlight streaming through the window.

Louise snuggled beneath the covers, the cold sheets cooling her heated body and making her sigh in contentment.

Who would have known that I would be sharing a bed with my husband so soon?

Christian lay down beside her, his warmth and tender embrace a balm to her soul. His hand slid around her, stroking her skin gently as he let out a soft sigh.

“Thank you,” she whispered into the darkness.

“No thanks are needed. I assure you, Duchess, the pleasure was entirely mine.”

She closed her eyes as they snuggled against one another and allowed sleep to take them.

The next morning, Louise woke up alone. She knew before she opened her eyes that the spot behind her was empty.

She kept her eyes closed for a little while, wishing that it was not the case until she could no longer avoid the inevitable.

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I wish I could still feel his arms around me.

She opened her eyes to find an empty mattress beside her, but there was a note on his pillow, placed carefully beside the rose he had procured for her. She picked it up eagerly.

Duchess,

I have some business to attend to. I shall return later today. Sleep and rest as long as you need.

C.

Louise read the note several times. She wanted to find some hidden meaning in it, that perhaps their night together had meant as much to Christian as it had to her, but there was nothing.

With a sigh, she flung the covers off her body and grabbed her robe from the floor.

She went to the door, the rose held loosely between her fingers, and poked her head out, feeling like a naughty child who had strayed into the wrong room. She could hear the servants going about their chores, but she could also tell that it was still early from the light filtering through the window.

Christian must have left before dawn... I wonder if he slept at all.

She went to her room and rang the bell for her maid, and when she was up and

dressed in a deep blue gown that she had been longing to wear, she headed downstairs to the library to begin her drawing of the Gallic rose.

When she passed Fenwick, she inquired about Jack's whereabouts, and he informed her that Marcus had taken him to the parlor.

Not wishing to disturb them, Louise continued toward the library, more determined than ever to finish her book as soon as possible.

He may have respected my wishes last night, but if we are already lying together four days into our marriage, I cannot imagine lasting a full year.

She closed the door behind her and walked to the small writing table that she had been using to finish her drawings. The Gallic rose was wilting now, but she was pleased to see that the paint was a perfect match to the color of the petals.

She sat down and picked up her paintbrush, but her thoughts would not settle. A lingering sense of disappointment and fear would not leave her, and it seemed to be growing all the more since she had woken up alone. The realization irritated her.

I have no doubt Christian woke up this morning and had no trouble leaving our bed without a second thought.

She looked at the garden outside the window and sighed, wondering if there were any other plants or flowers that she had not yet drawn for her illustrations.

She tightened her grip on her paintbrush and resolved to at least finish painting the Gallic rose this morning while pushing the memory of where the rose had come from down to the deepest recesses of her mind.

About an hour later, a gentle knock sounded at the door, and expecting it to be

Marcus, or perhaps Christian, she bid them enter.

The same maid with the lilting voice opened the door with a smile. "Lord and Lady Northbridge have arrived to see you, Your Grace," she announced with a small curtsy.

Louise frowned.

I really must explain to my father that he cannot simply turn up unannounced whenever he pleases.

Smoothing her hands down her skirts and checking that she did not have paint all over her fingers, she made her way to the drawing room. As she approached, she could hear her father's voice echoing through the corridors.

She entered the room, amused to see that she and her mother were wearing the same shade of blue that day. She smiled warmly as her mother rushed toward her and took her hands, giving her a kiss on the cheek.

Lady Northbridge drew back, examining Louise with a critical eye.

"You look very well, dearest," she noted happily. "I believe marriage suits you."

Louise swallowed, attempting to suppress the blush that threatened to bloom on her cheeks at her mother's words.

"We heard that Lord Marcus had returned and came to wish him well," her mother added.

At that moment, a quiet meow sounded in the corridor, and Marcus walked into the room.

“Ah, Lord Marcus,” Lord Northbridge greeted boisterously, coming forward and shaking the man’s hand rather aggressively. “We were pleased to hear that you had returned.”



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Louise watched their exchange in surprise. Her father did not seem pleased. In fact, his expression was almost angry as the two men stared at one another. Marcus drew back his hand with a tight smile.

Christian's suspicions are rubbing off on me, it would seem, but why is Father looking at Marcus like that?

"Thank you, My Lord," Marcus returned as her mother stepped toward him and curtsied. "I am recovering, as you can see."

"Well, we must all count our blessings for that," her father muttered.

The kitten, held loosely in Marcus's other hand, mewed again, and Lord Northbridge eyed it suspiciously.

"And who is this?" Lady Northbridge asked.

Marcus gently handed Jack to Louise, and she held him up for her mother to see. Lady Northbridge adored cats, and her face broke into a happy smile at the sight.

"This is Jack, Papa," Louise said. "Jack Frost."

Her father harrumphed irritably as the kitten mewed at him, and they all went to sit on the settees in the center of the room as a tray of tea was brought in.

Louise tried to get Jack to settle as he always did when Marcus held him, but the kitten was quite determined to return to its previous owner.

Marcus chuckled as Louise sighed exaggeratedly and handed the kitten back to him, where he padded up his thighs and lay down.

“It is as though he does not know I am the one who rescued him,” she muttered, a touch of hurt in her voice.

“Cats will do as they please, I think,” Lady Northbridge commented.

Marcus laughed at Louise’s hurt expression.

“He seems to like everyone else more than me,” she protested.

“I doubt that,” came a voice from the doorway.

Louise stiffened as Christian entered the room, having not anticipated his arrival and feeling strangely on edge in his presence.

However, when he came to sit beside her, the odd sensation faded into acute embarrassment as she remembered how they had spent the previous night. She stared at the carpet, wiling her blush away as her father and mother greeted him.

Christian’s sharp gaze was fixed on the Earl. “I rather hoped I would not see you again so soon, Lord Northbridge. Especially not without an invitation.”

Despite her father’s unpleasantness a few days ago, Louise found herself surprised by Christian’s stern words.

The Earl seemed just as taken aback, glaring at his wife as though it were her fault that Christian disliked him.

“I am only here, Your Grace, to speak with my daughter. Once that is done, I will

happily remove myself from your sight.” He stood up, and all eyes in the room turned to him. “Louise, I need a moment of your time.”

With that, the Earl stalked to the doors that looked out over the small terrace outside the drawing room and opened one without asking for permission. He walked outside, leaving Louise in the uncomfortable position of either ignoring him—as she would much rather do—or following him like a servant.

She sighed and glanced at Christian, who was aiming a withering glare in the Earl’s direction, and then excused herself, going outside to see what her father could possibly need from her now.

## CHAPTER 30

It was chilly on the terrace. The Earl was standing with his back to Louise, staring out at the garden.

He did not look around as she stepped out of the house, as though he had known she would follow him—or simply expected it. She stood back, waiting for him to speak.

He finally turned around, his eyes narrowing as he looked over her shoulder. “Close the door please, Louise. I wish to speak with you in private.”

Louise flexed her fingers, but she did as he asked, nonetheless. Her mind whirled as she tried to figure out what he could possibly want from her.

When she was facing him again, he cleared his throat, a peevish expression crossing his face as he stared her down.

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“It seems that your marriage is a success,” he noted coldly.

Louise resisted the urge to roll her eyes at his pompousness.

“As successful as five days will allow, yes,” she answered irritably.

“I am pleased to hear it. The Duke was likely displeased that his deal had been for nothing.”

Louise clasped her hands tightly behind her back, keeping her eyes fixed on her father. “I believe it was a deal you made first, Papa. Over a hand of cards, no less.” She kept her expression blank, but her voice rang with emotion.

The Earl’s eyes narrowed as he pursed his lips. He cleared his throat a little awkwardly, but he did not deny it. Louise bit her tongue, attempting to keep her temper in check.

“Do not pretend you have any affection for the man, Louise. Your marriage was a business transaction. Many women have suffered the same fate and live happily until their dotage. You should be thanking me.”

She glanced behind her at Christian, who was speaking with her mother but keeping an eye on the terrace. She moved out of sight, a feeling of trepidation creeping up on her as she considered what her father might want.

“Was there something specific you wished to speak to me about?” she asked.

“Because it is rather cold.”

The Earl took a step forward, looking down at her with a haughtiness she knew all too well. “I assume you are aware why I made the deal in the first place?” he asked archly.

Louise frowned, trying to think back to what Christian had told her. He had merely said that the Earl had made her the prize.

“What are you speaking of?” she asked carefully, unwilling to give anything away if she could help it.

“The Duke is in possession of something of mine,” the Earl said briskly. “I want it back. The man is refusing to speak to me on the matter and he is treating me abominably, as you have seen with your own eyes.”

Louise held back the sharp retort on the tip of her tongue. “What is he in possession of? I am sure you are mistaken, Papa. If you ask him, he will return it to you.”

The Earl scoffed derisively. “I am certain he will not. He holds power over me, and men like him will do everything to retain it. He holds the deed to the townhouse in which your mother and I now reside. You will get it back from him.”

Louise recoiled, staring up at him in astonishment. “I will get it back for you?” she asked. “What on earth do you mean?”

“You are a Dawson, Louise, no matter how pretty a picture the Duke paints of your marriage. He married you because it suited his interests, and he wished to torment me, nothing more.”

“Papa, you have not?—”

“I suppose you know about the animosity between us,” the Earl continued lazily. “It

goes back years. Christian and his brother once had the audacity to ask me for an invitation to The Devils. Low-born, worthless, little creatures expecting me to welcome them with open arms because their father decided to acknowledge them.”

Louise was so startled by the venom in his voice that she struggled to speak.

“Their mother was a servant in the late Duke’s household. His wife could not give him children, so he got them elsewhere, and when his wife died, he had the audacity to marry Christian’s mother. Amaid! It is unconscionable.”

Louise moved further down the terrace, terrified that Christian or Marcus might hear the vitriol spewing from her father’s lips.

“Whatever your opinions on the subject, Papa, he is the Duke of Egerton, whether you recognize it or not.”

“I do not, and neither should you,” the Earl said impatiently. “This is not a negotiation. You should have already agreed without question. You will get the deed for me. It must be in this house somewhere. He will keep it close—I know his sort all too well.”

“I will do no such thing.”

“Do not be obstinate, Louise. It is unbecoming. Would you see your parents on the street? As you said yourself, you have been married less than a week. And what happens when the tide turns? When the Duke decides he does not need to protect your family? What then?”

“All right, answer this question then,” Louise snapped. “Why does Christian have the deed to our home in the first place?”

The Earl faltered briefly before he snorted and shook his head. “You are your mother’s daughter, I see. All accusations and assumptions without a shred of evidence. I had a run of bad luck and lost it at the gaming tables.”

Louise threw her hands up in despair.

“And that is myright!” the Earl thundered. “I am the lord and master of my estate, and I choose what to do with it. You would not have a roof over your head if it were not for me. Remember that, my girl.”

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“Then what you are telling me is that Christian owns the deed because of a bet that you lost. Which means,” she said angrily, “that you do not deserve to have it back.”

“He is hanging the sword of Damocles above my head, Louise. Would you have it so for the rest of my life?”

“You would honestly ask me to steal from my husband?”

The Earl’s face twisted into a snarl as he pointed an accusatory finger at her. “Your husband? I am your father. You honor me above all else, and you will do this, or I will be forced to take matters into my own hands.”

Louise froze, staring at the twisted, angry face of a stranger. Here stood a man she no longer recognized. Her father was gone, and in his place was a frightened, ruined creature who would stop at nothing to get what he wanted.

“And what do you mean by that?” she asked, dreading his response.

Her father cast a glance behind her, his jowls wobbling as he jutted his chin arrogantly. For a horrible moment, he reminded her of herself.

“You are aware of the rivalry between The Devils and Orions. It has existed since they started their club. The Duke has encouraged it, I think, for better or worse.” The Earl sniffed and cocked his head, a mocking little smile on his face. “I relished the challenge, at the beginning. I enjoyed the competition, but this is my entire fortune we are speaking of. I cannot delay any longer.”



He took a menacing step toward her, his nostrils flaring.

“If you will not collect the deed, then give me some money so I can pay off my debts. I know the Duke is well off.”

“Papa,” Louise gasped, horrified, “how do you expect me to do such a thing? This is monstrous.”

“I can destroy him, you know.” She watched a sinister smile spread across his face. “I can destroy everything he has built in an instant if I choose to.”

“What? How?”

“I do not think you realize how precarious the Duke’s position is,” the Earl stated coldly. “Apart from his brother’s odd disappearance and reappearance, they are by no means as respected as he seems to believe. I could click my fingers and steal away every member of Orions if I choose. One word from me and he would be destitute.”

Louise had never felt such rage before. Her father was truly mad if he was willing to pursue that course of action.

She stepped away from him, matching his posture. “Papa, are you suggesting that you would deliberately ruin my husband’s life?”

“Two weeks ago, he was a stranger to you. Stop pretending you care for him—it is tiresome.”

“The only reason I have him in my life is because of your shortcomings, Papa.” She surprised herself by the icy tone of her voice, and her father’s face paled considerably. “You have brought all of this upon yourself,” she hissed. “I believe Christian made it clear to you how he felt about you being in his home, and I second it

now. You are not welcome here. Please, leave.”

She stood to her full height, pushing down the guilt that rose in her chest at his expression, and glared at him, determined to see this through.

I do not owe him anything. If he had his way, I would be someone’s mistress, to be used and thrown aside to pay off his debts.

The Earl’s face contorted with anger, and he sneered at her, his lips twisting unpleasantly.

“The Duke is in your life only because he wishes to exact revenge on me. That is all. He might be interested in you now. He might even convince you that he cares for you. But do not be foolish enough to believe it. Men like him are out for what they can get. He has a marriage that will serve him well—that is all he has ever wanted from you.”

The chilly March air seeped through Louise’s gown, making her shiver. Her father’s words cut deep, right to the bone, as she thought of the past few days. Christian’s distance, his absence after they spent the night together. His obsession with his club and only ever wishing to possess her.

Her father was right—her husband did not care for her as she cared for him.

She stepped back, preparing to return to the others.

“That may be true,” she relented, the words tasting like ash in her mouth. “But my loyalties lie with my husband now. You have ensured that more than you ever could with your conduct. Now, I wish you to leave.”

The Earl watched her, his calculating gaze hardening as he glanced at the house. “Are

you expecting me to leave without saying farewell to your precious Duke?”

“I expect you to leave regardless of your wishes, but you will not be setting foot in this house again today,” she said vehemently, before opening the door to the terrace to return to Christian, her body vibrating with anger.

I cannot believe that I once assumed if I did his bidding, he would one day treat me as an equal. The only person my father cares about is himself.

## CHAPTER 31

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Louise went back inside, hearing her father's angry footsteps retreating into the garden.

She rejoined the group, feeling Christian's eyes on her the entire time, but she avoided looking at him.

"Where is your father?" her mother asked, looking at the terrace in surprise.

"He left, Mama."

"Left?" Lady Northbridge echoed, furrowing her brow.

"I believe he had some business to attend to," Louise offered, acutely aware of Christian's eyes boring into her. "Urgent business."

Lady Northbridge shifted in her seat, appearing uncomfortable suddenly as she cleared her throat. She looked over at Christian, her hands clenching into fists in her lap.

"I see. Well, I would not wish to be here without my husband. Your Grace, I can only apologize for him leaving without bidding you farewell. I am sure he had a good reason."

Christian's expression was nonchalant, but he nodded his head at her respectfully.

Marcus leaned forward in his chair and carefully handed Jack to Louise. "I would be happy to escort you home, Lady Northbridge," he offered solemnly.

“Oh, there is no need, Lord Marcus. But I am most grateful for the offer. It is not far, and I shall enjoy the walk.”

“I insist,” Marcus said, standing up.

Lady Northbridge looked rather startled by his persistence, but her shoulders did relax, and she sighed. “Very well then.”

Christian rose too, and the whole party showed the Countess to the door.

As they stood in the entryway, Lady Northbridge turned to Louise and pulled her into her arms. “It was lovely to see you, as always,” she said earnestly.

Christian was murmuring something to his brother, his voice too low for either of them to hear, but as their attention was elsewhere, Lady Northbridge leveled Louise with a sharp look.

“Will you allow me to visit you without your father, dearest? I do not want us to become estranged because of the... bad blood between them.”

“Of course, Mama. You are always welcome in our home. I hope you know that.”

Lady Northbridge smiled gratefully and gave a single nod before Marcus offered her his arm and they walked out into the chilly air.

Louise watched them go, her mother’s youthful gait reminding her once again of how much she had sacrificed for her father and how little he seemed to appreciate it.

“What is it?” Christian asked tersely as soon as they were out of earshot. “You came back inside as white as a sheet. What did your father say to you?”

Louise shook her head, her eyes lingering on Marcus and her mother. “Let us return to the drawing room. I do not wish to speak about it here.”

Christian looked as though he wanted to insist, but as she walked away, he followed her back into the room.

As Louise listened to the gentle bustle of the staff below stairs, she mulled over how much her life had changed in so short a time.

A week ago, if anyone had asked me if I would defend my husband against my father, I would have laughed at them. And now here I am, protecting him above all else.

Once they had returned to the bright drawing room, Louise looked around the floor for Jack. She had placed him on a chair before they left the room, and now he was lying beside the fire, his belly to the flames, his paws splayed out happily.

Louise turned back to Christian, who closed the door rather defiantly and crossed his arms over his chest, glaring at her. She shifted her weight from one foot to the other, uncertain how to begin the conversation.

My father has insulted Christian in every manner imaginable. It is a question of which offense to reveal first.

“What did the Earl say?” Christian demanded.

“You must promise not to be angry.”

“I will promise no such thing.”

Louise huffed. “I do not want you to come to blows. My father is a formidable man, and he has threatened to ruin you.”

Christian’s eyes hardened at that. “And how, pray tell, is an already ruined man planning to ruin me?”

“This is exactly what I mean,” she said briskly. “You have a rivalry that goes back years. It will never be settled if you continue to provoke each other.”

“Ha!” Christian scoffed incredulously. “Then the Earl wishes to settle things, doesn’t he? And how did he propose to do so? Alone, with just his daughter to speak to?”

Louise wrung her hands in front of her, dreading his reaction but knowing she would have to confess all the same.

“He told me that he wanted the deed to our townhouse. Is it true that you have it?”

Christian’s eyes widened in surprise. “Yes, it is true, although I am astonished that he revealed as much to you. He must be truly desperate.”

“I do not think he has anything left to lose,” she confessed. “He was agitated, speaking about the power you hold over him while you are in possession of the deed.”

“I intend to keep it forever,” Christian replied grimly. “Would you honestly trust him

with it more than me? He also holds your mother's life in his hands, and I imagine he values that as highly as he values yours."

Louise's stomach churned at the thought of her father harming her mother in other ways besides using his fists.

Would Christian really protect us?

Her father's words were still ringing in her ears. Although she did not trust him, she knew there was a grain of truth in what he had said about her husband.

"I am grateful that you would protect my mother and my future," she said, "but that is not all he wanted."

"What else?"

"He told me to ask you for money. Well, he told me to take money from you and give it to him. I do not know where he expects me to find it, but he asked me all the same."

"This is preposterous," Christian snapped. "I will deal with it."

Louise blinked at him. "You will deal with it? How will you deal with it?"

"In my own way. He is not the first man to wrong me, although he was one of the first. It is depressingly predictable that he has neither changed nor improved over the years." Christian pulled out his fob watch and grunted as he checked the hour. "I shall deal with this," he muttered, almost to himself.

To her dismay, he opened the door and left the room.



Louise was forced to follow him at a light trot to keep up. Christian's shoulders were pulled back and tense, his stance altogether confrontational, and she dreaded what was to come.

He walked into his study, leaving the door open behind him, apparently anticipating that she would follow him. He moved to his desk and began gathering some papers, looking over a few things before placing them into a leather-bound binder.

"Are you leaving?" Louise asked helplessly.

Have I just made everything worse? Should I have held my tongue?

"Yes," he said curtly. "I expect to find the Earl at his precious club. I will make sure that he understands his position once and for all."

"You will not hurt him." Louise meant it as a question, but it came out as a demand.

Christian paused, looking up at her. "Do you honestly think I would intend to harm anyone? I didn't think you thought so little of me."

"You have banished him from your house," Louise hissed, "and I know there is no goodwill between you."

"I will do as a gentleman does and put him in his place with words."

He deposited one last piece of parchment in the binder and rounded the desk as though to walk straight past her and out of the room. Louise grabbed his arm before he could do so.

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Christian looked down at her questioningly. His proximity had the usual effect on her, and she stepped back so as not to be drawn to him again.

“My father said something else.”

Christian lowered the binder and turned to her. “And what was that?”

“That you only married me because you felt you had something to gain. He said that you did it for revenge and nothing more.” She searched his eyes for any hint of emotion, but they were hard and cold. “Is that true?” she asked desperately.

Christian didn’t move for a moment. He glanced away, his jaw working, the vein in his temple prominent beneath his hair.

He licked his lips, a hint of irritation crossing his face as he finally looked back at her. “I have been honest with you from the beginning, Louise. The fact that you feel the need to ask me that question offends me deeply.”

Louise’s stomach dropped as he looked down at her with an expression she had not seen since the day of the masquerade ball—it was one of deep disdain.

“Now, if you will excuse me, I must speak to your father.”

## CHAPTER 32

Christian climbed into his carriage, holding the binder carefully in front of him. He waited until they were moving and the sound of the carriage wheels would muffle any

noise before he slammed his fist repeatedly into the opposite bench.

When he was finished, his knuckles were aching damnably, but the overwhelming frustration had abated.

“Goddammit,” he snapped, slumping back in his seat and throwing the binder angrily across the carriage.

No wonder Louise believes I married her for revenge. Why would she not? I have given her no indication of anything else.

The look of desperation in her eyes had left him disquieted and uncomfortable.

What does she expect from me? We have a mutually beneficial arrangement. We shall exist alongside one another peacefully without love complicating matters.

He rubbed a hand over his face, staring into the blackness of the night, his chest tight.

Love was a weakness; his father had shown him that. Love was the reason Christian had endured the humiliation his whole life, the pitying glares of those who believed themselves superior to him. If his father had done his duty and not allowed his heart to complicate matters, he would never have been born.

I will not repeat his mistakes.

He swallowed past the lump in his throat, disliking the feeling in his gut. Louise’s blue eyes haunted his thoughts, imploring and uncertain as he walked away from her.

Her father has planted doubts in her mind to rattle me. He must be my focus now. This ridiculous powerplay ends tonight.

He raked a hand through his hair as they rode toward The Devils. It had been a long time since he had been in the vicinity of the club and even longer since he had set foot inside it.

Once Orions was fully established and Christian's wealth had grown beyond his wildest imaginings, there was no reason to. Christian and Marcus, and even Gabriel, had frequented the club on a few occasions to observe the competition, but that was all.

Ten minutes later, he peered out the window as the carriage wound down the familiar street. He was shocked by the appearance of the club itself.

Although the exterior was still opulent, it seemed in need of maintenance. The lettering above the door was still handsome enough, but there were dark stains around the edges and a crack running along one side.

Christian alighted from the carriage and looked up at the glowing windows above him as he fastened his coat. The simmering rage returned as he ascended the shallow steps. He walked into the reception hall, where a very well-to-do gentleman came to greet him.

"May I assist you, Sir?" the gentleman asked pleasantly, bowing to him.

"I am the Duke of Egerton," Christian said, affecting his most arrogant tone. "I am here to see the Earl of Northbridge, although I do not have an appointment. I am sure he will see me."

"Very good, Your Grace. The Earl is in the salon, I shall have the footman show you up."

"You have my thanks," Christian returned dismissively, and the man scurried away.

Christian followed the footman through two large double doors that led to a rather beautiful room. The chairs were upholstered in a sky-blue fabric, and the deep navy curtains complemented them.

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It was occupied by a small number of men. A few of them were grouped together, speaking quietly to one another. Several were drinking whiskey or smoking cigars. It was a quiet and peaceful environment which Christian very much expected he was about to irrevocably disturb.

The footman held out his arm, indicating a tall figure beside the fireplace. The Earl. He was speaking to someone whose face was turned toward Christian. The other man looked deeply uncomfortable, frowning as the Earl made quick, jerky motions with his hands.

Another man he owes money to, no doubt. I wonder who he lost Louise's dowry to. Knowing the way he gambles, I wager it was on a single bet.

Christian slowly navigated the chairs, maintaining a steady pace as he approached them. The other man spotted him and hastily took his leave. The Earl watched him go, bewildered, until he turned to find Christian standing before him, intense fury contorting his features.

The Earl clicked his fingers at a footman. "This man is not welcome here," he said, his voice low and menacing. "Escort him out immediately."

Christian did not move, meeting the Earl's gaze without flinching. The footman, who had stepped up to him, glanced between them, evidently uncertain how to proceed.

"Are you sure you wish to throw me out, My Lord? I believe you wished to speak to me about the deed to your townhouse," Christian stated loudly. "Or perhaps it was about the money you asked me to lend you?"

A man to their right let out a scandalized gasp and lowered his paper to look at them.

Christian raised his eyebrows at the Earl, but he had not anticipated the outburst that would follow.

The Earl surprised him by raising his fist and swinging it at his left eye. Christian ducked sideways, his own hand rising to block the blow. His fingers tightened around the Earl's fist, and he twisted his arm up against his back.

The Earl growled in outrage as Christian shoved him unceremoniously against the wall.

There were sharp gasps from the men a few chairs to Christian's right, and they hastily rose from their seats, making noises of outrage before walking out of the room.

But they did not try to help him. The Earl is running out of allies.

"I would be very careful how you choose to act next, My Lord," Christian growled in the Earl's ear. "I do not wish to break your arm, but I will if necessary. You will leave my wife out of our business, is that understood?"

The Earl cried out sharply as Christian twisted the offending limb even further, briefly letting his anger take control. The Earl whimpered, and Christian relaxed a little as the fight seemed to drain out of the man.

He stepped back and glared at the footman, who was still hovering nearby. He was a young fellow and seemed to be in two minds as to what he needed to do. He quickly retreated to the far wall and kept his eyes trained on the floor.

"This is a disgrace," the Earl hissed, turning around and rubbing his wrist. "I would

expect nothing less from the son of a nobody.”

Christian let the barb wash over him, a sense of deep satisfaction blooming in his chest as he realized that the Earl had nothing left to threaten him with.

“What is a disgrace, Sir, is you coming to my house, demanding a word with my wife, and then telling her to steal something from me that is no longer yours.”

“It is my house!” the Earl gritted out.

“No, it is mine. It has been mine since you foolishly lost it, and it will remain mine for the foreseeable future—unless you can prove to me that you have changed. If you involve Louise again, you will suffer the consequences.”

The Earl scoffed. “Thick as thieves the two of you, aren’t you? Managed to worm your way into her good graces quickly enough—but then you always did have a reputation. Where is Lady Carruthers, by the way? I am sure Louise would be thrilled to meet her.”

Christian glowered at him, even as fear shot through him. The thought of Louise learning of his old arrangement with Lady Carruthers filled him with acute shame—shame that he had neither expected nor welcomed.

Guilt flooded him, and he tried to push it away as swiftly as he could.

“I would caution you against bringing up my past behavior. I believe Louise would be just as interested in your history and how you almost brought your family to its knees because of your greed.”

The Earl’s eyes were darting around the room now as he began to sweat. Christian could feel the remaining men watching them with interest. It would not be long



before the whole ton knew about the Earl's situation.

I thought I would feel gleeful when I won the toss against this man. But now I can only think about how Louise will take the news.

Christian cleared his throat, taking another step back. "As I said before, Sir, you will not return to my house again," he declared, a hint of smugness in his voice. "If I wish for you to enter, I shall send you an invitation. It seems fitting. Were those not your original terms?"

With a condescending glance at the rest of the room, he walked out, happy in the knowledge that the Earl of Northbridge would no longer be a problem.

Louise was sitting with Jack on her lap when she heard Christian's voice outside. Placing the kitten in the little bed she had made for him in the library, she swiftly walked out to find her husband.

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He was in the entrance hall, removing his hat and gloves and murmuring quietly to Fenwick. He glanced at her when she approached, but his expression gave nothing away.

Several scenarios were running through her mind, from Christian killing her father to her father ruining him with a single word.

Fenwick took his leave, and Christian crossed the entrance hall toward her, raising his eyebrows as though he were confused by her presence. Her anger flared at his casual demeanor.

“Why are you looking at me as though nothing happened? Do you not know how worried I have been?”

Christian closed his eyes, his jaw flexing as he folded his hands behind his back. “I told you that I would deal with it, and I have,” he said, sounding exasperated, and then walked toward his study.

“Stop walking away from me!” she thundered, following him into the room and slamming the door shut behind her. “Tell me what happened between you and my father. I have been worried sick for hours. I have no idea what you were doing, what you said, or how you chose to act. You will tell me this instant!”

She was panting by the end of her tirade, but when his eyes locked onto hers, she felt the familiar pulse of desire at the heat in them, and her anger melted away.

“What would you like to know?” Christian asked, taking a step toward her.

“What did you say to my father?”

“I told him that he would keep you out of our business, and he has agreed. That is all.”

Louise opened her mouth, staring at him in disbelief, and then scoffed. “That is all, is it? He simply agreed?”

“He did. Were you expecting something more interesting? I believe you specifically told me that you did not wish for us to come to blows. We would have if it had been left up to your father, believe me.”

Lousie looked him over, fearful that he might be hiding some injury.

Christian let out a hollow laugh. “Ah, now you are concerned about my welfare. How touching. Considering I have married you to exact revenge on your father and nothing else, I am astonished you care at all.”

“You did not deny it!”

Christian’s eyes widened comically before they narrowed as he took another step toward her.

“I believe, Duchess, that my exact words were that your insinuation offended me deeply. Or do you only listen to your father’s opinion on the matter?”

“How am I supposed to listen to yours?” she retorted. “You give nothing away. Even when we spend time together, you barely speak to me, and if I ask you what it is I can expect from you, all you tell me is that we have an arrangement. How am I supposed to understand what you want from this marriage when you do not choose to play a part in it!”

Her chest was heaving now, the fears in her heart coming out in a raw and vulnerable way that she had not intended.

Christian snarled as he took a final step forward and gripped her upper arms tightly, roughly pulling her to him.

“Do you understand this?” he shot back, before lowering his head and claiming her mouth.

It was a harsh and brutal kiss, and Louise melted against him, powerless to prevent it as his heat enveloped her and his tongue plunged into her mouth.

She moaned as he walked her back to the door, grunting as her back hit it and his hands tangled in her hair. All she could feel was his tongue and his fingers gripping her flesh, not allowing her to move an inch as he devoured her body and soul.

After what felt like an age, he finally pulled back and drew in a gasping breath, resting one hand beside her head against the door and staring at her with blazing eyes.

Louise shivered as he slowly slid his hand down the door, before pushing away from her and straightening his clothes. His movements seemed hurried and uncertain.

“I did not marry you for revenge.” His voice was flat but sincere. Guilt welled up inside her at the hurt in his eyes. “After everything we have shared, did you truly believe that to be the case?”

Louise hesitated, studying his face for any signs of deceit.

Does he truly care for me? It is in times like this that I can almost believe he feels the same for me as I do for him.

Christian smoothed down his waistcoat and fiddled with his cuffs. There was something awkward in his manner that reassured her. He was rarely awkward, always knowing what step he needed to take next. Now, he looked ruffled, and all she wanted to do was reassure him.

His cravat had come undone in the frenzy of their kiss. She stepped forward, slowly raising her hands to his neck, and he watched her with a frown.

“What are you doing?” he asked.

“You look untidy,” she replied, pulling at the ends of his cravat, which were already a little loose. She untied a section of it and then retied it so that it was straight.

Christian allowed it, lifting his chin as though she were his valet, and she smiled softly as he did so. She tied the ends and stepped back as he looked at himself in the mirror. His frown deepened as he touched his cravat reverently.

“How did you do that? I can never get the damned thing to sit right.”

“At least you look presentable now,” she said softly.

He turned back to her, the hurt look lingering on his face.

“Come,” she urged. “I want to show you something.”

Louise gently took his hand and led him out of the study, toward the library. There was something fragile and new between them now that she could not name, but she was desperate to hold on to it for a little bit longer.

As soon as they entered the library, Jack started mewling at them and trotted toward them. To Louise’s surprise, Christian bent down to pick him up and cradled him in his arms, and the kitten instantly settled.

Louise smiled at them both as she indicated the little writing desk where she had finally finished her drawings.

“I wanted to show you my encyclopedia,” she said, suddenly feeling embarrassed and wondering if Christian would have any interest in it.

He raised his eyebrows, moving to the pile of parchment. After eyeing it for a few seconds, he extended a hand and began to leaf through the pages while holding Jack in the other.

“Did you paint these?” he asked, leafing through the drawings with gentle care.

“I did.”

Christian dropped the paper, his fingers flexing before he stepped away, his jaw tight. “I am sure my brother has already given his opinion—you do not need mine.”

Louise sighed. “I have not shown them to Marcus yet.”

Christian looked over at her in amazement. “But you told him he would be the first person to see your encyclopedia.”

Louise held his gaze, trying to nurture the connection she could feel between them.

“When I promised him that, I did not believe you would be interested,” she murmured, picking up the book and walking over to the chairs before the fireplace. “Would you like to be the first to see it? I am almost finished with this category.”

Christian stood staring at the book, motionless, his head tilted to the side, before he joined her.

“It would be my honor,” he said wistfully as he rang the bell for a servant.

A footman walked into the room, and Christian handed Jack to him, asking that the

kitten be tucked in his bed in the kitchens for the night.

After the footman had left, Christian settled beside his wife, his movements slow and measured as she smiled and opened the book, turning to the first page.

Over the next hour or so, she outlined everything she intended to do with the book. She spoke of the categories she had chosen and the specifics of the flowers that she wanted to illustrate. Christian made some pertinent points and asked many questions. He was interested in everything.

As they reached the final drawing of the Gallic rose, Louise passed it to him, and Christian admired it just as he had all the others.

“Beautiful. I think this might be my favorite. But where is its subject?” he asked curiously, glancing around the room.

“I am afraid it has withered now. They do not survive long once they are cut.”

Christian placed the drawing back in the book with delicate care.

“You know,” he said thoughtfully, “my estate in Derbyshire is rather large. We could build a greenhouse, and you could grow them all year round if you would like.”

Louise’s heart swelled at the twinkle in his eyes.



“I would like that very much,” she said.

But as the words left her lips, Christian’s smile dropped, and he spun around in his seat.

“Louise,” he said sharply, all the softness in his manner evaporating in seconds. “Do you smell smoke?”

### CHAPTER 33

Christian rose as Louise jumped to her feet. He ran to the door and out into the corridor, looking around for the source of the smell.

His heart pounding, he saw a faint orange glow coming from one of the corridors opposite him. He grabbed Louise’s hand and pulled her along with him. But as he opened the door, he found the morning room ablaze.

Christian stepped back; the heat of the flames was already too much for him to get closer. One of the settees and a large chunk of the corner of the room was on fire. He coughed as the smoke billowed out into the corridors, and he stepped back, pulling Louise with him.

“We must get out of the house,” Louise urged, pulling him toward the door, but he stopped her.

“My mother. We must get her out.”

Louise's eyes widened, and she nodded. "I shall get Jack, you go get your mother. I shall ensure that the servants escape unharmed."

Christian gripped her wrist, panic thrumming through his veins at the thought of leaving her.

"Be careful. Do not come near this part of the house again."

They were both coughing now as the smoke began to fill the wide entrance hall.

"You do the same," she said.

For a suspended moment, they stood staring at one another. Christian was sure that Louise was worried for his safety, but time was of the essence. With a final nod of reassurance to his wife, Christian ran to the stairs and up to the first floor of the house.

He looked around frantically as smoke began to spread into the halls and slither beneath the doors.

He ran to Marcus's room and hammered on the door. He heard rapid footsteps inside before Marcus, half-dressed and clearly having been abed, opened the door, staring at him in alarm.

"Christian? What is it?"

"The house is on fire. We must get Mother."

Marcus was all action suddenly, running to a chair to pick up his coat and ringing the bell repeatedly. They sprinted across the landing to their mother's suite, and Christian burst into the room, hearing a shrill cry from his mother's chair beside the fire.

She stood up, her eyes wild, looking between them in confusion.

“Mother, we must get out of the house. It is on fire!” Christian ran forward and collected a thick shawl from the chair beside her, before helping her out.

“On fire?” the Dowager Duchess echoed, aghast. “How?”

“I do not know yet, but we must get you to safety.”

Marcus stepped forward, taking their mother’s arm. “Where is Louise?” he asked with concern.

“She has gone to fetch that damned kitten and ensure the kitchen maids get out safely,” Christian muttered as they reached the corridor. “Marcus, can you see to Mother? Do not come back into the house under any circumstances and take her down the back stairs. I must see to the staff and my wife.”

“Of course, go!” Marcus barked.

Christian set off at a run down the wide stairs and into the hallway. Several servants were carrying pails of water to the morning room, many of them young girls and boys who worked as footmen and maids in his house.

“Go outside!” he shouted. “Do not risk your lives for this. Take the water outside, and if you can douse the flames from there, do it, but do not breathe in the smoke. Out, out!” he bellowed and ushered them toward the front door.

Satisfied that they were carrying the water outside and were not immediately at risk, Christian ran to the kitchens, where he opened the door to chaos.

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Several panicked servants were running about as the housekeeper shouted instructions over the din.

Fenwick was a pillar of calm in the center, directing the boys and footmen to leave the house. Christian looked around for Louise but could not see her anywhere.

“Fenwick!” he shouted.

“Yes, Your Grace.” The butler came forward instantly.

“Where is the Duchess?”

“I have not seen her, Your Grace. She came to retrieve the kitten and went to find you.”

Christian swore. “Fenwick, get out of the house as quickly as you can.”

“Yes, Your Grace.”

“Do not leave any servants behind,” Christian insisted as he turned and went back into the house to find Louise.

Panic had seized him. He was convinced that he would somehow walk into the corridor and find his wife on fire or screaming for help.

I cannot lose her.

The thought was clear as day in his mind.

Not now. Not ever.

As he reached the entrance hall, he let out a sigh of relief when he spotted her looking up the stairs, where Marcus and his mother were making their way out of the house. She had Jack in her arms and was clutching him tightly to her.

“Louise,” he said desperately. “Why did you not leave?”

“I wanted to ensure you were safe!” she cried, glancing behind her as the remainder of the servants brought more water and ran outside.

“Come, let us get out of the smoke.”

The orange glow beneath the door seemed to have grown enormously since he had first seen it, and he dragged her outside as his lungs constricted around the toxic fumes.

They ran around the side of the house to the terrace, where a line of servants were dousing the flames with water from the well in the gardens.

Christian looked up at his beloved home, pain gnawing at his chest as he watched the smoke billow upward, obscuring the stars.

“Stay here,” he said to Louise.

“What are you going to do?” she asked, alarmed.

“I must help them, but you stay with my mother and Marcus. Do not go near the house. Please, Louise.”

She nodded.

He ran to the front of the line and grabbed a bucket, getting to work as the servants kept pouring water on the flames. He stepped as far into the house as he dared, throwing as much water as he could on the fire. To his relief, the flames seemed contained to the corner and had not yet had a chance to spread to the ceiling.

There was an enormous amount of smoke, but it seemed that only the settee and the rug beneath it had been damaged. The heat of the fire had lessened, and as they continued their efforts, the flames slowly died down.

Fenwick appeared at Christian's side, holding a great mass of fabric. Christian recognized it as the old curtains that had once hung in the drawing room, and he and Fenwick threw them over the remaining flames, extinguishing them completely.

As he coughed against the smoke, Christian held out his hand to Fenwick, who shook it warmly. They looked down at the ruined corner of the room. The wallpaper was black, the rug ruined, and the settee a charred ember of its former self, but everyone was alive.

Christian looked back at the servants, all of whom were safe, and then his eyes flicked to his mother and Marcus, who stood on the lawn, watching in silence.

Louise was standing beside them, Jack cradled in her arms, and as their eyes met, Christian felt the same, yawning fear seize him at the thought that he might have lost her.

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After denying that he needed her all this time, the notion of life without her was unbearable. How did she become so vital to him?

He slowly walked away from the house as the last tendrils of smoke drifted away into the night. The acrid smell of charred wood and fabric burned his nostrils as he descended the steps and crossed the garden toward his family.

“Is everything well?” he asked as he reached them.

His mother was staring at the blackened walls of the house. The fire had shattered the glass panes of the terrace doors—it was an unpleasant and gloomy sight.

“How did this happen?” she whispered.

“I do not know,” Christian replied somberly, “but we are all safe. That is what matters.”

Louise stepped forward then, and the kitten in her arms mewed at him as she stared at the destruction before them. Her face was a mask of uncertainty and fear, and all Christian wanted to do was take her in his arms and hold her. She did not look at him, her back rigid.

“Your Grace?”

Christian turned to find Fenwick standing before him. Beside him was a stable boy who could not have been more than fifteen.

“Would you tell His Grace what you told me, Larkin?” Fenwick prompted.

The boy gazed up at Christian, looking terrified to be in the presence of his master.

“What is it, young man?” Christian asked.

Larkin twisted his cap in his hands and glanced at Fenwick before he eventually mustered his courage and began to speak.

“I was out seein’ to the horses, Your Grace, and I heard someone movin’ outside. I thought it was odd, as all the horses were away for the night, so I went out to see who it was. I saw a man runnin’ away. The man who came with the lady.”

Christian frowned at him. “The lady?” He looked at Fenwick.

The butler’s expression was grave. “Larkin was working when Lord and Lady Northbridge came for tea, Your Grace.”

Christian clenched his hands into fists at his sides. “You are certain it was the same man?”

“Yes, Your Grace.” The boy nodded once. “I always remember a rude cove.”

Fenwick made a noise in the back of his throat, and Larkin stopped talking.

Christian swallowed and glanced at Louise, whose eyes were wide with shock. She looked as pale as a ghost.

“Thank you, Fenwick,” he muttered. “Please ensure that Larkin is rewarded for his honesty.”



“Of course, Your Grace,” Fenwick said and bowed as he retreated.

Christian turned back to his mother and brother. Marcus’s face was dark with fury, his eyes hard and cold.

“The Earl did this?” he hissed.

“So it would seem,” Christian murmured, but his attention was focused on Louise.

She was as still as a statue, watching the retreating figures of Larkin and Fenwick.

“Louise?” Christian said gently. “Are you all right?”

She turned to him, the expression on her face one he had not seen for several days. The Ice Queen was back, and the cold, steely look she gave him made his stomach churn.

“I never would have thought my father capable of this,” she mumbled, her eyes glistening with tears. “How could he do this? Why would he do this? I can only apologize to you, Your Grace.” She swallowed as she looked back at the house.

Christian was about to scold her for using his title again, but as he studied her face, she did not seem entirely present. Her eyes were glazed over, staring ahead of her in shock.

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“Come,” he sighed. “Let us return to the house. If the smoke has cleared, we should all get some rest and deal with everything else tomorrow.”

He offered her his arm, but she moved past him. She did not touch or look at him as they all walked into the house.

It was like looking at a stranger, and his heart ached to see it.

I will make the Earl pay for this. He will rue the day he ever tried to hurt my wife.

### CHAPTER 34

Louise waited in her room, listening to the bustle of the servants and the sounds of London waking up.

Dawn was breaking, the first spears of light spreading across the sky, the clouds tinged with pinks and purples.

After the fire was put out, Christian had taken her up to her room, all the while enquiring if she was well. She had simply told him she was tired and closed the door in his face, unable to voice any of the thoughts racing in her mind.

I cannot believe that my father would do something like this. I must speak to him. He could not have been so desperate. Surely, the stable boy was mistaken!

Northbridge Manor could be reached on foot, and Louise was relieved that she would not have to trouble the servants for a carriage. It was imperative that Christian knew

nothing about her movements, so she had sat in her room for hours until she was certain that he was asleep.

She waited another half an hour until the faint light of dawn made the streets safer for a lady and then snuck out of her room.

Keeping watch for any servants who might pass by, she descended the stairs, pulling her cloak tighter around herself. Reaching the hallway, she could hear voices from the morning room as Fenwick shored up the windows and the clinking of glass. The smell of smoke was still thick in the air as she tiptoed out of the house.

The streets were fairly deserted. A few vagrants wandered by, and several street urchins ran alongside her, asking for coins, but otherwise, it was eerily quiet. Louise hurried through the streets, hoping that she did not encounter any trouble.

The walk to her family home was almost a quarter of an hour, and by the time it came in sight, several carriages had passed her by, and many men and women were up and going about their business.

Louise was unsure whether her father would be at home, but she wished to keep her arrival secret.

She went down the side stairs and toward the entrance to the kitchen. Praying that the door was unlocked, she turned the handle and sighed with relief as it opened. The narrow passage beyond it led to the back stairs.

Louise crept along, listening to the voice of the cook and the kitchen maids as they prepared breakfast, and then headed up the stairs to the main part of the house.

As she stepped out into the hallway, she was relieved to find that it, too, was empty—she had managed to sneak into the house without being seen by anyone.

It was always easy to tell if her father was home because he could not disguise his booming voice, but she could not hear anything suggesting that he was up and about.

She decided that the best thing she could do was hide herself in one of the rooms. If a maid or a footman entered, she was confident she could buy their silence for a few short hours until he returned. If her father rose and came downstairs for breakfast, she would know he had not been responsible for the fire.

The very idea that he could set my home ablaze is unbearable.

She headed to the nearest door and opened it quietly, sneaking into a small parlor. But as soon as she did so, she heard a moan from behind her and spun around.

She let out a cry of dismay as she saw her mother's huddled form in the corner of the room. Something about the cowering shape of her body made Louise suck in a sharp breath as she ran forward.

"Mama!" she hissed, kneeling beside her. "Mama, what happened?"

Lady Northbridge's face was badly bruised. Her lip was cut, and there was blood trickling down her chin. She wiped it away as Louise pulled her into a sitting position, groaning pitifully. A dark bruise was forming above her eye, and she struggled to open it fully as she looked down at her daughter.

Fury overtook Louise as she helped her mother to her feet.

"What happened?" she asked. "Never mind. As though I need to ask."

Lady Northbridge shook her head slowly as she took Louise's hands in her own. "What are you doing here?"

“Come, we must get you to a chair.”

Louise moved her mother to the chaise longue, where she sat, looking like a shadow of her former self. Louise hated to see it and felt utterly helpless as her mother brushed her hair from her face, trying her best to look presentable again as Louise sat beside her.

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“Why are you here?” Lady Northbridge asked. “It is not even seven o’clock.”

Louise hesitated, not wishing to heap more pain on her mother, but she could not hide the truth forever.

“There was a fire at our home, Mama,” she admitted.

Lady Northbridge’s eyes widened with alarm as her fingers clutched at Louise desperately. “What? Are you all safe?”

“We are. Christian managed to get everyone out. We are safe, but one of the stable boys said he thought he saw Papa running away from the house before it happened. I came here to ensure that it was untrue. He is here, is he not?”

A shadow passed over Lady Northbridge’s face. “No. He left yesterday evening after...” she trailed off, her eye twitching. “I do not know where he is. I had hoped that he would not return,” she whispered, a tear rolling down her cheek.

I have left her here, alone with him. The only company she has now is a man who beats her.

“Let me find a maid, Mama, and bring some water to you.”

“No!” Lady Northbridge said desperately. “I do not want the servants to know.”

“I will find Jenny, my old maid. She will not say a word. You are hurt. I cannot leave you like this.”

Lady Northbridge's gaze was still fearful, but eventually, she nodded.

Louise rose, moved quietly to the door, and opened it slowly. She knew that Jenny would be somewhere in the house—it was just a matter of finding her.

After unsuccessfully searching the rooms on the ground floor, she went upstairs and found her in one of the bedrooms, folding away a number of gowns in a drawer.

“Jenny,” she whispered from the doorway.

The maid whirled around, staring at her in astonishment. “Lady Louise!” she exclaimed, smiling happily as she rose and smoothed down her skirts. “I mean, Your Grace,” she corrected quickly. “I did not know you had returned.”

“I am here to see my mother,” Louise said softly as they moved out into the corridor. “Can you please bring warm water and a cloth to the parlor? Do not speak to anyone if you can avoid it. This must be done with the utmost discretion.”

Jenny frowned, but then she wiped her hands on her apron and nodded. “At once, Your Grace,” she said, before bobbing a curtsy and hurrying away.

Louise took in the long hallway before her. She had once run down it as a young girl, but she no longer felt any affection for her old home. All she experienced now was a sense of loss that she was not in her real home with Christian.

She went back downstairs as quickly as she could, hiding from some passing servants in a side room before returning to her mother. As she reached the ground floor, however, she heard a man's voice in the parlor. Her heart leaped to her throat.

She burst inside, terrified that her father had returned to hurt her mother again, and froze almost immediately, staring at the scene before her in shock.

Marcus was standing in the room, his arms wrapped around her mother, who was holding him tightly. As Louise entered, they sprang apart, and Marcus paled when he saw her.

She hurriedly shut the door and leaned against it, trying to make sense of what she had just witnessed.

“Louise...” her mother said weakly. “I can explain.”

“What is the meaning of this?” Louise asked, looking to Marcus for an explanation.

She did not know what she had expected from him, but the defiance in his gaze was something new. Without hesitation, he took her mother’s hand and drew her to him even as she gasped and tried to pull away.

“I am not leaving her here with that man any longer,” he declared sternly. “I am sorry, Louise. I know I should have told you sooner, but I did not know where to begin.”

Louise was speechless, her wide eyes darting between the two of them.

“Mama?” she prompted, her voice low and confused.

“I am sorry, dearest,” Lady Northbridge breathed. “I have never intended for this to happen. But Marcus and I... it was not something I could escape. I always thought my life had ended, and I was happy because at least I had you, but then... This is not something I can give up. I do not want to. I really hope you’ll find it in your heart to forgive me, Louise.”

Marcus pulled her closer to him, their fingers entwined.



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Louise expected to feel betrayed or angry at the news, but instead, hope sprung up within her at the thought that her mother had a chance to be happy.

Now that she looked at them, somehow they fit together, as though there was an understanding between them that had existed for a long time. Marcus's expression was resolute but sorrowful as he glanced at her.

"I am sorry," he said again. "I should have told you." He nodded with a half-shrug. "As Althea said, this was not something we ever intended. I would never set out to deceive you, Louise, but I did not know how to confess it. I tried many times."

He looked at her mother, a smile flitting across his face.

"In truth, I did not understand my feelings until I began visiting the house more often. I was always aware of Althea, hoping that she might spare me a glance. I believed it to be admiration, nothing more. I did not fully understand what my heart felt until almost a year ago..." His jaw tightened. "... when I saw that she was injured and learned that that blaggard was responsible."

Lady Northbridge's lips thinned, the bruise above her eye all the more obvious as she closed it in despair.

"I had never felt such anger," Marcus muttered. "It was at that moment that I knew I loved her—the kind of deep love that is impossible to ignore. I would do anything to protect her." His eyes met Louise's once more. "But I need you to know that I never used you to grow closer to Althea. Our love blossomed over a series of encounters quite separate from our friendship."

Lady Northbridge nodded at that, her eyes earnest and imploring. “Please believe him, Louise. We never wanted to lie to you.”

Louise’s fingers tightened in the folds of her gown, anxiety growing in her chest as she thought of Marcus’s return and all that had happened before it.

“Is this why you went missing?” she asked. “Do you think my father had something to do with what happened to you?”

Marcus’s expression was difficult to read. His chest expanded as he held his breath, before letting out a long sigh.

“I do not know, but I suspect that is the case.” His expression was grave and sad. “The Earl discovered us together some months ago. He threatened my life, and Althea’s if I did not leave London immediately. He was raging—mad with fury. I had no choice but to flee. I believed it might save us both if I was gone, but when the accident happened, everything was turned on its head. I was desperate to return and save her from him. I still am.”

Lady Northbridge was looking up at him adoringly now, and Louise found that she was touched by it.

Marcus was a wonderful person who would care for her mother unconditionally for the rest of her life. Perhaps it was not what Society or convention would permit, but remaining in a violent marriage was far worse to Louise’s mind.

The ton are only interested in appearances, after all. They care nothing for genuine happiness, and my mother deserves that more than anyone.

She stepped forward, and her mother stiffened, her gaze never leaving her.

“I am happy for you, Mama. Truly. You deserve someone who will treat you well and love you for who you are. You could not have found a better man than Marcus.”

Her mother’s grateful smile dropped when thundering footsteps hurried down the hall and the door burst open.

“You dare to make a cuckold of me in my own home?”

## CHAPTER 35

Louise gasped and turned around. Her mother cried out in shock as her father walked through the door, his eyes flashing with fury.

Lady Northbridge stepped around Marcus, shielding him with her body even as Louise took a step toward them to do the same. Marcus was a coiled spring, his body rigid with tension. Louise had never seen him so angry, his expression so murderous.

Marcus is an accomplished actor—all the times I have seen him with my mother, I never suspected a thing.

“You will step away from my wife,” the Earl commanded, glaring at him.

Marcus stepped forward instantly, his chest puffed out, his lanky form appearing impossibly small in front of the Earl’s bulky body. Louise held her breath, her eyes darting between them.

“I would invite you to look at your wife, Sir, and see the damage that you have inflicted on her,” Marcus roared.

“This is not your concern, Lord Marcus. You will leave my house this instant, or I shall remove you from it.”

Marcus didn't move an inch. Lady Northbridge stood straight and tall behind him, her eyes fixed on the man who had abused her. Louise wrung her hands nervously, even as her heart swelled at her mother's courage.

"What did you do, Walter?" Lady Northbridge demanded, her voice cold as ice.

"What are you talking about, woman? You think that I should have acted differently when my wife was lying with a man behind my back?"

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“You have lain with countless women!” the Countess shouted, her usually soft voice reverberating through the room like a thunderclap. Her face was red with rage. “I know it—I have seen it. You do not understand the misery I have endured all these years. I had to hear about your conduct from an acquaintance at all. You spent your money on your mistress and squandered the rest of it at the gaming tables.”

“This is outrageous,” the Earl roared, but she would not be silenced.

“I have endured this for years, Walter. You promised me time and again that you would change. Even when you gambled away my mother’s jewelry—everything I cared for in the world—I accepted it because I believed that you would change. It has taken the love of a good man, a better man, to see that you will never change.”

Her eyes were sharp and assessing as she glanced at Louise, the sorrow in them palpable before she looked back at her husband.

“When you gambled away my beloved daughter, when you almost destroyed her future, I knew then that I had to get away from you. One way or the other, if you have not already destroyed yourself, Marcus and I will leave you to your debts and your precious name and be done with you forever.”

Louise’s chest swelled with pride as she witnessed her mother’s defiance. Her bruises seemed to darken as the weak sunshine began to filter into the room, and her face twisted into an expression of disgust as she looked upon the man she had once loved.

“You will do nothing of the sort!” the Earl bellowed, pointing a meaty finger at her. “You are a disgrace. Do you hear me, Althea? A disgrace to my name and

Louise?—”

“You will not bring me into this,” Louise spat.

His head whipped around, and he looked at her in astonishment as she came to stand beside her mother.

“You have created the world in which you live, Papa. By your own hand, you have set it alight in more ways than one. I always believed that you were better than you seemed... that in your heart, there was some good that remained. Until you tried to kill me and Christian in our beds by setting our house on fire!”

A charged silence fell over them before the Earl began to splutter desperately.

“Do you deny it?” Lady Northbridge demanded, reaching for Louise.

Both women stood to their full height, a silent agreement passing between them.

“You are both mad,” the Earl said with a derisive laugh. “Utterly mad. What fire are you speaking of? Have you lost your senses, Louise?”

“Then where were you tonight? Answer me!”

The Earl’s pomp and bluster slowly faded, as did the color in his cheeks. Louise had held on to the hope that her father was not guilty until that moment. To see the truth written all over his face was sickening.

Lady Northbridge stepped forward, but Marcus made to stop her.

“We will be leaving now,” she announced solemnly and reached out her other hand to her lover.

Marcus gripped it tightly, and that was when Louise saw the light in her father's eyes change.

Before, he had been a dejected fool, standing in the house he had gambled away, in front of the wife he had lost. But in a few seconds, the monster that lurked beneath reared its head.

Her mother seemed to recognize the change in him, too, and recoiled as he swung back his left hand, the muscles beneath his coat bulging as he prepared to slap his wife across the face.

Without a second thought, Louise stepped in front of her mother at the last moment. It could have been mere seconds, but the Earl did not slow down, and she felt the blow rattle her cheekbone.

With a startled cry, she fell to the floor, astonished at the pain that splintered through her face. There was absolute silence for a charged moment before a thundering voice filled the room.

“How dare you lay a hand on my wife?”

Christian had stayed in bed late into the night, replaying the events of the evening.

He was glad that his mother and brother were safe, but his thoughts kept returning to Louise. The moment when the fire was finally put out and he had looked across the garden at her played over and over in his mind.

The relief, the overwhelming joy he had felt at seeing her safe, had shocked him. She was the most beautiful woman he had ever beheld, brave and determined to the last—he did not know how he had not seen it before.

He tossed and turned, hating being alone in his bed and wishing she was with him. He was at a loss as to what had caused the cold distance in her eyes, but he was determined to find out.

Eventually, he rose from the bed and walked out of his room. He padded to her door and prepared to knock on it, only to find it ajar.

“Louise?” he murmured, gently pushing the door open. He peered inside to find her room empty.



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He straightened, whirled around, and ran to the stairs. Something told him that Louise was not in the house. He could not explain it, but it was as though he could sense her absence in the very air around him.

Most of the servants were abed or clearing the debris from the fire. It would have been easy for her to sneak out without anyone seeing her.

His throat constricted. There was only one place she could have gone. He gritted his teeth at the thought of her walking through the streets of London alone in the early hours. She had not called for the carriage, or else he would have heard it.

He ran back to his room and tugged on whatever he could find, pocketing a cravat to make himself presentable once in the carriage, and rang the bell.

Fenwick was with him in seconds, ever-present and loyal as he helped him into his tailor-made coat.

Then, Christian ran out of the room and bolted down the stairs two at a time. While the carriage was brought around to the front of the house, he went to his study and scrawled a brief note across a thin piece of parchment.

As he went back to the hallway, he summoned a footman and told him to deliver the note to his club most urgently. As the man departed, Christian ran down the front steps and launched himself into his carriage, instructing the driver to travel to the Earl's townhouse at top speed.

The journey seemed interminably long, and he was unable to concentrate on anything

but Louise and what might have happened to her.

Finally, after a few short minutes, the tall, narrow shape of Northbridge Manor came into view. Christian tugged at his coat and arranged his clothes as best as he could before he jumped down, marching to the door with all the authority he could muster.

The butler admitted him without ceremony. He had the eyes of a man who was no longer loyal to his employer when his pay had been withheld.

As Christian entered the house, he could hear voices coming from the parlor. He gently pushed the door open when he heard the sharp sound of a slap, and he watched Louise fall to the floor in front of her brute of a father.

My God, I will kill him for this.

“How dare you lay a hand on my wife?” he bellowed, stalking into the room. He drew his fist back and slammed it into the Earl’s nose with satisfaction.

The Earl’s head snapped back as he cried out and stumbled backward. He landed on the floor awkwardly as he frantically tried to stem the blood spurting out of his nose.

Shooting the Earl a final glare, Christian ran forward and knelt beside Louise. There was a large red welt on her face where the Earl’s signet ring had hit her.

Christian would have hit the man a second time if he could.

“Louise, are you all right?” he asked, gently pulling her to her feet.

She was shaking a little, her eyes focusing on the room around her again. She looked down at her father, her lips trembling as she stepped away from him, and then looked around for her mother.

That was when Christian realized that there were other people in the room.

A shocked gasp escaped his lips at the scene before him. His brother was holding Lady Northbridge in his arms so tightly that there was no space between them.

Christian stared at them in utter amazement as his brother pulled back, looking down at the Countess with such love that he was at a loss for words.

“Marcus?” he asked stupidly. “What is the meaning of this?”

Marcus turned to him, his jaw clenched, and reached his hand behind him. Lady Northbridge clasped it, and he pulled her close, meeting Christian’s eyes without a trace of fear.

“I am taking Althea away from this brute,” he declared. “I love her, and I will not be without her any longer.”

Christian had never seen his brother look so grave or determined, his gaze unwavering.

He glanced at Louise, who was watching him warily.

“You knew about this?” he asked.

“Not until today,” she mumbled.

Somehow, he felt relieved by that revelation even as his mind tried to make sense of the jarring image of his brother holding Lady Northbridge’s hand.

His eyes met those of the Countess, and her guilty expression was a quiet contrast to the stubborn set of Marcus’s jaw.

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“And do you feel the same way for my brother, Lady Northbridge?”

She glanced at Marcus, seemingly at a loss for words as she nodded her head. “I do,” she whispered.

“I know there will be a great scandal,” Marcus said, his tone exasperated. “I had intended to go abroad, and then Althea would join me later, sparing you from all this. But with the accident, my plans were blown apart. I would not have made you all worry for nothing.” He shook his head. “I do not understand what happened to the letter.”

“I might explain that,” Christian said, a memory suddenly resurfacing in his mind. “Fenwick brought me several letters in the Earl’s presence. It was a few moments before Louise kicked him out of the house. I thought at the time I should have had Fenwick escort him out. He could have easily recognized your handwriting and stolen the letter, learning of your plans before I could.”

Marcus looked down at the Earl as though he intended to finish what Christian had started. But the older man looked quite pathetic, sitting awkwardly on the floor, his face covered in blood.

Marcus scoffed and seemed to change his mind. “Much good it did him in the end,” he muttered.

Suddenly, there was a commotion in the hallway, and they heard the raised voices of the butler and another man.

Ah, I see my note was delivered.

“Jarvis!” Christian called.

Jarvis appeared in the doorway before he entered the room, his hulking figure dwarfing everyone else.

“Would you please take this man to the constabulary?” Christian asked, gesturing toward the Earl. “I believe there is a place waiting for him in debtors’ prison.”

The Earl spluttered against the handkerchief he held to his nose and tried to protest, but Jarvis was already pulling him to his feet effortlessly.

Jarvis nodded to Christian, and without a second glance, he dragged the Earl out of the room.

Christian watched him go and then turned back to his brother.

Marcus’s eyes were guarded, shielding Lady Northbridge with his body as though to protect her from Christian’s wrath.

Christian studied their entwined hands, surprised to find that he was not angry with them for their conduct. He was relieved that his brother seemed to have finally found happiness.

He stepped forward, and Marcus lifted his chin, ready to face whatever venom Christian might spew at him for ruining their family name and destroying his reputation.

Instead, Christian turned to Lady Northbridge and bowed low.

“My Lady, I can think of no one more worthy of happiness than you. To have experienced so much and come out the victor is a feat, indeed.” He glanced at his brother. “Though, you will have to put up with my brother for the rest of your days, which seems a hollow victory.”

Marcus’s shoulders relaxed as Lady Northbridge clung to his arm, giving Christian a grateful smile. “Thank you, Your Grace. I am sorry for any hardship this will cause you.”

Christian smiled. “I have been through worse, My Lady.” He glanced at Louise, meeting those crystal-blue eyes. “Now, if you will excuse me, I would like to have a word with my wife.”

## CHAPTER 36

“Where are you taking me?” Louise demanded as Christian led her down endless corridors. “This is not even your house.”

“I am taking you where people cannot hear us,” he muttered darkly.

Louise worried her lip with her teeth as he chose a door to his right and pushed it open, before dragging her inside.

He closed the door and turned to face her, the dark determination on his face making her heart race. He had clearly woken up and thrown on any clothes he could find. His shirt was open, revealing a bit of his chest to her hungry eyes, and his hair was loose and falling about his face.

“Would you care to explain yourself?” he growled.

She raised an eyebrow. “Explain myself? For what?”

He advanced on her menacingly, his fists clenching and unclenching. “For leaving the house in the early hours of the morning to creep across London alone without so much as a note to explain your absence?” he thundered.

“And what would you have done if I had told you? This is my family—they are my responsibility.”

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“I could have at least accompanied you, Louise. You have no idea how dangerous the streets can be for a woman.”

“I waited until it was light,” she said dismissively.

“And why did you not wake me up?” he hissed.

Louise rolled her eyes. “I was trying to protect you from the machinations of my family. I wished to learn from my father what he had done.”

“You did not believe that it was him?” Christian sneered.

Louise glowered at him furiously. “Forgive me for not dismissing my father as a madman without good reason. That stable boy could have easily been mistaken—you yourself must have enemies.”

Christian threw up his hands in agitation and turned away from her. But as he did so, he was distracted by his reflection in the large mirror above the fireplace. He balked at it and began to adjust his clothing.

“Look at me. I am a disgrace. I have been forced to leave my house before dawn to chase my wife, who went on a mission so idiotic that it is beyond comprehension!”

“Idiotic?” Louise snapped. “I was ensuring that my mother was well, and she was not!”

Christian paused as he tweaked his shirt cuffs, his expression morphing into one of



contrition.

“I am sorry he treated your mother so despicably.” He glanced at her curiously. “Has it happened before?”

“Yes,” she spat. “It was one of the main reasons why I did not wish to marry.”

His sharp eyes flicked to her again, his mouth twisting into a snarl.

“I did not wish to leave her, Christian. Not everything revolves around you.”

Despite the gravity of their conversation, Louise felt a hint of amusement as he stuck his hands in his pockets and pulled out a cravat from one of them, before walking to the mirror and tying it around his neck.

“I look like a vagrant,” he muttered as he smoothed its folds, before twisting it into a Mail Coach knot.

Louise watched him struggle with it for as long as she could bear it before she walked to him and turned him around. She pulled the cloth tight and brought the ends to the front. She crossed them over one another and then tied them in a final knot, before stepping back and raising an eyebrow at him.

Christian turned to the mirror and poked at his cravat. “Wherever did you learn to tie these?”

“Marcus has the same trouble with them,” she replied.

His eyes instantly hardened. “Did you have any suspicion of what had happened between Marcus and your mother?” he asked, watching her in the mirror.

“None, I told you.”

“Are you upset?”

Louise glared at him, her irritation and anger rising to a fever pitch as he fidgeted on the spot. “And why should I be upset? My mother is happy for the first time in her life—that it is a wonderful thing.”

“But it is a betrayal, is it not?”

“Christian, I will not have this conversation with you again.”

“You are telling me that you feel nothing after learning that Marcus has been conducting a secret affair with your mother all this time? I do not believe it.”

“You may believe whatever you wish,” she retorted, “it will make no difference. What does it matter what my feelings are on the subject?”

“I know you must care, Louise. It is?—”

“The only thing I care about is that the man I love seems determined to push me into the arms of his brother!”

Very slowly, Christian turned away from the mirror, his mouth hanging open in amazement. Louise glared at him furiously, her gut churning at her admission.

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“I know that you do not feel the same. This was never supposed to be a love match, and God knows you have made your opinion on the matter clear.”

Christian’s eyes snapped to her, a look of confusion crossing his face.

“I know that all you ever wanted was a marriage of convenience,” Louise continued, “and now you got everything you needed from it. Marcus is home, he is safe, and you have avenged yourself against my father. You have no more use for me, and I would rather remain here, where I can be content?—”

Christian stepped forward, pulled her to him, and kissed her. Louise gasped against his mouth. She fought him, trying to push him off her, but his arms encircled her, holding her tightly to him.

He moved his tongue against hers in a wicked spiral as she gasped again, and his hands gripped her wrists, tugging them behind her and bending her backward as he ravaged her mouth.

He pressed himself against her desperately until, finally, he pulled back, his eyes glinting as she panted for breath.

“It seems that you know so many things, Duchess,” he said, keeping her hands pinned behind her back.

“Do not mock me,” she huffed as she attempted to wrench her wrists free. Christian tightened his grip in response.

“How have I mocked you?” he asked.

“You may be content with pleasure for pleasure’s sake, but I am not.”

Christian’s heart clenched at the anger in her voice. Her eyes held a deep pain that he wanted to wipe away forever.

Slowly, he released her wrists, but then he pulled her against him so she could not escape. Her hands came up to push against his forearms, trying to force him to release her.

“I love you, too,” he confessed softly.

Louise all but froze before she scoffed. “You are a fool if you expect me to believe that. I have watched you walk away from me many times. Every moment we spent together that required care or commitment, you have shunned as though it were?”

“Louise, listen to me!”

She recoiled at his exasperated tone, and he sighed heavily.

“I confess I did not recognize my feelings before,” he said, loosening his grip and letting his hands move down her arms until he interlocked their fingers. “Not until I thought I might have lost you forever.”

He felt the same fear rise inside him as he imagined being without her.

How did I ever believe that I could keep her at arm’s length? I have been desperate to claim her as my own since the very beginning.

“My father’s actions destroyed his first wife. He humiliated her beyond bearing when

my mother gave birth to me and Marcus. I was still a boy, but I could tell how much it hurt her to see us. When she fell ill, I remember thinking how cruel it all was. How love had destroyed something that should have been genuine and made it into something sordid. Then, love did the same thing to my mother and us. Of course, no one dared to say anything to my father when he decided to marry her, when he did everything in his power to acknowledge us, but oh, people loved to talk to us. Do you know how many times people have offended my mother and she just took it with a smile, all because of love? How many times I had to protect Marcus from other children in ways I shouldn't have if my parents hadn't fallen in love? And yet neither my mother nor my father seemed to care what the ton thought of them. I didn't understand how they could be like that."

He shook his head, sighing as Louise looked up at him quizzically.

"I did not want a wife. I always knew that if I married, it would be, as you say, for convenience. And I made a bet with your father because I was half mad with worry for Marcus. I was desperate to know what had befallen him, and you were simply a pawn in a larger game. But that changed."

Louise took a small step back from him, furrowing her brow. "You told me right from the beginning that you would never love me."

Christian huffed a laugh as he nodded. "Yes, I did say that—a stupid, blind fool to the last. I told a woman that I would never love her, even as I was beginning to do so. In truth, from the moment I stood before the Ice Queen and demanded that she marry me, I believe I have been fighting these feelings to no avail."

Louise still did not seem convinced, and his heart ached for everything he had done to her.

I have pushed her away at every turn. It is no wonder that she does not believe me.

“I am a selfish man, Louise. At first, I believed my obsession with you was merely a wish to claim you. And then, as things progressed, I saw how attentive you were and how kind. The damned kitten was a testament to that. I began to see the woman I married instead of the prize.”

He tucked a loose lock of her hair behind her ear as she shivered in his arms, and he smiled softly.

“You do not need to believe me today or even tomorrow. I shall spend the rest of my life convincing you that you are who I have always needed. I cannot imagine my life without you. I love you, Louise, with all my heart, and everything we do, from this point onward, we will do together.”

For a long time, Louise did not speak, the ticking of the clock on the mantelpiece and the gentle crackle of the fire the only sound in the room. Her eyes were glistening with tears, and she sniffed, trying to prevent them from falling.

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“You are not merely pleased to have tamed the Iron Harridan?” she asked, the bitterness in her voice palpable.

Christian drew her to him. “I do not need to tame her,” he murmured. “She was quite perfect just the way she was,” he said tenderly. “But if you ever think of leaving me again, I will not hesitate to punish you.”

Her breath caught in her throat as he slowly lowered his head, giving her the chance to pull away. She watched him warily but finally closed her eyes as their lips met in a passionate kiss.

They remained at Northbridge Manor for some time as they all had tea together, the burden of the Earl’s presence visibly lifting off the Countess’s shoulders.

Louise felt off balance and unsure of everything, but Christian remained at her side for the rest of the day, attentive and caring to a fault. Indeed, he was rarely more than a few feet from her.

Marcus, for his part, was an entirely changed man. The distance and stiffness in his posture had melted away. He laughed easily and seemed hugely relieved that Christian had accepted his relationship with the Countess.

“Where will you go?” Christian asked eventually.

The weather outside had improved greatly, and bright sunshine streamed through the windows.

“I thought about the house in Buckinghamshire. It is small compared to the one in Derbyshire and not too far from London. I would not wish for Althea to be too far from Louise.”

Christian saw Louise smile at Marcus gratefully, but for the first time, he did not feel jealous.

There truly is nothing between them. What a blind fool I have been.

“I think that would be an excellent idea,” Christian agreed.

“You would not mind?” Marcus asked worriedly. “I know that it will be splattered all over the gossip sheets soon.”

Christian waved a hand. “Society has never accepted us fully, Marcus. We have been traveling upstream all our lives and still prevailed in the end. I would rather my brother were happy and content than placating that nest of vipers. My wife and I will weather the storm when it comes.”

Lady Northbridge bowed her head. “You are too kind, Your Grace.”

Christian shrugged a shoulder. “I am simply sorry you have already weathered your own, My Lady. This townhouse will always be available to you should you ever return to London. It is in my possession and will remain so.”

Lady Northbridge and Marcus glanced at one another happily, and Christian felt lighter than he had in an age.

“You should take Jack with you,” Louise said softly.

Marcus turned to her, placing his teacup on the saucer before him with a surprised



look. “What? No, I could not possibly do that.”

“He prefers you to me and finds peace with you. The city is no place for a kitten to grow. Moreover, you have always wanted a pet, Mama,” Louise said gently as her mother attempted to mask her excitement about the idea.

“But would you not miss him, dearest?” Lady Northbridge asked.

“I would,” Louise confessed. “But I would rather he had a large estate to scamper around, and there are so many carriages here that he might injure himself if he ventures outside. Besides,” she added mischievously, glancing at Marcus, “it will give me a reason to visit.”

Christian laughed, as did Marcus, and the lightness he felt bloomed into something new and bright and clear as he looked at his wife.

She is the most beautiful creature I have ever seen, and she is all mine.

## EPILOGUE

The streets were dark by the time they headed home.

Louise settled on the bench opposite Christian, aware that his eyes rarely left her as they traveled through the dark streets.

She still did not know how to feel about what he had said. She had spent the last few days convincing herself that he had no feelings for her and that she could never expect a connection to grow between them. Discovering that he returned her feelings filled her with elation and fear in equal measure.

Does he truly want me? Or did he just tell me what I wanted to hear?

They rode back home in relative silence as her doubts and worries spiraled through her mind. She watched Christian for most of the journey, just as he watched her.

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When they pulled up outside the house, Christian alighted from the carriage first and then held out his hand to her. After she climbed down, he took a moment to pull Fenwick aside and murmur something to him before he turned to his mother, who was waiting for them in the entrance hall.

He took her hand and kissed her cheek. “I have some news, Mother. It may not be the most welcome.”

He took her into a side room, away from the morning room, which still smelled faintly of smoke.

The Dowager Duchess looked between them curiously as Christian told her of what had taken place between Marcus and Lady Northbridge.

The Dowager Duchess glanced at Louise. “Did you know about this?” she asked.

“I did not, Sabine. I learned the truth today. My father has treated my mother very poorly, and I believe she found comfort and solace with Marcus.”

The Dowager Duchess glanced between them in confusion, but her expression was more surprised than angry—much to Louise’s relief.

She can hardly disapprove, I suppose, given how she found love.

When Christian told her that he accepted his brother’s choice fully and that Marcus would soon be leaving London, she seemed to relax.

They spent some time with her after that, explaining what would need to be done to repair the ruined room and that the terrace would be boarded up and the doors locked until then.

The Dowager Duchess was appalled that the Earl was responsible for destroying part of a home she had lived in all her life, and Louise felt no guilt as she considered her father's fate. He had treated many people she loved with contempt and scorn, and she would waste no more tears on him.

Eventually, they stepped out of the room, leaving the Dowager Duchess to her reading. Louise turned to head up to her chambers.

I still do not know what will become of my marriage despite everything that has happened between us today. I do not know what to do.

She stopped, however, when a gentle hand touched her wrist.

“Will you come to the gardens with me? There is something I wish to show you,” Christian said softly, and she could not find it in her heart to refuse.

He led her out to the part of the terrace that was not touched by the fire. In the dark, it all looked far less dreadful than thereality. Louise was glad not to have to look at the evidence of her father's cruelty anymore.

Christian took her hand and walked them through the flowerbeds and rose bushes to the walled garden at the rear. She recalled what Marcus had told her about the secret garden at the country estate and wondered if she might recreate it here.

She stared at Christian's strong back as he led her through the archway, the stars twinkling prettily above their heads.

The walls around them were high, and the area within was covered by a neat lawn that stretched to the extremities, where flowerbeds and pots lined the edges. There was a small fountain in the center that pattered merrily into a basin at its base, and the overall effect was very soothing after the tumult of the last few days.

Lighted torches placed around them at intervals cast a gentle glow over the ground, and Louise turned to Christian in confusion as he pulled her to him and lowered his head to hers, giving her a soft kiss.

“I know how much you love the gardens, and I have decided that we would spend more time in them,” he said, his voice filled with amusement.

“Is that so? And what are we going to do here?” she asked curiously as his hands moved over her waist.

“I intend to show you just how much I care for you in a place that you love dearly,” he murmured.

Louise looked around them, spotting a blanket and cushions laid out in a corner.

Christian led her to it before lowering himself to his knees, and after a brief hesitation, she did the same.

“I have always been honest with you, Louise. I meant what I said before, and I shall spend every day for the rest of my life proving it to you.”

“You mean your love for me?”

“Of course.”

Louise sighed as she lay down. The day had given way to a clear night sky above

them, and there were no clouds to mar the view. It was chilly in the gardens, but she was glad of the darkness. It felt easier to process her feelings in the shadows.

“What is it, my love?” Christian asked.

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The words made her stomach flutter.

“I do not know what it is you want from me,” she answered honestly.

“I want my wife, my Duchess. That is all. I never believed I would have a wife in my home, let alone one I looked forward to seeing every day.”

“We have been at each other’s throats since our wedding.”

Christian chuckled. “I would not say so. I have told you how I wish for things to be between us, and you have challenged me on every point,” he said playfully.

Louise sat up, rolling her eyes at him. “I have done no such thing.”

“Oh, yes?” he drawled. “When I told you that we would not share a bed, you simply lay in mine and gave me no choice.” He tucked that same wayward strand of hair behind her ear. “It was the best sleep I’ve ever had. I woke up quite confused by it all. I did not know how I felt, and I left before I had to confront it.”

“Are you suggesting that we share a bed every night?” she asked as he moved closer to her, his hand cupping her cheek.

“If you wish,” he whispered. “I would do anything you ask of me.” He leaned forward and kissed her gently.

She let out a soft sigh.

“You are so confusing, Your Grace,” she teased.

Christian chuckled. “As are you, Duchess.”

Louise looked into his eyes, searching them for the reassurance that she so desperately needed. They were warm and filled with affection, making her heart swell.

She steeled herself, moving her hand to his cravat and slowly loosening the ties she had secured earlier that day. Christian’s eyes darkened instantly as she drew it away from his neck.

“My Duchess, you are full of surprises,” he purred.

“I believe I shall tie your cravat every day,” she declared. “It is the only way it will remain straight.”

“My valet will be most pleased to hear it, I am sure,” Christian said as he gently pulled her into his lap.

Her skirts hindered her movements a little, but eventually, she was straddling him beneath the stars, the garden silent around them.

“Is this what you want?” Christian asked as he looked up at her uncertainly. “I did not bring you out here for this. I merely wished to spend time with you.”

Louise smiled, a rush of affection washing over her as she brushed the hair from his face. “I do want this, just as I did before.”

Christian’s smile was broad and happy. “Then I shall prove to you this instant how much I care for you, and you will no longer be able to doubt it.”



He pulled her down and kissed her gently, pressing her against him. They kissed for what felt like hours in the darkness and privacy of the gardens, and Louise's heart sang at being so protected and cared for all at once.

Eventually, Christian lowered her to the blanket, kissing down her neck as he laid her on the cushions. His hands delved beneath the folds of her dress to unfasten her stays.

She was already quivering with need as his thumbs curled around the hem of her underclothes and slowly pulled them down her legs, before tossing them to the side with a wry smile.

"I believe I shall take you among the flowers more often, Louise," he murmured. "You are always beautiful, but the moonlight reveals your true nature, I think."

He leaned forward, taking her mouth again as his hand slid beneath her skirts, drawing a tantalizing path up her inner thigh until his fingers found her wet heat. She groaned, suddenly desperate to feel him again.

Louise spread her legs, and he let out a low groan, trailing kisses down her neck and slowly pushing the tip of his finger inside her. He stroked her, and she felt the pleasure pulsing in her core.

I never would have thought that this feeling could be so addictive. I could spend hours with him like this and never leave this place.

She shuddered as he slid his finger further inside her, even as he moved up her body again and covered her mouth with his own. He curled his finger upward and pumped it until she was crying out with abandon into the night.

Louise writhed beneath him as he pulled at her bodice, peeling the tight fabric off her breasts so that he could suck on her erect nipples, groaning all the while as he made

her come alive with pleasure.

“Sit up,” he commanded.

She rose on her knees as he pushed down his breeches, and she straddled him again while he stroked his manhood.

“I would have you like this, my Duchess. I want you to control everything, and I will prove to you how you command my every feeling.”

She felt his hard length pressing against her as they both paused to stare at one another.

“Go gently,” he said tenderly. “I do not wish to hurt you.”

Louise did as he said as he positioned himself beneath her, and she slowly sank down onto him. She threw her head back, hereyes closed as she took deep breaths. His length slid into her deeper and deeper, giving way to intense pleasure.

When she looked back at him, his eyes were closed, his jaw slack with pleasure as their hips finally connected. It was an entirely different experience to making love in a bed, and Louise sighed in contentment as she felt the familiar pleasurable ache.

“I love you,” Christian said, solemn and sincere in the darkness.

Louise felt the tears well up in her eyes as he cupped her face in his hands and kissed her reverently.

“I love you, too,” she murmured.

Then, with a wicked smile, she rose slowly. Christian swore, and his hands wrapped around her waist as she began to rock against him.

“My God, you will drive me mad,” he groaned as his hips began to meet her halfway, sinking himself into her.

Louise moaned loudly as the pleasure multiplied to an impossible degree.

They moved as one, rising and falling together like the steady waves of the ocean, until Christian lifted her off him, laid her down on the blanket, and began to pound into her. He kept one hand in her hair, cradling her head as he looked deep into her eyes.

“Ah,” he groaned suddenly. “You’re testing my limits, Duchess.”

He began pulling out of her, but she pulled him back in swiftly, her hands on his shoulders, holding him tightly. He looked at her in confusion, and she shook her head.

“I do not want you to withdraw,” she whispered.

“But... are you certain?” he asked, his eyes softening even as he struggled to hold back his release.

“More than certain,” she said.

He groaned, pounding into her again, each movement becoming more erratic than the last until she threw her head back in ecstasy and screamed her release.

A few seconds later, Christian stilled above her, his eyes closing in bliss as he spilled his seed inside her. Louise let out a contented sigh as he collapsed on top of her.

After a few minutes, as they came down from their high, Christian slowly pulled out of her and drew her into his arms, hugging her tightly to his chest and kissing the crown of her head with a contented sigh of his own.

“What made you change your mind?” he asked.

Louise wrapped her arm around his waist and closed her eyes as she rested her head on his chest.

“I was a fool to think that a child would hold me back,” she said lightly. “I shall publish my encyclopedia no matter what happens. I want everything with you.” She looked up at him. “Nothing in this world can hold me back.”

The look in Christian’s eyes was one of quiet awe as a smile slowly spread across his face, and he kissed her again before lying back on the pillows.

“That’s my Fire Queen,” he murmured.

Louise chuckled, hugging him tighter as the moon came out from behind a cloud and bathed their little garden with an ethereal glow.

The End?